

**Hyperstitions of the Future:**

**Terminal Culture and Contemporary Fictions**

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# Abstract

My thesis invokes the concept of hyperstition, a name for the activity of fictions *becoming* real, as a structuring motif organizing the antagonisms between terminal culture and the aesthetics of the possible-future. Terminal culture names a cultural imaginary intensely attuned to and perpetually caught up in crisis, whose temporal and historical movement tends towards fixed and futureless ends. This culture of terminality, I suggest, might be challenged based on fictions which hypostasize escape velocities away from that culture’s movement towards fixed and futureless ends. Terminal culture and hyperstition form the essential pillars of the thesis, a twinning which, I argue, tracks and traces oscillations between processes of apocalyptic runaway in capitalist modernity and a nascent aesthetics of the possible-future. Undertaking a comparative reading and analysis of contemporary fictions alongside critical, philosophical, social and political cross-currents in the moment of terminal culture, the various explorations of this project situate hyperstition as the context and mechanism for critical reflection and experiment alike. The thesis explores how and what to what ends contemporary fictions might conceptualize, represent, and model alternative futures.

*For all of us staying at The Hole We’re Inn*

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# Abbreviations

***(IC)*** *Invisible Cities* Italo Calvino

***(IJ)*** *Infinite Jest* David Foster Wallace

***(GR)*** *Gravity’s Rainbow* Thomas Pynchon

**(TB)** ‘The Terminal Beach’ J. G. Ballard

# ‘The Terminal Beach’ and Terminal Culture

It’s night time as J. G. Ballard’s 1964 short story ‘The Terminal Beach’ opens and Traven, an ex-military pilot, is troubled by traumatic dreams relating to his part in bombing raids against the Japanese in the Second World War.[[1]](#footnote-2) We find him atop a makeshift bed of piled magazines, sequestered off in a derelict shelter someplace on Eniwetok Atoll, the site of nuclear weapons tests in the late ‘40s since dubbed the nuclear trashcan of the pacific. Other than “the sand and a few anaemic palms,” there is not much of life to speak of here, “the entire landscape” being a “synthetic, […] man-made artefact with all the associations of a vast system of derelict concrete motorways” (31). Nightly, Traven is betrayed by his ears, mistaking the crashing of waves nearby for the roar of aircraft engine, just as “[t]he landscape of the island,” “covered by strange ciphers” (29), analogously breaks into and deranges his perceptions, consciousness, and very constitution. We begin, here, with a questioning of what is inside or outside, self-forming or externally constituted, as an incipient interrogation of the nature of becoming in catastrophic times.

As a complement to the flash of burning bombers falling through the air, Traven also dreams of Atlantic rollers—fierce and tall waves that roll in from the Atlantic sea—contemplated in a happy youth spent on the beaches of Dakar, dreams too of a car speeding his loving mother and father home to him... The foaming waves he dreams of are disturbances, oscillations, which propagate through time and oceanic space; the car signifies a motorized energy rolling onwards with kinetic motion as the Atlantic rollers do. Traven dreams, then, of the kind of motion and dynamism slowly eluding his now broken and listless body—which has been slowly deteriorating during his time on the terminal beach owing to a debilitating disease; he dreams nostalgically of another—more *vital*—time.

Here, as elsewhere in Ballard’s story, the *itinerary* of temporality is staked together with images of crisis and terminal disease; while Traven dreams of remote and traumatic pasts, he presently expires through an immobilising illness—an inertial state which further immanentizes both his own personal and the world’s apocalypse by inhibiting the production of new and more vital futures.[[2]](#footnote-3) That is to say, the movement, sense, and experience of time are conditioned by the morbidity and fatalism that irradiates from the terminal beach, this graveyard of American nuclear ambitions and reliquary of ‘archaeopsychic’ traumas.

I intend to draw out of this itinerary of temporality, as it is charted in Ballard’s short story, a diagnostic model for reading our contemporary situation. (*TB*), I argue, inaugurates a reading of what I’ll develop as the ‘terminal culture’ of capitalist modernity and its catastrophic times. Terminal culture is a name for a cultural imaginary intensely attuned to and perpetually caught up in crisis, whose temporal and historical movement tends towards fixed and futureless ends. Having established the scene through Ballard, the intention is to then turn our collective attentions to fictions that propose escape velocities away from the condition of terminal culture—what are called ‘hyperstitions’ or fictions of possibility. Between terminal culture and fictions of possibility lie the essential pillars of the thesis, a twinning which, I argue, tracks and traces oscillations between processes of an apocalyptic runaway in capitalist modernity and a nascent aesthetics of the possible-future. With this twinned theme in mind, the following reading of (*TB*) begins to sketch out the contours of my argument.

## Beriberi

Over some six months on the island lived in a sedentary fashion, Traven has been wasting away from *beriberi*—a nutritional disorder, stemming from a thiamine deficiency. *Beriberi* derives from the Sinhalese for ‘extreme weakness’ and results in a general neurasthenic lassitude, atrophy of the muscles often leading to a loss of reflexes and, eventually, paralysis. Traven’s affliction from the disease is evidenced by shortness of breath, numbness, constipation, loss of motor function, loss of appetite… These symptoms share in a general theme, as they together indicate the somatic and nervous systems in states of attenuation.

In more severe cases, *beriberi* is accompanied by Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome, a form of brain damage similarly instigated by a deficiency in thiamine. Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome variously targets the thalamus, hypothalamus, and limbic system, often causing them permanent damage. The syndrome’s effect is that vision and the movement of the eyes are impaired, and that memories are not only lost, but the sufferer’s capacity to produce *new* memories also fails. As with Janus, the Roman god with two faces, one trained on the past, the other, the future, vision works as a kind of technology of temporal access; memory, a way of establishing continuity through the preservation of identity via historical memory.[[3]](#footnote-4) Working in concert, then, Traven’s afflictions—as they confirm these symptoms—act on the *cognitive* and *ocular* instruments involved in the processing of time and history.

As Traven penetrates deeper into the recesses of the island, walks “through the dark sand,” he is “already forgetting where the shore,” the outside, “lay, although the atoll was little more than half a mile in width” (29). Going deeper still, his temporal field contracts and with it his ability to process his memories, owing to the effect of the island and the sickness it imparts to his cognitive capabilities: “The symbolic journey through [the island’s] inner circles,” we are told, “set its own times of arrival and departure” (35). If, as Gerald J. Whitrow argues, the mind is considered as a memory-based process of integration, then the annexation of this integrative process by the beach’s imperative order implies Traven’s loss of an interior sense of historical and temporal continuity.[[4]](#footnote-5) Traven “evolve[s] no routine for himself” (35), as he is unable to order his own sense of temporal direction or self-organize his memories in his own meaningful way. Like a behaviour-altering parasite, the island infects the central nervous system, namely Traven’s memory processes and, through the symptoms it imparts, manipulates the coherence or readability of temporal and historical order.

In addition to their effect on memory, Traven’s afflictions also target the ocular instruments. Vision, perception, and the treatment of light and shadow are recurring themes in the short story and, together, they illustrate the gap, or vanishing point, which stands for a void of meaning between Traven’s benighted senses and the ungraspable world rendered opaque; where vision fails, a morbid, occlusive world forms. Take how Traven seeks shelter among “the broken bodies of plastic models,” “their deformed faces gap[ing] at him sightlessly” (44), and makes a companion of a corpse, “its sightless eyes regard[ing] him with unmoving compassion” (48). Traven is surrounded by such unseeing and morbid figures, their dead eyes maybe hinting at the flash blindness that follows a nuclear explosion, but certainly expressive of a cold, inert lifelessness. In sharing in their blindness, Traven participates in the dead-eyed mortification that characterises life on the terminal beach.

More than this, Traven is often perturbed by the island’s chiaroscuro, the play of light and shadow, small tricks of the eye that cause shadows to move and darkness to linger even in the brightness of noon: “For hours it would be noon, the shadows contained within the blocks, the heat reflected off the concrete floor. Abruptly, he would find that it was early afternoon or evening, the shadows everywhere like pointing fingers” (45). A sense of inchoate temporal flow, depicted through the gnomonic quality of the island’s block-shaped security towers, pervades the island and Traven is unable to orient himself in a coherent direction.

His own “phlegmatic” (30) eyes are described as “the eyes of the possessed” (40)—possessed by the island’s eerie and compelling force. The trope of eyes as windows to the soul makes sense here, as the possession of Traven’s eyes corresponds to an existential vacancy. In this way, his are gelded eyes that fail to see beyond what the island itself makes necessary, what it permits him to see. Impaired sight and a sightlessness to life, newness, and futures beyond the temporal horizons set by island’s imperative order are staged through the terminal beach as an *occlusive* site of history, “a zone devoid of time” (36), a place where histories are said to disappear.

Through an exposition of *beriberi* and its related symptoms, Ballard pathologizes temporality and history, making their malign effects legible on the medicalized body of Traven. The former soldier’s lassitude speaks to a waning of bodily and cognitive movement and the capacity to project oneself forward in time. Without treatment, *beriberi* is fatal; likewise, the terminal beach, which has a hand in Traven’s illness, is also fatalistic. The failure of vision and memory, as experienced through illness, communicates an inability to countenance or render newness or to orient oneself in the direction of the future, hence my previous claim the itinerary of temporality is staked together with terminal disease.

## Shrinking horizons

Read in this way, the terminal beach appears as an “element in a quantal world” (45), where quantal denotes that world’s configuration as and through discrete units; the world’s time as a series of stuttered steps, as opposed to a continuous or projective flow. As David Roden states in his exploration of philosophy and aesthetics of catastrophe through (*TB*), “The narrative is unconcerned with motivation or history which only breaks its surface in fragments.”[[5]](#footnote-6) We encounter an environment that inhibits the integration of time, memory, history, into a continuous flow and which is organized around a recurring theme of blindness, especially to images of vitality. The text’s conception of historical movement is thus fragmentary and fragmented in such a way that a linear and projective account of temporality is foreclosed.

What’s more, the terminal beach itself serves as an *objective correlative* for end times, that is to say, the beach gives off a feeling of temporal inertia, alters the moods of those within its vicinity in a fatalistic direction, analogizes a sense of morbidity. The immobilisation of bodily and cognitive functions through morbid symptoms implies a complementary inertia of historical processes. This is demonstrated through a reading of the autonomic and cerebro-spinal systems as they relate to time:

Since the discovery of the blocks he had become a creature of reflexes, kindled from levels above those of his existing nervous system (if the autonomic system was dominated by the past, Traven sensed, the cerebrospinal reached towards the future). Each evening when he woke he would eat without appetite and then wander among the blocks. Sometimes he took a canteen of water with him and remained there for two or three days on end (39).

The autonomic system that Traven has entirely become a creature of lingers in a state of temporal lag. Reduced to the satisfaction of only immediate and essential impulses, Traven cannot be motivated to consider the future; he is no longer able to engage those synaptic procedures that process futures:

Perhaps, too, he had identified the need for food with a forward motion in time, and that with his return to the past, or at most into a zone of non-time, this need would be eliminated (33).

The degeneration of cerebro-spinal action in this specific manner directly relates to the inhibition of the orientation or movement towards the future:

The system of megaliths now provided a complete substitute for those functions of his mind which gave to it its sense of the sustained rational order of time and space. Without them, his awareness of reality shrank to little more than the few square inches of sand beneath his feet (41).

Spatio-temporal horizons contract alongside psychosomatic capability, all in the shadow of the island’s many blocks, megaliths, or nuclear security bunkers. These structures organize the tyrannizing landscape and irradiate its inertial effect, a force that consequently affects Traven’s cerebro-spinal reflexes. What is wrought on Traven’s mind and body during his time on the island expresses a comorbidity between, on the one hand, the terminal beach, its thermonuclear legacy and, on the other, a somatic, cognitive, and temporal inertia. This is to the effect that the dynamics of these three latter forms of activity and movement are permanently inhibited. The terminal beach and Traven’s sickness, together, analogize forms of decline that have eschatological implications.

How Traven arrived on Ballard’s terminal beach is unbeknownst to us; historical causation is, at any rate, immaterial, as history is staged as an effect of the island:

By now he had forgotten the existence of the sea and vaguely assumed the atoll to be part of some continuous continental table. A hundred yards to the north and south of the bunker a line of dunes, topped by the palisade of enigmatic palms, screened the lagoon and sea, and the faint muffled drumming of the waves at night had fused with his memories of war and childhood (35).

The island seems to comprise—in Traven’s now warped perspective, at least—the bounds of the wider world, seems to incorporate all other spaces and times into its own singular and fragmentary form. The terminal beach brings about a recombination of the ‘elsewheres’ of history and memory, of war-torn Japan, of Dakar beach days, into the temporal zone of the island. In its own strange way, the terminal beach dissolves the floors of memory and all its clear and precise relations into a melange of local horrors, remembered traumas, and hallucinated apocalypses.

At any rate, any cause for Traven’s being there is muddied by his equivocation; he variously “maintains that he came to the island to carry out some scientific project” (40), to find his departed wife and child, to discover the “the tomb of the unknown civilian, *homo hydrogenesis,* Eniwetok Man” (43). Severe nuclear exposure, nutritional deficiency, and his knotting into the inertial condition of the terminal beach mean that he has since lost himself and his historical sense amongst the atoll’s many large, megalithic blocks, which were designed to screen those gathered within against test explosions. Though lost among the beach’s many abandoned superfortresses and nuclear test mannequins, Traven is overtaken by an uncanny sense of belonging to this doomed isle.

Traven finds vicarious causation for a meagre existence amongst the block-like superfortresses, organized in concentric circles around a singular point of detonation, as “around him the lines of cubes” now constituted the “horizon of his world” (45). The cubic blocks have their own measure and appropriately analogize a landscape were “time had become quantal” (45). Time’s reduction to particularized units of measure signifies breaks in, or a break with, continuity or, even, a breaking *of* diverse temporal flows—biological, historical, geological, or otherwise. We encounter, as I further elaborate below, a landscape that disrupts the coherency of narrative line and temporal order as an expression of the traumas of history.[[6]](#footnote-7)

## Geologies of finitude

In addition to the inscription of the terminal structure of feeling on the body and its cognitive processes, Ballard communicates this terminal mood through geological excavation. A sense of a time beyond that determined by the terminal beach is foreclosed through the effect of thermonuclear heat on the substratal layers of the island. The various geological layers deposited over deep time underneath the island are said to fuse together through the heat of nuclear explosion. Nuclear trauma disrupts the coherence of the gradual process of accumulation and consolidation of matter over geological time:

The series of weapons tests had fused the sand in layers, and the pseudogeological strata condensed the brief epochs, microseconds in duration, of thermonuclear time. Typically the island inverted the geologist's maxim, ‘The key to the past lies in the present.’ Here, the key to the present lay in the future. This island was a fossil of time future, its bunkers and blockhouses illustrating the principle that the fossil record of life was one of armour and the exoskeleton (32).

I’d also describe the terminal beach as an objective correlative for end times by virtue of this fusing of the various deep geological epochs of catastrophe into a singular, flat, geological plane. This homogenising of geological and historical catastrophes implies catastrophe’s uniform reproduction into the (non-)future. Recent excavations of the recesses of deep geological time have disclosed a rich and plentiful history of the “ends” of the world. Peter Brannen summarizes that “animal life has been all but destroyed in sudden, planetwide exterminations five times in Earth’s history.”[[7]](#footnote-8) The fossil record “of armour and exoskeleton,” of defence against impending and inevitable threats, points to this history of geological catastrophe at the planetary scale.

Like so, geological timescales, of which the human is only a minor constituent, reveal apocalypse as an ecological given and this geochronology of previous cataclysms is transposed onto a single thermonuclear and pseudogeological strata, presaging the impending nuclear holocausts or violent cataclysms of the future. As Bradley J. Fest writes, “the increasing invocation of deep time in a variety of discourses signals one of the more notable transformations of the post–Cold War global disaster imaginary.”[[8]](#footnote-9) Ballard, in fact, presages this post-Cold war moment and elaborates the comorbidity of the thermonuclear disaster contemporaneous to him with the history of geological cataclysms, through an involution of what Fest describes as “geologies of finitude.” Ballard achieves this by fusing geological layers and condensing whole, catastrophic epochs into a singular thermonuclear time. The “fossil record” is thus bound up with the “fossil of time future.” Geological remains give an intuition of the future, insofar as the cataclysms of time-past are fused together through the heat of the present nuclear threat, which gives a prefigurative or representative image of the traumas to come.

## The island is a state of mind

As we’ve noted already, the thermonuclear desolation of the terminal beach is of a piece with a psychosomatic debilitation; Ballard’s psychogeographic writing develops an aesthetic trauma of nuclear apocalypse in conjunction with a mortifying, inertial structure of feeling. After that we uncovered the figuration of geological disaster through a singular geological stratum, produced through nuclear heat, which is prefigurative of future atrocities that, we discover, refer to an immanent third world war. Dr C. Osborne, a fellow traveller carrying out research on the island, declares that “This island is a state of mind” (30). Osborne, who also carries out a report on Traven’s deteriorating condition, notes of the beach, “in some way its landscape seems to be involved with certain unconscious notions of time, and in particular with those that may be a repressed premonition of our own deaths” (40). The intimations of a coming nuclear apocalypse, of a third world war are, in this way, a dream-work; a phantasmatic operation of a disaster imaginary stimulated into action by the terminal beach. This imaginary reproduces the beach’s pessimism of futures by facilitating its immanentization of Armageddon:

The Pre-Third: the period was characterized in Traven's mind above all by its moral and psychological inversions, by its sense of the whole of history, and in particular of the immediate future—the two decades, 1945-65—suspended from the quivering volcano's lip of World War III. Even the death of his wife and six-year-old son in a motor accident seemed only part of this immense synthesis of the historical and psychic zero, the frantic highways where each morning they met their deaths the advance causeways to the global armageddon (31-2)

The Pre-Third, which names both the Cold War and the period before a third world war, is a historical epoch that anticipates and fantasizes about imminent destruction. Traven imagines that the pervasive sense of impending destruction palpable in the Pre-Third coincides with the fatalistic image he holds of his dear and departed family. Roden confirms this logic when he argues that “Traven has become his traversal of the island; what passes for his world the unity of his disparate encounters. The island is thus a function of temporal synthesis or time binding.”[[9]](#footnote-10) As it is a synthesis of both real historical events and the imagination, an involution of disasters that have befallen Traven and cataclysms that he projects, the concept of Armageddon in ‘The Terminal Beach’ is irreducible to either historical causation or the subjective imagination; both are mutually reinforcing. The imagination of disaster and the real disaster are mutually reinforcing. Historical causation is said to be functionally indistinct from the projective activity of a disaster imaginary:

The actual and potential destructiveness of the atomic bomb plays straight into the hands of the Unconscious. The most cursory study of the dream-life and fantasies of the insane shows that ideas of world-destruction are latent in the unconscious mind... Nagasaki destroyed by the magic of science is the nearest man has yet approached to the realization of dreams that even during the safe immobility of sleep are accustomed to develop into nightmares of anxiety (31).

What is key to note is the mirroring of “moral and psychological inversions,” on one side, with temporal and historical involutions, on the other.[[10]](#footnote-11) As we’ve observed, Ballard presents geological and historical cataclysms as deeply complected, fused; in the same way, the moral and psychological dimensions of the Pre-Third subject are entwined with a historical death-drive. At bottom, Ballard’s complex theory of history presents crisis as a part of apocalyptic processes always already underway and latterly projected through subjectivity.

Given this mutual implication with disaster, the ability of the historical subject to orient themselves in the direction of the future is inhibited, as their historical sense is overtaken by an impulse towards terminal catastrophe. In other words, the order implied in *historia magistra vitae*, that of a continuity between past, present, and future, collapses through these intimations and enfoldings of disaster. T. S. Eliot, in his essay on classicism in art suggests that the expressive “fluency” of art in its classical forms is rooted in “a critical sense of the past, a confidence in the present, and no conscious doubt of the future.”[[11]](#footnote-12) Eliot describes an ideal itinerary of history, as it is elaborated in classicism, which serves as a useful point of comparison. Lacking in the authenticating confidence that this itinerary describes, the situation presented through the terminal beach in the time of the Pre-Third describes a collapse of the totalities of history. The “fluency” of these organizing structures of meaning withers through the malignant effect of nuclear trauma. “The actual and potential destructiveness of the atomic bomb plays straight into the hands of the Unconscious,” stimulating its ideations of Armageddon, undermining the coherence of ideal historical form, inducing an anxiety about the future. This collapse is also a collapsing *into­*, given the irreducibility of Armageddon to a singular historical cause, moral or psychological principle, or technological or epistemological conditions; (*TB*) describes a quantal world, a world divided into fragments, seemingly oriented by a doctrine of quantum indeterminacy. Quantum indeterminacy describes a world without order, irreducible to an emergent or ordering principle. This quantal character has direct consequences for the narrative fluency and continuity of time.

As a case in point, in his attempt to understand the construction of the terminal beach, “this minimal concrete city” (30), once a nuclear testing facility, now left abandoned to slow radioactive decay, Traven recognizes the following:

if primitive man felt the need to assimilate events in the external world to his own psyche, 20th century man had reversed this process; by this Cartesian yardstick, the island at least existed, in a sense true of few other places (31).

Despite the rootedness in a deep geological and historical time, the island equally exists as the projective, phantasmatic construction of a socio-cultural imaginary. The beach exists in different states, different modes of being, but the contingency of which always tends toward Armageddon. The mutually reinforcing relationship between geological history and 20th century man is generative of the terminal sickness incubating on the island and in Traven’s body. This recalls a passage in Ballard’s *The Drowned World* which maps the psychic dimension of the material plane:

Just as psychoanalysis reconstructs the original traumatic situation in order to release the repressed material, so we are now being plunged back into the archaeopsychic past, uncovering the ancient taboos and drives that have been dormant for epochs… Each one of us is as old as the entire biological kingdom, and our bloodstreams are tributaries of the great sea of its total memory.[[12]](#footnote-13)

Ballard implicates the historico-biological trauma in an “archaeopsychic past” which, like the fusion of different geological strata we observed previously, develops a world composed as a deeply enmeshed and complex structure. To mutually implicate contexts and causes in this way is to complicate the historical or narrative record. Ballard’s references to the traumas of history and their excrescence in the experience of the 20th century “sustains the challenge to official notions of endings and beginnings which is staged obsessively throughout Ballard’s fictions.”[[13]](#footnote-14) This state of complexity, which challenges assumed itineraries of temporality and history and uncovers a crippling anxiety of the future, characterises (*TB*) and, as I’ll shortly argue, can serve as an explanatory model for contemporary conditions.

## An Auschwitz of the Soul

(*TB*) is not only about “20th century man,” however, but the whole gamut of associations circling around man in modernity and in the age of capitalism—the Pre-Third would thus also seem to be the time of capitalist modernity. I argue for the short story’s relevance to capitalist modernity based on Ballard’s fashioning of his text with properties of allusion, encouraging readings *beyond* a given context. This is a consequence of his figuration of the terminal beach itself as a palimpsest of the atrocities and traumas of history.[[14]](#footnote-15) The situated-boundedness of the short story’s setting on Eniwetok Atoll and its Cold War context belies a broader sense of historical abstraction which, for my purposes regarding the terminal culture of capitalist modernity, permits an allusive form a reading.

For one, the correspondence of nuclear culture and capitalist modernity is articulated through the formation of that “pseudogeological strata” encountered previously: “The series of weapons tests had fused the sand in layers, and the pseudogeological strata condensed the brief epochs, microseconds in duration, of thermonuclear time.” The formation of a geological layer through human activity recalls the concept of the Anthropocene:

Formulated by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000, the Anthropocene concept proceeds from an eminently reasonable position: the biosphere and geological time has been fundamentally transformed by human activity. A new conceptualization of geological time—one that includes ‘mankind’ as a ‘major geological force’—is necessary. This was a surely a [*sic*]courageous proposal. For to propose humanity as a geological agent is to transgress one of modernity’s fundamental intellectual boundaries.[[15]](#footnote-16)

Ballard is prescient, then, when he writes of a geological formation produced through the activity of the human, specifically the development and catastrophic use of nuclear power. The fundamental role the human plays in the production of this “geology of finitude,” can be rendered in an equation familiar to adherents of the Anthropocene concept: “human action” in addition to “nature” equals “planetary crisis.”[[16]](#footnote-17) Study of the Anthropocene epoch has had to contend with the emergence of the capitalocene as a more accurate designation for the essentiality of capitalism to the organization of “human action” and “nature”; “the Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology.”[[17]](#footnote-18) I refer to the integration of Anthropos and capitalism in the context of nature, which has emerged through the related concepts of the Anthropocene and Capitolecene, to highlight the short story’s comparable formal and thematic concerns. (*TB*) communicates the catastrophic age of capitalist modernity and its complex integration with nature through its concept of traumatized geological time. Clearly, the terminal mood which pervades the island is not isolable to the Cold War context as it is comorbid with a broader and more ubiquitous sense of human history.

In exposing complicities in causes, contexts, and symptoms in the production of the terminal phenomenon across historical time, as Ballard does through his representation of “the island [as] a function of time synthesis,” an understanding of how the itinerary of temporality itself is deeply complected and therefore loses form and direction is inaugurated. At least, it is in this direction I would like to take my argument by suggesting that the terminal culture of capitalist modernity, as with (*TB*), is a complex formation and a product of diffuse and mutually-implicated crises established across time, deranging any coherent orientation or hope in the future. I use capitalist modernity as a descriptor for historical period constructed through the political, economic, technological, and social conditions arising out of capitalism and modernity.

Though predicated on the legacy of the Second World and Cold Wars and their intensification of nuclear threat, (*TB*) encapsulates a broad and dislocated sense of crisis, one which holds the future to ransom. The island describes “an Auschwitz of the soul whose mausoleums contained the mass graves of the *still undead*” (31, my emphasis). From Ballard’s vantage point in 1965, Auschwitz being only twenty years hence, the recent historical trauma of the genocide embodies a present and lingering threat, such that Auschwitz resembles something the western cultural imagination had not ‘moved past.’ “Civilisation,” after all, “now includes death camps and Muselmanner among its material and spiritual products.”[[18]](#footnote-19) I mean to say that Ballard’s conception of historical trauma is broader and more far-reaching than the category of “Auschwitz” allows; Ballard describes a trauma inclusive of and yet beyond Auschwitz, beyond nukes and mutually-assured destruction, which is at the planetary scale and rooted in deep geological time.

The crisis of confidence in the itinerary of history highlighted by Eliot, which comes because of modernity’s disintegrated totalities, is bound up, as the phrase “Auschwitz of the soul” implies, with the twentieth century’s violence and upheaval. Beyond humanity’s most violent century, Herbert Read similarly argued in 1947, an “attitude” of confidence in humanity and faith in civilisation is no longer possible.[[19]](#footnote-20) (TB) recalls those arguments of civilizational collapse and goes on to implicate them in the barbarisms of the present and the “still undead” future.

Taking this as a basis, we could say that we too inhabit the terminal beach, we today inhabit its world-historical Pre-Third moment, that “still undead” condition, which immanentizes apocalypse and finds the future in perpetual crisis. To be “still undead” is to no longer behave as if one were still alive, it is to be in some sense clinically dead and yet not quite at peace. Ballard’s use of the undead condition to describe the time of the Pre-Third discloses how the morbidity of the Twentieth Century persists in the manner of a haunting. History is thus captured by a terminal mood which shapes the future with reference to its nightmarish condition.

Moreover, Ballard’s pathologization of time and the future can be read on Traven’s body as well as the social body. In carrying out such a diagnostic reading, we would then be able to establish the grounds for the following argument: the arrested itinerary of temporality in contemporary culture is a symptom of a series of crises and terminal afflictions of capitalist modernity. Given (TB)s’ recombination of heterogeneous contexts of meaning into a singular and complex structure and Ballard’s depiction of a corrupted itinerary of temporality, there are productive comparisons that can be made with capitalist modernity’s structure of complexity; capitalist modernity is similarly formed of a series of mutually-implicated crises and terminal symptoms that complicate the itinerary of temporality. What follows elaborates this argument with reference to several moments in capitalist modernity. I wish to introduce these moments as examples of modernity as intensely attuned to and caught up in crisis. This fixation on crisis characterises my understanding of terminal culture. I’m looking to show how, in several contexts, a pervasive sense of crisis seems to haunt the modern cultural imaginary, at the cost of alternative visions of the future.

Antonio Gramsci’s reading of his own historical moment in the early part of the twentieth century is relevant to my argument concerning the comorbidity of crisis in capitalist modernity with terminal culture. Gramsci describes a period of political turmoil in modernity, one which cannot resolve itself into a future. The following statement from Gramsci is often quoted, though often severed from its historical context: “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”[[20]](#footnote-21) Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks,* wrote this note in response to the moribund politics that followed The Wall Street Crash and the advent of the Great Depression. The upheaval in the wake of that severe crisis of capitalism mobilized European fascisms and, on the other side, a retrenchment into undemocratic ultraleft orthodoxy, of which Gramsci was critical.[[21]](#footnote-22)

This general characterisation of political deadlock across Europe was keenly felt in his native Italy. Gramsci lamented the radical political division between the rising fascism of Mussolini and the Italian Communist Party’s adherence to “an ultraleft perspective predicated on the impending collapse of fascism and the imminence of a proletarian revolution in Italy.”[[22]](#footnote-23) By way of an explanation of this situation, Gramsci wrote

The aspect of the modern crisis which is bemoaned as a ‘wave of materialism’ is related to what is called the ‘crisis of authority.’[[23]](#footnote-24)

Metastasized with the crisis of capitalism was a “crisis of authority” that expressed itself through the “polarization between radical Left and radical Right that developed during the interwar crisis.”[[24]](#footnote-25) The emergence of these new forms is what Gramsci describes as a “wave of materialism.” Capitalism, no longer able to legitimize itself, to establish a convincing case for its stability and functionality, thrusts politics to radical extremes. This lead Gramsci to read the crisis of the times as a consequence of the dominant ideology passing away, yet a new order remaining powerless to be born. In this suspended state, the “morbid symptoms” of new fascisms and moribund politics appear. In the state of “interregnum,” defined as a breach of continuity, an interval in which power is vacated, Gramsci observes a culture pitted in crisis, without the means to resolve the situation into an order or to produce newness.

I claimed at the outset that the itinerary of temporality is staked together with images of crisis and terminal disease. Gramsci describes an inter-war period as locked in a state of temporal and historical lag because of a crisis of capital and authority, which results in malignant political outgrowths and a prevailing state of inertia. This initial claim is also born out elsewhere and not only here: crises of authority and confidence in the twentieth century trace a general trend observable in modernity even since the time of Matthew Arnold’s ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,’ 1855, which articulates a malaise in modernity still apt for our time:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,

The other powerless to be born[[25]](#footnote-26)

When I quoted him previously, Eliot was concerned primarily with classicism in art and the enunciation of *historia magistra vitae* as the ideal form of historical movement therein. In his criticism of Arnold’s poem, Eliot exposes this ideal itinerary in crisis beyond the bounds of classicism and in the time of modernity, for Arnold’s poem represented “a moment of historic doubt, recorded by its most representative mind.”[[26]](#footnote-27) Eliot brings to attention a crisis of faith in the historical order which, in Arnold’s poem, emerges as a fundamental concern of modernity. Whereas historical “fluency” was dependent on a “confidence in the present” and “no conscious doubt in the future,” the modern cultural imaginary is riddled with doubt and anxiety, which consequently inhibits temporal flow and the production of newness.

‘Stanzas’ models a typically modern consciousness of uncertainty in the face of undecidable meanings, incompatible totalities, and competing systems of faith. The schisms inaugurated through the rise of a liberal, progressive, scientifically-oriented, and technologically-mediated image of the modern future in antipathy to the traditional—and especially religious—totalities that organized the pre-modern world don’t need repeating here. Suffice it to say the crisis of identity represented in Arnold’s poem, in which irreconcilable tensions result in a state of impotence, characterises a sense of the inhibited itinerary of temporality as a distinguishing feature of modernity. Modernity’s persistence in a state of interregnum, unable to resolve its conflicts into a coherent and successive order, resembles Gramsci’s critique of modern politics. Both shed light on what I’m looking to develop as terminal culture.

Gramsci and Arnold diagnose a morbidity in the modern body politic indicative of a culture in terminal decline, without the means to resolve itself into a coherent future. What the former develops out of a two-fold critique of capitalism and its resultant political forms only obliquely recalls the internalisation of the antinomies of the modern social imaginary posited by the latter. What I, nonetheless, seek to emphasise between them and beyond their respective contexts is the pervasiveness of crisis and inertial structures of feeling as emergent modes of being in modernity. More than this, I wish to emphasise the comorbidity of crisis, terminal culture, and the conditions of capitalist modernity. The metastasization of a variety of symptoms alongside a progressive knotting together of inertial states, like we observed in Ballard’s short story, characterise the situation of capitalist modernity.

## Culture of crisis

Expanding on the debilitating co-implication of crises with a sense of temporal inertia referenced above, the terminal culture of capitalist modernity appears as a problem of complexity and integration at the planetary scale. This argument relies on the work of Edgar Morin, whose systems theory suggested that the constitutive problems of the twentieth century, namely, “the economy, population, development, ecology have become problems that concern all nations and civilisations, that is, the planet as a whole.”[[27]](#footnote-28) Furthermore, the crises of capitalist modernity have become multivalent, integrated, and “polycrisical”:[[28]](#footnote-29)

In fact, there are inter-retroactions between the different problems, crises, and threats. Such is also the case for the problems of health, population, the environment, lifestyle, civilization, and development. So it is also with the crisis of the future, which promotes virulent nationalisms, economic instability, and general balkanization, all of this through inter-retroactions. From a wider perspective, the crisis of the anthroposphere and that of the biosphere are mutually implicative, as are the crises of the past, present, and future.

[…]

Thus, one is at a loss to single out a number one problem to which all others would be subordinated. There is no ‘single vital problem,’ but many vital problems, and it is this complex inter-solidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem.[[29]](#footnote-30)

Morin sheds light on how the many crises of capitalist modernity are no longer isolable owing to their integration and interaction. Elsewhere he argues that “The richer the organizational complexity, the greater the possibility, hence danger, of crisis.”[[30]](#footnote-31) The complex interaction of modernity’s constitutive antagonisms itself stimulates the tendency towards crisis as they are “mutually implicative.” Morin’s “complex thought,” as his theory of complex integration of systems is named, finds more recent expression in the work of Franco Berardi who considers what happens to our collective concept of possibility in the wake of such complexity.

In *Futurability*, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi diagnoses the situation of capitalist modernity as follows: “The inertia of the possibilities inscribed in the present composition of the social body is an effect of the impotence of subjectivity[; …] impotence is the shape that potency takes in the age of technical and geopolitical hyper-complexity,” wherein “the energy-centred style of modernity is replaced by inadequacy.”[[31]](#footnote-32) Hyper-complexity, the intricacy and involvedness of the world-historical structure of capitalist modernity, results in a situation in which the energy of modernity is unable to resolve itself into a potent force because the faculties needed to process complexity are found wanting. “Reason. […] can no longer govern the hyper-complexity of the contemporary network of human relations,” writes Berardi.[[32]](#footnote-33) Morin’s claim that crisis propagates crisis in a system of complexity complements Berardi’s with regards to hyper-complexity’s inhibiting effect on the production of futures. It is on this basis that I argue that the itinerary of temporality is bound up with crises and terminal culture, insofar as the overwhelming rampancy of crisis and its complex integration into the structures of capitalist modernity produces a condition directed towards terminal and futureless ends that we are powerless to alter the course of.

The diversity and complexity of forms in capitalist modernity and the “powerlessness” to resolve themselves into a coherency *catalyse* terminal culture. Berardi and, as I will argue below, Susan Sontag, suggest that the inability to conceive of possibilities beyond crisis condemn us to a state of terminal decline. Depression, impotence, morbidity, powerlessness, interregnum, inertia—these descriptors of terminal culture—characterise a situation also described by Sontag. In her essay ‘The Imagination of Disaster’ she writes “the imagery of disaster […] is above all the emblem of an inadequate response.”[[33]](#footnote-34) Sontag writes in the context of the disaster film and its depictions of unfathomable terror, where the tendency towards total annihilation as expressed through that cultural form exposes an inability of the cultural imaginary to assimilate and confront the possibility of annihilation. The crises the disaster film depicts are abstractions of “world-wide anxieties” and the film then “inculcate[s] a strange apathy concerning [their] processes of radiation, contamination, and destruction.”[[34]](#footnote-35) The complexity of crises and anxiety in the face of them conditions a subjectivity of impotence. At bottom, the impotence at the heart of modern experience is bound up with the presentiment of disaster, as the means to imagine and actualize possibilities beyond the catastrophe of the status quo is inhibited.

My scope of reference—to Ballard, Gramsci, Arnold, Berardi, Sontag—is wide and tries to extrapolate an argument regarding terminal culture out of what are, in any event, distinct and specific historical contexts. The futurelessness of Ballard’s Cold War text is distinct from the political inertia of modern politics in Gramsci’s Italy, Arnold’s characterisation of tensions in the modern cultural imaginary, or the inability to cogitate and represent disaster in Sontag. Having said that, Ballard complicates a reading of the inertial condition of the terminal beach as reducible to a single, isolable cause. I suggested that the text represents a quantal world regulated by a theme of quantum indeterminacy; this is part of Ballard’s creative means of aestheticizing crisis but, nonetheless, I think this principle of mutual implication maps directly onto contemporary conditions. What I see as terminal culture, much like in ‘The Terminal Beach,’ is an involution of causes and contexts, where the “polycrisical” nature of capitalist modernity takes on more significance than individual instances of historical causation; or, as Morin writes, “it is this complex inter-solidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem.”

My references, though indeed sharing in the general theme of terminal culture. are rooted in their specific historical contexts; nonetheless, they speak to a complicity in symptoms, to a comorbidity of causes, to a universalised feeling, to a metastasization of crises with terminal states owing to the complex structure of capitalist modernity. I’d argue, then, that when Morin speaks of how “one is at a loss” to identify a singular problem in crisis capitalist modernity, he recalls that “impotence,” “inadequacy,” and “powerlessness” referenced by Berardi, Sontag, and Arnold respectively; together these constitute the inertial mode of being that has long characterised the complex and evolving nature of the experience of crises and the responses to them in capitalist modernity.

In speaking of terminal culture, I wish to emphasise the pervasiveness and ubiquity of this trend. What I describe as terminal culture Panayiota Pyla and Belgin Turan Özkaya describe as a “Culture of Crisis” in their editorial to a special issue on crisis for *Architectural Histories*:[[35]](#footnote-36)

To speak of a ‘crisis’ at this moment is to speak of an ubiquity of crisis. Any working distinction between ‘economic’ and ‘political’ crises or between ‘personal’ and ‘collective’ crises has become meaningless. In addition, ‘crisis’ either exists or is evoked in every realm of cultural practice. One may speak of a ‘culture of crisis’ not only in the sense of a ‘way of life’ (per the ethnographic or anthropological definition of culture), but also in the sense of ‘cultural production’ and ‘cultural consumption’, whereby crisis has its own politics of social antagonisms, local and global.[[36]](#footnote-37)

The ”ubiquity of crisis,” where crisis seeps into all aspects of life and reproduces itself thoroughly, resembles terminal culture in the sense of an unidirectional tendency towards crisis. The mutually-implicative nature of crisis and its wide-ranging institutionalisation in culture recalls what Morin and Berardi describes as (hyper-)complexity and refers to the composite structure of terminal culture where, owing to an involution of the technical, geopolitical, geological, biological, cultural, personal—as we saw in (*TB*)—crisis metastasizes. As disclosed in the title of a recent work by philosopher Isabelle Stengers, we live *in catastrophic times*—the times of multiple catastrophes, now metastasised, no longer reparable in isolation and, therefore, terminal.[[37]](#footnote-38)Evidently, the contemporary worldview is replete with these serialized accounts of crises; ranging from the linear project of modernity’s culmination through the achievement of its progressive goal, to the collapse of an overextended politico-economic structure that leverages futures by capitalizing on the present and its finite resources, the vaunted culmination of civilisation in neoliberal democratic society, intimations of emerging nuclear holocausts, ecological crisis, crises in solidarity at Europe’s borders, population crisis, and so on.

## Fixed points

The crises I have just elaborated are pervasive, exponentially intensifying, and mutually-implicated. Crucially, they fix the future in a terminal direction given the ever-limited possibilities of the intractable global situation. The contemporary situation of capitalist modernity, seemingly formed of rampant and intensifying crises, is fixed in a state in which alternative futures are powerless to be born. An incapacity characterises modernity, especially in relation to crisis, and gives it the mood of an era of limit through which a terminal culture arises. As I noted previously with reference to the Capitalocene concept, “human action” in conjunction with “nature” results in “planetary crisis”—crisis which, in its intensification and viral reproduction, conditions a subjectivity and cultural imaginary of impotence. What this thesis seeks to address, then, is the terminal “structure of feeling” defined by Mark Fisher as capitalist realism, “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.”[[38]](#footnote-39)

The terminal structure of feeling in capitalist modernity is self-fulfilling and prophetic, insofar as the catastrophes of the times serve as “virtual ‘attractors’ towards which our reality, left to itself, tends.”[[39]](#footnote-40) Slavoj Žižek suggests in this statement that crises serve as prefigurative and magnetic images towards which reality is inevitably pulled. Reality is so fixed and futureless as it is overdetermined by the virtual attractions of magnetic images of catastrophe. The readings in the previous section sought to elaborate the development of the tendency towards catastrophe as a function of, on the one hand, a destructive culture of crisis and, on the other, the inhibiting effects of the complex structure of capitalist modernity. Beyond considerations of structure, I’m also keenly interested in the question of image and representation, as this thesis understands the domain of image and representation as the context in which images of crisis contend against those of the possible-future. The overdetermination of images of crisis in the production of fixed and futureless terminal culture is owed to capitalist modernity, such that there appears to be a crisis of representations in capitalist modernity.

In *Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Jason W. Moore alludes to the lack of radical images of the future capable of contending against capitalist modernity’s own representations:

Efforts to transcend capitalism in any egalitarian and broadly sustainable fashion will be stymied so long as the radical political imagination is captive to capitalism’s either/or organization of reality: Nature/Society.[[40]](#footnote-41)

Moore argues that “reality” is “encased” in capitalism’s dualisms or, in other words, what we experience as reality is an effect of capitalism’s own particular terms and representations. This is crucial to my understanding of terminal culture as a consequence of capitalist modernity. Our ‘map’ of reality and thus our orientation to the future is conditioned by the coordinates set by capitalism. Capitalist modernity shapes reality and the itinerary of temporality within it by two means; firstly, through what Timothy Mitchell describes as modernity’s “staging of the world as representation”; secondly, through what Jean-Pierre Dupuy describes as the “self-transcendence of the future” in capitalism. The first process is the more elementary as it describes how social reality in modernity is produced through forms of representation. The second draws out the implications of this process in the context of the future, where the future as represented through capitalism begins to reproduce itself terminally. I’ll elaborate these ideas further in order to prepare the ground for my discussion of fictions of possibility as a response to terminal culture and crisis of representations found therein.

There’s not enough time to reproduce Mitchell’s argument here in full detail. Briefly, nonetheless, modernity’s ‘staging of the word as representation’ is Timothy Mitchell’s description of the way capitalist modernity organizes social reality through image-based “forms of replay, replication, and staging.”[[41]](#footnote-42) What modernity innovated through its recognition of the artificial nature of control was the translation of the mechanics of representation into controlled, material effects. [[42]](#footnote-43) Mitchell refrains from making a direct analogy between “image-making” and the modern. Mitchell’s argument is not that ‘image-making’ serves as the elementary basis for modernity; rather, he seeks to emphasise that what is taken for reality in modernity is an effect of the representations martialled to its serial reproduction. At bottom, capitalist modernity is a hegemonic social, political, economic, and cultural condition, whose space and time is of its own making and which is constitutive of what we come to know as ‘reality.’ Beyond Mitchell, this is a reading of modernity shared by Zygmunt Bauman, Adūnīs, Houben and Schrempf and others.[[43]](#footnote-44)

## Self-transcendence

In conjunction with modernity’s staging of the world as representation there is also what Dupuy describes as the ‘self-transcendence of the future.’ Both are related insofar as they define formal practices in capitalist modernity which direct the course of the future through forms of *meaningful description*. Self-transcendence is Dupuy’s definition of “the feedback of the causal effects of predicting the future upon the future itself.”[[44]](#footnote-45) Dupuy uses the term to articulate “the way the future is described and understood is part of what determines the future.”[[45]](#footnote-46) The projection of capitalism into the future is dependent on this logic of self-transcendence. As Dupuy elaborates, capitalism formalises this projective activity, builds it into the market and financial instruments, then sets up the self-transcendence of the future as an inbuilt feature of capitalism.[[46]](#footnote-47) An understanding of the logic of self-transcendence in capitalist modernity is significant to our inquiry into terminal culture as it reveals how the future is subject to a determining logic. Capitalism sets its own predicates for reality and the future, deciding in advance what is possible and impossible.[[47]](#footnote-48) The self-transcendence of the future and modernity’s staging of the world as representation serve as the formal and representational structures which found and undergird the conditions of terminal culture, its sense of reality and the disposition of what is possible and impossible within that construction of reality. Accordingly, capitalist modernity’s catastrophic spacetime demarcates the limits of the necessary and, therefore, the circumscribed horizons of our present reality.

Žižek takes up Dupuy’s concept of self-transcendence and then elaborates on the role of representations in the production of the apocalyptic future in his *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously.* He does so by first referencing the Derridean distinction between *l’avenir* and *la future*, as words for ‘future’ that cannot be easily accommodated in English:

There are in French two words for ‘future’ which cannot be adequately rendered in English: *futur* and *avenir. Futur* stands for future as the continuation of the present, as the full actualization of the tendencies which are already here, while *avenir* points more towards a radical break, a discontinuity with the present—*avenir* is what is to come (*a venir*), not just what will be. Say, in today’s apocalyptic global situation, the ultimate horizon of the ‘future’ is what Jean-Pierre Dupuy calls the dystopian ‘fixed point,’ the zero-point of the ecological breakdown, of global economic and social chaos – even if it is indefinitely postponed, this zero-point is the virtual ‘attractor’ towards which our reality, left to itself, tends. The way to combat the catastrophe is through acts which interrupt this drifting towards the catastrophic ‘fixed point’ and take upon themselves the risk of giving birth to some radical Otherness ‘to come.’ We can see here how ambiguous the slogan ‘no future’ is: at a deeper level, it does not designate the closure, the impossibility of change, but what we should be striving for – to break the hold of the catastrophic “future” over us and thereby open up the space for something New ‘to come.’[[48]](#footnote-49)

Žižek captures several key points relevant to my conception of the relationship between the inhibited production of futures in capitalist modernity, contemporary crisis, and fictions of possibility. Firstly, he elaborates the Derridean distinction between *futur* and *avenir*, the uninterrupted continuity of always already established tendencies against the radical contingency of the ‘wholly other.’ *Futur*, most relevantly,pertains to a future that is reducible to a rational programme, a programmable future. Read in this way, this future appears as a deterministic horizon, one to which reality inevitably tends. This is reality understood as the determination of an all too fixed image of the future. *Futur*, the future as “the feedback of the causal effects of predicting the future upon the future itself,” resembles Dupuy’s self-transcendence of the future in capitalism. It resembles it insofar as self-transcendence implies a similar continuity and projection of the established paradigm which, in this case, is that determined by capitalism.

The logic of self-transcendence is evident in Žižek’s consideration of Dupuy’s idea of the “fixed point” or absolute horizon of apocalyptic global capitalism. Žižek characterises this apocalyptic projection as a “virtual” image of the future, “towards which our reality, left to itself, tends.”[[49]](#footnote-50) Žižek paraphrases Dupuy, who characterises our present reality as the outgrowth of this determining “fixed point,” a telos towards which reality tends, thereby establishing the future’s “ultimate horizon.” For Dupuy, this end-state of contemporary society subsists in “the ecological breakdown of global economic and social chaos” and is consolidated through a virtual attraction or a tendency towards the magnetic image of catastrophe. What is at stake here is how terminal culture and its occupation of the horizons of possibility obtains in the idea of a fixed and self-transcending future.

Žižek also sets up the virtual is the ground of contestation for alternative accounts of the future. I’ll develop this concept of the virtual further in the pages to come, as the virtual is an essential element in my own conception of fictions of possibility. Here, in this context, Žižek develops the domain of the virtual, that which exists *in effect* though not actually existing as such, as the arena in which diverse images of the future are contested with a view to producing new possibilities. For Žižek, Dupuy’s fixed point is a virtual attractor towards which reality tends. The relationship of virtuality to reality in this case can be best understood, as Mark Fisher points out, through a fundamental distinction made in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory between ‘the real’ and ‘reality.’[[50]](#footnote-51) “The Lacanian Real,” Žižek writes in *Interrogating the Real*, “has no positive-substantial consistency, it is just the gap between the multiple perspectives on it.”[[51]](#footnote-52) The Real cannot be encountered directly, cannot be translated into the symbolic order of language, as it is the site of a traumatic void. The Real offers itself only through partial, parallactic views in the frame of reality. In fact, the real is the unpresentable that is suppressed in order to give reality its own logical coherence. Reality, as it is constituted through a repression, appears as a ‘principle of mental functioning’ and not as an apparent and objective given.

The reality principle is not some kind of natural way associated with how things are […] The reality principle itself is ideologically mediated; one could even claim that it constitutes the highest form ideology, the ideology that present itself as empirical fact (or biological, economic…) necessity (and that we tend to perceive as non-ideological). It is precisely here that we should be most alert to the function of ideology.[[52]](#footnote-53)

Reality serves as a virtual and parallax view of the Real that cannot be directly encountered. Reality is *virtually* the same thing as the Real but is distinguished from it by virtue of its ideological and representational mediation. Psychoanalytic theory invokes suspicion of reality in the guise of a naturalised order of meaning through an elaboration of its ideological conceit. No longer a given, reality opens to questioning, given its status as a contested domain of meaning through which varying accounts of its concept are made possible.

What is at stake is our world-historical entanglement in a state in which the conception of alternative, wholly other, or utopian spaces and times is determined to be impossible and out of our capability. Frederick Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, Isabelle Stengers, Mark Fisher, Svetlana Boym, Franco Berardi, and Simon Critchley, amongst others, suggest that thinking directed towards alternative futures has been made to conform, through various processes of domestication, reappropriation, marginalization, to a dominant capitalist modernity whose logic recognizes no possibilities past the limits of the necessary. Dupuy’s reading is redolent of recent cultural and critical theory, which crystalizes what he calls a fixed point—the telos of the contemporary as resolved in a fixed and final (sometimes catastrophic, but always fatalistic) image —in a series of related concepts such as ‘capitalist realism,’ ‘the age of impotence,’ ‘the end of history,’ ‘culture of crisis,’ etc. The ‘ecology of limits’ delineated by this strain of contemporary critique laments the false identification of the historico-temporal horizon of capitalist modernity—the particular itinerary of temporality capitalist modernity stages through representation—with reality *as such* and balks at capitalist modernity’s viral reproduction of these limits.

Reality, the account of things as they supposedly are, in its identity as a horizon of meaning, imposes a limit accepted and assumed at the level of the cultural consciousness. Stengers characterises the contemporary as a period in which “‘realism’ has triumphed;” “Every measure that would fetter the free dynamics of the market, that is to say, the unalienable right of multinational oil companies and financial speculators to transform every situation, whatever it may be, into a source of profit, will be condemned as ‘unrealistic.’”[[53]](#footnote-54) The ‘facticity’ of the real—the ‘reality principle’—has a mediating function in public discourse and serves to organize our social reality. It delegitimizes forms of idealism and utopianism which tend to look speculatively towards possible futures owing to the established status quo—that the world *supervenes* on ‘the real.’ Mark Fisher dedicates his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* to this pervasive sense of futural inertia arising out of ‘[capitalism’s seamless occupation] of the horizons of the thinkable.”[[54]](#footnote-55) A significant portion of his argument is drawn from Žižek’s critique of an avowedly ‘post-ideological society,’ which maintains a cynical distance from capitalism, but remains nonetheless subject to it in its form as “an (unconscious) fantasy [that structures] reality itself.”[[55]](#footnote-56)

## Shields and ciphers

The ‘catastrophe’ of our contemporary situation obtains in its *timelessness*, its perennial status as a “way of life,”[[56]](#footnote-57) owing to the iteration of crisis and disaster that persists as a continuous fixture of experience. In that event, catastrophe also obtains in this situation’s *untimeliness,* since the conceptuality of time is now *out of joint*. To return to my opening claim, the *itinerary* of temporality is staked together with images of crisis and terminal disease, such that the movement and production of futures is inhibited and conditioned by inertial states. And so, without a working grammar, concept, or vocabulary for the progressive future, we remain dispossessed of a temporal register for an alternative to these catastrophic times.

To return also to Ballard, the author suggests his own temporal register for an alternative to terminal culture in (*TB*). The speculative practices he elaborates through Traven’s navigation of the terminal beach have productive implications for my understanding of fictions of possibility, the counter-argument to terminal culture. Ballard develops the play of significations and the construction of creative virtualities as means to introduce possibility into a fixed and futureless situation. What’s at stake for Traven as he slowly wastes away in the tomb-like superfortresses is the discovery of a means of escape. In this way, the challenge Traven faces is relevant to our situation, at least when framed in the form of the following question: what means are available to us so that we are not structured by that terminal mood, that mutual implication of life and crisis, which immanentizes apocalypse by iterating crisis and inhibiting the production of futures? To immanentize, as suggested earlier, is to bring about an end condition through the stimulation of latent eschatological impulses. It is this virtual attraction and tendency towards fatal ends that Traven will seek to reverse or escape by means of a type of creative power, a power which can bear up against the island’s terminal condition.

Traven, lost between the blocks, feeling in the dark for a means of escape, realizes finally that “he must soon find an *equivalent* for the blocks or he would end his life within them” (41, my emphasis). Apparently, “It was not until he discovered the blocks that Traven realized he would never leave the island” (36), that is also to say, his fate is sealed in his encounter with these superfortresses. The blocks, as we discovered earlier, organize the tyrannical landscape and are the objects out of which the beach’s inertial force irradiates. The blocks stimulate the immanent and deep-seated trauma of geological cataclysms through the heat of the present nuclear threat and register that legacy of trauma as the imminent and apocalyptic fate of Traven and the collective future; after all, “This island was a fossil of time future” (33):

As he moved past the towers and blockhouses the heat lay over the island in an unbroken mantle. He had entered a zone devoid of time (36).

Cloistered in a hot and oppressive enclosure, the island lags in a timeless limbo, with no sense of movement or change. The terminal beach also represents a world without cause, in the sense that temporal and historical contingency has been arrested by the tyrannical order of the blocks:

With their geometric regularity and finish, the blocks seemed to occupy more than their own volumes of space, imposing on him a mood of absolute calm and order (38).

Regulated by this fixed order—the terminal structure of the beach—Traven comes to appreciate his total ontological destitution: “With dusk, and the need to leave the blocks and find food, he realized that he had lost himself” (38). It is at this point he realizes that, in order to escape, to breach the terminal beach’s enclosing “mantle,” he must find an *equivalent* to the blocks.

Traven means an “equivalent” of the blocks’ ability to immanentize and actualize their terminal temporality, their condition, their state of things; but rather than doing so in the service of apocalypse, to do so for the ends of life. Traven seeks a route heading in the other direction to “the advance causeways to global Armageddon” (32) charted by the terminal beach, a route which can instead advance the cause of his escape. If the blocks can immanentize the eschaton in this way, Traven’s equivalent must immanentize alternative possibility. To be equivalent, that is, to be *virtually* the same thing as, or being equal to in effect or essence, sees Traven seeking out an equivalent potential*.* He seeks a potency or a potentiality corresponding in value, meaning, significance, to the blocks—one that he can use to save himself. If the terminal beach provides a temporal register for Armageddon, Traven’s equivalent resembles a temporal register for an alternative to it. To escape the inertial condition of the terminal beach, to rediscover the self he has lost, he must find a force equivalent and opposite to the island’s inertial force.

As evidence for the argument I’ve sketched out, I’ll begin with the various descriptions of the island as the site of the play of significations, a place constituted by symbols and ciphers:

Above him, along the crests of the dunes, the tall palms leaned into the dim air like the symbols of a cryptic alphabet. The landscape of the island was covered by strange ciphers (29).

The symbolic journey through its inner circles set its own times of arrival and departure (35).

The terminal beach is rooted in the symbolic universe; this is a place where conjectural meanings are encoded and decoded, read and (re)interpreted interminably. This is a place where “The abstract patterns were meaningless, [but where one might amuse] himself by devising suitable titles for them” (39). Ballard constructs a zone devoid of time, ordered and regulated by an inertial force, but whose underlying symbolic architecture offers a margin of creative play. Meaning is not totally foreclosed in this space, despite the oppressive mood of the island. Against the “geometric regularity” of the blocks themselves, we have an alternative play of symbolic meanings, which introduces contingency into the frame. Like so, several of the island’s symbols, ciphers, abstract patterns, pertain to futures:

Above him, the five apertures looked out upon this scene like the tutelary symbols of a futuristic myth (35).

Ameliorative and protective symbols begin to appear in this way, but only appear through meaning-making and the play of significations. Apertures appear *as* or *like* “tutelary symbols,” in the manner of a resemblance, as the work of interpretive comparison. Through the play of significations, a countervailing myth of the future appears, but this is a notion of the future unlike any we’ve encountered previously. Whereas the future elaborated in the earlier part of the short story was the property of the “fossil record,” a future constructed on the basis of archaeological and geological relics and remains, here we are introduced to a futuristic myth constructed on the basis of “aperture,” which the Oxford English dictionary understands as “the process of opening”; “the opening up of what is involved, intricate, restricted”; “an opening, an open space between portions of solid matter.”[[57]](#footnote-58) Against the future inscribed in material, fossil record, we have a future of interstitial openings. Ballard articulates through the aperture and symbolic invention an alternative ontology for the future.

That the possibility of escape is staked on the discovery of a symbolic equivalent to the power of the terminal beach is explicitly suggested towards the short story’s conclusion. In his traversal of the island, Traven has found himself stuck within “the thousands of empty cubic pits of the blocks” (46). Then,

In the interval of lucidity, he looked down at his emaciated arms and legs, decorated with a lace-work of ulcers. To his right was a trail of disturbed dust, the wavering marks of slack heels.

To his left lay a long corridor between the blocks, joining an oblique series a hundred yard away. Among these, where a narrow interval revealed the open space beyond, was a crescent-shaped shadow, poised in the air above the ground.

During the next half an hour it moved slowly, turning as the sun swung, the profile of a dune.

[…]

Seizing on this cipher, which hung before him like a symbol on a shield, Traven pushed himself through the dust. He climbed precariously to his feet, and shielded his eyes from the blocks. He moved forward a few paces at a time (46).

Afforded a brief moment of respite from the oppressive mood of the blocks, Traven *sees* a gap, an opening of a possible-space, which introduces a rupture into the island’s mantle of mortifying enclosure. Let us remember that the related symptoms of the illness he’s developed on the island affected the ocular instruments which pertain to the processing of time and history. In this “interval of lucidity,” those functions seem to have momentarily returned to him. Apparently, the act of looking is critical to the discovery of Traven’s equivalent: in shielding his eyes to the blocks and turning his gaze instead in the direction of a gap which opens to a beyond, there is a suggestion of a means of protecting against the island’s inertial condition. Whereas the terminal beach functions as an enclosing “mantle,” an enclosed “zone devoid of time,” this interval Traven sees signals or opens towards a beyond. Traven apprehends the opening as a cipher and seizes upon this symbol as a practical means of seizing upon a kind of future.

That there is an element of possibility symbolically inscribed in the terminal beach goes somewhat against Catherine McKenna’s argument in her article ‘Zone of Non-Time: Residues of Iconic Events in Ballard’s Fiction’:

Ballard’s texts emphasize the nature of these locations [in ‘The Terminal Beach’ and *The Atrocity Exhibition*] as archival sites, or material substrates upon which archival traces are etched, through his repeated descriptions of elements of the landscape as cipher and cryptic alphabets. […] These landscapes are imprinted with signs, ciphers, and physical evidence, forming an alternative archive of the trauma that took place there.[[58]](#footnote-59)

My own reading of ‘The Terminal Beach’ uncovers an element of contingency not wholly present in McKenna’s reading, insofar as the opening of possibility through these ciphers as “tutelary” and protective symbols does not neatly correspond to her reading of the cipher as an alternative archive of trauma. Whereas McKenna explores the terminal beach’s ciphers as archivizations of historical trauma, I suggest that the specific appearances of recuperative ciphers posit a world *beyond* trauma. In other words, these ciphers are not only decisive “etchings” and “imprints” through which traumatic meaning is codified, but also “intervals” and “openings” through which meaning opens to possibility, as means to “push through” and “shield against” historical traumas. We encounter not only an *informatics* of trauma composed of archival sites, archaeological remains, and “material substrates”; counter to and beyond this informatics there is also the emergence of what Thomas Pynchon describes as a ‘corridor metaphysics,’ incipient beginnings and openings in the form of gaps, passages, and interstices that possess symbolic meaning.

As McKenna notes, the cipher is a fundamental component in (*TB*), given “repeated descriptions of elements of the landscape as ciphers and cryptic alphabets.”[[59]](#footnote-60) For my purposes, the cipher is also fundamental to the construction of an alternative to terminal culture, so it is worth spending some time to unpack this concept. The Oxford English Dictionary describes the technical definition of the cipher as follows:

An arithmetical symbol or character (0) of no value by itself, but which increases or decreases the value of other figures according to its position. When placed after any figure or series of figures in a whole number it increases the value of that figure or series tenfold, and when placed before a figure in decimal fractions, it decreases its value in the same proportion.[[60]](#footnote-61)

The cipher, then, as a symbol which relativizes all other figures based on their comparative position to it, functions, I argue, as a principle of contingency in the face of the beach’s terminal condition. The cipher itself means nothing, as its various etymological roots in Old French, Medieval Latin, Arabic, etc., denote its meaning as nothing, void, or empty. This constitutive emptiness is significant in that it leaves open an alternative possibility to the “etchings” and “imprints of historical trauma or the “fossil record” of geological trauma; in the face of a daunting archive of the natural and manmade catastrophe, the cipher—as empty signifier—points to an unwritten, unknown, contingent, future.

We’ve observed through the geological “fossil record” and through McKenna’s reading of the archivization of historical trauma in the landscape an argument which ties violence to the codification of meaning, archival practices, and methods of categorising knowledge. In McKenna’s reading, historical trauma is constructed as a “material substrate,” a materialisation of a traumatic body of facts. In the latter stages of ‘The Terminal Beach,’ there seems to be a case made for openness and the contingency of meaning through the play of ciphers, signs empty of content, and in which meaning is still contingent. Traven reflects towards the story’s conclusion that “Most known motives are so despicable, one searches the unknown in the hope that…” (48). His unfinished and suspended sentence forms an analogy between, on the one hand, “known motives,” the epistemological record of rationalized human action, as expressive of a “despicable” logic and, on the other hand, speculation in the domain of the unknown as the opening of possibility. The empirical record mostly tells of nothing but violence and despicable actions of humanity, implying that for any redeeming hope to be discovered, one has to look beyond the known, beyond the human archive, and to, maybe, “seize on [the] cipher” instead.

The cipher does not designate or specify meaning but is concerned with meaning’s mechanical operations. The cipher’s concern with the operation of meaning is more explicit in the definition of the cipher as it pertains to writing;

A secret or disguised manner of writing, whether by characters arbitrarily invented (apparently the earlier method), or by an arbitrary use of letters or characters in other than their ordinary sense, by making single words stand for sentences or phrases, or by other conventional methods intelligible only to those possessing the key; a cryptograph. Also anything written in cipher, and the key to such a system.[[61]](#footnote-62)

The cipher is a form of writing that functions through “arbitrary invention” and the play of symbols and values, the ciphering or substituting of meanings. This operation gestures towards the creative and arbitrary production of meaning through ciphers, as we have seen in the example of “the five apertures [which resemble] tutelary symbols of a futuristic myth” or “a crescent-shaped shadow” which appears as a shield. In the latter case, to seize upon this cipher, this shadow, as shield is to first confer that meaning onto it, to allegorize it as such, and to put it into effective action based on this substituted or virtual value. To paraphrase a previous quote, “The abstract patterns were meaningless, [but one might amuse] himself by devising suitable titles for them.” The shadow that Traven perceives is a meaningless signifier in itself but comes to take on its tutelary quality through the conjecture of meaning.

The cipher, as a form of writing through which arbitrarily invented meanings come into effective play, represents that equivalent Traven seeks, insofar as the cipher serves as a means through which shields and sigils corresponding and in opposition to the blocks’ own terminal power are conjectured. We are told that Traven “must soon *find* an equivalent for the blocks or he would end his life within them.” The “arbitrary invention” that defines the operations of the cipher relates to the *finding* of this equivalent since “to invent” can be defined as follows: “To *find out* in the way of original contrivance; to create, produce, or construct by original thought or ingenuity; to devise first, originate.”[[62]](#footnote-63) Moreover, invention itself is defined as “The action of devising, contriving, or making up; contrivance, fabrication.”[[63]](#footnote-64) Ballard’s use of the word “find” recalls the practice of creating or devising fictions already implicit in the operations of the cipher. There is a network of related terms in the cipher as the fabrication of meaning, finding as invention, equivalence as virtual potential, whose common denominator is the domain and practice of fiction. Therefore, the work of finding this equivalent is bound up with the invention of ciphers, such that fiction, its structures, and its practice emerge as fundamental aspects of Traven’s escape.

The necessary “equivalent” that Traven searches for is something equipoised between fiction and power, with the hope that former can be paraphrased into the latter—that a fictional entity can become real or, at least, materially effective. This is the way Traven puts the cipher to use, at least: in seizing upon the cipher as shield, he invents a fictional sigil as a form of protection in the dark underground of the terminal beach. This invented fiction points to an actual opening through which “He move[s] forward a few paces at a time” (46). In seizing upon the cipher as shield, Traven identifies the cipher as the means to invent creative virtualities against or beyond the oppressive blocks, In the same gesture, he suggests that the means to escape the terminal beach and to move forward, a few paces at time, into the future are implicated in the category of fiction. Beyond ‘The Terminal Beach,’ the terminal culture of capitalist modernity similarly opens itself up to the creative possibilities of fiction as “shield.”

If we are indeed lacking a temporal register for an alternative to catastrophic times, then the speculative activity of fiction holds the promise of that language. To speak of a ‘language of the future’ calls attention to the genre of science fiction which concerns itself with the depiction of possible futures, usually either utopian or dystopian in their tendencies. At least in Robert Heinlein’s definition, science fiction emerges as a transaction between ‘the real’ and the future, as the genre can be understood as “realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method.”[[64]](#footnote-65) The transaction that occurs between fiction and reality in the construction of futures throws into sharp relief how the future is already implicated in different ontological categories, in “different dimensions of time.”[[65]](#footnote-66) How to ‘return’ this language of the future to us, not merely as the property of literary genre, but as a materially effective activity, a ‘science-fictioning’ of reality, that has traction on the real and on the times, demands a form of reciprocation between these categories.

## The disappearance of the future

Introducing this thesis through Ballard’s ‘The Terminal Beach,’ I hope, has illustrated its general concern with terminal culture, a culture oriented around fixed ends, which is also to say, a culture of crisis. In arguing that the itinerary of temporality is staked together with images of crisis and terminal disease, I laid the foundations for the world-historical problematic I wish to respond to over the course of three chapters. Along those lines, this thesis addresses the “disappearance” of the future in capitalist modernity. This disappearance is a consequence of capitalist modernity’s superimposition of images of crisis, which occult images of the future from the view of the contemporary imaginary. In the manifestation and metastasization of crisis, terminal culture comes to thrive. Against terminal culture, I also introduced through ‘The Terminal Beach’ the creative practice of fiction, of arbitrary invention and creative possibility, as a response to the rampancy of crisis. Therefore, this thesis also engages fiction, its structures and its practice, as a means by which to conjecture new images of the future and explore creative virtualities in critical opposition to and beyond terminal culture.

As opposed to, say, Ross Wolfe’s expression of the future’s withdrawal as a “passing out of existence,”[[66]](#footnote-67) I’ve taken to describing it as a *disappearance* of the future, as Mark Fisher does in his *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures.* Couching the withdrawal of the future in terms of a disappearance transposes its concept into the domain and vocabulary of representation, specifically as an image-based or visual artefact. Drawing on the legacy of capitalist modernity’s staging of the world as representation, I argued previously that terminal culture is a crisis of image and representation. Image and representation are the contexts in which images of crisis and the future come into play as “virtual attractors towards which reality tends,” either projecting new possibilities of the future or serving as “dystopian fixed points.”

Variously, the cultural imaginary apprehends the future in the mode of image and representation; either, to reference Fred Polak, Robert Bundy, and Christer Bjurvill, as figurations of subjunctive possibilities, as imaginative representations of virtual potentialities; or, in the tradition of Janus, the God with two faces—one trained on the past; the other, the future—as the object of the technical instrument or cultural technology of *seeing*.[[67]](#footnote-68) Bundy opens his preface to *Images of the Future: The Twenty-First Century and Beyond* with the following definition of future: “By *future* is meant the public images, the focused expectations of the yet to come.”[[68]](#footnote-69) Image and representation, as modes of comprehension in culture and as means through which the mind conceives virtual scenarios, serve as elementary categories for the understanding of futures.

Visuality is related to virtuality because of the image of the future’s status as *latent potential*. At least in the basic of what we mean by virtual—an inherence of potential or that which is capable of being produced—the virtual describes that quality in images of the future which indicates what is possible or may come to pass. As such, images project the future’s latent potential or depict the cultural imaginary’s “focused expectation[s].” These are magnetic images a subject, a heuristic cultural device like Janus, or a public is intentioned towards as an imagined future possibility, much like Žižek’s virtual attractors, or Traven’s “tutelary symbols of futuristic myth.”

“The virtual is the active principle, the disclosure of the hidden potential of the real,” writes Phillipe Queau, thereby disclosing the virtual’s implication in the “process of actualization.”[[69]](#footnote-70) Queau suggests that the virtual points to immanent potential which is ready to be actualized in the future. In other words, the virtual describes a force that could have material effectiveness. On this point, Roberto Diodato writes “the virtual signifies a dynamic configuration of forces that have an intrinsic tendency to actualize themselves in not entirely pre-constituted forms.”[[70]](#footnote-71) If we take Queau and Diodato’s suggestion that the virtual is an “active principle” that holds in reserve the potential to “actualize” itself, then we can argue that the virtual has a functional role in the production of futures.

The image of the future operates in the space of virtuality, a space in which holds the promise of the various possibilities of the actual present. Granting that virtual images of the future have a critical role in the construction of the reality to come does two things. Firstly, it suggests that the future is implicated in different ontological categories, different modes of existence; the space of virtuality implies an ontological differentiation between the virtual image and present reality. Understood in this way, the image of the future differs in nature from the concrete matter that the real is supposedly composed of. Secondly, it implies that when reality is implacably fixed in one direction, as in the case of terminal culture, one reason for this could be an impotence of virtual images of the future—the powerlessness to actualize images radically distinct from the status quo. I shall develop this second critical point further in the paragraphs to come, but for now let us deal with the first.

Fred Polak’s *The Image of the Future* accounts for the future’s implication in different ontological categories by pointing to the human animal’s corresponding “conscious process of dividing his perceptions, feelings, and responses, and sorting them into categories on the time-continuum”:[[71]](#footnote-72)

Man is the one animal able to cross the frontier of present reality. Man is the only living being who consciously splits reality in two; into the existing, concretely observable situation and into another, an inventively conceived, not-existing state of being. Homo sapiens thus is ‘split man,’ and in this creative capacity he distinguishes himself from and rises above a purely animalistic or vitalistic state. He can behave purposefully as a ‘citizen of two worlds.’ The development of this typical dualism marks the most significant milestone in the almost unknown process of the birth and early growth of human civilization. It is the main explanation of the progressive bifurcation between nature and nurture. It starts the biological species of *homo* off on its amazing career as man, the maker of civilization.[[72]](#footnote-73)

Polak’s “typical dualism” maps onto a wider philosophical concern with the correlation between human and world. In Polak’s case, the human’s capacity to think in the abstract, “to categorize and reorder reality within the self (present reality) and in relation to perceptions of the not-self (the Other), distributes his being equally between two worlds”: “the present and the imagined.”[[73]](#footnote-74) This essential dualism, a thinking and existing at intervals, gives rise to the future, according to Polak, as it serves as an “indispensable prerequisite to the movement of events in time, and to the dynamics of historical change.”[[74]](#footnote-75)

Present reality pertains to an ontological category separate from idealized futures and thus functions differently; the former “pushing” the social body from behind; the latter, serving as virtual attractors or magnetic images to which society tends. Polak argues that the human’s processes of ordering reality are equipoised between the dynamic transactional exchanges of, on the one hand, already constituted presents and, on the other, the image-based virtualities of the imagination.

## Pynchon, the fabric of history, the fabrication of history

Taking and applying Polak’s argument reveals that our world-historical experience is formed of a series of flows—dynamic transactional exchanges between the unmoveable object of “present realities” and “realized pasts” against the irresistible force of “magnetic images” of the future. For Walter Benjamin, this exchange is between the increasingly piling rubble of past catastrophe that arrests the gaze of the angel of history, against the storm of progress that thrusts her forward. In Thomas Pynchon’s *V,* 1961,world history find’s its analogy in the texture of fabric, the crests and gathers of this fabric standing for a series of occlusive and disclosive sites of historical perception. This analogy takes up Polak’s bifurcation of social reality into the past and present, on the one hand, as concrete and constitutive elements already made and, on the other, the future as a contingent and virtual thing in the process of being imaginatively realized:

Perhaps history this century […] is rippled with gathers in its fabric such that if we are situated […] at the bottom of a fold, it's impossible to determine warp, woof, or pattern anywhere else. By virtue, however, of existing in one gather it is assumed there are others, compartmented off into sinuous cycles each of which had come to assume greater importance than the weave itself and destroy any continuity. Thus it is that we are charmed by the funny-looking automobiles of the '30's, the curious fashions of the '20's, the particular moral habits of our grandparents. We produce and attend musical comedies about them and are conned into a false memory, a phony nostalgia about what they were. We are accordingly lost to any sense of continuous tradition. Perhaps if we lived on a crest, things would be different. We could at least see.[[75]](#footnote-76)

Historical comprehension is conditional to the position one occupies in relation to the folds and crests of the fabric constitutive of world history. Our deep entrenchment *in* history—to be ‘in its midst’—precludes a privileged insight into its shape and character and into the ‘elsewheres’ of history, too. A transcendent position, however, above, beyond, or outside of the enclosed compartments of historical experience, offers the possibility of difference by allowing a vantage point from which alternative images of the future can be countenanced and rendered.

That historical agency is lost to us the moment in which we are lost in history, suggests to us what may be happening to us in the terminal state of capitalist modernity, for one. The alternative implication, that one can occupy a transcendent position in relation to history, from which “things would be different,” where “we could at least see,” holds open the possibility that the technology of seeing, through which virtual images of the future are countenanced and rendered, might inaugurate the process of the future’s production. This is the direction Pynchon takes us in, as history’s constitution as “fabric” in *V* prefigures the elaboration of history’s *fabrication* in a later and related image in his 1965 novella *The Crying of Lot 49*. This image, Remedios Varo’s surrealist painting *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* depicts a world woven into existence.

In Mexico City they somehow wandered into an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful Spanish exile Remedios Varo: in the central painting of a triptych, titled “Bordando el Manto Terrestre,” were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in the tapestry, and the tapestry was the world.[[76]](#footnote-77)

The painting is an allegorical edifice analogous to the novella’s heroine Oedipa Maas’ detective-paranoid arc of narrative discovery, in which she has to “follow intricate narrative threads which weave themselves inexorably into the fabric of the world.”[[77]](#footnote-78) The conspiratorial plot she is implicated in is figured as a woven skein of narrative threads which intertwine with reality. Beyond the scope of Oedipa’s detective work, at its heart, the painting depicts the formation of ‘world’ as an outgrowth of the process of fictionalization. Remembering the crest in the gather in *V* as the privileged site of historical disclosure, perhaps the elevated tower from which the girls weave their fiction and spill it forth into the world is an analogous site of production, where mental representations serve as both medium and message of futural production.

In alluding to the transactional exchange between fiction and reality, eliding the separation between fiction and world, Varo’s painting dichotomizes their relationship in a way which is conducive to the countervailing dialectic between paranoid reading and conspiratorial forces in Pynchon’s context of the postmodern, but also to the divided ontology of the human as existing between the present and imagined. In either case, Pynchon’s ekphrasis of Varo’s painting argues for the functional role of fictional and creative virtualities in the comprehension and construction of the world.

Image and representation, the visuality and virtuality found therein, are the grounds on which historico-temporal formations consolidate themselves into realized presents and come into play as virtual, future-oriented attractors towards which reality tends. This thesis interrogates the reflexivity of these categories, constitutive as they are of futures. This reflexivity, which appears also as an antagonism, manifests itself in the conflict between fictions, possibility, idealism, speculative futures, utopias, on the one hand, and the ‘real,’ reality, realisms, dystopian “fixed points,” impossible-aporias, horizons of possibility, on the other.

Where, though, does the fiction end and the world begin? In fact, Varo’s painting dichotomizes the relationship of these categories so as to question the sanctity of the distinction between fiction and the real, renders null any belief in a finite and singular identity in either term. For the figures, depth, colour, constitutive of the place depicted in *Bordando* are “contained in the tapestry, and the tapestry was the world.” Given this inseparability of fabricated fiction and the actual world , Varo’s painting doesn’t depict fiction and the real separately and in diametrical opposition; rather, it depicts *fictional entities making themselves real.*

## Hyperstition

There is a name for the activity of fictions becoming real: hyperstition. The words hyper and superstition come together to compose the portmanteau hyperstition, words which, in their singular forms, respectively refer to processes of hyperbolic intensification and unorthodox, occult practices marked by the credulity of belief in them. From the ‘hyper’ of hyperstition, the structure of transitiveness that constitutes this concept emerges. The prefix hyper, meaning over, beyond, overmuch, beyond measure, when placed in front of a stem-word, discloses that referent’s transition into a hyperbolic state. In this way, hyperstition consists in the activity of the incredulous—i.e. fictions, speculations, ciphers, magic sigils, engineering diagrams, paper architectures, subjunctive illusions, conjectural realities, etc.—coming into belief, into material effectiveness, and therefore into being.

The concept emerges in the theory-fiction of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), an interdisciplinary, student-run collective based at the University of Warwick in the mid-nineties, whose membership included Sadie Plant, Nick Land, and Mark Fisher, amongst others. A primary aspect of the concept developed CCRU’s writings is the understanding of hyperstition as an “Element of effective culture that makes itself real.”[[78]](#footnote-79) It is this aspect of a *functional* socio-cultural fiction that interests me, though hyperstition operates on other levels and has since its inception taken on contextually specific forms. Hyperstitions are not simply and only ideas but cultural technologies that conjecture realities of their own, “Chinese puzzle boxes, opening to unfold to reveal numerous ‘sorcerous’ interventions in the world of history,” though only in “‘favorable’ circumstances.”[[79]](#footnote-80) According to Land,

Hyperstition is equipoised between fiction and technology, and it is this tension that puts the intensity into both, although the intensity of fiction owes everything to its potential (to catalyse hyperstitional ‘becomings’) rather than its actuality (which can be mere human expressivity).[[80]](#footnote-81)

Land focuses on the hyperstitional fiction’s capacity to transmute itself into actuality as a distinguishing characteristic; hyperstitions should be understood as cultural technologies that are able to produce their effects out of their own catalytic potential. Elsewhere, he goes on to explain that

Hyperstitions by their very existence as ideas function causally to bring about their own reality. The hyperstitional object is no mere figment or ‘social construction’ but it is in a very real way ‘conjured’ into being by the approach taken to it.[[81]](#footnote-82)

Hyperstitions catalyse change in the social body, by conjuring and conjecturing their own realities, altering the arc of events through their influence on the socio-cultural imaginary.

The word emerges in many different guises in the theory-fiction of CCRU, but the article ‘Lemurian Time War’ in particular elaborates on “the hyperstitional relations between writing, signs and reality.”[[82]](#footnote-83) In this way, hyperstitions are similar in effect to “magical sigils” or architectural diagrams in that they give schematic form to the positive feedback cycles that effect culture.[[83]](#footnote-84) Delphi Carstens has offered more recently the description “the action of successful ideas in the arena of culture,” pointing to the “effects and the mechanisms” of hyperstitions as “exponentially accelerating social transformations.”[[84]](#footnote-85) His concern with “success” flags a broader concern with authority, truth, and use-value in the regulation and organisation of the arena of culture. The cultural arena is a space of contestations in which processes of hyperstitional ideation contend with the status quo formed of regularized ideas. Fictions, in their attempt to become real, struggle against forces which establish what is actual, credible, or credulous. The dominant culture, read capitalist modernity, confers upon fictions their reality-status. The categorisation of authorized status is made with reference to a reality principle—“rationality as reality control.”[[85]](#footnote-86) Superstition recalls the orders of meaning which regulate the status of belief as plausible and therefore amenable to the orthodox belief-systems governing the regulated space of reality or what constitutes the real. In short, when we speak of hyperstition we uncover the ontological categories which divide and regulate socio-cultural norms and practices. Hyperstition presents a complication to the rational epistemological frameworks regulating the status quo.

Land regards the question of truth and falsehood as irrelevant with regard to hyperstitions, as the concept is concerned with the process of “transmuting fictions into truths.”[[86]](#footnote-87) Hyperstition is an errant traveller between b/orders of meaning, rendering the passage between fictions and the state of the actually existing fluid through its processes of transmitting fictions into reality. Hyperstition doesn’t interest itself in the false dichotomies of belief *as* being and unreality as inhering in a fixed state of unbelief; “fiction,” according to CCRU, “is not opposed to the real. Rather, reality is understood to be composed of fictions – consistent semiotic terrains that condition perceptual, affective and behavioural responses.”[[87]](#footnote-88) Doing away with the ontological categories of ‘truth’ and reality in construing what fiction ‘is’, hyperstition concerns itself with what fiction does—fiction as method, fiction understood as functional rather than aesthetic. Moreover, in dispensing with the fixed binary category which opposes fiction to the real, Hyperstitions differentiate themselves from superstitions as false beliefs; “[s]uperstitions,” after all, “are merely false beliefs, but hyperstitions—by their very existence as ideas—function causally to bring about their own reality.”[[88]](#footnote-89)

In the conjugation of hyper and superstition, we can recognize the movement of virtual and magnetic images actualizing into present realities that we have been tracking and tracing since our initial reading of Ballard. In the vocabulary we have been using up to now, hyperstition is this name for the process of actualization of ciphers or virtual images of the future into present realities. I’ll use hyperstition and the movement of hyperstition to refer to creative virtualities and fictions of this kind throughout this thesis. I’ll track and trace the movement of hyperstition, of fictions becoming real, in different contexts, forms, and descriptions. I will use the term interchangeably with functional fictions and processes of ‘fictioning.’ Hyperstition serves as a structuring motif in the following chapters, a means to uncover the operations of effective forms of culture in the context of the fixed and futureless situation of capitalist modernity.

The future, as I argued through Polak, is formed of both the modality of the magnetic images of the public imagination and the substance of the historical present. In that case, the disappearance of the future is implicated in the waning of the potency of hyperstitions. When I speak of the disappearance of the future, I speak—like Polak—of the waning of the potency of image-based virtualities in the face of ever-hardening and implacably fixed present realities. I hinted at this previously by suggesting that fatalistic trend of contemporary terminal culture, which seems condemned to perpetual crisis, is due to an impotence of images of the future. Bundy observed as much in 1976 and this state of things has only intensified since:

The importance and timeliness of this inquiry into images of the future derives from a crucial observation about Western civilization. In our time we seem to have finally exhausted the central images of the future that have pulled us on, however erratically, in the past. These images are not dead, for they still have their adherents. However, none seem to have the power to energize the public imagination in any collective sense.[[89]](#footnote-90)

Terminal culture persists in a terminal direction owing to the inability of hyperstitions to posit a future beyond the status quo and culture of crisis, beyond the self-transcending future of capitalism, beyond modernity’s determining account of reality.

The project interrogates a contemporary moment in which horizons of possibility are subjected to capitalist modernity’s universalising impulse, what is presented as “realistic,” what looks possible, at any point in the social field, being defined by ideologically determined structures of representation.[[90]](#footnote-91) Further, it will look at how this radically unbalanced disposition of what is possible and impossible in society, politics, and economy, is even accepted at the level of the cultural unconscious, in our cultural productions, in our use and interpretation of the built environment, in shaping our conception of cosmopolitanism. The future, “conceived as the possibility that historically given conditions can be radically transformed, that there is a telos toward which humanity might progress,” has largely disappeared from the cultural imaginary as an operative term in the post-war crisis of history and taken on the lowly state of inoperative dreamwork.[[91]](#footnote-92)

My thesis seeks to make a case for hyperstitions as effective images of the future against the retrenching of representations which immanentize the catastrophe of the status quo. The thesis reads this reflexivity through post-war literature, art, and culture with a view to the discovery of a revitalised aesthetics and poetics of futurity; an exploration of the hyperstitional technologies on which futures depend; and an outlining of the historical conditions in which they operate. My thesis centres on the concept of hyperstition, “fictional entities that make themselves real,” not least because its internal structure references the elementary conflict between realism and idealism which is crucial to this analysis, but also because it centres fiction and the structure of fictionality in the process of social the construction of reality. My thesis is focused on hyperstition as a mode of fictive practice for the realization of alternative spaces and times. It is also focused on the hyperstitional art object as an entity that works against the grain of the conditions of impossibility redolent of capitalist modernity.

The key questions that will guide the project are as follows:

* What is the shape and form of the aesthetics or poetics of the possible-future, and how does it negotiate the conditions of impossibility set by terminal culture?
* What are the existing and nascent formal, critical, or conceptual languages for the crisis of possibility and how do they relate to the possible-future?

Around these questions, the project seeks to negotiate the aesthetics of possibility and futurity and to make a case for the role of critical and cultural production in the wake of the disappearance of the future. The thesis traces the movement of hyperstition through these questions across several texts in the form of three chapters.

The first chapter, ‘An Unaccountably Futureless Look’ focuses on the disposition towards the future ‘after Auschwitz.’ This essay takes up and works through *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* conception of the future at the point of the future’s collision with the aporia of the Holocaust as an unthinkable and unsurmountable condition of post-war arts, on the one hand, and the post-modern self-referential scepticism of the possibility of signification, on the other. The Holocaust-as-aporetic-condition is made manifest in the novel through its interrogation of the limits of expressivity, recalling Theodor Adorno’s questioning of the possibility of poetry after Auschwitz. What is at stake is the possibility of imagining a possible-future beyond the limits of expressivity of the post-war/modern.

The second chapter, ‘How does the Body Politic Move?’ takes up the crisis of solidarity at the European border as a context for the deliberation of several Western literary cosmopolitanisms. By reading several hyperstitional fictions together, I explore the problems and prospects of and for the politics of mobility via the critical models of fiction. Through Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,’ Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, I track and trace the fluid movement between fiction and reality as a means to explore the conceptualisation and practice of cosmopolitanism.

The third chapter, ‘Citizens of Nothing: Belief, Hyperstition, and Fiction’ centres its discussion on the correspondence between fiction and reality, how the former workers on the latter, and how fiction functions as a cultural technology for the production of new futures discontinuous from terminal culture. Taking up the legacy of Café Society, a New York jazz venue which sought to employ strategies of fiction to reshape the course of American race relations, alongside *Infinite Jest*, I look to delineate the mechanics effective fictions and how their efficacy rests on the credulity of belief, even when the predicates for belief are unavailable.

# ‘An Unaccountably Futureless Look…’

## The Rocket is Destiny

Ballard’s ‘The Terminal Beach’ describes its eponymous landscape as “an Auschwitz of the soul whose mausoleums contained the mass graves of the still undead.” On this basis, I argued that the Cold War short story references together several historical, geological, and psychological traumas as the singular expression of a mutually-implicated conception of crisis. After all, that text—like its landscape—seemed rooted in the barbarisms of the twentieth century and yet posited traumas in deep time alongside those still to befall the Anthropocene in some speculative, “still undead” future. Significant for me in this homogenisation of crisis were the apparent consequences for the imagining of futures *beyond* this morbid and inertial state. Recalling arguments made by Herbert Read and T. S. Eliot, who jointly feared for the prospects of the ideal and linearly directed itinerary of history given the advent of industrialized slaughter in modernity, I suggested that Ballard’s co-implication of the archaeological and anthropological with this strain of barbarism implied a similar fatalism.

Ballard’s “Auschwitz of the soul” represents an ingrained fatalism redolent of terminal culture—a fatalism which repeats itself in Pynchon’s *GR*, published eight years after ‘The Terminal Beach.’ Auschwitz is a common concern for these authors and, here, serves as a point of transition into a discussion of the concerns of the former text. The death camp, so emblematic of the barbaric spirit of modernity, communicates a shared view about the disjunctive and debilitating effects of the constitutive trauma at the heart of the western cultural imaginary. This view is one most fervently articulated by Theodor Adorno in his rendering of Auschwitz as the site of an aporia reason, aesthetics, and representation cannot ‘resolve.’ This is Auschwitz in its rendering as the site of several types of ‘limit.’

For Ballard, the legacy of Auschwitz is expressed in and through the terminal beach, a place composed of past, present, and future traumas which, together, form a complex geological structure. This geological pattern of trauma hints at the fatalistic reproduction of the horrors encountered in the death camps and the ‘elsewheres’ of history into the crisis-ridden future. Conversely, Pynchon inscribes the limit-situation of Auschwitz in the master-trope of the rocket, a signifier which tracks and traces the violent course of history, with due attention paid to the period of the Second World War, on towards a final apocalyptic end encountered through a hallucinated detonation in a speculative future. Between ‘The Terminal Beach and *Gravity’s Rrainbow* there isa mutual recognition of Auschwitz as the excrescence of modernity’s barbaric rationalization of death.

More than this, these texts deal with the consequences for the subject and for civilisation ‘After Auschwitz.’ On the one hand, ‘The Terminal Beach’ deals with the deformation of body and spirit and the inhibited capacity to orient oneself in the direction of the future implied therein. On the other, *Gravity’s Rainbow* takes up the question of the corruption of modernity in the context of the limited modes of aesthetic representation in the advent of the end of representation *as such*, given the increased possibility of total annihilation through the rocket. The emergent fatalism of these texts proceeds, in part, as a result of a series of effects circulating around the event of Auschwitz. What follows considers Pynchon’s novel as a prognostic reading of the apocalyptic future in the wake of Auschwitz.

For Herman and Weisenburger in *Gravity’s Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom*, the mentioning of Auschwitz and Buchenwald in one passage of *GR* “comes to identify […] the Holocaust as systemic catastrophe.”[[92]](#footnote-93) However, Pynchon makes mention of those “infamous concentration camps […] only in order to point *beyond* them” (my emphasis), to highlight the extension and abstraction of the logic of genocide through the “Rocket [and its] rationaliz[ation of] power and domination,” as well as through “cartelized capitalism and a German version of the military-industrial complex.”[[93]](#footnote-94) As evidence for this claim, Herman and Weisenburger state that the rocket embodies the perfection of a project of extermination rooted in the German colonial atrocities in the Southwest of Africa in the early twentieth century. It is there that gassing is developed as a technique for industrialized slaughter and where Zyklon B is initially tested and refined. The link between what occurred in Southwest Africa and the development of the rocket is the place of the camp: Auschwitz and Buchenwald were manufactories for exterminating European Jews” while Peenemünde and Mittelbau-Dora “operated as […] forced-labour plant[s] for the manufacture of V-2 rockets.”[[94]](#footnote-95) The concerted development of two technologies of extermination intersect at the locus of the camp, where gassing is concurrently implemented and rocketry innovated.

The historical past of Southwest Africa serves as source and origin for horrors realized in Auschwitz and Buchenwald and, through further rationalization via the development of the rocket in networked manufactories, projected *beyond* the camps into a hallucinated explosion in the novel’s implied narrative future. Auschwitz and Buchenwald were therefore “end points of a telos begun decades earlier,” whereas “Peenemünde and Mittelbau-Dora were the inception points of the rocket and the rocket age, whose terminus is the Orpheus Theatre at the novel’s end.”[[95]](#footnote-96) The limit-situation or, situation of unparalleled trauma, originating in the camp expands to the whole world. In drawing the connection between historical genocidal practices and the development of the rocket, Herman and Weisenburger uncover a morbid historical telos:

Extermination is the logic of both historical process [gassing and rocketry]. The rocket is the novel’s master trope for this moment when the West can be seen to have pivoted from a mode of ethno-racial extermination, soon to be named genocide into a process for incinerating the globe. The rocket *is* destiny.[[96]](#footnote-97)

The rocket as “destiny” and as terminal end point, one which deranges the itinerary of temporality by travelling through time and exploding in a speculative future, consequently occupies the horizons of the thinkable. The arc or trajectory of the rocket serves as the very arc of history, thereby formulating within it its own predicates for the possible-future. I mean to say that the rocket functions as a totalizing, meaning-making structure in the text; after all, the rocket “has to be many things, it must answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it.”[[97]](#footnote-98) The implication of the ‘rocket as destiny’ is that the rocket functions as a kind of virtual attractor towards which rocket-subjects and reality itself tend. In serving as *GR’s* constitutive horizon of meaning, the rocket ties the future to the logic of extermination long gestating in the cultural imaginary and projects it into a “still undead” future. The “Auschwitz of the soul” runs parallel to the “rocket as destiny” in that they both articulate fatalistic historical tendencies fermented in those fateful grounds. A hauntology of history pervades *GR,* with the trace memory of genocidal horror acting on the novel’s present and commuting the spectrality of the Holocaust onwards through a rocket-apocalypse which haunts the future.

In this chapter, I’m looking to understand terminal culture as it manifests in these two related contexts—Auschwitz and the rocket. I’m interested particularly in their appearance as aporetic limits beyond which futures outside of the limits of barbarism seem impossible to countenance and render. The integration of Auschwitz into the Western soul and its cultural imaginary has long since called for engagements with that horror and yet at the same time rendered impossible any attempts to ‘pass’ through it. Given the necessity of remaining within the difficulty of what it means to conceive of Western culture “after Auschwitz,” given its culpability in producing it, the questions Pynchon’s novel propose are particularly significant. How much of the fatalism and hauntological force that emanates from the insurmountable aporia of the death camp catalyses the rocket and the incineration of the globe destined through it? This would be to say that *GR’s* ideations of rocket-apocalypse partake of the same barbaric logic simultaneously enacted and innovated in the camps. Moreover, to what extent does the end of representation *as such*, that is, the end of the world itself through a final violent cataclysm in the novel’s conclusion, correspond to a terminus already at work in the barbarism of the mid-century?

I wish to centre my discussion of terminal culture in the context of *GR’s* approach to Auschwitz and the apocalyptic runaway of rocket-culture that follows it. I’m also concerned with the possibility and propriety of imagining futurity in the wake of the aporetic limits posed by Auschwitz and the rocket—at least as they are dealt with in Pynchon’s novel—as these conceptual and ethical limits directly correspond to the work of imagining in the shadow of the camps. I opt to read the text in this way to discover whether it holds open the promise of a hyperstitional future beyond terminal culture. What’s at stake in this is the possibility of thinking beyond the historical traumas imparted by the violence and barbarism of the twentieth century. To understand the nature of ‘Auschwitz as limit’ I’ll begin with the originary thinker of that thought, Theodor Adorno.

### Auschwitz as Limit

The perimeter fencing in Auschwitz—that networked concentration of death camps—also marks out the compass of a boundary, one past which the writing of poetry apparently becomes impossible. Auschwitz is where ‘limit’ is given its exemplary form; through the originary barbed wire that one could not get beyond, but also through the destruction of the archive (of names) now irretrievable, through its re-description of the situation of progressive modernity as, in fact, a context of and for barbarism, through language which cannot properly *name* the experience of the camp, and through a nominal singularity that designates to this place a status unique, of its own kind, and beyond approach. In fact, there’s no longer any opportunity to go ‘past’ those manifold fences, as thought and life must now remain within that inescapable and aporetic condition to which the name Auschwitz is given.[[98]](#footnote-99) Circulating around this place are a series of irrecuperable, unresolvable effects that strike at the heart of Western civilisation, encircling the Western spirit and mind through several criterial limits setting bounds to what is possible, what is just, and what can be made meaningful.

At least, this is the state of things as they appear in Adorno’s famous and controversial dictum, first uttered in the essay ‘Cultural Criticism and Society,’ 1949: “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”[[99]](#footnote-100) After Auschwitz, history is irrevocably changed and this event comes to stand as a historic point of reference—the juncture at which poetry became indelibly marked by barbarism. This is to say, the barbaric inflection that metastasizes in culture “after Auschwitz” renders the writing of poetry impossible to the extent that the products of culture bear the marks of barbarism within its very forms and in the event that the horror of Auschwitz cannot be countenanced and rendered in any aesthetic form or through any practice of reason. I began with the analogy of Auschwitz as the exemplary *form* of limit as it recalls Adorno’s concern with the state of *forms* of culture after Auschwitz.

Adorno’s statement is the consequence of a recognition of the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust, of its deep integration into the Western cultural imaginary, and of the absolute status accorded to that event. These recognitions form the basis of the Holocaust’s persistence in and through the spiritual products of Western civilisation. J. M. Bernstein describes this persistence as “the *traumatic insistence* of the event of the Holocaust and our moral *certainty* about its evil character”;[[100]](#footnote-101) the utter force, magnitude, and unalloyed evil of the event is such that the Holocaust has a fundamental bearing on civilisation in its aftermath; every moral compass needle has to be referenced by its position to Auschwitz. In this way, the judgement that poetry is ‘barbaric’ after Auschwitz defines a culture thoroughly and inevitably constituted by the historical legacy of Auschwitz. This recombination explains Adorno’s pessimism regarding the “effects produced by poetic renderings of unspeakable events.”[[101]](#footnote-102) The dictum that poetry is barbaric after Auschwitz describes the essential corruption at the heart of culture and its forms, a corruption with no possibility of recuperation.

As a result, Adorno places qualifications on poetic renderings based on the ineffability of the Holocaust and the culpability of culture itself in producing the barbarism of Auschwitz. Adorno sets out the limits to representation:

All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage. […] Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be. Not even silence gets us out of the circle. In silence we simply use the state of objective truth to rationalize our subjective incapacity, once more degrading truth into a lie.[[102]](#footnote-103)

Adorno describes an impossible situation where to act with, against, or outside of culture is to be complicit with the barbarism of Auschwitz. All forms of response are regrettable on some level. Adorno’s “circle”—the perimeter fencing in Auschwitz as I put it—is an impossible boundary constituted through several types of limit—the limits of representation, Auschwitz as cultural prohibition, the impropriety of speech and silence in the face of unspeakable horror, too.

Perhaps the perlocutionary effect of Adorno’s dictum is to warn us away from naïve assumptions of intimate knowledge about the Holocaust, or attempting to quantify it through forms of disinterested rationality, or to discourage ornate aestheticization in a case where no equivocation really belongs. This would be to repeat the thought of Elie Wiesel, a firm believer in the singularity of his experience of the Holocaust, but also presumably in what Martin Paul Eve describes as “its quale-like inexpressibility.”[[103]](#footnote-104) “Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds,” writes Wiesel, “can possibly transform their experiences into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so.”[[104]](#footnote-105) Wiesel points to a *gap* between the quality of the experience endured by those in the camps and the poetic, sociological, historical, etc., renderings of that experience formed in the pursuit of knowledge or aesthetic representation.

Through this injunction we are rightly denied what Maurice Blanchot describes as “the so-called dignity of knowledge: that ultimate propriety which we believe will be accorded to us by knowledge.”[[105]](#footnote-106) The gap that opens between singular, direct experience and indirect report uncovered by Wiesel corresponds to Blanchot’s establishment of an ethical prohibition with regard to the erroneously assumed dignity of indirect knowledge; both point to the irrecuperable void between the singularity of experience and the attendant claims to knowledge that follow in the wake of the horror of Auschwitz. To presume to know would be “to accept horror in order to know it,” and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.[[106]](#footnote-107)

For Adorno, silence on the subject of Auschwitz would not fall merely because of the heeding of this prohibition; rather, the injunction to poetry inheres also in an incapability typical of modern reason and rationality to *absorb* experience in any meaningful way. Modern life, in this condition of irresolution, with recourse only to a “culpable and shoddy culture,” which registers nothing other than unresolved and unknowable trauma, is doomed to apocalypse. Adorno, then, says more than can be summed up in his often-quoted maxim cautioning against attempts to make the Holocaust ‘sayable.’ He seems to also suggest that barbarism, as a malignant growth deep in the soul of Western civilisation, as a corruption of culture and critique, in contaminating the very forms of reason and expression, takes on the dimensions of apocalypse. Adorno warns of an apocalyptic end that consists in the newly established limits of representation:

Life has transformed itself into a timeless succession of shocks, between which gape holes, paralyzed intermediary spaces. Nothing however is perhaps more catastrophic for the future than the fact that soon literally no-one will be able to think of this, that every trauma, every unprocessed shock of that which recurs, is a ferment of coming destruction. Karl Kraus was right to call his play *The Last Days of Mankind.* What is happening today should be called ‘*After Doomsday*.’[[107]](#footnote-108)

This passage, from his thirty-third aphorism in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life,* mourns the evolution of war into a transcendent stage beyond the capacities of psychic and emotional life to comprehend it. Adorno cites the technical and bureaucratic procedures of war, their development to such a proportion that it is now inconceivably difficult to situate war within a measurable scale. Shocks, traumas, horrors of war, repeat themselves with such frequency and with such an intensity because of sophisticated practices of organising destruction. One legacy bequeathed by the World Wars of the twentieth century is this revolutionization of war in a mechanical and processual direction, at the expense of our capacities to “think” or process” its trauma. This is not to say that war was not mechanized or functioned based on rational procedures in the past; rather, the “gap[ing[ holes” or “paralyzed intermediary spaces” that open up amid the many recurring “shocks” of modern conflict in particular are openings for apocalypse. Thinking, Adorno seems to argue, cannot happen in these spaces, void as they are of any assimilable or edifying meaning. The centrality of gaps, voids, aporia, limits, to Auschwitz’s concept consists in the essential schism between cognitive modes and cultural forms of ‘thinking’ Auschwitz and the intractable horror of the actual experience of it.

And in this “vacuum between human beings and their fate” is “where their doom actually consists.”[[108]](#footnote-109) By this Adorno suggests two things; firstly, that war, in its mechanical reproducibility, is insured against the possibility of thinking—in the form of poetry, cultural critique, or otherwise—beyond it; secondly, that the inability to think, process, and absorb the shock and awe of industrialized warfare “ferments” destruction. Adorno speaks of an incapability typical of modernity to process experience and events, especially traumatic ones, comprehensively or meaningfully.[[109]](#footnote-110) Both small and large traumas, as Patrick Pritchett suggests, which recur and remain unprocessed, tax consciousness, and gather like so many combustible triggers of apocalypse.[[110]](#footnote-111)

### Unnatural Utilization

Adorno is allied in this view of debilitated forms as catastrophic for the future by Walter Benjamin, whose ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,’ analyses the consequences for art and perception in the advent of sophisticated modes of production and the conditions of capitalism. The latter portion of Benjamin’s essay confronts these issues specifically in the context of war. Through war, “aura” and its related processes of embodied experience are abolished in a new way.[[111]](#footnote-112) The withering away of aura is symptomatic of the technological reproducibility of war alongside the persistence of its shocks and traumas into that timeless succession without form or order described by Adorno in his observation of “the withering of experience.”[[112]](#footnote-113) Both recognise in the mass reproducibility and industrialized scale of war the emergence of formless violence without any readily assimilable ‘uniqueness.’ This is not to lament a time when war was at least formalised and within the grasp of understanding, but to recognise the regrettable situation in which forms will no longer hold together experience so as to render them meaningful. Therefore, it is not the loss of meaning of that is necessarily lamented here; it is the collapse of meaning-making structures. This situation is troubling insofar as formlessness and timelessness propagate that terminal structure of feeling through which catastrophe thrives. In an extension of Adorno’s logic of corruption at the heart of culture, Benjamin suggests the complementary denaturing of the customary form and composition of experience in the age of mechanical reproduction.

War, in its mass reproduction and increased rates of speed, “will press toward,” in Benjamin’s words, “an unnatural use.”[[113]](#footnote-114) A “natural use of productive forces” harmonizes technology and the social body in a way that is conducive to a just social order.[[114]](#footnote-115) This is evidently not the case in the advent of the instrumentalization of technology at industrialized scale for slaughter in the twentieth century, and especially under German fascism:

The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society.[[115]](#footnote-116)

The “unnatural” utilizations technology is put to in modern society uncovers a collective failure to assimilate technology into the social fabric in a socially productive manner. The singular and the auratic falls victim to the assault on bodies and sense through serialized, technologized, and mass war, a state that denatures “natural material and precludes naturalization: “Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities.”[[116]](#footnote-117) Technology, as an inorganic organ improperly incorporated into the social body as an instrument of war as opposed to that of natural production, comes at human cost: “*Imperialist war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in ‘human material’ for the natural material society has denied it*.”[[117]](#footnote-118) Benjamin points to a gap or schism between “unnatural utilization” of technological power and the desired social “maturity” and level of “development” necessary to produce natural material. To live at a remove from experience, to have this experiential gap mediated by denaturing and desensitising forces, extends the possibility of apocalypse. The “doom” of humanity consists in this vacuum of cognitive power and denatured experience as it directly impinges on the human capacity to confront apocalypse; the failure of the instruments of reason and experience immanentize apocalyptic conditions.

I make reference to Adorno and Benjamin to illustrate their shared view on the derangement of modern forms of reason and representation owing to the decisive trauma and industrialized slaughter of the mid-twentieth century. This is critical for me as this derangement functions as a catalyst for apocalyptic conditions. This corruption in the fabric of modern modalities of thinking and representation directly relates to my inquiry of the possibilities for imagining of futurity in the context of terminal conditions, especially in terms of *GR.* As follows, what are the consequences for hyperstitional fictions which seek to posit possible-futures beyond terminal culture? How are they to negotiate the injunctions to forms of representation “after Auschwitz”? These are questions that literary texts have long sought to address since that historical juncture.

### Ink Flowed Like Blood

The corruption of forms of reason and representation in the modern consciousness—what Adorno describes as a “vacuum”—is, in part, a consequence of language. This much is evident from Adorno’s reference—quoted above—to Karl Kraus’ *The Last Days of Mankind,* 1922,in the construction of his argument regarding the causes of the “coming destruction.” That “literally no-one will be able to think of this, that every trauma, every unprocessed shock of that which recurs, is a ferment of coming destruction,” relates also to a corruption of language. The interdiction of thinking here is analogous to a suppression of the imaginative and cognitive processes of language, as well as corruption of semantic circuits of meaning; in fact, the context of language seems to be where the derangement of modern reason is enacted. Adorno refers to Kraus’ work as *The Last Days of Mankind* interrogates the role of language in fermenting the coming destruction.

For one, Kraus’ eschatological ‘last days’ are fabulously textual, working in satire, apocalyptic fantasy, and invented quotation alongside verbatim statements drawn from print media and government propaganda. Moreover, Kraus’ epic works to “show […] how journalistic language glosses over the realities of war and thereby helps perpetuate it.”[[118]](#footnote-119) The tragic and satirical epic scorns modernity as the nexus of debased language and reason, rabid nationalism and its development into militarism, the unnatural utilization of technology, and capitalism in the innovation of the modern war machine.[[119]](#footnote-120) Never intended to be staged, *The Last Days of Mankind* spans the course of the First World War, though it refuses gratuitous descriptions of the violence on the front, instead constructing the war as one of discourse and representation.[[120]](#footnote-121)

This is to say, Kraus’ play, which excoriates the modern war machine, gestures towards the corruption at the heart of language and the symptomatic development of apocalyptic conditions out of that corruption. Beyond the consideration of language’s capacity to ferment the coming apocalypse, the Austrian satirist’s conception of the end days of humanity explicitly ties its apocalyptic subject to the question of the limits of representation, in the sense of the horizons of thinkable, imaginable, or expressible:

Were not all the realms of imagination evacuated when that famous manifesto declared war on all the peoples of the world? At the end was—the Word. Having killed the spirit, the printed word had no alternative but to bring forth the Deed. Weaklings gained the strength to crush us under the wheels of progress. It was the newspaper press that achieved this, the press above all—the harlot that corrupted the world! Not that the press set the engines of death in motion—but that it hollowed out our heart and made us incapable of imagining what it would be like: that is its war guilt![[121]](#footnote-122)

The dissipation of mankind, implied in the corruption of its spirit, is tied to the limits of representation *as such*. The processes of apocalyptic runaway set in motion by the advent of world war consist in the suppression of the functions of language and the imagination, that is, our capacities to cognitively map the terrain of war and to orient ourselves in a alternative direction. The word not only set in motion the war machine, but rendered us incapable of countenancing its consequent horrors. In particular, Kraus “saw the press as an apocalyptic threat,” owing to its “falsification of reality,” falsification engaged in for the purposes of militating for war and conflict.[[122]](#footnote-123) The disconnection between the dulled critical and imaginative faculties of mankind and the horror of war, what Adorno describes as the vacuum between human beings and their doom, is a space in which apocalypse thrives.

*Last Days* confronts the catastrophe of war while asserting that the imagining of it is beyond the cognitive capability of a cultural imaginary whose very language of and for understanding and representing horror has been corrupted. Kraus’ poetics of disaster is better suited to “a theatre on Mars,” rather than earth,[[123]](#footnote-124) as the contents of war, “the contents of those unreal and unthinkable years” are “out of sight and out of mind, inaccessible to memory and preserved only in bloodstained dreams.” Kraus, as Ben Hutchinson notes, opts for a “transcendental perspective [to[ render […] the depiction of martial modernity.”[[124]](#footnote-125) A terrestrial theatre would be composed of an audience therefore incapable of comprehending the spectacle of war, as the faculties of those who reside there are subject to a trauma which contaminates the faculties of dreaming, remembering, and thinking.

Adorno cites Kraus for his recognition of the experiential and imaginative limit that arises out of shock of war and its consequent fermentation of the coming apocalypse. For my purposes, I’m interested in the linguistic dimensions of this reflexivity between the limits of representation and the immanentization of apocalypse. Other than being fabulously textual, as we’ve seen with Kraus’ text, the apocalyptic condition of modernity is inscribed in language, insofar as the poetry to come after the death camps harbours the “semiotic ghosts”—William Gibson’s term—of Auschwitz.[[125]](#footnote-126) At least when framed in this way, as “imagery […] that permeates our culture,” these semiotic ghosts, which cannot be exorcised, haunt the poetic renderings of Auschwitz.[[126]](#footnote-127) We’ve noted previously that Auschwitz’s hold on the western cultural imaginary derives from its “traumatic insistence.” This insistence, I ague, manifests in the form of a spectrality that inhabits language itself. I’ll come to show how this notion of spectrality is expressed in Pynchon’s *GR* in due course but, before that, I wish to show how the linguistic relates to catastrophe in the manner of a haunting.

What is significant, nonetheless, is that language seems to be at a remove from the ‘real’ of Auschwitz, as argued by Wiesel and others, at the same time as it still harbours semiotic ghosts and is leveraged in the representation of future apocalypses, as argued by Kraus. The discrepancy lies in the fact that an avowedly corrupted and corruptive form partakes in the representation of horrors beyond its capacities to know and describe, such that further horrors are set in motion. As Kraus writes,

[The war] was more than sin—[…] it was a lie, a daily lie out of which printer’s ink flowed like blood, the one feeding the other, pouring out like a delta into the great ocean of insanity.[[127]](#footnote-128)

The spilled ink of journalistic language, propagandising and perpetuating war, flows into the spilled blood of wartime butchery, which is again inked through written falsifications and idealizations of that experience. The complicity between ink and blood, in which the forms of language write with a liquid admixture of ink and blood, suggests the continuity of barbarism through language, just as the continued hauntings of the semiotic ghosts of Auschwitz linger on in the cultural memory. Kraus describes the continuity of the barbarism of the First World War in terms relevant to Adorno’s parallel understanding of the Second:

But it will transform the whole surrounding world into an enormous backdrop of deceit, degeneracy, and the most barbarous blasphemy, as the evil it produced continues to have its effect, growing fat on its victims under cover of its phoney ideals.[[128]](#footnote-129)

Kraus points to the transformation of the world in the War’s evil image, such that the industrialized slaughter of the Front and the rhetorical strategies of the functionaries that stoked the bellicosity leading to it, persist in the forms, structures, and notions of civilisation. This recalls the statement we encountered previously: “Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be…” Both statements share in the view that history, after the respective cataclysms Kraus and Adorno write in response to, is captured by a barbarism thoroughly affecting all forms of culture to come after.

### Whether after Auschwitz you can go on living

Adorno ties the limits of representation to Auschwitz, owing to its appearance as a form of cultural prohibition, but does so in a way which prefigures the postmodern scepticism of historicity, narrative, and language as viable conveyancers of meaning. Osborne helpfully contextualizes the correspondence between Adorno’s dictum and the postmodern in the literary arts through her description of “*post*-post war literature”—a metahistorical generic field that reflects on the non-viability of forms of expressivity elicited by the legacy of the War.[[129]](#footnote-130) Post-post war literature is a designation that also reflects on writing’s association with a “compulsive […] attachment to the violence of National Socialism in whose shadow it emerges.”[[130]](#footnote-131) Such reflection and self-criticism then culminates in “the discourses of postmodernism and post-structuralism that emerge as a consequence.”[[131]](#footnote-132) Pynchon’s *GR* addresses both the cultural prohibition formulated after Auschwitz and the limits of representation through its self-referential, postmodern take on the nature of paranoid reading and sense-making in relation to the rockets, deathcamps, and damaged landscapes of the Second World War. The novel’s recombination of these central images into an impenetrable networked conspiracy—“an irreducible *strangeness*, a self-sufficiency nothing could get inside” (285)—resembles Adorno’s construction of the prevailing aporetic condition of post-war culture. So alive to elusive meaning and attentive to the *undisclosed*, the novel’s hermeneutic of paranoid reading, “of aggravated suspicion and negative affects,” appears to be commensurate with the structure and experience of the complex, ineffable phenomenon of Auschwitz, at least at it is figured in Adorno’s works.[[132]](#footnote-133)

I’m interested in the effects of the implied limits to representation on the novel’s vision of the future: would the intractable horror of Auschwitz and the processes of apocalyptic runaway it sets in motion foreclose the possibility of a reparative reading of that aporia? Additionally, as the novel skirts the limits of representation and reckons with the impossibility of absorbing the catastrophe of Auschwitz with any sense of finality or resolution, does this injunction contribute to the novel’s apocalyptic vision? After all, there is no “whole which can teleologically justify and thus redeem or sublate an event such as the Holocaust”;[[133]](#footnote-134) in that event, what is the course or concept of the future that endures after the integration of that catastrophe into the western cultural imagination ?

These questions arise out of and operate in the context of barbarism and the limits of poetic language. What is harder to swallow is the implication, as Antony Rowland draws attention to and argues against, that there is “no poetry after Auschwitz,” that poetry was “not only impossible but immoral.”[[134]](#footnote-135) Recent scholarship has sought to recover the complexity, which has been lost through popularisation, decontextualization, and mistranslation, in Adorno’s original thought and in its consequent revisions. Rowland’s ‘Re-reading “Impossibility” and “Barbarism”: Adorno and Post-Holocaust Poetics’ suggests that, rather than gesturing towards its impossibility, the passage in question actually “predicates its existence.”[[135]](#footnote-136)

Impossibility is a concept that has been overextended in the interpretation of Adorno’s statement. Impossible seems to have been meant not simply in the sense that words cannot be uttered, or that culture must meet the horror of Auschwitz with avowed “linguistic silence.”[[136]](#footnote-137) Rowland understands Adorno to mean that the possibility of speaking in the poetic mode remains, albeit now with an inflection of barbarism.[[137]](#footnote-138) Such a statement recalls Benjamin’s belief in the reciprocity between culture and barbarism, the one being conducted through the other through a historical process of transmission. Adorno takes up this reciprocity and considers what this dialectic of culture and barbarism has meant for life. In the years to come, Adorno tempered his grim and disabling claim, framing it no longer as a question of culture. Rather, it was a matter of

whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz.[[138]](#footnote-139)

The problem, as similarly identified by J. M. Bernstein in his *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, is a kind of “guilt at having to sustain oneself through the very stance of coldness that is the precondition for Auschwitz.”[[139]](#footnote-140) What is a non-cultural question—a question of simply living—extends what, for Adorno, is already explicit in culture: to repeat the coldness of bourgeois subjectivity by means of cultural criticism or production is to reify the culture that produced Auschwitz. This is not to say that the poets must be now and forever silent; rather, the work of culture must persist in acknowledgement of the impossibility of working through the ungraspable aporia of the Holocaust.[[140]](#footnote-141)

What follows is an attempt to read *GR* in the context of Adorno’s view of cultural criticism and to explore Pynchon’s representation of persistence after Auschwitz. Taken together, I believe the inability to speak poetically in the face of the memory of the death camp structures our approach to the thinking of utopian and dystopian futurity, as the structures of meaning hitherto relied upon before Auschwitz are displaced in the process of historical reflection. The novel’s own reflection on that history is oblique, difficult, and its methods of paranoid reading are wilfully unable to clarify the haunting memory of the Holocaust with any justifying or redeeming fidelity. The waning of the possibility of reparative readings of that catastrophe is comorbid with a pessimistic image of the future. The endgame of this inquiry relates to whether the changed concept of cultural production in the wake of the holocaust has any absolute implications for the idea of the future, for hyperstitions which dream of the future; to rephrase Adorno’s statement, if poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, what of the poetic spaces of utopian futurity? Given what *GR* and Adorno’s thought may share in terms of their scepticism of resolution and redemption in the context of the Holocaust, it is reasonable to ask the following of *GR:* how many of the negated futures we encounter in the novel have to do with the very same cultural prohibition established in Adorno’s dictum?

## Spectres

I stake my argument regarding the association between the limits of representation and the terminal itinerary of history in *GR* on the logic of the spectre. Spectres, in the manner of their portrayal in the Mittelwerke section of Pynchon’s novel, implicate the irreducibility of the ghost, the ontological vagueness of spectral existence, to the question of survival, of persistence and continuity. Readings of Pynchon’s works have long “described the sense of historical indeterminacy caused by problems of historical representation in allegorical terms.”[[141]](#footnote-142) The spectre, as I wish to argue, represents one such instance of the allegorization of history and whose revenant and hauntological properties gesture towards the irrecuperability of genocidal trauma and its inscription in the future. *GR* thus emerges as a text concentrated upon hauntological historical memory threatened by erasure and whose responsibility to historical memory consists in a reckoning with the limited means of touching on memory that manifests itself in the elusive form of the spectre.

The ghosts of the Mittelwerke demand of those who they haunt that they pay attention to the temporal, historical, and ontological disjunction implied in the structure of the spectre. The nature and experience of the spectre is related to the hauntological form of history. This is to say, history is caught by a “spectrally deferred non-origin,” an unresolved remnant/revenant, which manifests in the figure of the ghost, itself caught between presence and absence, the living and the dead, the corporeal and the ethereal, etc.[[142]](#footnote-143) Being caught between these categories and, in fact, eliding the separation between them, inaugurates three things; firstly, it uncovers an in-built problem of representation given the mutability of the ontological form of the spectre; secondly, it sets out an ethical obligation, owing to the spectre’s appearance as a “a wholly irrecuperable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving”;[[143]](#footnote-144) lastly in destabilizing the ordered sense of chronology by exposing the still-present ghosts of history, the spectral signals “the impossibility of conceptually solidifying the past.” In doing so, the spectral contests the possibility of constructing a future based on unsound historical foundations and unresolved historical memories.

The hauntological form, the related considerations of comprehensibility, representability, and responsibility built within it, obligate formal and ethical considerations which, in *GR*, are implicated in the production of futures. *GR’s* onto-eschatological conception of history derives from, on the one hand, the overdetermination of the apocalyptic runaway of hauntological forces (Auschwitz and the Rocket) and, on the other, the inchoate structure of the spectre, which then has a bearing on the course and conception of the future. Hauntology, “as the dual movement of return and inauguration” of the spectral, encapsulates the phenomenon this reading wishes to address: the return of historical memory acting on the present and persisting in the future.[[144]](#footnote-145) As we’ve seen in the quoted paragraph from Adorno above, the question of what is possible after Auschwitz is related to the notion of survival; Adorno questions “whether after Auschwitz you can go on living,” what form this living-on will take, with what compromises and into what kind of future. Pynchon’s novel continues with these inquiries and takes up Adorno’s originary critique of poetry after Auschwitz in the form of the limits to representation with regard to the hauntology of history. The question of whether one can go on living is addressed through the figure of the undead ghost.

### Terminal evening

The association between the limits of representation and the course of history is evident in the case of the Mittelwerke spectres. The Nordhausen Mittelwerke in which they appear once served as a manufactory for V-2 ballistic missiles worked by the slave-labourers of Mittelbau-Dora. Now abandoned, the Mittlewerke is a place “found adrift and haunted, full of signs of recent human tenancy” (361). A place haunted by semiotic ghosts, then, ghosts whose hauntings hint at “the attic horror of What Might Have Happened” (361) here. Consequently, the work of representation, of semiotic re-production, is implicated in the hauntology of the Holocaust. The circulation of meaning through the mutable figure of the ghost analogizes the work of negotiating the aporia of the Holocaust. In their symbolisation of the displacement and dislocation of meaning through supernatural means, the ghosts of the Mittelwerke point to the negation of meaning at this and other sites of wartime violence which harbour the traumatic memories of the time.

The trace memories of the ghosts that abound in this space and the annexed Dora camp where slave-labourers were housed points to historical “[m]emory […] on the rampage.”[[145]](#footnote-146) Turned into a tourist attraction in the post-war power vacuum, the networked camp and manufactory is made available for guided tours, before which tourists are briefed “on what to do in case of any encounter with the dead” (362). Richard Crownshaw argues that the shock and disturbance to those who visit the site is that of “those who participate in a collective memory shared with witnesses of the Holocaust [and are thus] still subject to reverberations of what those witnesses felt. The shock of remembering disrupts attempts to place memories of these witnesses in an appropriative discourse.”[[146]](#footnote-147) The spectres of history remember themselves to the visitors of the camp complex, inaugurating a disjunction of history, as the disruptive process of remembrance does not allow for the easy archivization and ordering of that history. The Mittelwerke spectres are figurations of memory not yet dead, of history not even past.

Beyond the place of the camp and the attached Mittelwerke, the hauntology of history reverberates throughout the text. As Amy J. Elias writes, Pynchon’s “historiographic metafiction” “meditate[es] on the nature of history itself.”[[147]](#footnote-148) To borrow one of three of Elias’s formulations for history in his works, Pynchon’s metafiction relies on “[a] notion of polyvocal history,” one which “leads Pynchon to advocate paranoia as a form of cognitive mapping.”[[148]](#footnote-149) Drawing on the work of Linda Hutcheon and Fredric Jameson, Elias reads Pynchon’s paranoid fiction as valuing “multiplicity over universalism,” and “advocat[ing] a pluralist view of historiography.”[[149]](#footnote-150) Therefore, *GR* operates on the basis of a concept of history replete with a multiplicity of perspectives, without the transcendent guarantee of meaning, couched in a language of ironical detachment, and sceptical of the notion of neutrality in the recording and retelling of history.[[150]](#footnote-151) Moreover, the text “incorporates poststructuralism’s semiotic awareness, and challenges narrative unity in the interests of multiplicity and disparity.”[[151]](#footnote-152) I refer to Elias reading of polyvocal history in Pynchon’s fiction as it underlies the construction and representation of hauntological history in *GR*. The abstractive tendencies of polyvocal history manifest in the figure of the spectre and the manner of its haunting of post-war history. Memory is on the rampage in *GR* in the form of a polyphony of spectres whose irrecuperable accounts of history disclose the widening of the text’s historical frame to include non-identical historical actors.

In the case of the Mittelwerke, the hauntological force operating in this place also signals toward a temporal and historical finitude. Now abandoned, “All the objects [in the Mittelwerke] have grown still, drowned, enfeebled with evening, *terminal* evening” (361, my emphasis) and analogize a state in which

you are lost or isolate inside the way time is passing, when there is no more History, no timetraveling capsule to find your way back to, only the lateness and the absence that fill a great railway shed after the capital has been evacuated […] (361)

The Mittelwerke is thus conditioned by a terminal structure of feeling; this is a place where the future is foreclosed, and it is already too late. Even at the novel’s beginning, when the screaming comes across the sky and the evacuation proceeds, it is already “too late” (1). For Captain Blicero, dreaming of perfect “bookish symmetries” of past loves and the acuity of the apt name of a lover, dreaming like this is meaningless, too, as in “1944 [it] was much too late for any of it to matter” (120). The temporal lag and historical lateness of *GR* is to do, variously, with a belatedness of acts of mitigating slaughter (130); “the sound too late” (164) of a blast one never hears approaching; the lateness of moments already lost to history: “Now, too late, when at last he wanted to act, there was nothing to act on” (486). The lateness of the Mittelwerke, as throughout *GR,* recalls that described by Robert Spencer as the “lateness” of modernity, “the general condition of a world that has outlasted the catastrophe of the Holocaust.”[[152]](#footnote-153) Spencer describes lateness as “a sort of temporal exile; it names an experience of dislocation.”[[153]](#footnote-154) Lateness thus corresponds to the deferral, displacement, or disjunction inherent to the form of the spectre and emblematic of the state of post-war history and its indenture to the rocket. *GR* is concerned with ghosts, “Because analogies with the ghost-life exist” (872) and the historical analogy of ghosts lies in the ghost’s disjunctive qualities. *GR* presents a notion of history in which there is “no timetraveling capsule to find your way back to” a pre-lapsarian past in which the future was so pregnant with possibility, not yet foreclosed; as opposed to a past to which one can return, it is rather history and its revenants that return to us. In the passage quoted above, the “lateness” of history connotes a terminal mood, insofar as the catastrophic event of the Holocaust has passed but its effects still circulate. The wartime manufactory Slothrop finds himself in is thus a reliquary for the apparitions of an elapsed and yet enduring moment. The itinerary of time and history is out of joint with only the ghosts left over from the suffering that befell this place left to tell of its horror. The bodies of the slave-labourers no longer work the metal, but the lingering memory of their suffering—as in “all stilled Europe” (361)—persists in the form of spectres.

In a brief and astonishing passage which follows our introduction to this place, set amid the farcical, foul-mouthed chasing of Slothrop by Major Marvy and his band of soldiers in the “terminal evening” of the Nordhausen Mittelwerke, comes a searing intervention from the “true momentum” of the time:

There is only the hurtling on, through amazing perfect whiteness. Whiteness without heat, and blind inertia: Slothrop feels a terrible *familiarity* here, a center he has been skirting, avoiding as long as he can remember—never has he been as close as now to the true momentum of his time: faces and facts that have crowded his indenture to the Rocket, camouflage and distraction fall away for the white moment, the vain and blind tugging at his sleeves *it’s important . . . please . . . look at us . . .* but it’s already too late, it’s only wind, only g-loads, and the blood of his eyes has begun to touch the whiteness back to ivory, to brushings of gold and a network of edges to the broken rock . . . and the hand that lifted him away sets him back in the Mittelwerke—

Lifted for a moment out of the reach of his pursuers by an Angel into a state of “amazing perfect whiteness,” Slothrop is confronted by what seem like spectres who pull, plead, and implore him to pay them attention. Under the illumination of white light, “whiteness without heat,” recalling the coldness that is the basic precondition of Auschwitz, a kind of white visitation is revealed to Slothop. “Faces and facts”, maybe, of the dead, displaced, and powerless to be born of the Holocaust are illuminated in spectral form to one who has tried to supress their irrepressible historical force; the “true momentum,” which I take to be the trauma of the Holocaust, breaks out in the form of spectres. Through “faces and facts,” these ghosts of the dead make an *account* of themselves, remember themselves to Slothrop. Slothrop is urged to engage souls whose very subjectivation is enacted through the ambiguous form of the spectre, a form that *elides* the separation between the categories constitutive of our rational frameworks.

As the spectre presents an “irrecuperable intrusion into our world,” the qualified existence of the souls of the Mittelwerke, given their ambiguous representation as residual spectres, inaugurates a questioning of the limits of representation. “The shock of remembering,” as we discovered through Crownshaw, “disrupts attempts to place memories of these witnesses in an appropriative discourse.” Insofar as the ghost cultivates an “openness to what exceeds knowledge,” the spectre sets down an implied boundary, a limit separating that which can be appropriated or objectified as knowledge from that which is beyond the limit of understanding and representation.[[154]](#footnote-155) The spectre disrupts by introducing an otherness into the scene that has be reckoned with, given the complication it presents to our intellectual frameworks. What we take to be solid and dependable is destabilized owing to the intervention of the spectre, which asserts, according to Jameson, “that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us.”[[155]](#footnote-156) How one observes, negotiates, or practices the limit set down by the spectre in and through the work of writing or the act of communicating with spectres serves an indexical function. This is to the extent the spectre reveals “an essential unknowing which underlies and may undermine what we think we know.”[[156]](#footnote-157) The spectre operates at the limit of the knowable and representable and thus defines what is in the remit of knowledge or what exceeds it.

The ambiguity and precarity of the ontological category of the spectre, which exceeds the bounds of what we know as dead or living, instead emphasises the subject of “survival,” “the meaning of which,” according to Derrida,

is not supplemental to life or death. It is originary: life is survival. Survival in the conventional sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live after death. All the ideas that have helped me in my work, notably those regarding the trace or the spectral, were related to the idea of ‘survival’ as a basic dimension. It does not derive from either to live or to die. No more than what I call ‘originary mourning.’ It is something that does not wait for so-called ‘actual’ death.[[157]](#footnote-158)

Survival, then, is related “life,” living on after death, where the continuity of life after death entails a responsibility for the life still to come, regardless of the attenuated form it takes. The question of survival makes a demand of those who, like Slothrop, are confronted by the originary power of the spectre. It is originary in the sense that, rather than functioning as riddle to be solved or overcome, “the spectre’s secret is a productive opening of meaning rather than determinate content to be uncovered.”[[158]](#footnote-159) The spectre’s intrusion into our world uproots our frameworks of knowing by introducing an element in excess of these frameworks. This excessive element survives the uprooting of our grounds of knowledge and is the occasion for new and productive meanings.

The originary quality of the spectre emerges in Pynchon’s novel in the form of “the new Uncertainty,” a concept which is concerned with the precarious quality of life in the wake of the upheaval of the war:

barn-swallow souls, fashioned of brown twilight, rise toward the white ceilings . . . they are unique to the Zone, they answer to the new Uncertainty. Ghosts used to be either likenesses of the dead or wraiths of the living. But here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly. The status of the name you miss, love, and search for now has grown ambiguous and remote, but this is even more than the bureaucracy of mass absence—some still live, some have died, but many, many have forgotten which they are. Their likenesses will not serve. Down here are only wrappings left in the light, in the dark: images of the Uncertainty … (361-2)

The displaced inhabitants of the Zone and the Mittelwerke spectres are forms that exist in a state of absent-presence emblematic of what Pynchon calls “the new Uncertainty.” This uncertainty manifests in the “ambiguous and remote” status of those displaced physically in the Zone but also ontologically. This uncertainty is also to do with the surviving, spectral trace of those whose history consists in the destruction of their record, both in flesh and in name. Joseph Tabbi writes that “the rubric of ‘the new Uncertainty’ […] suggest[s] a confusion of categories that blurs even the line between living and dead souls.”[[159]](#footnote-160) Survival “is not supplemental to life or death” just as the nature of existence in the Pynchonian Zone is subject to a significant blurring, where even the memory of one’s ontological status prior to being made ghost is forgotten.

### Dilemma and Responsibility

The responsibility of attending to the ghosts of the Zone and of the Mittelwerk is set against the precarious, elusive status of the spectre. In exceeding the prescribed limits of what constitutes the living and the dead, the representation of the precarious subjects of *GR* is conditional to what Derrida describes as “a quasi-logic of the phantom,” and must register

a readiness to welcome the law of the phantom, the spectral experience, and the memory of the phantom, of that which is neither dead nor living, more than dead and more than living, only surviving, the law of the most commanding memory, even though it is the most effaced and the most effaceable, but for that very reason the most demanding.[[160]](#footnote-161)

While the spectres of the Zone are described as ‘forgetting whether they’re are truly alive or not,’ it is still beholden on those who encounter them to preserve their memory, despite—or indeed because of—their elusive otherness. The principle of uncertainty conditioning the status of these souls and the precarity of their ambiguous existence is implicated in the work of representation. As Derrida asserts in ‘The Force of Law,’ “the dimension of language that is re-presentative, mediating, thus technological, utilitarian, semiotic, informational” necessitates a questioning of how representation treats its “original destination,” or the object of the act of representation, as well as an evaluation of to what extent it is faithful in its representation of them.[[161]](#footnote-162) This is the “demand” the spectre makes of us.

More broadly, the question of how to heed the spectre’s call for attention discloses the immense dilemma and responsibility of the work of representation in the case of the Holocaust. We encounter this twinned dilemma in the guise of the ambiguous spectre which, if we recall Derrida on the ambiguity of the ghost as related to the question of justice, reveals a parallel concern with the “uncertain” work of representation. In other words, the simultaneous responsibility and impossibility of representing the precarious, ambiguous, remote life of the spectre is related to the negotiation of the hauntological force of the Holocaust, a force which displaces meaning and is without the possibility of recuperation or clarification. The encounter with the ghost obligates a discussion of ethics as it is conditioned by how one remembers or recalls the ghost when called upon by them or when confronted by their forgotten or disappearing memory; Pynchon references the question of how to do justice to the re-presentation of one whose presence is effaced and effaceable through writing as a mode constituted by “powers” of representation “that uproot language and cause it to decline, to fall far from, or outside of, its originary destination.”[[162]](#footnote-163) What representation leaves out or adds in discloses its inability to get at the “reality” of the Holocaust and this problem is presented through the ontological properties of the spectre.

Anna Richardson’s ‘The Ethical Limitations of Holocaust Literary Representation’ thoroughly maps the territory of the limits to representation. Citing Berel Lang’s claim that “by definition there must be a difference between a representation and its object *un*-represented, with the former adding its own version to the ‘original’ it represents,”[[163]](#footnote-164) Richardson asserts that literary representations cannot touch on the experience of the Holocaust as they “will always be bound to convey a representation of that experience particular to the situation in which it (the representation) was produced.”[[164]](#footnote-165) The qualification of “any form of representation as essentially a ‘representation-*as,*’”[[165]](#footnote-166) indicates a supplemental or excessive quality to representation: “To render the Holocaust experience [in] a work of literature, to express it through written language, necessarily imports some meaning to it, which it arguably does not warrant.”[[166]](#footnote-167)

Language thus introduces an excessive element redolent of the “polyvocality” of *GR’s* paranoid approach to history, where the interlocutors of history are not only living subjects, but the “ghost-lives” of Nazi genocide and the rocket that is a “ghost in the sky” (56)—the “rocket’s ghost calling to ghosts it newly made” (164). The theme of spectrality relates to polyvocality insofar as the hauntings of the historical past act on and enunciate the present; likewise, the hauntings of the rocket-future prefigure the morbidity to come. On varying levels, the polyvocality of history is staged through revenants as participating voices in history.

*GR* is a text disruptive of a monological view of history, its recording and its narrativisation, whose polyvocality is evoked through the hauntology of history. The theme of spectrality is the locus at which a universalistic history, formed of diffuse and inchoate voices, meets with disjunctive representations that call into question our capacities to know, order and represent. Despite the ethical and formal problems of disjunctive representation articulated through the spectre, *GR* nonetheless reckons with the issue at hand; “that the Holocaust happened and it must not be forgotten.”[[167]](#footnote-168) The responsibility to the future is bound up with the work of preserving, remembering, representing the aporia of the Holocaust. What, then, does the future look like given this fundamental inability to countenance and render the hauntological forces of post-war history at the same time as they haunt the cultural imaginary?

## Corruption and Ashes

In concert with the disordering of representation disclosed through the spectre, surface manifestations, looks, and specular images also function in this text as representations of limits, the implications of which also have a bearing on the imagining of utopian futurity. Early on in *GR*,Katje Borgesius gives off “an unaccountably *futureless* look…” (247). Mid-way through a sexual encounter, the double-agent flashes a certain look to Tyrone Slothrop beyond which apparently no prospect lies. To his mind, the inexplicable look implies a thing not amenable to reason, “too insubstantial to get a fix on” (247), or a thing shrouded from meaning through secrecy, a “con” (247) of which she is unaware. Whether through vagueness or conspiracy, hopes­­­­­­ for the time to come are said to disappear in *the obliqueness of disordered signification*. In either case, if this is to be her disposition to the world—how she is to interface with it—then she bears a look disclosive of the impossibility of imagining futurity beyond the limit of meaning and meaningfulness. That is to say, the future’s disappearance is registered on Katje’s enigmatic face—a surface operating as a signifier that signifies nothing and the nothing to come. Katje’s look implies the future’s inability to be countenanced and rendered. Therefore, surface vis-à-vis signification emerges as that which frames our efforts in the envisioning of futures.

“Unaccountability” refers to the unthinkable, inexplicable outlook of history after Auschwitz, where history is re-formed out of the nullity of the Holocaust.[[168]](#footnote-169) In exposing the nullity in Katje’s look, faciality and the face-to-face encounter, the normative sites of the ethical relation, are constructed as the *loci* of a historical fatalism. The human face signifying nothing recalls Adorno’s interpretation of one specific camp experience in which the posture of the spectator conveys a sense of one’s existential in*-significanc*e:

Thinking men and artists have not infrequently described a sense of being not quite there, of not playing along, a feeling as if they were not themselves at all, but a kind of spectator. Others often find this repulsive; it was the basis of Kierkegaard’s polemic against what he called the esthetic sphere. A critique of philosophical personalism indicates, however, that this attitude toward immediacy, this disavowal of every existential posture, has a moment of objective truth that goes beyond the appearance of the self-preserving motive. “What does it really matter?” is a line we like to associate with bourgeois callousness, but it is the line most likely to make the individual aware, without dread, of the insignificance of his existence. The inhuman part of it, the ability to keep one’s distance as a spectator and to rise above things, is in the final analysis the human part, the very part resisted by its ideologists.[[169]](#footnote-170)

Adorno describes a feeling of disembodiment or distanciation typified by the position of the spectator. For the survivor who recounted this phenomenon, the act of spectation or witnessing, as a “disavowal of every existential posture,” articulated the essential “insignificance of his existence.” To see and then for what is seen to mean nothing or to be met with a meaninglessness that occludes the possibility of an engaged temporal existence served as grounds for the subject’s detachment from his historical situation. What I wish to emphasise in this, as in the case of Katje’s look which signifies nothing, is the emergent principle of empty signification as a facet of the very experience of the camp and the terminal nullity of post-war history. Whereas the camp describes an experience of existential evacuation *in sight* of the horror of Auschwitz, Katje’s look describes a sense of being *unsighted* in the face an oblique image of the future. It is this key insight of the unaccountably futureless look that I’d like to draw out in its connection to the limits of representation and the terminal course of post-Auschwitz history. The nullity at the level of the signified, the vacuity of surfaces, discloses the end of beautiful semblance. As Benjamin writes, “The significance of beautiful semblance is rooted in the age of auratic perception that is now coming to an end.”[[170]](#footnote-171) The withering of the significance of beautiful semblance, as an allegory for the destabilization of the grounds of experience, emerges because of the disintegrative effects of modernity. What we have, then, is a world without “beautiful semblance, […] harmony, nor the unity of the manifold,” with their inverse—the disjunctive, haunted, corrupted, etc.—characterising the vision of modernity.[[171]](#footnote-172)

That Katje’s “look” is conveyed during a sex act is significant insofar as, according to Paul Bove, Katje’s understanding of the historical is construed through her sexuality. Bove writes that Katje’s “historical understanding comes from thinking about her own sexuality to her masters,” as she allegorizes various acts, aestheticizes bodies, and symbolizes sexual hierarchies in the framework of a given historical situation.[[172]](#footnote-173) As a result, the impossibility of imagining futurity implied in this futureless look observed between moments of sexual encounter invites a reading sensitive to its historical implications. The question that arises out of this and other moments that tie together the nullity of history and aesthetic practices of signification is as follows: what, other than a sense of the impossible future, can be constructed out of the “corruption and ashes” of the Nazi oven-state to which Katje belongs?

At the images she sees in the mirror Katje also feels a cameraman’s pleasure, but knows what he cannot: that inside herself, enclosed in the *soignée* surface of dear fabric and dead cells, she is corruption and ashes, she belongs in a way none of them can guess cruelly to the Oven … to *Der Kinderofen* … (111)

Though now relatively safe back in Pirate Prentice’s house, making preparations for their elaborate ruse of Slothrop, Katje is still haunted by persistent images of the horrors of the Oven she has left behind on the continent. In this scene, Katje perceives herself as object, the object of a lens’ gaze, her heavily ornamented appearance disguising the bleak and ruinous matter of the Oven-state she holds within. The “corruption and ashes” belied by her “soignée surface” aren’t recognizable, as they elude the camera’s gaze, nor are they cognizable, in that they are beyond what others can know. We fail to glimpse the future in Katje’s face as the Holocaust persists, within her as it does elsewhere in the Zone’s haunted landscapes, in the form of a psychopathology of traumatic history, on the one hand, and an aporia beyond which redemptive futures are unthinkable, on the other. The specularity of the mirror reflects back to Katje a virtual, aesthetic ‘cover’ that belies the horror of the Oven and renders it unknowable. In much the same way, the unaccountability of the future in her earlier look consists in the unknowability of the depths of her historically contaminated being, knowability apparently being a condition for imaginable futures.

To be unaccountably futureless would be to have a future with no account, one without the means to be explicated. The business of accounting in relation to the future implies a reckoning of it; if this reckoning uncovers a deficit, then the deficit is of the idea of the future as “an abstract, empty, and quantifiable entity” with the potential to be exploited and put to use.[[173]](#footnote-174) Some of our ways of speaking about prospective events have something to do with looking—facing the future, looking to or looking forward to it, etc. Katje’s is a look that betrays the future-oriented essence of surface appearances—that something lies behind or beyond them—in favour of a terminal and ‘corrupted’ image of the future. Beautiful semblance thus gives way to the futureless look of modernity.

What is signalled by this look isn’t a curiosity solely pertaining to Katje, it must be said; rather, the inability to render the future seems prototypical of many characters in *GR*. In Katje’s mythologised character arc—that of Hänsel and Gretel and the Oven—“it is she, who at some indefinite future moment” (114), must engage in some decisive act, to either move the story onwards or bring it to its conclusion: “Will Katje feel her obligation cancelled by someday calling down English fighter-bombs, her game’s prison, though it mean death?” (114-15). She seems to always stand at the cusp of a decision or a next step. This critical action, however, is deferred, suspended, out of one’s capability. Slothrop reads the same characteristics of powerlessness within himself; Katje, like Slothrop,

stands at the end of a passage in her life, without any next step to take—all her bets are in, she has only the tedium now of being knocked from one room to the next, a sequence of numbered rooms whose numbers do not matter, till inertia bring her to the last. That’s all (248).

The implied forward momentum ­­of her narrative arc is stifled, shown to be a series of inertial movements to inconsequential points of ending. There are also others—like Roger Mexico—who are passive, impotent subjects on the receiving end of that decisive act. Roger had “seen himself a point on a moving wavefront, propagating through sterile history—a known past, a projectable future” (149). Were it not for Jessica, Roger would’ve continued in much the same way: “But Jessica was the breaking of the wave. Suddenly there was a beach, the unpredictable… Past and future stopped at the beach: that’s how he’d set it out” (149). Either the decisive act is suspended in some indefinite limbo, or it is the taking of that decision on a character’s behalf and out of their hands that forecloses the future somehow, as in Roger’s case; either way, the future is unaccountable, forbidden, or conditional to other powers.

### A ghost in the sky

What we divine in Katje’s unaccountable look, a look behind which nothing meaningful lies, and her gaze into the mirror, where she sees nothing past her beautified exterior but “corruption and ashes,” are instances of *GR’s* engagement with the *disposition* of the future in the moment of its disappearance from the cultural imaginary. The vacuity of representations or, even, the operation of representations as sites of and for apocalyptic manifestation in *GR* are analogies for a historical fatalism inscribed in the critical devaluation of semantic and representational forms. Culture after Auschwitz is marked by an insistence that doom consists in the limits of representation and the disordering of practices of signifying meaning. Our analysis began with readings of the modern mind’s inability to absorb experience, to countenance and render horror, or to imagine beyond it—a state of cognitive decline through which Adorno asserted that the “vacuum between human beings and their doom” is “where their doom actually consists.” The vacuity of the meaning behind representations, which signify nothing and can no longer relate (to) experience, recall the “unaccountably futureless look” of post-war culture in *GR*. In other words, the futurelessness disclosed through Katje’s look consists in a failure to make the future answerable, able to be reckoned, explicable. Conversely, its opposite—futurity—would then consist in the power to countenance and render the future through meaning-making or signifying practices.

The primary example of the novel’s “unaccountably futureless” condition emerges through the figure of the rocket, an object who’s elusive, spectral form cannot be brought to account or represented in the manner necessary to construct futures beyond apocalypse. The hauntological, disjunctive properties of the rocket, which shape and order the world in its image, violate the capacity of the future to be reckoned and exploited. As noted by Peter L. Cooper in *Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World,* “The possibility of imminent destruction pervades *Gravity’s Rainbow* in the form of rocket strikes.”[[174]](#footnote-175) The rocket analogizes the disordering of signification insofar as the rocket’s apocalyptic force is heard approaching only ‘after the fact’ of its explosion.[[175]](#footnote-176) Described as “the one Word that rips apart the day” (29), “a Word spoken with no warning in your ear, and then silence forever” (29), the rocket inverts chronology as well as the order of the signifier and signified; the rocket only *announces* itself to its victim after it has already exploded. The disordering of signification in this way corresponds to the disjunctive properties of the spectral. The rocket, in reversing the logic of cause and effect with the “roar of its own fall” (56) following the blast, “catching up to what’s already death and burning” (56), is said to resemble “a ghost in the sky” (56)—the “rocket’s ghost calling to ghosts it newly made” (164). The rocket’s roar, as a delayed report of its own explosion, reverses temporal sequence in a way which complements the hauntological properties of the ghost—the *afterimage* of a being no longer or barely present.

The novel, in fact, begins in the ‘aftermath’ of one such explosion, opening with “a screaming [which] comes across the sky” (1), one which presumably tells of an explosion already occurred. “It has happened before,” we are told, “but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late. The Evacuation still proceeds, but it’s all theatre” (3). Moreover, the novel concludes with another cataclysmic scene, with a vision of an apocalypse already underway—but on the cusp of being consummated—in a hypothesised contemporary California—an apocalypse based on the disaster of the Holocaust. As Stuart Moulthrop makes a case for in ‘Pink Automaton of the Panapocalypse,’ the novel ends at a point of suspension, redoubles the Holocaustal imagery of WWII in the context of contemporary Los Angeles, and leaves the prospect of rocket apocalypse hanging in the air, literally through the rocket suspended in mid-flight.[[176]](#footnote-177) Moulthrop traces “the movement towards holocaust in the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” via “fragmentary, elliptical passages;” from Blicero’s launching of the A4 Rocket in 1945, with Gottfried inserted into it, on through to its re-entry above the Orpheus Theatre in a contemporary Los Angeles.[[177]](#footnote-178) This aspect of simultaneous historical haunting and spectral foreshadowing is the novel’s articulation of the disappearance of the future insofar as the future is subject to hauntological processes of apocalyptic runaway:

If we are inside the Orpheus in contemporary California, then the pointed object in question must be the business end of a Soviet ICBM (the ‘pointed tip’ of a re-entry vehicle). Yet in the only sense that makes sense for this holocaustal reading, the missile in question is a Rocket indeed, and one Rocket in particular. In violation of linear history but in accord with a powerful alternative logic, the projectile here is the very same A4, serial number 00000, that carries Gottfried to his *Liebestod.* To make this identification we must of course remove ourselves from the ‘secular history’ of normal space-time and enter another order of being, a domain of synchronicity or dreamtime. This is a parabolic or paranoid order in which everything is at least potentially connected, where events in one coordinate system (Germany, 1945) may map on to another (Los Angeles, 1969).[[178]](#footnote-179)

The A4 Rocket’s narrative arc tracks and traces the movement of a Holocaustal apocalypse beyond its originary historical context, beyond its limited function as a set-piece in Blicero’s pursuit of rocket-annihilation as the oven door begins to shut on him in 1945, into something of a transhistorical force. The rocket becomes an abstraction of wartime violence, consistent with the historical events of the novel’s setting, and yet also allusive of an impending, future holocaust. The novel’s end transposes the historically-contextualised Rocket and turns it into a hypothetical construction of some future doom, not only in the form of a premonition, but as a constitutive element of an eschatological telos always-already in motion and which persists as a threat until the final moment of apocalypse. What is crucial in all this is the rocket’s “violation of linear history,” its derangement of cause and effect, the operation of its hauntological force, such that the itinerary of temporality and the means to orient oneself into a future beyond disaster is inhibited.

### Broken line

The rocket, the novel’s arch-symbol of the techno-culture of death, is part of the originary violence of the human. The screaming rocket of the opening chapter sounds a violence that has been heard before in the deep time of the archaeopsychic past. I stake this claim on Pynchon’s suggestion that the mission of “human consciousness, that poor cripple, that deformed and doomed thing” is “to promote death” (793). In a long account regarding the abundance of life at the formation of the world to which humans are introduced as “counterrevolutionaries” (793). Pynchon develops a murderous account of anthropological history. Read in this way, the rocket, the Zone, and the death camp appear as the novel’s excessive articulations of this originary being-towards-death.

Moreover, the incipient explosion at the novel’s conclusion is thus a part of a continuity of violence, a continuity which is communicated and propagated through language. Slothrop, under the tutelage of Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck, reads in the schematics of the 00000 Rocket a symbolic reference to a “broken line [that] evidently dates from a time of discontinuities, tribal fragmentation, alienation…” (250-252). The circuit-schematic symbols used to diagrammatically explain the Rocket recall Old Norse runes, which recall older Goth symbols. Dodson-Truck proceeds to deliver a lesson on the basis for organic linguistic evolution from these symbols, the marked similarities in how different cultures came to comparable signifiers and semantic circuits of meaning implying a mutual and osmotic development among disparate cultures. Significantly, there is also the suggestion that human culture shares in a similarly organic tendency towards violence, which Dodson-Truck expresses through references to discontinuities, tribal fragmentation, alienation, etc. The anthropological history that these circuit-schematic symbols draw from, the tendencies towards othering, atomisation, and antipathy implied therein, is made manifest in organic human language.

Language is the medium through which violence is communicated and the means by which violence is conducted across time. Cooper writes that “The violent advent [of rocket apocalypse] poises barely outside the frame of *GR*—right before its beginning and after its ending.”[[179]](#footnote-180) The novel is thus enclosed by apocalypse on either side, as if its narrative mediates between and a commutes a prior historical violence and a prospective cataclysm. As follows, the continuity between cataclysms past and to come is bridged through the aforementioned “broken line [that] evidently dates from a time of discontinuities, tribal fragmentation, alienation…” This broken line can be read in this way as the line of a narrative or a history.

More than this, the “broken line,” or fragmented telos of history, corresponds to the truncated sentence with which the novel concludes; both are suffused with eschatological meaning. The narrative line discloses a history determined by conflict and disorder, a history the 00000 subtends and merges into. In relation to this, at the very structure of syntax, as in the fragmentary formation of history itself, resides a sense of disorder. The novel’s last unfinished line, “Now everybody—” (903), makes us hang on its word, as if in thrall to the impending annihilation through the very suspension of discourse. From Moulthrop:

One possible reading points unambiguously toward holocaust: Pynchon's finale invokes a suspension of discourse (or culture, civilization, humanity itself) in the first thermonuclear flash of a third world war. In this case the term that completes the aposiopesis must be the verb *to die,* applied in the imperative. Read this way, the novel ends with a universal death wish: Now everybody die.[[180]](#footnote-181)

The novel holds the future to ransom through its suspended apocalyptic moment, a moment constructed based on the two senses of the broken and fragmentary line; the narrative line of disordered history and the syntactical line of interrupted discourse in the face of impending catastrophe. In terms of the latter, the indeterminate period until that flash of nuclear apocalypse, the anticipation of that coming death, will stretch out with the unfinished line. The unresolved syntactic construction holds the promise of death like the rocket suspended mid-flight.

Through the “broken line” of history—which is also the suspended line of the novel’s end—we can begin to sketch out a few concluding thoughts regarding the apocalyptic discourse of *GR* as it is composed in its final pages. The unresolved syntactic structure of “Now everybody—” which Moulthrop suggests is connected to a universal death wish, holds the promise of apocalypse and discloses the silence that is a condition of responses to disaster; the novel ends with rocket’s suspension mid-flight, a delay enacted through the suspension of discourse. The discontinuity of language and representation in the moment of incipient explosion, the inability to send word[s] in reply to or in disputation of imminent death draws attention to a concept of disaster that consists in writing and its limits. To paraphrase the title of an article by Paulina Ambroży, at the limits of language are the limits of the world.[[181]](#footnote-182) She writes, referencing the apocalyptic discourse of Derrida, that “the apocalyptic and its aftermath confront us with the unspeakable and unimaginable.”[[182]](#footnote-183) The twinned limit of world and word consists in the approach of “the extremity of the extreme [which may never] be comprehended.”[[183]](#footnote-184) The experience of total annihilation exists beyond the edges of knowability and describes an impossibility that modes of comprehension and representation cannot touch. Total annihilation implies a “doom,” as Tchitcherine suggests, “always to be held at the edges of revelations” (566). The edges of “the extremity of the extreme” that the novel skirts demarcate the limits of representation; it is at this limit that apocalypse manifests through the disruption of the order of the symbolic universe. According to Derrida, “apocalyptic discourse can […], in dislocating destinations, dismantle the dominant contract or concordant. It is a challenge to the established receivability of messages and to the policing of destinations.”[[184]](#footnote-185) The “apocalyptic” introduces dislocating ruptures into the symbolic universe by uncovering the absolute nullity of meaning and communicability inherent to the apocalypse.

Weissman is preoccupied with the function of language in the disclosure and mediation of disaster in the final passages of the novel. The orchestration of the discursive relationship between himself and Gottfried as the latter is launched to his doom is part of a wider discourse on language and apocalyptic power charted throughout *GR*. I wish to focus on the moment in which Gottfried has just been encased in the 00000 V-2 Rocket, which has been “modified to take him,” “among the fuel, oxidizer, live-stream lines, thrust frame, compressed air battery, exhaust elbow, decomposer, tanks, vents, valves” (891). “The two, boy and Rocket, concurrently designed” (891), are joined symbiotically and—given the suggestive symbolism of bridal purity, whiteness—seem also to be joined in matrimony: “Deathlace is the boy’s bridal costume” (890) we are told elsewhere. To this extent, “Weissmann has engineered all the symbolism today” (890) and has orchestrated the act and ritual of the rocket-launch to fine detail. One of these details is Gottfried’s necessary disconnection from the outside world, as the Captain makes a point of depriving him of a means to communicate in the moment of the end:

In one of his ears, a tiny speaker has been surgically implanted. It shines like a pretty earring. The data link runs through the radio-guidance system, and the words of Weissmann are to be for a while, multiplexed with the error-corrections sent out to the Rocket. But there’s no return channel from Gottfried to the ground. The exact moment of his death will never be known (891).

Weissman inserts a listening device into Gottfried’s flesh through a surgical incision. Machine is thus implanted in flesh which also encased in the housing of the rocket. The mind-metal recombination Gottfried is integrated into allows him only the passive role of receiver of signals, the technology to broadcast being conditional to other powers. Lacking expressive means thus inhibits the possibility of others knowing at which precise point he is to meet his doom. Moreover, the mortification of the boy’s flesh is steeped in symbolism, ritual, and mythical theatre, yet he actually cannot converse with death—Weissman is known as “‘Blicker,’ the nickname the the early Germans gave to death” (394)—or speak of his own death.

Giving speech over to the jurisdiction of death is, of course, deliberate, and the nullity of knowing, expressivity, and representation in the face of annihilation is an essential signature of Weissman’s mythical Kingdom. Weissman imagines himself lord of “*mythical regions*,” namely, “The Kingdom of Lord Blicero,” “his own space,” to which he aims to bring others “along with him” (576). One of Weissman’s devotees, Greta Erdmann, relishes the prospect of being led to this Kingdom: “My cunt swelled with blood at the danger, the chances for our annihilation, delicious never knowing when it would come down because the space and time were Blicero’s own …” (576). In this way, Gottfried’s orchestrated muteness follows Blicero’s logic of unknowable annihilation—the “Executioner’s silence” (862)—where the ritualised process of dying is left outside of the domain of expressivity. Weissman’s desire is to repeat the theotropic Word of the rocket, “a Word, spoken with no warning into your ear, and then silence forever.” Such a repetition extends the “broken line dat[ting] from a time of discontinuities, tribal fragmentation, alienation” by means of Blicero’s own linguistically-constructed death ritual.

Silence, in fact, is a condition of the ascendancy of an apocalyptic violence that operates on the basis of one’s inability to respond to it. The “*noiseless* flash of atomic weaponry” (my emphasis), which Weissman attempts to repeat by policing the receivability and the destination of messages, as Derrida might put it, serves as an “arch-metaphor […] for contemporary apocalypse.”[[185]](#footnote-186) Noiselessness, read “silence,” is one part of an antagonism between “love and silence” that structures *GR*, insofar as

what Pynchon explores in his search for an alternative to annihilation is whether love or silence will be the way of the contemporary universe: whether the nuclear age will be dominated by the covalent bond—the mutual sharing of electrons—or by the ionic bond—an invasion, a seizure of electrons. Each character, in turn, fails to sustain a moment’s rush of freedom from under the arch of history; each character hisses away into silence, inching the world toward cataclysm.[[186]](#footnote-187)

For Dewey, *GR* is equipoised between, on the one hand, a polyvocal history and a communicative fluency, on which a redemptive vision of history depends and, on the other, silence as the mode of annihilation and condition of the nullity of history. The possibilities of and for discursivity directly correspond to the possibilities for individual and collective resistance against destructive and totalizing structures of meaning. “Love,” in contradistinction to silence, defines an effusive, verbose “energy […] that can defy the nightmare of the zero and the enervating passivity of the one.”[[187]](#footnote-188) The silence at the level of expressivity has onto-eschatological implications. In particular, Gottfried’s silence in his final moments, read in the context of apocalyptic discourse, concerns the possibility of comprehending, disclosing, and responding to apocalypse at the limits of representation; the conflict between vital individual and collective speech against a techno-scientific programme of mechanized death; and the silencing of subjects and the disappearance of futures in the midst of the apocalyptic limit-situation.

For Gottfried there is no speech—it turns out—that can work “as a spell, against falling objects” (11); “no equation for [him], something to help [him] find a safer place (96). That there is hope to be found in the Word or in ciphers is a notion that has, up until the muteness of the end, been established over the course of the novel. The word has been imbued with magic properties, as if it were operative by way of inspiring action through its pronouncement, as if it were able to affect whomever heard it. As follows, there is an element of the hyperstitional trope in *GR* which affirms the affective and effective properties of language. We know, as Enzian shares with Slothrop, that the Hereros “have a word that [they] whisper, a mantra for times that threaten to be bad” (431). The word is a humanistically-oriented incantation against disaster, a way to protect against harm by casing oneself up in the shelter and consolations of language. Elsewhere, in another attempt to win Jessica back, Roger approaches her at work with a few plaintive hopes. In response,

She flips a red lever on her intercom. Far away, a buzzer goes off. ‘Security.’ Her voice is perfectly hard, the word still clap-echoing in the air as in through the screen door of the Quonset office with a smell of tide flats come the coppers looking grim. Security. Her magic word, her spell against demons (841).

‘Magic words’ are engaged in a feedback loop with the world and incite action in it that is meant to assure one’s security. Words, as magic sigils, ciphers, spells hold the promise of real material effects.

The hyperstitional movement of fictions becoming real can be tracked and traced in the operation of words in *GR*. In taking us in this direction, Pynchon elides the separation between symbolic and real power, a move emblematic of a wider historical tendency inherent to literary thinking in the wake of the New Left. Michael Szalay and Sean McCann argue in ‘Do You Believe in Magic?: Literary Thinking and the New Left’ that the affirmation of symbolic power, as a constitutive element of growing belief in the primacy of the cultural apparatus, was part of a historical move “toward a new political vision built in large part on the appeal of the spontaneous, the symbolic, and ultimately, the magical” of the countercultural New Left.[[188]](#footnote-189) The intended remystification of politics, against “the perils of excessive rationalism,” embodied “the countercultural challenges to orthodox liberalism.”[[189]](#footnote-190) The New Left returned the priority to language and marked out culture as the ground of political contestation so as to explore wor(l)ds of possibility beyond the status quo set down by epistemological and political rationality.

For Pynchon, regarded as the literary lodestar of the New Left,[[190]](#footnote-191) “the irrational or the extraordinary or the miraculous helped to describe [an] *other* mode of meaning” (my emphasis). As he writes in *The Crying of Lot 49,* there is either “another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none.” Based on this sentence and the text’s “rich semantic ambiguity,” which is productive for the possibility of “meaningful communication,” Szalay and McCann intuit Pynchon’s emphasis of the mysteries of language which emerge out of its miraculous and unknowable otherness.[[191]](#footnote-192) Between *The Crying of Lot 49,* as a text rooted in the mysteries of language, which revels in the margin of resistance semantic play might offer, and *Gravity’s Rainbow,* as a novel bifurcated between “technological discourse as a weapon of the oppressor class”[[192]](#footnote-193) and the magical spell, disruptive of rationalised orders of meaning, lies an affirmation of the powers of language, especially for the dispossessed subjects under the cosh of monological technical or scientific discourse.[[193]](#footnote-194) To complement its representation of polyvocal history then, there is also an effusive, miraculous conception of language and the symbolic universe.

### Speech and Silence

Despite the affirmation of the productive and ameliorative capacities of words established over the course of the novel, Gottfried is unable and, in fact, refuses to speak a word in his moment of exigent need. The “rich semantic ambiguity,” the source and origin of meaningful communication, the herald of language’s magic, anti-authoritarian power, is silenced as the rocket finalizes its trajectory towards an apocalyptic end. To ‘spell’ out words and turn them into action, to vocalise a thought and feel its effect, are practices and resources that have been taken over and consolidated by the theotropic Word of the rocket. “The mortal streaming of human speech” (422) has been made machine, turned technical, subjected to biopolitical power; power has been brought to “live in the muscles of [the] tongue” (384). The hyperstitional potential that lies dormant in the mysteries of language, the potential to be materially effective and to act on the world in favour of dispossessed subjects, seems to have disappeared in the final pages of the novel, through Gottfried’s inability and refusal to speak a word. Weissman denies speech to him initially, but Gottfried voluntarily vacates the field of language:

Gottfried does not wish to cry out … he knows they can’t hear him, but still he prefers not to … no radio back to them … it was done as a favour, Blicero wanted to make it easier for me, he knew I’d try to hold on—hold each voice, each hum or crackle— (900)

To “cry out” would be to “hold on.” To make his fear known, to make the last whimpers rueing his impending death heard, apparently discloses an untenable desire for presence, an unconscionable need to be connected. Gottfried, the subject dispossessed of language, one who “styles himself a passive observer” (121), who has “lost all of his [reality] to Blicero long ago” (855), captures in his mute disintegration the nullity that attends the monological violence of apocalyptic power. I mean to say that the dispossession of language, particularly when read in the context of Dewey’s rendering of silence as symptomatic of the subject’s suppression by apocalyptic power, is the occasion for monopolization of the symbolic universe by unitary power. To the extent that the rocket arrogates to itself the power of the Word, or the discursive relationship is organized by authoritarian power in the form of Blicero, or apocalyptic discourse renders mute those who approach the extremity of the apocalypse, then the monopolization of the field of language by monological and apocalyptic power, as opposed to polyphonous subjects, variously “shows us how power controls discourse, limits interpretability, decides the application of scientific knowledge, and fuels the technologies of death.”[[194]](#footnote-195)

I reference together apocalyptic discourse at the end along with the limits to representation in the context of the Holocaust because the possibility of speech is the originary limit for the survivors of the Holocaust. Having survived, whether to speak or remain silent? Primo Levi:

Those who experienced imprisonment […] are divided into two distinct categories, with rare intermediate shadings: those who remain silent and those who speak.[[195]](#footnote-196)

Levi elaborates how speech and silence are the essential determinants of how the survivor reconciles their experience to themselves and provides a means through which they can “consolidate their identity”.[[196]](#footnote-197)

The choice of either speech or silence is shot through with questions of propriety and bears the weight of the co-implication of culture and barbarism. Though survivors may consolidate their identity with reference to speech or silence, the history and legacy of the Holocaust itself refuses any sense of ‘consolidation.’ As opposed to consolidation, I sought to reflect a prevailing sense of ambiguity through the novel’s deployment of the spectral and the spectatorial in the representation of the Mittelwerke spectres, “the new Uncertainty” in the Zone, and Katje’s unaccountably futureless look. The limits to representability that are characteristic of poetry after Auschwitz haunt *GR,* as if the memory of the Holocaust is on the rampage in the very textual fabric of the novel and in the constitution of the subjectivity of the characters within it. To conclude the novel—if not its narrative—with the evacuation of speech and meaning is to articulate the rocket-apocalypse as the apotheosis of nullity and the Holocaust as an event marking the limit of representability. To conclude *GR* thuslyis to return to an originary silence described by Wiesel as follows: “In the beginning there was silence—no words. The word itself is a breaking out. The word itself is an act of violence; it breaks the silence.”[[197]](#footnote-198) The theotropic Word of the Rocket is an excrescence of this violence of language but differs from Wiesel’s formulation insofar as the Word not only breaks the silence—it institutes silence as a necessary condition of its violence. Nonetheless, the hauntological form of history introduces the ghosts of history as interlocutors, as memories still not yet resolved and still in effect. Pynchon’s polyvocal history, which is also hauntological in form, articulates forms of speech that are fundamentally conditioned by the limits to representation after Auschwitz.

# How Does the Body Politic Move?:

## Cut Off from the Lines of Mobility

*Gravity’s Rainbow* implicates speech with violence, silence with extinction, and seems to function as a “polyphonic archive […] of subaltern voices and minority histories which are constantly under the threat of erasure, both physical and epistemic.”[[198]](#footnote-199) The tenuous existence of its ensemble of spectral subjects, some existing under the category of “the new Uncertainty,” discloses their risk of effacement in and through limited modes of representation and monological discursive forms. In fact, the novel’s effusive glossolalia, a polyphony generated by subaltern voices always at risk of being silenced by power or the general precarity of existence itself, corresponds to Dewey’s reading of *GR* as a text equipoised between a verbose “love and silence” as extinction. Ergo, the threatened “erasure” of at-risk voices articulates a notion of apocalypse predicated on compelled muteness and the impossibility of redemptive communal dialogue.

I highlight these concerns as the elementary characterisation of subalternity as a function of dispossessed, choked speech sets out the general orientation of the following chapter. Speech is the pivot on which this thesis now turns, taking up the concern of the at-risk, dispossessed subjects of language in relation to the movement of peoples. I move in this direction as the politics of mobility is closely related to the question of displacement, dispossession, disenfranchisement and, to reference Spivak, subaltern subjects “cut off from the lines of mobility.”[[199]](#footnote-200) Spivak defines the subaltern as a figure occupying a marginal, outside position, without the means to traverse the limits constructed about them. Being more than a subject of discourse, the subaltern is also constituted through their capacities of mobility. Comparably, Pynchon’s “subaltern voices” are *mobile* populations; all over the map in *GR* “Post-A4 humanity is moving” (362). As Weisenburger reflects, “Evacuees, refugees, displaced persons, stateless persons and surviving concentration camp internees stream through the novel’s episodes. By any measure they are *the* dominant form of humanity under the sign of the Rocket.”[[200]](#footnote-201) Along these lines, the intricacies of the possibility of speech relative to the patterns and the exigency of mobility ground my intended reading of several western literary cosmopolitanisms in the chapter to come.

Literary cosmopolitanism, the correspondence between literature and cosmopolitanism or, if you wish, the construction and representation of cosmopolitanism in and through works of fiction, offers a context for critical reflection on the themes related to the politics of mobility: hospitality, citizenship, and belonging. I turn to the cosmopolitanisms of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,’ Coulson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad,* and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* in their appearance as hyperstitional fictions, fictionalized ‘strategies of belonging,’ ‘alternative infrastructures,’ that can serve as critical models for the arrangement of cosmopolitanism at the limit of the border. Hyperstition is a structuring motif in my work and through this set of texts, I track and trace the fluid movement between fiction and reality as a means to uncover the fictional elements already at work in reality and, in this case, the conceptualisation and practice of cosmopolitanism. As asserted by CCRU, “fiction is not opposed to the real. Rather, reality is understood to be composed of fictions – consistent semiotic terrains that condition perceptual, affective and behaviorial [*sic*] responses.”[[201]](#footnote-202) Reality, as fractionally fictional, accordingly opens itself to new, instigating hyperstitions of the future.

Less ambitiously, as a response to the crisis metastasizing at the European border, I believe that challenges to the prevailing border orthodoxy emerge in the form of fictions that wrestle with how and what it means to house the whole world’s dispossessed. In the advent of the crisis at the European border, I turn to the figure of the border-subject, dispossessed of language, as the dominant form of humanity under the sign of the contemporary global order. In this context, literary cosmopolitanisms pose problems of representation in the existing frameworks for belonging, hospitality, and citizenship, such that the alternative hyperstitions they present expose the failures and limits of existing border regimes. Given the broad scope of reference, this chapter is sizeable in comparison to the others. The comparative nature of the chapter is intended to situate several textualizations of cosmopolitanism in relation to current formulations of border regimes with the intention of producing a comprehensive and parallel reading of border poetics and border culture. Such a project begins by substantiating the grounds for a coordinated reading of the politics of mobility relative to the context of language.

### Who Sings the Nation-State?

To Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s question “who sings the nation-state?” asked in a work bearing that question as its title, we might also graft our own: how does the body politic move? What prompts my supplementary question is Spivak’s construction of the subaltern as a dispossessed outside; the subject without recourse to speech is analogously “cut off from the lines of mobility.” Twinning both contexts of inquiry together makes explicit the interrelated concerns of the dispossessed subject of speech and the dislocated, marginalized border-subject. Treating both as mutually implicated, moreover, sheds light on the practice of bordering’s linguistic modes of operation and the border’s linguistic architecture. On this basis, I hope to move to a discussion of Western literary cosmopolitanisms as the context for the elaboration of cosmopolitan identities; as apparatuses for the practice of bordering; and as intellectual edifices on which concepts of citizenship, hospitality, and belonging are (de)constructed.

Born of the controversy concerning the singing of the United States national anthem in Spanish during protests concerning the status of undocumented migrants in Los Angeles, 2006, Butler and Spivak’s question inquires after the predicated ‘who’ and ‘our’ of the nation-state—the nation-state’s predicated or proprietary subject. Such an inquiry forms an analogy between, on the one hand, “rights of possession” and “modes of belonging” and, on the other, their inscription in and through a language of possession.[[202]](#footnote-203) In that case, George Bush’s assertion that the anthem could *only* be sung in English implied, for Butler, that “the nation is clearly restricted to a linguistic majority, and language becomes one way of asserting criterial control over who belongs and who does not.”[[203]](#footnote-204) To the extent that proprietary rights to the anthem consolidate the identity of the nation, its ideal citizen, and its proper language, dispossession of the right to enunciate the anthem in one’s ‘own voice’ establishes a constitutive outside—a periphery necessarily formed through the grounding of a centre.

Therefore, in asking the complementary question of how the body politic moves, the politics of motion and mobility inscribed within the paradigm of state sovereignty and jurisdiction are likewise thrown into sharp relief. In arrogating to themselves the rights of possession, the linguistic majority forms an ‘us’ set against the ‘illegitimate’ claim of ‘them,’ a group then relegated to the position of outside. This then establishes the principle of the border intended to rigorously police the sanctity of the binaristic framework of citizen and non-citizen. One’s status as a citizen, as a member of the nation formed as a linguistic majority, relates to how mobile one is at the limit of the border, in the confines of the camp, in the detention centre, that is, in the infrastructural spaces organized by, for, and through the state. Modes of belonging and rights to possession are similarly tied to the *body politic* in its rendering as a somatic entity, such that we can paraphrase Butler’s statement as follows: the nation is clearly restricted to a mobile majority, and mobility becomes one way of asserting criterial control over who belongs and who does not. The mobile majority, possessed of the rights to language and all the attendant proprietary freedoms, describes a plurality, a body politic, whose rights to passage, accommodation, occupation, etc., are furnished on the basis of their possession of (the rights to) language or, even, their membership of the linguistic majority.

In this reading, the body politic—this mobile organism—is constituted as a regime of movement; in others, the body politic is depicted as an anthropomorphic personification of the state. Since Plato, a sort of anthropological representation has been used to understand the human abstractly through spatial metaphor, as evidenced by his assertion that the polis is man ‘writ large’ in *The Republic*:

Seeing then, I said, that we are no great wits, I think that we had better adopt a method which I may illustrate thus; suppose that a short-sighted person had been asked by someone to read small letters from a distance; and it occurred to someone else that they might be found in another place which was larger and in which the letters were larger—if they were the same and he could read the larger letters first, and then proceed to the lesser—this would have been thought a rare piece of good fortune.[[204]](#footnote-205)

What we call the body politic derives from this metaphoric exchange between the human and the “larger letters” of state, place, and environment. As a complement to Butler’s characterisation of linguistic heritage as a point of association and dissociation between subjects—between those belonging and not belonging to the linguistic majority, that is also to say the ‘nation-state’—what is evident in Plato’s *Republic* is the use of spatial metaphor as a hermeneutic tool for the ‘reading’ and interpretation of citizen-subjects through the mode of writing. Plato gives an account of the operation of writing in the emergence of the body politic; in man being written large on the broad canvas of the polis, the forms, hues, distinguishing characteristics, of the ideal citizen can be discerned. My reference to Plato is intended to illustrate a long-held reciprocity, enacted through analogy, between the state and the citizen ideally imagined. As this chapter rests on the construction of norms of cosmopolitanism through modes of representation, the conceptualisation of the body politic through literary paraphrase in Platonic thought grounds my inquiry within the philosophical frameworks of the West.

In their study ‘The Body Politic as Spatial Metaphor,’ Claire Rasmussen and Michael Brown argue that the effect of spatial metaphor is, firstly, to give “a descriptive and normative account of citizenship.”[[205]](#footnote-206) Besides this, they state, the body politic as spatial metaphor reveals how politics is bound up with geographical space and, I’d also add, that the political activation or elaboration of space is partly a function of language.[[206]](#footnote-207) I call upon Butler to make this point as “the national majority,” which is also, she writes, a “linguistic majority,” “seeks to define the nation on its own *terms* and even sets up or polices norms of exclusion deciding who may exercise freedom, since that exercise *depends upon certain acts of language*” (my emphases).[[207]](#footnote-208) The nation-state, as a linguistically elaborated entity, operates on the basis of a normativity of rights to possession and rights to mobility. Thus mobility is a matter of (non-)citizens *coming into terms* with the linguistic-national majority. Looking beyond the spatial metaphor of the body politic, this chapter considers the category of literature alongside the modes of language and representation in the production of cosmopolitanisms.

What’s at stake in the reciprocal questions of who sings the nation-state and how the body politic moves are the criterial categories through which citizen-subjects are produced, ‘languaged,’ and mobilised, both in the sense of juridical and dispositional entities.[[208]](#footnote-209) A juridical entity is one produced in and through law, its language and institutions, whereas disposition relates to the affective construction of the citizen-subject. In asking these questions, I’m looking to develop an account of how the citizen-subject, as a creature of law and affect, is cultivated and shaped through various regularizing criterial categories.

‘Who sings’ and ‘how one moves,’ that is also say, language and mobility, are two closely related axes of differentiation, whose power differentials play out on the dynamic field of politics. As follows, this chapter considers the coincidence of geographical space and mobility within it, politics, and language in the production of cosmopolitan norms and conceptions of citizenship, belonging, hospitality. As the occasion for the discussion of various criterial categories constitutive of identity and experience, these questions of who sings the nation-state and how the body politic moves inaugurate a discussion of dispossessed and displaced border-subject, as they highlight contexts in which political and ethical relations to the other *take place,* literally and figuratively. These questions, then, are vital to the interrogation of the phenomenon of the border in the ongoing refugee crisis and it is in this context I would like to untangle the woven skein of geography, politics, and language and to open this situation up to the suggestion of alternative hyperstitions of the future.

### A Crisis of Solidarity

The refugee crisis, being—more than anything—a “crisis of solidarity,” has thrown into sharp relief the failures of European hospitality.[[209]](#footnote-210) The refugee crisis is firmly situated in terminal culture, my descriptor for a culture intensely attuned to and caught up in crisis; the metastasization of crisis at the European border is a consequence of the ever-intensifying predations of capital, displacement via conflict, ecological disaster, that are constitutive of the terminal mood of the contemporary. As traffickers peddle hopes of border passage, transport bodies from the eastern shores of Africa to Europe’s coastlines, the limits of hospitality—the limits of the definition of European cosmopolitanism implied therein—announce themselves through the Union’s often fatal equivocation on the question of mobile populations and their asylum. As opposed to hospitality, “managed inhospitality,” an area suggested for critical inquiry in Zone Books’ *Near Futures* series,[[210]](#footnote-211) is an apt description for the infrastructures of empire built for the cultural defence and physical fortification of Europe and the way these infrastructures compound “the sovereign state as an apparatus of closure.”[[211]](#footnote-212)

That the ‘crisis’ of refugees inheres in a failed sense of solidarity is telling insofar as it signals towards a tension between solidarity, deriving from the French *solidaire*,as a compact unity, ‘interdependent, complete, entire,’ against “freedom of “movement as an axis of difference.”[[212]](#footnote-213) Movement for Hannah Arendt is “the substance and meaning of all things political”; she argues that “Of all the specific liberties which may come into our minds when we hear the word ‘freedom,’ freedom of movement is historically the oldest and also the most elementary. Being able to depart for where we will is the prototypical gesture of being free, as limitation of freedom of movement has from time immemorial been the precondition for enslavement.”[[213]](#footnote-214) Accordingly, the politics of motion is formed of dialectical tension between the solid and the liquid, immobility and flow, capture and release, settlement and fugitivity, closedness and openness. The refugee crisis *plays out* between these states of matter. Moreover, the nature of the response to the crisis, that is, the “management of inhospitality,” is part of long history of “the regulation of movement [as] the object of political desires.”[[214]](#footnote-215)

Should they survive the Sahara and the Mediterranean, barbed wire and the militarized perimeter of the camp await the many who then must navigate an administrative regime put in in place to pass judgement on their ‘deservedness’ of asylum. Interred here, though in relative safety, in the camps at Calais, Lampedusa, Lesbos, refugees “lack access to even basic primary healthcare,” are at “risk of sexual and gender-based violence,” and—as is the case with 10,000 unaccompanied child refugees—may simply ‘disappear’ into the dark spaces of Europe.[[215]](#footnote-216) Maybe worse still, the registration centres, read ‘courthouses,’ administer a cold, calculating system designed to secure the refugee’s passage back to whatever horror or destitution they sought to escape.

Responses to the humanitarian crisis point towards a European policy vacuum and—where frameworks for action do exist—incongruous perceptions and practices amongst constituent member states, which suggests “the structural and political crisis of the European Union, since they have brought into question the fundamental values of European integration, in particular human rights, unity, cooperation, solidarity, freedom, and democracy.”[[216]](#footnote-217) Conceptions of hospitality, as they have manifested in the failed migration and asylum policies of the EU and its member states, according to Pero Maldini and Marta Takahashi, “have raised the issue of redefining the modalities of cooperation and institutional structure.”[[217]](#footnote-218) Just as the advent of the singing of the US anthem in the language of the other invited a questioning of “rights to possession” and “modes of belonging” for Butler and Spivak, the call to responsibility articulated in the mortal movements of mobile populations in the current crisis provokes a similar questioning. This is a questioning of modes and rights and their institutionalisation in contemporary border infrastructures and in patterns and norms of cosmopolitan language.

For my purposes in this chapter, the failed policies of the refugee crisis have also brought to scrutiny the hierarchized language mediating the relationship between ‘native’ and ‘foreigner,’ ‘host’ and ‘guest,’ ‘citizen’ and ‘fugitive.’ Moreover, they have highlighted, on the one hand, the “infrastructures of empire” constitutive of the bleak experience at the limit of the border and, on the other, the fugitive infrastructures, or “infrastructures of resistance,” set up as counter-sites of shelter, escape, and rescue.[[218]](#footnote-219) Insofar as “the lexicology of migration is fraught with linguistic racism, the politics of exclusion and imperial violence,” as suggested by Emily Apter, the “structural and political crisis of the European Union” is also a crisis rooted in language.[[219]](#footnote-220) Likewise, “infrastructure,”[[220]](#footnote-221) defined by Deborah Cowen as “the collectively constructed systems that also build and sustain human life,” is connected to the “crises surrounding the rights of refugees and the provision of asylum in a world of thickening borders,” as border infrastructures condition experiences and subjectivities of “disconnection, containment, and dispossession.”[[221]](#footnote-222) My concern with the “lexicology of migration” and infrastructural space is a contextualisation and expression of the argument I developed earlier with reference to Rasmussen and Brown on the role of spatial metaphor in the construction of norms of citizenship: politics is deeply entangled with geographical space and, what’s more, the political activation or elaboration of space and border-subjectivity is partly a determination of language.

This chapter, then, is concerned with the language, infrastructure, and practices of bordering as active principles in the formation of worlds and subjects and as critical themes in Western literary cosmopolitanisms. What Plato sought to understand of the human in the “larger letters “of the polis bears upon the current project in that the infrastructural spaces arranging sovereign and jurisdictional territory give a *legible* and meaningful account of the human experience at the limits of those spaces. Moreover, this chapter looks to understand how the contours of language relate (to) physicalised and symbolic borders through which notions of citizenship are produced.

The occasion for my interest in textualizations of critical space emerges out of two distinct areas of inquiry. Firstly, Nicholas Spencer in *After Utopia: The Rise of Critical Space in 20th Century American Fiction* argues “that similar transformations regarding the rise of critical space take place in twentieth-century American fiction and continental theory,” that is to say, in “early-twentieth-century American fiction models of history are coarticulated with notions of critical space.”[[222]](#footnote-223) At bottom, fiction and theory, together, “constitute a transnational and transgeneric textual field.”[[223]](#footnote-224) Read in parallel, works of fiction exceed their generic limits by engaging with the broad dimensions of critical analysis arising out of the spatial turn. Spencer cites, amongst others, Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Don Delillo, but of particular interest is his parallel reading of Pynchon’s *GR* and William Gaddis’ *JR:*

Gaddis and Pynchon represent social power as inherently spatial in nature. For them, power imposes itself on society through spatial initiatives that reconfigure the entirety of social space. They are especially concerned with the imposition of spatial power through transformations of urban space.[[224]](#footnote-225)

Spencer is concerned with the realization of abstract space in these novels, that is, the sedimentation of the abstractive modes of power in and through concrete materializations. Bringing to mind my own understanding of hyperstition as fictions becoming real, Spencer’s formulation grounds my reading of the reciprocity between representations and their effective role in producing norms, practices, and border infrastructures. Moreover, motivated by this form of reading historical culture broadly, as opposed to the isolated textual object, I look to textualizations of critical space as meaningful engagements with and of spatial analyses and conceptions of belonging, citizenship, and hospitality.

Maybe gesturing to other works to come—like my own, here—Hagar Kotef describes the function of her theoretical writing in relation to the locations that serve as the objects of her analyses:

At a more general level we might say that the aim of projects such as this book is to rethink the relations between the abstract and the concrete; between the conceptual and theoretical on the one hand, and the particularities, the small details of reality on the other. Within this frame, the regime of movement in the oPt [occupied Palestinian territory] functions as the local field on which I look and from which I draw the matters that not merely enrich, but also provide the substance—as well as the method and orientation—for the theoretical analysis. In other words, the checkpoints are not merely where I find ‘materials’ to be theorized, or where I examine ‘reality’ vis-à-vis theory. Rather, there is an attempt here, to propose a mode of inquiry that does not yield to these distinctions.[[225]](#footnote-226)

The co-implication of writing and space recalls the writing *of* space insofar as the ‘management’ of space implies a staging of the world at representation at some level. By this I mean to say that the practices used to cultivate borders, checkpoints, detention centres, that is, infrastructural spaces, take on and make use of representational modes. In that event, a critical interrogation of how these spaces arise and function must read their abstract and concrete qualities together. Paying close attention to the formative role of representational modes in producing worlds motivates my own interest in the textualizations of space.

The above is my brief case for my mapping of text and representation onto the practices, pragmatics, and concrete materializations of space and the production of cosmopolitan norms within them. Of course, this tradition has deeper origins than those I’ve laid out. In coincidence with visions of the ideal society, a border poetics interested in questions of inside and outside, openness and closedness, developed in Western thinking. As far back as Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws*, attempts have been made todiscern and elaborate the scope of an ideal society that operates through productive tensions between “security” and “opportunity,” limit and possibility.[[226]](#footnote-227) Textualizations and representations of the kinds of differentiation established at the limits of varying types of border have long since naturalised certain identities, made fugitives out of others.

I’ve explained the general orientation around the literary but there’s more to be said of this word ‘fugitive.’ The many permutations of meaning in the word fugitive, especially in relation to ‘refuge(e),’ which shares a common fourteenth-century Latin root in *fugitīvus,* meaning fleeing away, from *fugere* to take flight, run away, organize my understanding in this chapter of an evasive, ceaseless, mode of being in the context of the politics of mobility. Fugitive has these meanings: (n) one who flees to avoid capture, restraint, etc., as in a fugitive slave, usually from law, justice, danger, a flighty, fleeting or elusive thing; (a) in flight or escaping from an uncongenial situation; (a) fleeting, not permanent, transient, lasting for a markedly brief time or having to do with subjects of temporary interest, perishable; being of transient interest (a) wandering or roving about; (n) Something hard to be caught or detained, uncertain, undecidable, difficult to comprehend or retain. Fugitive, as a term of mobility and a concept therefore elusive to fixed categories, discloses a disruptive mode that I will read in contradistinction to the materiality of borders.

Refugee, itself a thread in a skein of related words, shares in the Latin root *fugere*, but derives from the French *réfugié*, which first appears in English to refer to French Huguenots who sought shelter elsewhere following the revocation of the 1685 Edict of Nantes, which had up until that point enshrined the liberty and right to believe. From one who seeks asylum, after the first world war, refugee evolved to mean ‘one fleeing home.’ The understanding of the term now in use emerged out of this history to refer to those compelled to escape danger and to seek refuge in a place of sanctuary. From *refugium*, the act of taking refuge or a place of refuge or asylum, refuge derives in the Latin *fugere*, as with fugitive.

‘Fugitive’ has been used figuratively, as an expression of the notion of getting away. Similarly, in her appraisal of Arendt’s work on statelessness, Butler notes how the author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

imagines the stateless primarily through the figure of the refugee, and restricts her understanding of the refugee to that of the exile, one who has left some place and then arrives at another. The idea of passing from one bounded territory to another requires a narrative line in which arrival follows departure and where the dominant themes are assimilation and estrangement.[[227]](#footnote-228)

Under the influence of this image, Butler writes, “a certain thematic for comparative literary studies has depended on the legibility of that transition and the stability of those territories that constitute the ‘then’ and ‘now’ as well as the ‘there’ and ‘here’ of employment, topology, and narrative line.”[[228]](#footnote-229) These seemingly ‘settled’ conceptions of temporality and spatiality in the imagining of the refugee have been complicated by the development of a “departure from within, the dispossession that demands immobility.”[[229]](#footnote-230) The possibility of containment and dispossession “in the very territory from which one both departs and arrives” requires that we reconsider “the temporal and spatial dimensions of the here and there, the then and now, when it comes to the literature of the stateless.”[[230]](#footnote-231) At bottom, what we’ve come to know as the refugee has a fugitive meaning, one that escapes the legibility of travel narratives and literatures of exile and repression. Fugitivity, then, comes to represent an appositional subjectivity; a practice that makes use of that appositionality to facilitate escapes of varying kinds; a historical figuration of the political category of statelessness; and a gesture towards states beyond figuration, beyond narrativisation, beyond legibility.

What’s at stake in this border poetics is the possibility of producing new forms of solidarity at the limits of the border with the fugitive, the possibility of institutionalizing safety or escape in the face of regimes of empire. These forms may resemble “fugitive infrastructures,” Deborah Cowen’s description for alternative, hyperstitional infrastructures necessary to build “alternative worlds,” infrastructures “assembled to do different things, for different people, and according to different systems of value” in defiance of hegemonic powers.[[231]](#footnote-232) These fugitive infrastructures, as alternative constructions of possibility pointing to new arrangements of reality, should be read in close proximity with hyperstition. My thesis rests on the reflexivity between fiction and reality; hyperstition, as the movement of fictions becoming real, embodies the current undertaking considering the emergence of fugitive infrastructures as effective counter-fictions to the hegemonic infrastructures of regime.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney develop ‘fugitivity’ in their body of work, but especially in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, as a disposition of black radical aesthetics, set against intensifying apparatuses of control that operate through socialized debt and credit management, capitalist logistics and the management of pedagogy.[[232]](#footnote-233) In his introduction to *The Undercommons*, Jack Halberstam unpacks the logic of fugitivity as it operates in Moten and Harney’s thought and interacts with other related terms of mobility:

The movement of things can be felt and touched and exists in language and in fantasy, it is flight, it is motion, it is fugitivity itself. Fugitivity is not only escape, ‘exit’ as Paolo Virno might put it, or ‘exodus’ in the terms offered by Hardt and Negri, fugitivity is being separate from settling. It is a being in motion that has learned that ‘organizations are obstacles to organising ourselves’ […] and that there are spaces and modalities that exist separate from the logical, logistical, the housed and the positioned. Moten and Harney call this mode a ‘being together in homelessness’ which does not idealize homelessness nor merely metaphorize it. Homelessness is the state of dispossession that we seek and that we embrace: ‘Can this being together in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question?’[[233]](#footnote-234)

Fugitivity relates to a mode of being separate from settling, one elusive to systems of capture, control, and signification, and follows a fugitive path in that it explores the limits of a beyond—beyond ‘home,’ beyond ‘settlement,’ beyond “the call to order.”[[234]](#footnote-235) This chapter follows this path and explores hyperstitional, fugitive infrastructures of regime and resistance that grow out of, in tandem with, or against Western literary cosmopolitanisms. In tracking and tracing the hyperstitional movement of fictions becoming real alongside fugitive movements that abjure the fixedness and finality of the barred threshold, this chapter looks to uncover the possibilities of and for movement in literary cosmopolitanisms.

Before engaging with these literary cosmopolitanisms, the chapter begins with an exegesis of border thinking, to lay the historical background of the critical concepts variously modelled, challenged, and rationalized in the texts to come. Like so, the discussion proceeds with a deconstruction of Calvino’s conditional utopia (a utopia for some); secondly, it engages in a parallel critique of Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story ‘The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas’ which features a utopia dependent on the immiseration of a few; thirdly, an exploration of fugitivity and the fugitive infrastructure of Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* as a challenge to politically and linguistically elaborated regimes; then, finally, through a reading of the more expansive public of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* as one more faithful to concepts of openness and unconditionality.

As it is a key subject of discussion at the end of *Invisible Cities*, the anatomy of the body politic—the movement from the cosmopolitan public ideally imagined to its actual embodiment or formation, Calvino’s novelguides the early part of this chapter. *IC* serves as the pretext for a discussion of competing accounts of citizenship and the infrastructures of regime and resistance set up to fortify or escape the proposed limits of citizenship and territory. The chapter reads one specific representation of a limited conception of the ethics of responsibility in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities—*one which is not fully representative of Calvino’s project or his politics it must be said—as revealing of the crisis of European cosmopolitanism. In this accelerated moment of migration, Calvino’s text helps us approach the question of how difference is to be contained within contextually fixed, sometimes national, political, social, economic, or institutional, but always linguistically and ideologically grounded horizons of meaning. Le Guin’s short story, I argue, is the pragmatic and logical realization of the political elaboration of criterial categories that seems to be the aspiration of this specific passage in *IC*. Omelas demonstrates the consequences of the institutionalization, as a juridical norm, of exclusionary and dispossessing practices in the construction of the ideal body politic.

Against such practices of ‘political elaboration’ and ‘just discrimination,’ this chapter then moves towards a conception of hospitality and cosmopolitanism that looks beyond “settlement,” “beyond borders,” beyond any “call to order,” as suggested by Moten and Harvey’s conception of fugitivity, through *The Underground Railroad.* Whitehead’s development of fugitivity and the fugitive infrastructure gestures towards a mode of existing and a hyperstitional construction beyond normative conceptions of citizenship and belonging. Finally, having signalled towards the violence of interpretation performed on the body politic—in its ideal sense—by a specific characterisation of community proposed in *Invisible Cities*, exposed that public’s internal contradictions, a new, non-hierarchical infrastructural space—the space envisioned in *IJ*—which attempts to conceive an infrastructure of absolute hospitality, which stays faithful to the idea of cosmopolitanism, emerges as a hyperstitional possibility. But, crucially, it does so in an oblique, difficult, opaque way, given the impossibility of an absolute hospitality. Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*—as an articulation of a typically Derridean ethics—allows for the expansion of a limited, conditional, ethics while negotiating the theoretical limits of the total accommodation and representation of the other. Using the work of these authors, this chapter considers how literary cosmopolitanisms have sought to right and rewrite the language of citizenship, mobility, and representation. These texts work through competing accounts of community and citizenship and in so doing communicate diverse accounts of cosmopolitanism.

## Mobile populations

The refugee crisis is one amongst a litany of “struggles between hegemonic powers (EU, nation-states),” their administrative, military, and infrastructural regimes, “and populations (local, migrant, [refugee]) over spaces and the right to move.”[[235]](#footnote-236) The accelerated pace of forced migration and the displacement of peoples in the volatile state of the contemporary global order is a logical consequence of the contact between the ever-shifting tectonic plates of accelerating capitalism, uneven rates of modernisation, intensifying globalization, the legacy of colonialism, the climate crisis, geopolitical conflict and the modern-day state system. Markedly different about this crisis, according to Anna Papoutsi, is the articulated demand of and for movement:

In a spectacular and powerful moment in history, we saw a new articulation and understanding of the right to move. People arriving at the shores of Lesbos made themselves visible and said ‘we are here, you have to acknowledge us and let us pass, open the border.’[[236]](#footnote-237)

Papoutsi’s example is an instance of performative contradiction, where the injunction to movement, to paraphrase Butler, does not end with impasse but actually leads to “forms of insurgency.”[[237]](#footnote-238) In their appearance at the border of the sovereign nation-state and articulation of the demand of movement, mobile populations made their case against dispossession via the juridical system; they rejected the enforced disposition as dispossessed subjects. The contradiction lies in how their demand, made on the shores on which they’d arrived, served as a “restaging of the [shore], enacting freedom of [movement] precisely when and where it is explicitly prohibited by law.”[[238]](#footnote-239) The movement of displaced populations communicated to a tuned in, interdependent, and global audience, a demand for a response vis-à-vis the material and existential needs of those forced from home by war and impoverishment at the same time as this demand was enacted through their mobilization on the shore.

The locus of the crisis, the context in which the various claims and counterclaims for movement were contested, is the place of the border, where the line differentiating ‘here’ from ‘there’ coincided with the constitution of an ‘us’ and ‘them,’ as well as the antipathies between the two. The struggle between power and mobile populations was not an innovation of the refugee crisis; after all, the state actor has always seemed, according to James C. Scott, “to be the enemy of ‘people who move around,’” given that “efforts to permanently settle these mobile peoples (sedentarization) seemed to be a perennial state project.”[[239]](#footnote-240) State sovereignty and jurisdiction grows in antipathy to those who render porous the constitutive limits of the territory. Reece Jones cites Scott’s open invitation to develop further the relationship between the state and the movements of people in the latter’s *Seeing Like a State* as the major influence on his own work on the border, *Violent Borders*. Jones studies the case of displaced peoples in the hardening global order oriented around the following thesis:

[T]he existence of the border itself produces the violence that surrounds it. The border creates the economic and jurisdictional discontinuities that have come to be seen as its hallmarks, providing an impetus for the movement of people, goods, drugs, weapons, and money across it. The hardening of the border through new security practices is the source of the violence, not a response to it.[[240]](#footnote-241)

The violence through which state political and economic order instantiates itself conditions the manner of its interaction with the actors that come into contact with it, namely, the mobile populations that approach its borders and infrastructures of control. As we move to the discussion of literary cosmopolitanisms, what is to be carried into those discussions is the implication that the demarcation of the border obliges differentiations and discontinuities, disruptive tendencies which institute violence in and through the formal structure of the border. At bottom, the border is the formalisation of differentiation and discontinuity.

### Places, territories, categories

Borders are the arbitrary lines of separation drawn to produce and differentiate particular “places, territories, and categories” in the world by cultivating a unique sense of the “social, political, economic, or cultural meanings” inherent to a territory.[[241]](#footnote-242) They are arbitrary in the sense that they are not ‘naturally’ occurring but are effective only insofar as they have meaning invested into them through socially constructed norms and practices.[[242]](#footnote-243) “Borders and bordering processes” variously take formal or symbolic shape; at the level of the state, they mark the geographic or jurisdictional boundaries pertinent to a polity; in less formally differentiated contexts, they regulate the interaction of people within localities and their specific norms.[[243]](#footnote-244) Diener and Hagen define “Borders as dividers of space, symbolic markers of control, and social process of daily life”; whatever their scale, “whether familial, social, economic, or political,” borders “address issues of access, mobility and belonging in different ways.”[[244]](#footnote-245)

Historically, borders emerged out of the religious wars of the sixteenth century resolved through the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. This militaristic legacy catalysed the manifestation of the border as a means through which the related terms of state, nation, and identity developed in critical opposition to those of other self-constituting states. These principles of state were consequently transferred beyond European borders through the export of colonialism.[[245]](#footnote-246) The understanding, interpretation, and practice of territory has been subject to a significant degree of change and development historically and has been conditioned by the particularities of specific cultural, political, geographic, social, and economic contexts:

The modern state—to take what is perhaps one of the most relevant examples—especially after the invention of the passport, and increasingly with the evolution of technologies of sealing and regulating borders, is to a great degree a system of regulating, ordering, and disciplining bodies (and other objects) in motion.[[246]](#footnote-247)

The practice of bordering is related to territoriality, a pattern of behaviour characterized by the protection and governance of a privileged geographic area against others competing for or seeking access to that space.[[247]](#footnote-248) Modes of territoriality, whether they are an outgrowth of an anthropological determinism or, as constructivists argue, of specific historical and geographical situations, motivate the differentiation of ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ ‘native’ and ‘foreigner,’ ‘host’ and ‘guest.’ These indexes of power and positionality, made legible through arrangements of space, are expressions of what Doreen Massey would describe as “power geometries,” her means of describing space and mobility as constructions of differentials of power.[[248]](#footnote-249)

The increasingly complex interaction between polities and increasingly mobile populations in modernity, the yawning chasm in wealth and power that uneven rates of modernisation and the distribution of its benefits has established, amongst other causes, has given prominence to the notions of jurisdiction and sovereignty in the global world order. The twinned concepts of jurisdiction and sovereignty have shaped the modern state system, its practices of bordering, and modes of territoriality and belonging, accentuating the significance of the border as the locus of authority and power,[[249]](#footnote-250) such that the “sovereign state [appears] as an apparatus of closure”:[[250]](#footnote-251)

Today, perhaps more than ever, the rise of cross-border processes, patterns, and problems, often lumped together under the term ‘globalization,’ challenge established notions of territorial sovereignty.[[251]](#footnote-252)

Whereas state power had been exercised in relation to competing states, challenges to the sovereignty of state borders now seem to be increasingly waged by specific *categories of mobile people*. Specifically, in the form of “immigration control” and counter-terrorism policy, the limits of state sovereignty through the contestation of the border have seen these “border-related threats” receive the sorts of protectionist reflexes usually reserved for state-actors as had been historically the case.[[252]](#footnote-253) The focus has shifted more towards categories of people, making enemies of them as threatening “swarms.”[[253]](#footnote-254) As a result,

[b]orders are (re)produced as the hegemonic powers strive to gain control over mobility of populations, creating at the same time hypermobile people, while immobilising others or forcing them to move. The border becomes a filter for the unwanted but also a device that continuously produces new categories of belonging and deservedness (i.e. by rendering people illegal).[[254]](#footnote-255)

The border is a physicalised and symbolic filtration system operative in the ordering of not only bodies but types of people. This process invites a variety of system inequalities, economic, social, political, geographical, cultural, and so on. Rutger Bregman writes that “Borders are the single biggest cause of discrimination in all of world history. Inequality gaps between people living in the same country are nothing in comparison to those between separated global citizenries.”[[255]](#footnote-256) The development of globalisation has intensified the critical significance of the border, insofar as “In the 19th century, inequality was still a matter of class; nowadays it’s a matter of location.”[[256]](#footnote-257) What is to be borne in mind for the discussions to come is the establishment of power differentials and rights to mobility with reference to categories of deservedness, election and preterition, and juridical illicitness.

### Protectionist reflexes

The compression of global space and time, the nearing proximity of extraterritorial events, and the intensifying of transborder movements has been met with enhanced processes and infrastructures of securitisation, militarisation, and management. This is most readily observed in the refugee crisis rooted in conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen which resulted in mass exoduses of people from war-torn regions. Nonetheless, writes Monica de Castellarnau Cirera, “Europe has been building its fortress for a couple of decades, and [its] protectionist reflexes are now second-nature.”[[257]](#footnote-258) In the context of a general trend towards securitisation, influenced by counter-terrorism policy, the response to immigration has been to characterise it as a “border related threat,” to make enemies of categories of people, where the consolidation and reproduction of borders is meant to shore up—in certain cases—the defence of a white Christian Europe. This from the Hungarian Prime Minister, Victor Orban:

We don't see these people as Muslim refugees. We see them as Muslim invaders. We believe that a large number of Muslims inevitably leads to parallel societies, because Christian and Muslim society will never unite. Multiculturalism is only an illusion.[[258]](#footnote-259)

The territorial, that is also to say, cultural defence is enacted through a physical infrastructure composed of barbed wire, brick walls, shuttered bridges, or—at its worst—a revocation of attempts at saving those lost at sea, “wilfully letting people drown in the Mediterranean by refusing to create a legal means of safe passage and failing to even provide adequate resources for maritime rescue.”[[259]](#footnote-260)

As a complement to this physicalised infrastructure, there is also a ‘paper’ infrastructure, formed of legal, bureaucratic, and administrative impediments to entry or asylum. The proxy border, away from the actual boundaries of nation states, is part of “The externalization of migration policies, also known as the externalization of border control, [which] has emerged as an increasingly popular way for more developed countries to tackle the issue of irregular migration.”[[260]](#footnote-261) Out of the confluence of security and capital, “a European market has grown up to support this restrictive regime, driven by a number of companies that participate in the design, production and supply of security technologies and border surveillance.”[[261]](#footnote-262) A supra-national buffer zone formed of states, companies, NGOs, designed to expropriate the labour of and responsibility for the humanitarian crisis abstracts and obscures the concept of the border even as its functions become more pronounced.

The infrastructures of empire that have arisen in response to the crisis are products of “state power [and its] paradigm of juridified dispossession,”[[262]](#footnote-263) where government and international law, as it manifests in the administrative processing of mobile populations, the hostile infrastructures set up to secure territories, and the exercise of military force to enforce the separation between inside and outside, creates a supra-national “jurisdictional space that governs deservedness, mobility and inclusion.”[[263]](#footnote-264) As Kotef argues: “[d]ifferent technologies of regulating, limiting, producing or inciting movement are therefore different ‘technolog[ies] of citizenship,’ as well as of colonization, gender-based domestication, expropriation, and exclusion.”[[264]](#footnote-265) Movement emerges as an “axis of differentiation” through which experiences of dispossession can be marked and observed and this function has been expropriated beyond state borders and beyond the sovereignty of states.

The ‘hotspot’ mechanism, the invention of Dimitris Avramopoulos, EU commissioner for Migration, is one means by which the complexities of the procedures of ‘processing’ refugees are externalised. After concluding a deal with Turkey which produced the equivalent of a ‘one in, one out’ policy at refugee ‘hotspots,’ registration centres managed by FRONTEX, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, began to function as ‘courthouses’ where the right to entry of migrants was decided with reference to certain metrics of deservedness.[[265]](#footnote-266)

Hotspots have become the main apparatus–along with the Emergency Relocation Mechanism and the new European Border and Coast Guard–in the EU’s emerging border regime. Hotspots may be the specific loci of implementation and unfolding of the emerging regime. They are a sorting mechanism for categorising people and allocating deservedness accordingly and a filter for governing the unwanted (and the wanted). However, the entire Greek territory is turning into a container for the undeserving, a space for their management, which due to its own undeservedness, is easily imagined as the appropriate place for such border function.[[266]](#footnote-267)

The hotspot, as the locus for the practice of enhanced modes of territoriality, bears witness to the juridified dispossession of mobile populations by supranational entities. In conjunction with “technologies of citizenship,” then, are “filters for governing the unwanted.” What is to be noted is the prejudicial nature of the judgement of deservedness then formalised into juridical practice. It is not only the state, endowed with sovereignty and jurisdiction, but outsourced organizations putting into effect practices of bordering.

A supra-state outsourcing, in exemplary neoliberal style, its social welfare obligations to the private sector (the NGO/humanitarian complex). A supra-state under which core sovereign state functions (the judiciary, the police) are passed on to transnational agencies including FRONTEX, the European border police — or EASO, the judge-like Asylum organisation in the hotspot courthouses. A supra-state that sooner or longer will, just like in the case of the French state of exception, claim its hotspot breeding ground is no longer enough: that its state model needs to reach outside the camps if it is to be effective.[[267]](#footnote-268)

The border-subject is produced *as* a juridical entity through the assignation of the legal category and *in* the infrastructural spaces organized to control the regime of movement. This is to say, modes of territoriality now exceed the limited bounds of authority of the nation-state:

This function of the border does not necessarily take place at the geographical location marked by a state’s boundary and it cannot be fulfilled with the building of walls. Although such physical barriers definitely play their part in this system of hierarchised mobilities and inclusion and have an immense death toll. In this sense, Fortress Europe, so commonly invoked both in academia and activism, might not be the most appropriate way of imaging EU’s borders, mostly because it creates the illusion of a safe ‘inside’ of deserving and equal citizens and a dangerous ‘outside’ of undeserving people. The hotspot apparatus could not offer a better insight into this out-dated view of the border. Situated within EU territory but stripped of state sovereignty, it is more of a supra-state jurisdictional space that governs deservedness, mobility and inclusion.[[268]](#footnote-269)

What is stake is the broadening and intensification of a juridified dispossession beyond the limited bounds of the state, through enhanced infrastructures of bordering and territorialisation. Moreover, beyond these formally differentiated contexts of its realization, the border functions through the affective construction of the border-subject as not only a juridical but a dispositional entity, one formed through discourse.

### Righting the Language of Migration

Crucially, the limits of the hospitality Europe extends to those who arrive at its doorstep should not only be understood as a function of infrastructural space, of the newly instantiated, administrated, then brutally policed borders that are an excrescence of the hardening of global order of capitalist modernity. The limits of hospitality should also be understood as the advent of a prohibitive linguistic address, of a language of possession. The “taking place” of the “function of the border,” as Crawley puts it, occurs in the language used to articulate claims to territory, to govern it, and to address those within and without borders.

To take an example, the appropriative name in Italian for the Mediterranean Sea, *mare nostrum* or ‘our seas,’ articulates the dialogic relationship of power between host and guest: the hierarchized terms of the address inscribe within it a structural relation of power and possession. To take another case, sensitive to the “the lexicology of migration [as] fraught with linguistic racism, the politics of exclusion and imperial violence,” the broadcaster Al Jazeera “removed the term ‘migrant’ from its coverage and proposed in its place ‘refugee,’ to refer to persons in transit, specifically, those fleeing from regions of war, ethnic cleansing”:[[269]](#footnote-270)

For reasons of accuracy, the director of news at Al Jazeera English, Salah Negm, has decided that we will no longer use the word migrant […] We will instead, where appropriate, say refugee.

Migrant is a word that strips suffering people of voice. Substituting refugee for it is—in the smallest way—an attempt to give some back.[[270]](#footnote-271)

Like so, “[w]ords are never ‘only words’; they matter because they define the contours of what we can do,” writes Slavoj Žižek.[[271]](#footnote-272) The border, as a filter for governing the unwanted through which people referenced with the legalese of ‘illegal,’ ‘irregular,’ ‘undocumented,’ ‘*sans-papier,*’ are sorted, literalizes Žižek’s statement. Research has shown that “differentiating individuals based on these criteria has consequences well beyond questions of humanitarian access, even affecting how Syrian refugees perceive themselves.”[[272]](#footnote-273) Insofar as the “contours” of what we can do relate to a kind of cognitive mapping, the affective constructions catalysed by the experience of the border are consequential for the border-subject. Given the structural inequality of such a relationship as it manifests in language, the concept of European cosmopolitanism—its inherent contradictions and limitations—opens itself to a questioning sensitive to how power is spoken, how it addresses others, how it prescribes the contours of the border as well as of subjectivity.

While espousing values of liberal humanism, couching the securitization and militarisation of the border “as virtuous actions that can protect innocent migrants from unscrupulous human traffickers who have a wanton disregard for the lives of their human cargo,” the securing of European border hides, in fact, the violence of the border and the dispossession of border-subjects.[[273]](#footnote-274) And this violence is comorbid with a narrowing of the horizons of cosmopolitanism. For those left outside, the closed border represents narrow conception of hospitality, in that the securing and consolidation of localised relations legitimizes a politics of harm against those beyond the circumscribed bounds of the local. If the cosmopolitan project is to be recuperated, then a critique of the closed border’s function as a biopolitical measure, which serves as a counterpoint to the instability and perceived danger of the global other, is necessary:

Borders, or more specifically the apparatus that is constructed around the border to manage, control and represent the line between ‘us’ and ‘them’, serve a very particular role in marginalising and dehumanising ‘the Other’, such that humiliation and violence becomes utterly acceptable, even taken for granted. Violence exists at the border because of the nature of what happens there, but it is also constructed symbolically. The threat of the Other has become an important part of the politics of the border, a way of managing and controlling migration that speaks to the needs and expectations of the body politic as much as it does to the movement of people themselves.[[274]](#footnote-275)

Recalling the earlier claim made by Jones that “The hardening of the border through new security practices is the source of the violence, not a response to it,” Crawley makes a similar point about the border as a precursor to violence. Border practices and their attendant territorial claims inaugurate the conflicts between constituencies produced through power geometries. More than this, claims to territory and their expression in border practices rely on symbolic constructions of power differentials and existential conflicts: mobile populations as ‘threats,’ mobile populations as ‘invaders,’ movement as ‘swarming,’ etc. The designation of a symbolic identity fixes the identity of the subject in order to make them amenable to forms of control and violence.

Crawley highlights the perceived “threat of the Other” as an element in a feedback loop with the border and the body politic. The body politic refers to the collective group of people who belong to a nation state which relies on and establish norms of citizenship through the analogy of the singular body. Belonging, in the sense constructed through the social body as a somatic entity, expresses a necessarily particular rather than general composition of sociality; atomized bodies amongst other bodies, as opposed to a collective model of society. How the particular needs and expectations of *a* body politic, cloistered in the walls of the state, are set against those of a broader, generalized, public beyond the state’s walls is what is at issue for Crawley. The advent of the refugee crisis in a globalized and interdependent world, however, has put pressure on our old concepts of access, belonging, and mobility, ever reliant on the notions of sovereignty and jurisdiction, such that “[p]olitical categories need to be changed**;**the old ones have changed in meaning: notions of ‘migration,’ borders, territory, population, cannot be used as before (as we’ve seen already with terms like money, citizenship, work).”[[275]](#footnote-276) This is Emily Apter’s translation of Etienne Balibar’s call “to reinvent political concepts and minorized names” in his *Crise et Fin*.[[276]](#footnote-277) She analyses Balibar’s argument in that text as follows:

For Balibar, righting the language of migration (in the sense of putting it back on political course, restoring political rights to those whose language is treated as suspect or whose claims remain unlanguaged in any tongue), belongs to a larger project of rethinking what Europe is as a territory of cosmopolitical right (defined in Kant, as Balibar reminds us, as a universal system of juridical norms and a ‘meta-political point of view based on the idea of a moral destination of humankind, according to which the ultimate moral end or purposefulness of reason will transcend the simple sphere of positive law’), and beyond that, of translating ‘Europe’ by means of a political philology of statelessness, detention zones, camps, settlements, and unsettled existence.[[277]](#footnote-278)

Balibar’s untranslated essay entangles the work of righting the language of migration with a reworking of the language mediating the relationship between mobile populations and settled citizens belonging to the nation state. Butler and Spivak’s question of who sings the nation state works in concert with the project of “restoring political rights to those whose language is treated as suspect or whose claims remain unlanguaged in any tongue.” Both question the idea and legitimacy of the proprietary subject of the linguistic majority as the enfranchisement of this propriety subject entails the dispossession of unlanguaged border-subjects. This reworking entails a new political philology of the phenomena related to borders, mobility, migration, such that those without language of rights, or who have the language of juridified dispossession exacted upon them may have recourse to a language refurbished for changed and changing times.

The need for a renewed philology and linguistic framework for migration is made more acute if we also consider Jacques Derrida’s caveat about hospitality. To paraphrase Francois Raffoul’s articulation of it, a hospitality which has been defined, especially, “on the basis of the conditions laid out by the host, that is, by a welcoming power” isn’t a faithful conception of absolute hospitality.[[278]](#footnote-279) These conditions, according to Derrida, are always formulated through language:

Among the serious problems we are dealing with is that of the foreigner who, inept at speaking the language, always risks being without defence before the law of the country that welcomes him or expels him; the foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc.[[279]](#footnote-280)

As the linguistic address is fundamental to the relation between the foreigner and host, a critical attention must be paid to the operations of language in the practices of bordering, the conception of migration, and the experience of mobile populations. As follows, the linguistic address, the symbolic constructions of language, the subjunctivising processes instituted through capacities of speech, work in close proximity to the practice of the border and border thinking. More specifically, the linguistic address, the power differentials instituted through it, construct the infrastructural space of border regimes, as the rules governing the spaces of everyday life proceed from the prefigurative language constitutive of territoriality.

Cosmopolitanism is formulated as an abstract universal, as observed in James D. Ingram’s loose definition:

While the meaning of the term has varied considerably, its central proposition, embedded in its etymology, is that one is, or can and should be, a citizen of the world. Cosmopolitanism thus expressed the fact, possibility, or imperative of a certain universality, an actual or potential oneness of humankind.[[280]](#footnote-281)

Ingram devotes *Radical Cosmopolitics: The Ethics and Politics of Democratic Universalism* to the understanding and reimagining of a cosmopolitanism which “had seemed like a universalistic advocacy of democracy and human rights” but “was revealed to be all too particular in its conception, its social-political bases, and its effects.”[[281]](#footnote-282) The universalism of the concept of cosmopolitanism seeks to encapsulate an expansive sense and definition of community, insofar as being a world citizen is a fundamental and inalienable human right.

As a relevant indication of the hollowing out of the universalistic spirit of cosmopolitanism, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Theresa May, sought to reinscribe the meaning of belonging in the contemporary world axiomatically: “If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don’t understand what citizenship means.”[[282]](#footnote-283) The violence of such an interpretation relates to an actual violence, a very real politics of harm, in that it limits the possibility of solidarity and establishes competing accounts of community and citizenship. These competing accounts of citizenship set down the conditions for the power differentials which, when institutionalised and put into practice at the border and in infrastructural spaces, authorize the violence and dispossession that occurs there.

Competing accounts of citizenship also explain the crisis in solidarity expressed by Ban Ki Moon at the outset of this chapter. In a report from August 2015, Patrick Kingsley reported the news that “Lebanon, which houses 1.2 million Syrian refugees within a total population of roughly 4.5 million,” “a country that is more 100 times smaller than the EU, has already taken in more than 50 times as many refugees as the EU will even consider resettling in the future.”[[283]](#footnote-284) Contrast this scene with that in fortress Europe, where burial plots to inter the washed up dead are now scarce and which maintains an air of bureaucratic, analytical detachment where what it means or doesn’t mean to be citizen sponsored by a state—in the purely jurisdictional understanding of PM May—decides whether one is to drown, receive aid, or be granted passage.[[284]](#footnote-285) If we do not know, as Theresa May and the shifting global picture suggests, what the related terms of citizenship, cosmopolitanism, the public, belonging, hospitality, responsibility, mean then this chapter attempts to further complicate this reductionist view with reference to Western literary cosmopolitanisms.

## Invisible Cities / Invisible Citizens

Over time, Kubla Khan’s kingdom has grown into an unwieldy, ungovernable sprawl—“an endless, formless ruin.”[[285]](#footnote-286) To discern some type of order into the morass, the emperor enjoins Marco Polo, a mobile, cosmopolitan traveller, to definitively ‘map’ his kingdom, to mark out “the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites’ gnawing” (5). Formed of several dialogues between the two, *IC* thustells of the nature and composition of the city through fifty-five vignettes, elaborating the local architectures, social mores, and geographical idiosyncrasies of the various places in Khan’s kingdom Marco Polo visits. The Venetian traveller, met with the impossibility of obtaining total knowledge or definitive representation of these cities, instead conveys a sense of their multiplicity, their varying logics, and the different means available of navigating their divergent forms.

Presented as a series of visions, hallucinations, imaginings, of what the city can be, the ‘invisible’ in the novel’s title refers to the metaphysical content of the urban landscape—the fertile, open store of possible meanings where potentiality is held in reserve and out of which various styles of the construction of the built environment and civic participation can be imagined. So in enumerating various possibilities of how we can *think* and *build* space, what the text argues as being sufficient to realize ‘cosmopolitanism’ as such offers initial context for my discussion, specifically of the interplay between the linguistic address, dispossession, and just discrimination. Through the example of *IC* and the related discussion of Le Guin’s ‘Omelas,’ I wish to present a critique of the logic of the border and border practices as they manifest in these texts. Both texts feature one or more of the following: the force and operation of filters for governing the unwanted, where this ‘filtration’ is legislated with reference to a judgement of the Other’s deservedness; the practice modes of belonging based on the conditions laid down by the sovereign host; the predication of the order and security of the state on the necessary othering of marginal lives. Variously, these literary cosmopolitanisms exhibit the formal characteristics of border thinking insofar as the states they found operate through the constitutive differentiation and discontinuity of the border as well as the hierarchized mobilities that appear there.

Out of the multiple perspectives of the city he has recorded over his travels, Marco Polo puts forward a utopian ideal at the conclusion of his conversation with Kubla Khan. In Polo’s conjured vision of a utopian idyll, one constructed “piece by piece,” “made of fragments,” “discontinuous in space and time” (147), we come realize that the perfect city he has thus enunciated is, in fact, the reality in which we already live. This perfect city is always in the balance, however, requiring “constant vigilance” (148) to keep it from being entirely overtaken by infernal forces. In truth, this inferno is not a distant possibility; rather, it is a purgatory always with us, even now; it is “what is already here” (148):

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space (148).

This concluding passage forms the basis of my analysis, as it sets down a model of cosmopolitanism apparently reliant on the dispossession of marginal border-subjects or ‘invisible citizens.’ As the present unfolds, Polo suggests, the daily afflictions of lived experience undergone, a fork in the road opens to an unaddressed collective “we,” in the form of an either/or choice, as two ways to escape the inferno’s heat. For one, there is an easy narcotic: familiarization and desensitization; the option of simply being with others and with the inferno, accepting both—and uncritically so. To live in such a way is to act in bad faith, however, as it demands that one turns a blind eye to the raging inferno that nevertheless persists regardless of one’s heedlessness of it.

But there is also the opportunity to “seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.” In the secondary option, Polo suggests the extension of an invitation out towards the other—a chosen, vetted, known other—and to offer them a proposed refuge away from the inferno. On the face of it, this second choice—the salvation of those who suffer through the founding of a space of their own—seems promising. At this first glance, this means of rooting out the inferno appears to achieve the differentiation of the ideal citizen from the unwanted, infernal transgressor. Such a move appears as a righteous concern for the elected, ‘deserving’ ones that gives the impression of care and hospitality, conferring upon them the gift of shelter and compassion.

This image of utopia, as encountered in and through this albeit partial reading of *IC,* gives way, however, under the pressure of a critical analysis drawn from Polo’s own cautionary note: that we should practice this form of hospitality with “constant vigilance and apprehension.” Bringing to bear Polo’s politic judgement—a critical vigilance—against his own idea of the public, reveals, disguised within his idealized community, an ethics tolerant up to a point yet falling short of unconditional hospitality. The sense of hospitality espoused in this passage purports to be solicitous in its purpose and affections but conceives an avowedly open utopian state still riddled with conditions. Most insidiously, this passage proposes a utopia, a space of salvation away from the inferno of life—one for an elect few, at least—but one which preserves its shape and order by instantiating a border between those given space and those unaddressed, invisible citizens cast out.

There is a blind spot in this passage, unaddressed in several of its readings, in the form of the overlooked subjects passed over as a consequence of the operation of a filter for governing the unwanted. To reference Steven Shankman as an example, “In making a plea that that the subject allow the other [‘space’], Calvino is asking that we acknowledge the transcendent otherness of the other person and that we resist the imperial assimilation of the Other into our own consciousness.”[[286]](#footnote-287) On the surface of this reading, there is a predicated Other—the one who is regarded as “not inferno”—whose transcendent otherness is regarded as unassimilable. But behind this predicated subject, there is another, invisible Other whose “transcendent otherness” is negotiated away on account of the judgement of their infernal classification.

To reference the passage in question again, in giving “them*”* space, carving out a “safer place” for both the one who governs the state as well as the licit subject, what of those illicitothers duly articulated *as* other by an enforced, external resolve? What of their implied dispossession? The pointed use of the pronoun in the quoted passage indicates the paradox that underlies Marco Polo’s perfect city—opening a space for an elected set while actually producing other, invisible citizens and peripheries in the process. In constituting the “perfect city” (147) as a state founded as an apparatus of closure, this city produces collateral border-subjects.

As Marco Polo doesn’t stipulate a metric for separating the deserving from the underserving, we are left to wonder what are the criterial categories through which one decides who and what is inferno? The predicated subject of this decision is always assumed; the justice of the decision always manifestly demonstrative of its truth and probity. Take Robert Pogue Harrison’s reading of the passage in *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*. Harrison’s *Essay* chronicles and makes sense of the human impulse and requirement to serve as stewards of “the garden of the biosphere […] and the garden of human culture.”[[287]](#footnote-288) The gardens of human culture, these cultivated places of life and vitality act, for Harrison, “as […] counterforce[s] to history’s deleterious drives.”[[288]](#footnote-289) Affirming the necessity of “creating or preserving gardens in the midst of the wasteland, whatever forms they take,” Harrison cites Marco Polo’s final words as a performance of this protectionist reflex.[[289]](#footnote-290) “Marco Polo,” he writes, “gives voice to such an imperative in his very last words to the emperor Kubla Khan.”[[290]](#footnote-291) The vigilance and apprehension Polo emphasises “is the vigilance and apprehension of a gardener who knows what it takes to get things to grow, who knows what the odds are when it comes to planting a garden in the midst of the wasteland, giving space to the human in the midst of the inferno.”[[291]](#footnote-292) The predicated human subject in this situation is always a nominal construction, with the unaddressed, dislocated border-subject an afterthought not figured in the construction or composition of the ideal polis. Moreover, the “technologies of citizenship,” the modalities of regulating the cultivated space in question, work through a just discrimination of what is necessary to form this state. Just discrimination, an evaluation of what is the acceptable cost in order to achieve something, implies a sense of *realpolitik.* Preserving the garden of human culture, as with the perfect city, requires practical determinations of what is necessary. I level this criticism not to foreclose this possibility of discernment, of critical engagement, or of ethical responsibility, but to question the enactment of these gestures in a manner which readily dispossesses an unaddressed subject.

A poetic injustice survives in spite or, actually, as a direct cause, of a utopian urge in this image relating to the construction of the ideal polis at the conclusion of Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*. The form and anatomy of the body politic, as described in this passage, illustrates certain norms of citizenship and belonging which recall those posited by infrastructures of empire, that is, infrastructures constructed through elective and exclusionary organizing hierarchies, practices of bordering, and modes of territoriality. The just discrimination through which a place of survival for some is theorised relies on and recalls the language of rights to possession and the juridification of dispossession we have encountered as an innovation of the nation state.

In drawing the comparison between a kind of border poetics in *IC* and border culture, I wish to shed light on the functional role of the literary imagination in “strategizing belonging,” as Kim Anderson Sasser might put it.[[292]](#footnote-293) In her words, “To strategize belonging is to construct arguments about belonging, albeit narrative ones.”[[293]](#footnote-294) Sasser adapts Stuart Hall’s usage of such strategies as “responses to a particular challenge, the complication of belonging and identity due to cultural multiplicity.”[[294]](#footnote-295) Hall puts forward a “situation in which within a single geographical space we might find an array of ways that people imagine and enact belonging and identity.”[[295]](#footnote-296)

The construction of arguments about belonging takes the form of narrative and relies on the work of the imagination. That we ‘imagine’ communities of belonging is also the argument of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, where imagination is a necessary phantasmatic supplement to the very real distance between members of a nation: “[The nation] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”[[296]](#footnote-297) To bridge the gap between atomized members within the body politic, an imaginative construction of shared affinity takes place. The ‘local’ character of a nation-state shapes that place’s specific images of itself and its concept of the collective future. Particularly since *Imagined Communities*, there has been a shift towards understanding communities “not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”[[297]](#footnote-298) The development of a style or strategy for the imaginative construction of a community—a kind of hyperstitional fiction becoming real—emerges as the formal characteristic of the literary as well as a thematic concern.

Applying these twinned interests in imaginative style and strategies of belonging to the passage from *Invisible Cities*, we can then perceive the emergence of two distinct understandings of how communities are formed, two competing accounts of citizenship; on the one hand, community as a relationality formed through close contact and proximity; the other, as a foundational belief around which a collective can be organized. The first lies in throwing in one’s lot with others in the midst of inferno and out of that ostensive relation forming a community—by simply being with others a sort of communalizing process occurs, a process that is not innocent but is nonetheless informal. The second conception derives from the operation of a decidedness, which judges “who” and “what” is deserving, and through the construction of that fiction of deservedness conceptualises a utopian situation, at the cost of the dispossession of unwanted others. The distinction is telling insofar as it proceeds from an unassuming, impartial disinterestedness in the construction of the ideal polis, one which seemingly abjures politics, to an explicitly political and value-oriented imagining of community.

As is the nature of *Invisible Cities,* this passage works through multiple significations of meaning to discover the many ways in which the ideal polis operates. Calvino’s use of fiction to test out various possibilities to find *actual* cosmopolitan models for being in the world and being with others, blurs the boundary between these definitions, that is, of speculative fiction and performative action. The genre of fiction is significant to this interplay; after all, the genre of fiction, according to Martha Nussbaum, “on account of some general features of its structure, generally constructs empathy and compassion in ways highly relevant to citizenship.”[[298]](#footnote-299) Therefore, tracing this passage from the initial decisive force of the act of imagining or authoring community, the force of myth which produces and binds together social relations, to its actual manifestation in space reveals what is at stake in this analysis: the designation of status—in accordance to bourgeois values—that informs how the body politic is composed and who belongs there in the novel itself and the world at large.

### Omelas

Marco Polo’s utopia may as well be named Omelas, after Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,’ a prosperous city whose bountiful and happy state depends upon the immiseration of a few. I draw the comparison based on the shared construction of an ideal polis dependent upon a constitutive outside, a peripheral space formed of dispossessed border-subjects unfurnished with the rights and freedoms of the citizens within. In Marco Polo’s “perfect city,” the constitutive outside, which is composed of the “infernal” subjects whose expulsion from the privileged zone of the “safer space,” is the negative zone on which city’s perfection depends. Comparably, beneath Omelas’ most prestigious public building a child is caged, cruelly mistreated, and used for the preservation of the polis’ contentment:[[299]](#footnote-300)

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it; others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the kindly weathers of their skies depend wholly on this child’s horrid misery.[[300]](#footnote-301)

The necessary immiseration on which Omelas’ happiness depends is an open secret, its logic largely accepted as a necessary evil. What I want to draw form the example of Omelas’ is the apparent necessity of a constitutive outside to the functioning of the state and the way rhetorical and political elaboration facilitates its justification. The rhetorical strategies used to communicate and justify Omelas at the level of narrative complement the political construction of the state and its categories of citizen and non-citizen. By elaboration I mean the process of working out in detail, the particularization, of criterial categories for filtering who belongs from who does not. One of the features of these utopias consists in the practice decidedness that necessitates dispossession.

We encounter Omelas as a state of pure bliss, one which the narrator of the story extemporises explanations over—she attempts various strategies to explain, give an account for, justify, the organizational principle of the city. “Joyous,” she says of Omelas’ Festival of Summer, but “How is one to tell about Joy?, How describe the citizens of Omelas?” (218). The narrator references complexity throughout, as if the difficult thesis on which Omelas’ happiness depends had some abstruse yet, at its heart, sound logic. ‘Thesis’ is apt to describe the propositional nature of Omelas, insofar as the manner in which the narrator communicates Omelas as a proposition, one open to dispute, sheds light on the rhetorical stratagems used to defend its idea, to construct justifying arguments about the manner in which belonging is strategized here. The justificatory mechanism is key in this short story as the cold rationality out of which Omelas’ happiness is produced is always to be explained and explained away:

The peoples’ tears at the injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of splendor in their lives […] This is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of understanding (220-1).

Tellingly, the narrator, notwithstanding her references to the complexity intended to mollify critical doubt, enjoins the reader to believe in the idea of Omelas in order to justify its reality status:

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing. […] Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there in one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible (220).

The narrator assumes a disbelief on the part of the reader which has to be dispelled with clarifying, justifying descriptions. The exacting nature of these justifications anticipates controversy, as the obscure grounds for Omelas’ existence requires rhetorical and political pretence to sustain it.

As a rule, Omelas produces dispossessed border-subjects, the labour of their caged existence serving as the productive energy of the state. Recalling the infernal zone of Marco Polo’s “perfect city,” a constitutive outside created through just discrimination is similarly produced in Le Guin’s short story, which confers the category of ‘stateless’ to those within the state; the children shuttered in the basement beneath Omelas’ grand public building are, to paraphrase Butler and Spivak, “contained within the polis as its interiorized outside.”[[301]](#footnote-302) The principle of the functioning of these states is contingent upon a fungible, collateral class. Both states are structured by an “economy in which the public (and the proper sphere of politics) depends essentially upon the non-political or, rather, the explicitly depoliticized.”[[302]](#footnote-303) Political representation in this public sphere would confer rights to citizenship and participation, but these utopian visions rely on juridified dispossession to make them function. Marco Polo’s perfect city and Omelas require filters for governing the unwanted or technologies of citizenship in order to regulate, limit, preserve the sanctity of the politically ‘literate’ or enfranchised inside. The nation-state, which is also a linguistic majority as we established at the outset, is dominated by an elect group settled in the circulation of language and invested with political authority.

But in fact, the idea of election, of identifying and picking out an elect few in order to invite them in as a guest initially makes hospitality possible. As Derrida tells us in ‘Foreigner Question’ in *Of Hospitality*:

this right to hospitality offered to a foreigner ‘as a family,’ represented and protected by his or her family name, is at once what makes hospitality possible, or the hospitable relationship to the foreigner possible, but by the same token what limits and prohibits it. Because hospitality, in this situation, is not offered to any anonymous new arrival and someone who has neither name, nor patronym, nor family, nor social status, and who is therefore treated not as a foreigner but as another barbarian.[[303]](#footnote-304)

Derrida argues that the conditional conception of hospitality, constituted by a set of laws regulating the performance of hospitality, is the traditional one, insofar as the first encounter with other—the one in which names are exchanged, invitations given to enter into private, interior spaces—is the classic framework for social relations. The giving of a name, the process of identification, is fundamental to the possibility of hospitality in this original characterisation. It makes the hospitable relationship possible as the sanctifying name is the means through which the extension of hospitality is granted and the means by which the corresponding duty to be a conscientious guest can be properly regulated. In other words, the exchanging of the name is a token of the guest’s legitimacy and of the host’s responsibility.

However, the exchange of the name perverts the concept of hospitality—in its ideal and absolute sense—given the presupposed exclusion of *unknown* others, those without recourse to the authenticating, patronymic name or sanctioned identity, to whom participation in the nominative circuits of exchange is out of the question:

[A]bsolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.[[304]](#footnote-305)

The relationship of the host who practices absolute hospitality to the unknown other is an unquestioning one. I shall develop the relationship between unconditional and conditional hospitality further in relation to *Infinite Jest,* but for now it will suffice to say that a hospitality offered without reference to a name which sanctions entry is an expression of an unconditional relation to the other.

The identification of the name holds specific implications in the two texts currently under consideration. In terms of *IC*, if Marco Polo’s utopia were to be constituted by *the* law of absolute hospitality, it would be without the taking of names, without the identification and filtering of the unwanted, without prescription. In seeking and learning to recognize who, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, we can observe the work of political elaboration. Butler develops the concept of political elaboration in reference to the category of statelessness:

The political elaboration and enforcement of categories thus supplies the ‘status’ for the non-citizen, one that qualifies the stateless for the deprivation not only of rights of protection but also of conditions under which freedom might be exercised. ‘Qualification’ proves to be a juridical procedure through which subjects are both constituted and foreclosed.[[305]](#footnote-306)

The “qualification” of subjects, the political elaboration of their licitness and, therefore, rights to inclusion in the state recalls the comparable framework of hospitality. Elaborating the criterial categories through which citizens and non-citizens are grouped inaugurates the hierarchies of social relations. Supplying the status and category of ‘citizen’ necessitates a constitutive outside; the stateless ‘non-citizen.’ As follows, in seeking and learning to recognize proper citizens, the utopia away from the inferno of *Invisible Cities* engages in the prescriptive act of elaboration that produces non-citizens.

In relation to ‘Omelas,’ I wish to emphasise how participation in the political sphere, like in the case of Derrida’s conception of hospitality, requires fluency in the language of the majority or access to the linguistic framework. Language is a decisive modicum of exchange in social and political economies built on the of authority, legitimacy, and hierarchy. In Le Guin’s short story, the integration into the social fabric of Omelas is performed as a ritualized affair occurring some time before the teens. This integration consists in the subjection over time of young minds to arguments for the justness, rationality, and necessity of Omelas’ arrangement. The construction of the social body is thus enacted through the construction of rhetorical arguments about belonging, as Sasser might put it. Moreover, the dispossessed subjects of Omelas are excluded from participation in the linguistic community; it turns out that “there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child” (225) in Le Guin’s short story. At the level of narration, the “realization” of Omelas, its rendering as a credible and credulous state, implicates rhetoricisation in the political rationalization of the state. Variously, language serves to expedite the controversial logic of Omelas—to explain it and to explain it away—as well to connect the linguistic majority, thus furnished with the language of politics, against the dispossessed outside without recourse to speech.

As a challenge to this state of affairs, ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas’ concludes with a refusal of political elaboration. For all the rhetorical posturing engaged in to describe Omelas and confer its reality-status throughout, the short story concludes with meaningful silence, a refusal of the language of political elaboration. This silence begins with a demystified consciousness of the price of Omelas’ happiness. Of course, the child in the locked basement whose suffering makes possible Omelas’ prosperity is always to be replaced: “At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all” (222) Maybe in response to the loss of their own child to the regime or maybe by a courageous act of refusing the state of things, “[s]ometimes also a man or woman, much older, falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home” (223):

These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman. Night falls; the traveller must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas (222-3).

The rejection of Omelas’ politics of productive and directed immiseration is either prior to language, does not require it, or cannot be articulated: the narrator cannot describe where it is they go and those who go do so in silence. This may be in solidarity with the children “whose claims remain unlanguaged in any tongue” if we recall Apter or, to reference Derrida, those who are “foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated.” After all, the child

who has not always lived in the closet, and can remember sunlight and his mother’s voice, sometimes says, ‘I will be good.’ It says, ‘Please let me out. I will be good.’ They never answer it. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a lot. But now it only makes a sort of whining, ‘eh-haa, eh-haaaaaa,’ and it speaks less and less often (221).

Given the reversal that occurs at the end here, from effusive political elaboration to committed silence, this seems a pointed criticism of the utopian impulse in its linguistic form, where language is the origin and means of a politics of harm.[[306]](#footnote-307) This is the poetic torture house of language described by Žižek which, in shedding doubt on “the mainstream tradition in which the prevalent idea of language and the symbolic order is that of the medium of reconciliation and mediation, of peaceful co-existence, as opposed to a violent medium of immediate and raw confrontation,” forces us to instead ask the following: “What if, however, humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they speak?”[[307]](#footnote-308) ‘Omelas’ represents that normative conception of language as the medium of reconciliation and mediation, through which the narrator enjoins us to participate in the phantasmatic construction of a system of institutionalised state torture:

How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naïve and happy children, though *their* children were. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not horrible. O Miracle! But I wish I could describe it better to you. I wish I could convince you! Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it however you want to… for certainly I cannot describe well enough to suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets of Omelas. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary… and in Omelas, cars and helicopters was just not necessary. The people of Omelas could have had central heating and air, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here like floating light sources and the cure for the common cold… or they could have had none of that. It doesn’t really matter. As you like it. Imagine it as you will (218-19).

The reader participates in the construction of the idea of Omelas to the extent that they formulate their own equation for what is necessary for the realisation of happiness; happiness, after all, “is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary.” Through just discrimination one works out the cost of the wages of happiness and who is to bear them. ‘Omelas’ features a rhetorical device for the communication of an authoritarian ideology by engaging with the reader in acts of ‘just discrimination’ through which imprisoned children become the predicates for a society’s good fortune. Just discrimination recalls the juridified dispossession that organises infrastructures of regime insofar as juridified dispossession is the formalisation of just discrimination. The latter is strategy for judging and accounting for value; the former sees this strategy instantiated in legal framework and the legalese of law. Both just discrimination and juridified dispossession relate in my discussion to the development of power geometries in literary cosmopolitanisms; how notions of citizenship and belonging are formulated through linguistic address. In Omelas, the basement prison in which children are held is the innovation of a foundational fiction of lesser evil for the greater good, one which finds its support in and through rhetorical persuasion; moreover, what one *does not say* relates to a pre-verbal moral standard which refuses to participate in the generalized circulation of politicised language through which the cruel state persists. The rejection of Omelas’ authoritarian project takes the shape of a silent and fugitive act of refusal on behalf of orphaned and exploited children who can no longer speak for themselves. If Omelas is indeed a rhetorical edifice, escape from it is asymmetrically silent and fugitive.[[308]](#footnote-309)

The basement prison where Omelas’ child, stammering and unable to be understood, is kept is a depoliticized nether region asymmetrical to the functional body politic above it. The founding of a utopian state on the grounds of a structure of separateness and dispossession undermines any basis for a collective and cosmopolitan undertaking. Once power differentials territorialize what Hardt and Negri describe as the “commons”—“the shared substance of our social being, whose privatization is a violent act which should be resisted”[[309]](#footnote-310)—into sequestered zones differentiated by power, once the commons bisects into a series of private places, difference edges into the base-level commonality of a public, in view of the orphaned others, disassociated from the public body at large. In other words, to figuratively *dismember* the commons, that is, to divide and partition the commons into peripheral zones and imperial capitals, so as to destroy integrity, is to do away with the commons and the cosmopolitan ethic. The privatisation of the commons, which in the preceding analysis is enacted through political elaboration of the status of citizens and the consequent estrangement of non-citizens, is fundamental to how Marco Polo’s perfect city and Omelas operate.

Uncovering the simultaneous operation of dispossession through territorialisation sheds light on how ‘publicity’—the condition or fact of openness to the public—is not, as it is nominally defined, presupposed. Like cosmopolitanism, which “had seemed like a universalistic advocacy of democracy and human rights” but “was revealed to be all too particular in its conception, its social-political bases, and its effects,”[[310]](#footnote-311) the notion of the commons in these two texts is shot through with immanent divisions. Rather than being prior to any political elaboration of individual members, the public demonstrated in *Invisible Cities* and ‘Omelas’ necessarily *depends* upon privation: what is supposed to be an open whole actually turns out to be the site of instantiated difference. Just as with the relation between host and guest, where an invitation is made only “in the right conditions,” the grounds for inclusion into Marco Polo’s utopian community depends on the force of a divisive law of hospitality. In the event that modes of belonging and rights of possession depend so much on language, a space opens for the critical discussion of literary cosmopolitanisms as well as the role literary space has in orienting communities to come.

I began with *IC*, its embodiment of a kind of ethics that presupposes charitable openness but which, in actuality, proves itself to be prescriptive in its thinking of ideas of community and inclusion, as an effigy to be burnt. An effigy which also stands for the “bourgeois public sphere” identified by Jürgen Habermas, the “publicness of representation” of which does not actually constitute a “social realm, that is, as a public sphere; rather, it [is] something like a status attribute.”[[311]](#footnote-312) Like so, Polo’s public, in its identity as a “bourgeois public sphere,” in its distribution of space according to a given, associated status, and in its restriction to a select few with recourse to politically effective speech, “may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public.”[[312]](#footnote-313)

### The effacement of the question and the name

This particular strategy of belonging that Marco Polo puts forward, in defining and designating the “who and what” of the commons, of the citizenry in an abstract sense, in applying filters for governing the unwanted, actually throttles and negates its universalistic idea. Negates it in the sense that the presupposed totality of individuals, the aggregation of all admitted on the basis of simply being-thus and existing—an entrance policy which we must never take for granted—is ruptured in the emergence of a structure of necessitated and juridified dispossession. The welcome of the other, after all and according to Francois Raffoul, is “not on the side of the host as master of the house, but on the side of the arriving guest” (288); thus, we know Calvino’s public by the trail of dispossessed—as with Le Guin’s caged children—cast off in the wake of the procession of the select few elected in the name of a decidedness; a decision settled and walled up behind the avowedly innocuous cause of an ethical standard.

The more cosmopolitan, hospitable, public would be the one constituted by an inability to serialize and identify its membership, as doing so would pave the way for a class system where class becomes a sanction for violence against the other. But this public would not be formularized to the extent that commonality becomes a naively quixotic concept, anatomical to the point of evacuating any meaningful and local personality. Such a *pro forma* republic would bring about what Žižek calls “a violent act of abstraction,”[[313]](#footnote-314) that is, the forced erasure of the contents of concrete, localized relations between familiar individuals in favour of a formalized, abstract public composed of atomized individuals. Rather, the more hospitable public seems more like the ‘unavowable community’ of Maurice Blanchot:

May ’68 has shown that without project, without conjuration, in the suddenness of a happy meeting, like a feast that breached the admitted and expected social norms, *explosive communication* could affirm itself (affirm itself beyond the usual forms of affirmation) as the opening that gave permission to everyone, without distinction of class, age, sex or culture, to mix with the first comer as if with an already loved being, precisely because he was the unknown familiar.[[314]](#footnote-315)

A culture of permissiveness, then, nurtured by one and all; individuals unknown to each other looking toward one another with a gaze that discerns no class or category in the one who receives it, but which, nonetheless, grants a kind of recognition. The carnivalesque, explosive, encounter between members open to each other, which exists beyond expected social norms, illustrates a “hospitality [that] begin[s] with the unquestioning welcome, the effacement of the question *and* thename.”[[315]](#footnote-316) This is also similar to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s concept of the ‘multitude.’ Historically, multitude has been used to encapsulate an unclassifiable body of people who refuse any common identity aside from their mere being and existence. Hardt and Negri reconfigure that history and draw out of the multitude an all-inclusive, socio-Marxist project:

A multitude is irreducible multiplicity; the singular social differences that constitute the multitude must always be expressed and can never be flattened into sameness, unity, identity, or indifference.[[316]](#footnote-317)

Their text, *Multitude*, discards the notion of ‘the people,’ for a relation of peoples working together in a network of closeness and proximity. Effectively, it is the recombination of individuals in a larger system of relation. This system of relation, born of an essential condition of relatedness, is what brings the multitude together. However, as my references to the unavowable community seek to clarify, “common condition, of course, does not mean sameness or unity, but it does require that no differences of nature or kind divide the multitude.”[[317]](#footnote-318) Recognising how this multiplicity works, “the singular social differences that constitute the multitude,” elaborates a notion of a democratic public with broader scope.[[318]](#footnote-319)

The contradictory conceptual couple, identity and difference, is not the adequate framework for understanding the organization of the multitude. Instead we are a multiplicity of singular forms of life and at the same time share a common global existence. The anthropology of the multitude is an anthropology of singularity and commonality.[[319]](#footnote-320)

Every identity, […] even the multitude, must be defined by its remained, those outside of it, call them excluded, the abject, or the subaltern. […] There can certainly be points or nodes outside a network but none are necessarily outside. *Its boundaries are indefinite and open.* […] None is necessarily excluded but this inclusion is not guaranteed: the expansion of the common is a practical, political manner (my emphasis).[[320]](#footnote-321)

Hardt and Negri help articulate a concept of the public that doesn’t vacate the ground of difference for the sake of a totalising system of sameness. The network of the multitude, its boundaries indefinite and open, gestures towards the impossible in that it is irreducible, and therefore its meaning, its substance, always escapes definition or quantification. Laying oneself open to the risk and dilemma of alterity, of otherness, is an essential, but long-neglected condition of the public, such violence of interpretation having been meted out upon it: “If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere.”

The multitude and the unavowable community work on the premise that a concept of the commons riddled with conditions and prescriptions fails fundamentally. In positing itself or being revealed as conditional, as engineered by means of a presupposing ‘decidedness’, this formularized conception of the commons fails as it wrests away of the constitutive ‘undecidability’ of the absolutely ethical decision. At least in the Derridean framework of absolute hospitality, an openness to the other must risk the possibility of the arrival of the infernal other for the sake of not dispossessing subjects through a conditional ethics. Therefore, a “hospitality [that] begin[s] with the unquestioning welcome, the effacement of the question *and* thename.,”[[321]](#footnote-322) leaves the other unclassified and unchallenged, their identity always mobile and unsettled.

## The Underground Railroad

The effacement of identity inscribed in the concept of fugitivity recalls the ‘unavowability’ of Blanchot’s community to come. The refusal to fix the identity of the other so as to apply that unique identity as a point of differentiation implies that the other retains a fugitive status. What follows traces these lines of flight, which proceeded out of the fugitive, silent, movement away from Omelas by the jaded few who renounced their citizenship of that state-authorized immiseration into an “unimaginable” beyond, onward to an actually ‘realized’ escape in the form of Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016), the title of which “evokes the strategic, evasive movements of escaped slaves and the track-bound, scheduled movements of locomotives.”[[322]](#footnote-323)

Whitehead’s novel is part alternative history, part picaresque, part dystopic travel narrative, and part literature of exile and dislocation. Largely centering on Cora, a slave of the Randall plantation, *UR* charts the fugitive’s journey north to freedom after she escapes by the light of the full moon. An episodic structure situates Cora’s narrative in the context of the colonial slave trade through reference to her grandmother, Ajarry, brought to the United States from modern-day Benin. Moreover, it situates the American creed of exceptionalism, which serves as the state’s justification for the racialized domination of others, through the story arc of slavecatcher, Ridgeway. The generic variety of *The Underground Railroad,* which plays fast and loose with the historical and the fictional, draws attention to the fabulously textual invention and construction of ‘freedom,’ especially in its representation through the fictionalised railroad, as “freedom was a thing that shifted as you looked at it.”[[323]](#footnote-324) Freedom, like the runaway, is ever mobile and formed of a fugitive meaning.

Passing through numerous “state[s] of possibility” (82), Cora is enjoined to pay attention to the America she is to encounter riding the rails of the locomotive of freedom across the country, through the many opportunities and challenges each state presents. “If you want to see what this nation is all about, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America” (83). These are the words of one station master to Cora and the novel proceeds in this fashion, like a Dantesque progression through what turns out—ironically—to be nothing more than a quintessentially American darkness.

What began as “loosely organized networks of people” as early as the 1680s came in time to comprise a sophisticated network which earned the name ‘The Underground Railroad’ around the time the actual railroads began to be constructed.[[324]](#footnote-325) To differentiate between them, the historical Railroad will be capitalised and Whitehead’s fictionalised railroad left uncapitalized. The name also referred to the multitude of commiserating abolitionists of many creeds and categories of freedom who ‘oiled the pistons’ of locomotive escape. In his novel, Whitehead gives concrete form to the historical innovation of networks of passage, places of refuge, schemes of counterfeiting, designed to spirit black slaves away from the possession of masters and the institution of slavery into the freedom of free states and, in the advent of continued pursuit from slavecatchers, into the farther reaches of Canada.

The figurative network of escape finds its material instantiation in the novel as a series of functional locomotives and stations, “secret trunk lines and mysterious routes” (62), located across the American underground, manned and operated by stationmasters faithful to the cause, and ridden by those in flight. Of one such station, Whitehead writes: “Two steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel, pinned into the dirt by wooden crossties. The steel ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting toward a miraculous terminus” (80). The railroad’s descriptions are viscerally concrete yet are couched in a language of spirit, miracle, fantasy—a coupling which, as I’ll elaborate, is constitutive of Whitehead’s conception of the railroad.

The railroad is a fugitive infrastructure, then, invented and “assembled to do different things, for different people, and according to different systems of value” in defiance of the infrastructure of regime that is slavery, the regime of “King Cotton” (63). This regime depends on “[s]tolen bodies working stolen land. It was an engine that did not stop, its hungry boiler fed with blood” (139.) A “ruthless engine of cotton [which] required its fuel of African bodies. Crisscrossing the ocean, ships brought bodies to work the land and to breed more bodies” (193). Infrastructures of regime and resistance collide in the form of the underground railroad and the cotton engine.

These infrastructures differ and operate in a variety of ways in *The Underground Railroad*, but most notably for my purposes here, the infrastructure of regime relies on the modality of ‘fact’ and that of resistance relies on the ‘counterfactual.’ Between fact and its counter lies a conceptual schema for the arrangement of the brute, hard, capitalist logistics of slavery against the infelicitous, mutable mode of being associated with fugitivity. *The Underground Railroad* works in and through the productive tension of claim—to the rights of possession—and counterclaim; competing ‘states’ of possibility; “useful delusions” (340) of hope against the “iron facts” (88) of the chains that bind; the proper accounting of names which mark the slave as ‘asset’ against the elision of the ‘proper’ name through which the slave eludes systems of capture…

Fugitive meaning, as it is expressed in such practices associated with escape from institutions of power, on the one hand, and the exploration of the possibilities of ‘unavowable’ communities, on the other, offers a challenge to the literary cosmopolitanisms we’ve observed in *Invisible Cities* and ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.’ This is to extent that fugitivity rejects both “political elaboration and enforcement of categories” that supply the status of (non)citizens and the performative, rhetorical elaboration of conditional utopias reliant on dispossession and immiseration.

### Facts and the counterfactual

From the Latin *factum*, meaning ‘an event, occurrence, deed, achievement, act, exploit’ which in the Medieval Latin means ‘state, condition, circumstance,’ fact means literally ‘action or anything done.’ Fact derives also from the verb *facio*, as in ‘do,’ such that the quality of being actual is bound up with the activity of bringing about actualities, making them, producing them. Away from the realm of action, in modern usage it has developed into a ‘thing known to be true,’ as proved by having ‘actually occurred’ or ‘being actual.’ Fact as a single unit of information or truth in the plural means ‘a collection of factual knowledge about something’ or, if you wish, a ‘body of facts.’ Where in the late 15th century fact had related to a crime, as in the expression ‘he emerged as an accessory after the fact,’ fact has evolved to mean the findings produced out of a discriminating process of evaluation, where testing and testimony serve to distinguish fact from fiction. Facts, especially understood in law, are about the truth of events as opposed to their interpretation, truths that are observable, accountable, can be qualified.

For the slaves of the Randall plantation, this means the ineluctable “fact of their bondage” (33). But Randall is still only a microcosm of the larger fact of the American experience, as Cora, the fugitive of Randall on whom the alternative history novel largely focuses, realises as she shifts from old prisons to new prisons: “She smiled for a moment, before the facts of her latest cell reasserted themselves. Scrabbling in the walls like a rat. Whether in the fields or underground or in an attic room, America remained her warden” (207). In this scene, Cora has indeed escaped from the plantation, but the condition of her freedom is that she remain locked away in the attic room of her rescuers There is also the fact of law; despite the fact that freeman and slave alike “‘have a legal right as American citizens to be here,’” there is also the “Fugitive Slave Law [which] was a legal fact as well” (330). King Cotton is a fact, which like all brute “facts [is] impossible to avoid” (54). Chains too are “iron facts” (87-8) Arnold Ridgeway, blacksmith and father of the slavecatcher Ridgeway, “mash[es], and draw[s] out the metal into the useful things that ma[k]e society operate: nails, horseshoes, plows, knives, guns. Chains” (87). These are iron facts to compliment his son’s proven method of apprehending fugitive slaves:

Ridgeway gathered renown with his facility for ensuring that property remained property. When a runaway took off down an alley, he knew where the man was headed. The direction and aim. His trick: Don’t speculate where the slave is headed next. Concentrate instead on the idea that he is running away from you. Not from a cruel master, or the vast agency of bondage, but you specifically. It worked again and again, his own iron fact, in alleys and pine barrens and swamps (95-6).

These iron facts make no allowance for speculation, ruled as they are by the exacting logic of secure knowledge and impelled by the regime of slavery to secure King Cotton’s assets.

Factuality, the overdetermining role of the state of the actual, is to be contrasted with the counterfactual in *UR.* Ajarry, the matriarch who heads a line of fugitive women, is intimately aware of the facts which order and regulate the regime of King Cotton:

Since the night she was kidnapped she had been appraised and reappraised, each day waking upon the pan of a new scale. Know your value and you know your place in the order. To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible (9).

One’s subjection to the condition of slavery is bound up with certain principles of one’s value, of the state of things as they actually are, and the logic of verifiability. Against this body of facts, the counterfactual relates to and communicates that which has not in fact happened; rather, it delineates what is possible; what might, could, or would be if conditions were not what they were. The counterfactual, against the matter of fact, speaks in the subjunctive mood which speculates beyond given conditions. The counterfactual is related to the fugitive and to the project of the underground railroad in that escape is always to be counter to the fact and logic of a given situation. Remarking at the fearful things in the swamp which separate her from freedom, Cora—Ajarry’s granddaughter—is aware that she has to avail herself of logic, reason, to escape:

Things in the swamp whistled and splashed, hunting in the living darkness. To walk in there at night, heading north to the Free States. Have to take leave of your senses to do that (46-7).

To imagine freedom and to pursue it requires a counterfactual ignorance of the danger one exposes themselves to. This explains the non-sensical superstitious, faith in escapes by the light of the first moon, in the good omen. The counterfactual and the possibility inscribed in its speculative denial of fact is precious in that it leaves open the possibility of something beyond the state of King Cotton:

“You heard my name when you were a pickaninny,” [Ridgeway] said. “The name of punishment, dogging every fugitive step and every thought of running away. For every slave I bring home, twenty others abandon their full-moon schemes. I’m a notion of order. The slave that disappears—it’s a notion, too. Of hope. Undoing what I do so that a slave the next plantation over gets an idea that it can run, too. If we allow that, we accept the flaw in the imperative. And I refuse” (268).

‘Ridgeway,’ the slavecatcher’s name, is a call to order, an order which fugitive hope challenges by eluding order. The slave that disappears cultivates a sense of hope that exposes a flaw in the imperative. Imperative, from the latin *imperativus*, that which pertains to command, works in conjunction with a series of other terms which establish a certain normativity to order: order is the slave brought “home”; order is the regimentation of control from one plantation to the “next plantation over”; order is the heeding of facts and not “get[ing] [any] idea[s]”; order is the slave without speculative “schemes”; order is the slave’s ‘appearance’ and visibility before command; order is the substance of ‘doing’ which must not be ‘undone.’ Insofar as fact derives from an etymological inheritance in ‘doing,’ the bringing about of actualities, then order pertains to the domain of positive law. The slave that disappears undoes and negates the positivity of order, relies on a metaphysics of negativity, on a meaningful absence. Positive law, “law that exists by virtue of being posited, laid down and set firmly, by a will empowered so to will,” is also law that obliges or demands an action.[[325]](#footnote-326) The counterfactual, then, is also a counteraction, a rejection of the notion of order by means of a rejection of the imperative of facts.

One expression of the counterfactual in *Railroad* is the “useful delusion.” The functional aspect of deluded belief is interrogated in a debate on the future of Valentine Farm, a utopian idyll situated in Tennessee where fugitives go to find shelter. Cora stops here on her journey and, with the others, participates in an ad-hoc community, and gains a critical, practical, and political education in matters of race and survival.[[326]](#footnote-327) Whitehead explains the reasoning behind the Farm as follows: “I wanted refuge, and a stage for debates about black determination that were going on 150 years ago, and still go on.”[[327]](#footnote-328) One such debate is between Brother Mingo and Elijah Lander, archetypes for positions and leaders within the abolitionist struggle. The former cautions against harbouring fugitives, some of whom—like Cora—have killed in self-defence during their escape in addition to committing the crime of refusing to be property, in order to foster better relations with the local white community. Lander opts for the difficult and dangerous option of unconditional hospitality, though the prospect of sheltering all appears impossible:

“Brother Mingo made some good points,” Lander said. “We can’t save everyone. But that doesn’t mean we can’t try. Sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useless truth. Nothing’s going to grow in this mean cold, but we can still have flowers.

“Here’s one delusion: that we can escape slavery. We can’t. Its scars will never fade. When you saw your mother sold off, your father beaten, your sister abused by some boss or master, did you ever think you would sit here today, without chains, without the yoke, among a new family? Everything you ever knew told you that freedom was a trick—yet here you are. Still we run, tracking by the good full moon to sanctuary.

“Valentine farm is a delusion. Who told you the negro deserved a place of refuge? Who told you that you had that right? Every minute of your life’s suffering has argued otherwise. By every fact of history, it can’t exist. This place must be a delusion, too. Yet here we are.

“And America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes—believes with all its heart—that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers. This nation shouldn’t exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are.[[328]](#footnote-329)

The incommensurable reality of slavery nonetheless exists in the form of its bodily and historical scars, a literal body of facts; and yet, the functional role of a delusional dream of a state beyond it sustains the utopian ideal of Valentine. Lander’s dream can only exist as delusion as it is not sanctioned by the status quo—“Who told you the negro deserved a place of refuge?” What’s more, it contravenes the general course of history, what the slave had “known” to be possible. The implication is that the only means by which Valentine’s utopian ideal can exist is by counterfactual and divine providence. Dream and delusion are related insofar as they stand for a related notion of freedom:

Cora was acquainted with this squeamish quality of Lovey’s, but she did not recognize the other side of her friend, whatever had overtaken the girl and made her run. But every slave thinks about it. In the morning and in the afternoon and in the night. Dreaming of it. Every dream a dream of escape even when it didn’t look like it. When it was a dream of new shoes. The opportunity stepped up and Lovey availed herself, heedless of the whip (66-7).

The dream of escape and the delusion of refuge are speculative prospects that contravene the state of things as they actually are. Regardless, Lander’s useful delusion functions in abeyance of slavery’s scars; likewise, Lovey’s dream of escape sustains her heedless of the whip.

### The Unavowable Community

*Railroad* is encoded with the language of settlement and fugitivity: “Lovey glorie[s] in rare escapes” (14) away from the misery of the plantation whenever they come, whether through birthdays, harvest nights, or the warmth of corn whiskey. Lovey, like all slaves, is attuned to the possibility of escape, as her friend Cora remarks of her when she absconds from the Randall plantation. This is also expressed in the quoted paragraph above, where “[e]very dream [appears] a dream of escape even when it didn’t look like it.”

At the same time as she is attuned to escape, whenever appalled at the Cora’s attitude for whatever, Lovey enjoins her friend to “fix [her] mood” (15). Cora herself is always looking for things to “fix” (15), like her small plot of land, her private territory located in the plantation in which she is forcedly “fixed” and, even after escaping it, she again ends up in chains: her captor “fixed her manacles again” (261), Like so, the novel is self-conscious of the *economies* of language where, for example, fixing relates to the settling of the price of the slave whom must always be “brought to the white man’s proper accounting” (49), of “human cargo” (258). This process of detailing the slave’s identity continues even after death, in order to satisfy the desired level of efficiency of the regime of King Cotton: “The names of the dead were as important as the names of the living, as every loss from disease and suicide—and the other mishaps labelled as much for accounting purposes—needed to be justified to employers” (258). ‘Fixing’ works in concert with other related terms of capture, prescription, accounting, control, order, settlement, assignation, designation, etc.

Where we encountered a political elaboration in the construction of categories of citizens and non-citizens previously, the capitalist logistics of *Railroad*, its “ledger of slavery” (258), resembles an economic elaboration delineating conditions of captivity and freedom. When one’s “price fluctuated” (6) there comes a change in the world’s disposition to them: “When you are sold that many times, the world is teaching you to pay attention” (6), But to *pay* attention, to heed the signals disclosed by King Cotton, is to reconcile oneself to the capitalist logistics of slavery, “to quickly adjust to the new plantations, sorting the nigger breakers to the merely cruel, the layabouts from the hardworking, the informers from the secret-keepers” (6).

Beyond the act of paying attention—beyond heeding “the call to order” as Moten and Harney might put it—is a fugitive disengagement, a walking away from Omelas, attending to something beyond the institution of slavery: “Cora’s attention detached itself. It floated someplace past the burning slave and the great house and the lines that defined the Randall domain” (56-7). To be called to attention, hailed, would be to be interpellated as a subject of the apparatus of slavery and, when the wanted posters note that a fugitive might “possibly be answering to the name Bessie” (356), to not heed the call, to not answer to one’s name, is part of one’s escape, however futile or delusional.[[329]](#footnote-330) The name, the proper noun, which establishes the discrete designation by which one is known and addressed, in its usage in the regime of slavery, services power: “According to the law, most of them were still property, their names on pieces of paper in cabinets kept by the United States Government” (148) The name designates how one is indexed as property in the regime of King Cotton.

James Baldwin notes of his inability to retrace genealogical roots back to Africa, to rediscover his proper name: “My entry into America is a bill of sale and that stops you from going any further. At some point in our history I became Baldwin’s nigger.”[[330]](#footnote-331) The erasure of the contents of one’s genealogical and patronymic heritage is the occasion for one’s reassignment into the capitalist logistics of slavery. Receiving the new name, which corresponds to the newly supplied status as slave marked in the bill of sale, introduces subjects into indexical and capitalist logistics of slavery:

List upon list crowded the ledger of slavery. The names gathered first on the African coast in tens of thousands of manifests. That human cargo. The names of the dead were as important as the names of the living, as every loss from disease and suicide—and the other mishaps labeled as such for accounting purposes—needed to be justified to employers. At the auction block they tallied the souls purchased at each auction, and on the plantations the overseers preserved the names of workers in rows of tight cursive. Every name an asset, breathing capital, profit made flesh (258).

Capitalist logistics coincide with archival practice, insofar as “[…] the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.”[[331]](#footnote-332) Capitalist logistics, as technical practice, impose a “notion of order” and “fundamental principles […] of existence” in the life of the slave. The slave-subject, read as a body of facts, is rendered as archivable or legible ‘content’ amenable to the justification of owners, to the kinds of cruel treatment the slaver reserves for an object they own.

As noted previously, it is Ridgeway’s name which Cora heard as a pickanny, a name which refers to the peril of escape that the slavecatcher himself represents. On one hand there’s the public and technical use of the name to establish order and, on the other, the effacement of the name in order to facilitate one’s escape:

“You’re runaways,” Sam said. “This is who you are now. You need to commit the [new] names and the story to memory” (109).

Only in moments of privacy, away from technical practice, in a dream of a lover, can the name be uttered beyond the bounds of regime: “Cora kissed him and ran her hands over the territory of his body. When he spread her legs she was wet and he slid inside her, saying her name as no one had ever said it and as no one ever would, sugary and tender” (364).

In fact, the fugitive infrastructure of the underground railroad rests on silence and the disavowal of the name. The underground railroad is a name for something that never could be named, as the originary “Underground Railroad existed long before it received its name. After all, people began escaping from slavery long before railroads were invented.”[[332]](#footnote-333) The notional Railroad predates the railroads as such and this structure of namelessness carries on in its fugitive practices. Of one station and its stationmaster the following is said: “The owner of the premises was away on business, Royal told them as he untied the rags from their eyes, a ruse to hide his part in their enterprise. Cora never got his name, nor that of the town of departure. Just that he was another person of subterranean inclinations” (309). To not speak of the name is as necessary as to not speak of the subject of the railroad:

“We’re not supposed to talk about what we do down here,” Royal said. “And our passengers aren’t supposed to talk about how the railroad operates—it’d put a lot of good people in danger. They could talk if they wanted to, but they don’t.”

It was true. When [Cora] told of her escape, she omitted the tunnels and kept to the main contours. It was private, a secret about yourself it never occurred to you to share. Not a bad secret, but an intimacy so much a part of who you were that it could not be made separate. It would die in the sharing.

The coordinated activity of the railroad recalls the Derridean conception of hospitality, “hospitality [that] begin[s] with the unquestioning welcome, the effacement of the question *and* thename.”[[333]](#footnote-334) The sharing of the name and the secret of the railroad is an intimacy that would die if shared, but which sustains life in its effacement. In this way, the underground railroad resembles an unavowable community:

“That’s why,” he said. He rubbed his spectacles with his shirttail. “The underground railroad is bigger than its operators—it’s all of you, too. The small spurs, the big trunk lines. We have the newest locomotives and the obsolete engines, and we have handcars like that one. It goes everywhere, to places we know and those we don’t. We got this tunnel right here, running beneath us, and no one knows where it leads. If we keep the railroad running, and none of us can figure it out, maybe you can” (62).

We previously developed the idea of Blanchot’s unavowable community as a shared commonality which dispenses with the need for prescriptive elaborations of membership. The railroad is similarly an aggregation of people and one that relies on an effacement of the name, on a secrecy about its internal structures, on an inability to ‘figure’ its shape and character.

### The invention of the railroad

That “none of us can figure” out the underground railroad of Whitehead’s novel invites the question of why he gives it its material figuration. Whitehead invents an *actual* rail transportation system as a materialization of the historical notion of the Railroad. The reasons for this doubling lie somewhere between the history of invention as fabulation and invention as technical apparatus elaborated by Derrida as follows:

Within an area of discourse that has been fairly well stabilized since the end of the seventeenth century in Europe, there are only two major types of *authorized* examples for invention. On the one hand, people invent *stories* (fictional or fabulous), and on the other hand, they invent *machines*, technical devices or mechanisms, in the broadest sense of the word. Someone may invent by fabulation, by producing narratives to which there is no corresponding reality outside the narrative (an alibi, for example), or else one may invent by producing a new operational possibility (such as printing or nuclear weaponry, and I am purposely associating these two examples, since the politics of invention is always at one and the same time a politics of culture and a politics of war). Invention as *production* in both cases—and I leave to the term “production” a certain indeterminacy for the moment. *Fabula* or *fictio*, on the one hand, and, on the other*, tekhné, epistemê, istoria, methodos*, that is, art or know-how, knowledge and research, information, procedure, and ко forth.[[334]](#footnote-335)

In ‘Psyche: Invention of the Other,’ Derrida relates a genealogical history of invention equipoised between two conceptions of it as fictionalised invention and invention as machine. These, for Derrida, “are the only two possible, and rigorously specific, registers of all invention today.”[[335]](#footnote-336) Using this framework sheds lights on the playful use of fiction and technology in Whitehead’s elision of the underground railroad as a fictional construction and its concrete manifestation as a technical apparatus.

Invention, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “The action of coming upon or finding; the action of finding out; discovery (whether accidental, or the result of search and effort)” points to a division between the phenomenon of ‘happening upon’ a discovery and putting in the requisite creative labour required to produce it.[[336]](#footnote-337) Derrida makes much of the ambiguity that lies in the word “find.” “To find,” he writes, “is to invent when the experience of finding takes place for the first time. An event without precedent whose novelty may be either that of the (invented) thing found […], or else the act and not the object of ‘finding; or ‘discovering.’”[[337]](#footnote-338) Invention is a form of finding for the first time, either as an act of chance discovery or an attending to an as yet unobserved object. With this novelty comes a valuable status attribute.

Despite the ambiguity in the meaning of invention, what is critical is the implication that from both perspectives—of object and act—it transpires that “invention does not create an existence or a world as a set of existents, it does not have the theological meaning of a veritable creation of existence *ex nihilo*. It discovers for the first time, it unveils what was already found there, or produces what, as *tekhné*, was not already found there but is still not created, in the strong sense of the word, is only put together, starting with a stock of existing and available elements, in a given configuration.”[[338]](#footnote-339) Derrida means to say that invention does not arise through an absolute inventiveness, a creation out of nothing, but brings to attention what has not been attended to previously or what not been attended to as a particular configuration of elements. Invention arises out of frameworks of attentiveness and receptiveness to latent elements. Derrida develops this reading in relation Francis Ponge’s ‘Fable’ which he describes in terms relevant to the invention of Whitehead’s underground railroad:

[I]t gives rise to an event, tells a fictional story, and produces a machine by introducing a disparity or gap into the customary use of discourse, by upsetting to some extent the mind-set of expectation and reception that it nevertheless needs.[[339]](#footnote-340)

In (re)telling a fiction which gives rises to a machine, Whitehead is referencing the ambiguity which generated the novel in the first instance: Whitehead says in a lecture, “I envisioned, as a kid, an actual subway beneath the Earth.”[[340]](#footnote-341) The introduction of a disparity into the customary use of discourse lies in the gap between a naive understanding of what the Railroad was and the confirmation of this misconception in fictional form. Sunny Stalter-Pace characterises this misconception as a general one that not only Whitehead is guilty of in her review of *Railroad:*

Whitehead’s underground railroad is an uncanny setting: though counterfactual, it reflects a misunderstanding that many readers may have experienced as children—that the underground railroad was a real train. (Near the novel’s publication date, Colson Whitehead retweeted comments by Twitter users who had made that mistake.)[[341]](#footnote-342)

By redoubling this ambiguity, by transcribing into fiction a machine that was already a fiction, *The Underground Railroad*, to paraphrase Derrida, “forms a beginning *and* it speaks of that beginning, and in this double, indivisible movement, it inaugurates. This double movement harbours the singularity and novelty without which there would be no invention.”[[342]](#footnote-343) The deluded understanding of what the Railroad actually was ‘usefully’ inaugurates, invents, and it is useful to the extent that its critical retelling of history emerges out of that historical fallacy. In other words, Whitehead makes use of a delusion.

This double movement is the beginning of a critique as, Stalter-Pace argues, “Whitehead’s literal underground railroad highlights the American fetishization of that form of transit as synonymous with freedom, as well as the tendency to ignore the ways that freedom often came to exist through the work of enslaved people.”[[343]](#footnote-344) Whitehead returns the railroad’s ambiguity back to itself as the opening of a question regarding the legacy of “the potential and peril inherent in African American mobility.”[[344]](#footnote-345)

Moreover, in the context of the framing of the novel through binary themes of the factual and counterfactual, fiction and reality, the useful delusion of the fabulous construction of the railroad affirms the material effectiveness of useful delusions in the face of incommensurable realities. Whitehead’s railroad is thus a hyperstitional fiction, insofar as it complicates the categories of fiction and reality and uses this ambiguity to disclose the real historical force of fictions. The layered fictionality of *Railroad*, with its rupturing, unsettling, undecidable meaning,points to the uses of delusions and the productive capacities of fiction. What fictions can create by way of utopias and “emblematic mobilities” and other such means of evading systems of capture and control explains its close relation to the notion of fugitivity and fugitive meaning. After all,

Fugitivity has come to be an important concept in contemporary critical theory, associating the movement of escaped slaves and maroons with the waywardness and utopianism of contemporary black writers and thinkers. *The Underground Railroad* prompts theorists of mobility to reflect upon the forms of fugitivity, past and present.[[345]](#footnote-346)

Through an elaboration of what fugitivity means as an evasive mode of being circumventing the slave regime, on the one hand, and the effectiveness of fugitive meaning as a creative source out of which utopian hope emerges, on the other, this reading of *Railroad* traces these currents in theory. In addition, this reading elaborates how fictional play and fugitive infrastructures contravene the makeup and logic of the limited literary cosmopolitanisms I have explored previously. What follows is an exploration of another fugitive infrastructure, one that contrasts that of *Railroad* in that it attempts to ‘represent’ a community of others in fictional form as opposed to the unavowable community we have so far observed.

## Infinite Jest/Infinite Hotel

The final section in this chapter reads David Foster Wallace’s 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* as a performance of unconditional hospitality in literary form. The question of hospitality, as encountered here and in the literary cosmopolitanisms mentioned thus far, is always one of what to do with the guest, where and how to house them or, in the words of Nolan Gear, “by what ingenuities could we house the whole world’s dispossessed?”[[346]](#footnote-347) “Ingenuities” could also be useful delusions, as in *Railroad,* or styles of imagining communities, or strategies of belonging, as in *IC* and ‘Omelas.’ These are fictions, hyperstitions, which function as models for living and being with others in the world. Whatever the case, the question of hospitality, made urgent by the material and existential needs of the dispossessed, inaugurates explorations of communal practices, competing accounts of citizenship, and structures of accommodation.

Wherever lives are staked together in this way, especially in the proportion of “whole worlds,” the *measure* or *extent* of hospitality emerges as vital criteria for the evaluation of an ethics. The problem made explicit in the question of the proportion of hospitality gestures towards the difficulty of making the ethical decision of who is chosen and who is passed over, given the incommensurability of lives. The task of “seek[ing] and learn[ing] to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then mak[ing] them endure, giv[ing] them space,” is fraught with difficulty as it necessitates the dispossession of others. The enactment of just discrimination is precisely at this cost. Amongst the other competing accounts of citizenship explored thus far, the supposed ‘unconditionality’ of *Jest* argues for a more expansive description of the public sphere and who belongs to it.

Gear’s question develops out of a consideration of David Hilbert’s infinite hotel paradox, a thought experiment explored in a 1924 lecture, which sought to clarify the concept of infinity.[[347]](#footnote-348) Hilbert’s lecture centres on an imaginary Grand Hotel, furnished with an infinite number of rooms and charged with the management of an infinite number of arriving guests, even as all rooms are supposedly ‘fully booked.’ The lecture’s various permutations on the mechanics of countenancing and rendering infinity have since invited significant philosophical interest, as they invite considerations of the precepts of accommodation, responsibility, pragmatism.[[348]](#footnote-349) The ‘infinity’ of Hilbert’s Hotel conveys the limitless itinerary of unconditional hospitality, an itinerary which *Jest* seeks to track and trace through thematic and formal invention. I mean limitless in the sense of existing as a deferred or unattainable ideal, much like an ethics of the impossible.

Hospitality is bound up with the ethics of the impossible insofar as, for Derrida, “the concept of hospitality within Western tradition takes the form of a tension, a contradiction, an antinomy or a double imperative.”[[349]](#footnote-350) As briefly touched on earlier in the section, this contradiction is between, on the one hand, *the* law of unconditional hospitality, always and unerringly welcome to the other as and when they arrive, regardless of the question of their name or identity. On the other hand, there are the various conditional *laws* of hospitality, certain formulae prescribing the proper conditions and practices through which hospitality is to be offered and observed. In Derrida’s discussion of the concept, the responsible performance of hospitality rests in the tricky arbitration between mutually exclusive requirements; in the first place, there is the obligation to offer unconditional hospitality to any and all unspecified persons which then comes up against the regulation of hospitality through contextual frameworks—the political, juridical, and moral conditions of hospitality’s performance.[[350]](#footnote-351) These conditions, which Derrida articulates through the practice of exchanging of names as a means to authenticate whether the one who arrives is deserving of hospitality or not, limit the horizons of possibility of hospitality by defining narrow terms. The narrowing of horizons thus perverts the ‘purity’ of unconditional hospitality.

To sustain its status as unconditional, hospitality should not make prescriptions about the proper identity of the guest which, consequently, leaves itself open to the risk of the unwelcome visitor. This is where the undecidable paradox of hospitality essentially lies, insofar as conditional hospitality, in the process of certification that transpires between host and guest, makes hospitality practicable and possible, though at the cost of unconditional welcome of the absolute anonymous other. At the same time, unconditional hospitality, through the refusal of the authenticating procedure, welcomes with an open affection, at the risk of its own undoing by leaving oneself open to the guest who might cause harm.[[351]](#footnote-352) The impossibility of hospitality derives from the undecidability of these contrasting claims of hospitality. According to Derrida, the charge of absolute hospitality and its practicability are inseparable and irresolvable.

The impossible difficulty that characterises the logic governing hospitality appears in the paradox of the Grand Hotel which Gear puts forward as a playful theoretical response to the question “by what ingenuities could we house the whole world’s dispossessed?” Hilbert’s paradox of the Grand Hotel is a thought experiment which co-articulates the problem of actual infinities with the challenge of hospitality.[[352]](#footnote-353) The paradox asks how far the gift of hospitality can go, given certain unthinkable limits. The paradox asks us to undertake an imaginative exercise, to conceive a Grand Hotel formed of an infinite number of rooms, all of which are occupied by guests at any given time, and then to contemplate the mathematical possibility of suffering visitors over and above what the Hotel can plausibly accommodate. Always at capacity, then, on the appearance of a new arrival in the lobby, a problem is presented to the Hotel’s management, now tasked with the accommodation of this new arrival without displacing incumbent guests. The question is as follows: how does the Hotel’s management provide for the need of the new arrival while remaining alive to the responsibility it owes to those already lodged within its rooms?[[353]](#footnote-354) In other words, how to accommodate the one without displacing any the infinite many?

Hilbert’s paradox demonstrates how the Grand Hotel makes possible the accommodation of additional guests beyond its prescribed limit. As a solution, management asks the guest lodged in Room 1 to shift up Room 2, the one in Room 2 move to Room 3, and so on, vacating a space for the new guest while the incumbents remain accommodated. Where a room is *n,* this method of accommodating new guests requires guests to move to room *n+1,* which can be replicated infinitely, as however many guests arrive sets the measure of traversal: were 7 new guests to arrive, then the occupant of Room 3 would have to move into the Room 3 + 7, that is, 10.[[354]](#footnote-355) A hotel with countably infinite rooms is infinitely capacious, so there will always be room for new arrivals, though the problem is also one of coordination: guests must vacate their old rooms and occupy their new rooms simultaneously, as anything other than coordinated movement—uncoordinated movement entails one guest to wait on the movement of the next—would require an infinite amount of time as there are infinite guests.

Having solved the problem of the arrival of a finite number of guests, the stakes are upped for the management at the prospect of an infinite number of new guests waiting outside the grand hotel to be housed. Hilbert’s Grand Hotel suggests that the guest occupying room number *n* needs only to shift to room 2*n,* the room twice the number of their current room, leaving an infinite number of even numbered rooms occupied while an infinite number of odd rooms remains available for new arrivals. What Gear describes as a “miracle of interstitial abundances” paradoxically suggests the following:[[355]](#footnote-356) that the injunction “all rooms are occupied” does not necessarily mean that there is no room left for the ones yet to come.[[356]](#footnote-357) The Grand Hotel puts into effect a hospitality without condition in the face of the logical prohibition of such generosity.

*IJ* is related to the infinite hotel insofar as the novel enunciates the problem of making room for and representing the irreducible life of the other in a formal literary structure as *a problem of proportion and measure*. The counterintuitive, imaginary hotel resolves the problem of actual infinities through mathematical abstraction. *Jest* wrestles with the ethical implications of the housing and representation of countless others, their irreducible forms of consciousness, in literary and ethical dimensions. The question is not only “by what ingenuities do we house the whole world’s dispossessed,” but how do specifically literary ingenuities negotiate the horizons of possibility that circumscribe acts of aesthetic representation?

What follows traces the limits of hospitality as a question of the limits of representation in literary form. The problem *Jest* attempts to confront relates to the foremost insight of Spivak’s work on subalternity: the overfull and various lives, experiences, and forms of consciousness of the subaltern are denied a proper means of expression in elite modes or “official institutional structures of representation,” particularly textualization.[[357]](#footnote-358) Other texts explicitly confront this situation, of course; I introduced this chapter referencing Prerita Sen’s reading of *GR* as a polyphonic archive of subaltern voices always under the threat of erasure, for example. What is of note in *IJ* is the construction of an aesthetic project, a literary genre named ‘radical realism,’ which attempts to *schematise* absolute hospitality*.* As opposed to serving as an archive, *Jest* performs its ethic of hospitality through its fugitive infrastructure, its own model for social relations. Away from the context of the (post)colonial, *Jest* substitutes the subaltern for the “figurant,”[[358]](#footnote-359) one on the margins of society, usually seen but not heard, like the background characters in film and television there to merely give a scene its verisimilitude. The figurant is centred as the subject of the novel’s ‘radical realism,’ a genre focused on a cosmopolitan ethic of representation. *Jest* is concerned, in part, with the representation of figurants through writing and the attendant problems that this literary act presents in terms of reproducing hierarchies of power, like in *IC*, and of the elaboration of political categories of identity, as in ‘Omelas.’ The question of the propriety and impropriety of forms of textualization runs parallel to the prospect of accommodating and representing marginal lives.

Thoughts around these issues are organized around Derrida’s appraisal of writing in the historical and philosophical legacy of Platonism, on the one hand, and *Jest’s* development of the genre of ‘radical realism’ and its formal structure, on the other. Through Derrida’s ‘Plato’s Pharmacy,’ I develop the argument that writing’s critical devaluation in Platonic metaphysics, its castigation as an improper form for inclusion in the ideal polis, develops an association between peripheral forms and marginal lives—fugitives, orphans, ghosts, figurants. Moreover, the twinning of the assessments of the propriety or impropriety of forms of communication with the construction of the ideal state has a bearing on concepts of hospitality and cosmopolitanism. *Jest*, as a text intimately aware of the status and ‘state-making’ capacity of communicative forms presents, through its generic and formal innovations, a particular set of interventions into understandings of hospitality and cosmopolitanism.

‘Radical realism,’ a genre developed by James Incandenza in the novel, takes a marked interest in the life of the other and operates through various techniques of investigation. *Radicalis*, ‘of or having roots,’ is the Latin etymological root for the project of radical realism which similarly goes to the origins, to the essential, of character’s life histories. After Tom LeClair’s critical appraisal of Wallace’s work, the term gained critical currency and came to emblematise the author’s project. Radical realism prospects the depths of a character’s roots motivated by a cosmopolitan ethic, insofar as it carries out this investigation without privileging particular narratives by randomising the subject of its investigations. My claim is that the use of the aleatory as a means to flatten hierarchies is expressive of a critical and democratic cosmopolitanism.

More than this, this section concerns not only *IJ’s* radical theme, but its formal structure—a Sierpinski Gasket, a fractal composed of infinitely recurring triangles—which analogizes characters as self-sufficient beings connected in a structure of infinite recursion. The movement into illimitable depth and incalculable measure, which comes to define the identity of and relation to others, performs a double move, one which gestures towards the contradiction of unconditional hospitality: first there’s *Jest’s* monumental size and scope which analogizes the radical proportions of the social experience and in so doing performs the expansive proportions of its hospitality. There’s also the novel’s self-conscious acknowledgement of the limits of this performative representation. The confrontation with the limits of unconditional hospitality appears as a structural flaw, an accident of the editorial process, which incidentally signals towards the formal imperfections of the novel’s project; severe editorial cuts to the novel resulted in *Jest* resembling a ‘lop-sided Sierpinski Gasket,’ a deformed and imperfect model of social relations. I take the structural flaws that emerge as part of the editorial process as an articulation of the fundamental irrepresentability of an infinite hospitality. What the infinite hotel manages through mathematical abstraction the novel cannot do through aesthetic and symbolic representation. This is another kind of fugitive infrastructure, then, in that the novel is formed by a system of relationality that recognises how the identity of the other always escapes measure and representation.

Analysing the novel’s form as such occasions the reading of *IJ* as an expression of an impossible hospitality; to the extent that it imagines endless room for all its characters (“its boundaries are indefinite and open” like the multitude of Hardt and Negri) without circumscribing a place for an elect few, Wallace’s community of and for figurants puts into practice a more expansive sense of the concept of the hospitality than that of *IC* and ‘Omelas.’ While following the imperative of the unconditional, *Jest* nonetheless discloses its limits through its structural flaws and its appreciation of the limits of representation.

### Responsibility Rests Upon Recognition

*IJ* offers another model of cosmopolitanism in contrast to those previously discussed, one which questions prevailing linguistic structures which organize the recognition and representation of the other. As opposed to the view of language and the symbolic order as conciliatory mechanisms, which enable communication between dialogic partners, *Jest* offers a model of communication that does not so easily reconcile understanding, belonging, and togetherness in its presentation of these as intractable problems.

As stated previously, language mediates the relationship between host and guest, and so a critical attention has to be paid to the formulation of this linguistic relationship given the stakes of hospitality. The discussion of the linguistic address through which the encounter between host and guest is formulated bears the political exigency of the dispossessed other in mind; consequently, the critique of the limits of hospitality in this chapter corresponds to a critique of the narrow, managed inhospitality prevailing at the European border, in its configuration of the refugee as an ‘unlanguaged’ and depoliticized subject. The managed inhospitality that characterises the administrative procedure at the European border sees the other in their appearance as a political category but does not recognize the other ‘radically’ in the originary sense of the word as I take it to be used in *IJ*. Managed inhospitality is expressive of an encounter with the other in which the other is seen through gelded eyes, where seeing ‘radically’ would be a precondition for a more hospitable ethics.

A reference to subalternity is useful to clarify my weaving together of a politics of mobility with the work of representation, though it was explicit at the outset in the related questions of who sings the nation-state and how the body politic moves. Subalternity is as much about speech as it is about mobility and invisibility. Spivak’s deployment of the term in her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ made use of Ranajit Guha’s definition of subalternity as “the space that is cut off from the lines of mobility in a colonized country.”[[359]](#footnote-360) Through a series of expansions, redeployments, decontextualisations, the term has ceased to be as rigorously defined. It remains, however, as a critical description of “a space of differentiation,” where difference manifests through spatial presence, proximity, and relation. The visibility of bodies and the legibility of selves are crucial aspects in this space of differentiation.

As a literary thematic, visibility has been developed in relation to concepts of responsibility and hospitality. Regimes of seeing, hearing, appreciating, being conscious of, etc., in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* analogize visibility and invisibility as descriptors of belonging and citizenship. This is from Ellison’s 1952 novel:

I can hear you say, ‘What a horrible, irresponsible bastard!’ And you're right. I leap to agree with you. I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me? And wait until I reveal how truly irresponsible I am. *Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement.* Take the man whom I almost killed: Who was responsible for that near murder—I? I don't think so, and I refuse it. I won't buy it. You can't give it to me. He bumped me, he insulted me. Shouldn't he, for his own personal safety, have recognized my hysteria, my "danger potential"? He, let us say, was lost in a dream world. *But didn't he control that dream world—which, alas, is only too real!—and didn't he rule me out of it?* And if he had yelled for a policeman, wouldn't I have been taken for the offending one? Yes, yes, yes! Let me agree with you, I was the irresponsible one; for I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society. *Some day that kind of foolishness will cause us tragic trouble.* All dreamers and sleepwalkers must pay the price, and even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all. But I shirked that responsibility; I became too snarled in the incompatible notions that buzzed within my brain. I was a coward . . .

But what did I do to be so blue? Bear with me.[[360]](#footnote-361)

Explicit references to the narrator’s invisibility are made throughout the course of the prologue of *Invisible Man*, where invisibility is an analogy for social contact at the margins as a black American under the tyranny of that nation’s racism.We are told, for instance, that “When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me” (1). To be invisible is to have that citizen status—which recognition confers—denied on the basis of one’s blackness. Todd M. Lieber describes this experience as Ellison’s description of “an existence that society refuses to recognize, an identity for which there is no place in society's definitions of reality, truth and history, and to which, consequently, society is blind.”[[361]](#footnote-362)

The narrator’s invisibility is a precondition for his irresponsibility. Without conferring upon him his reality-status as an actually existing person, by merely recognizing him, society at large disavows him of the conditions sufficient for his participation in the social body. As a consequence of this social disenfranchisement, his culpability for an attempted act of murder against a blond passer-by, who throws insults his way after a collision, looms large—though the possibility of serving justice for this offense against the law draws into question the very justification of the exercise *of* law. In posing this question, Ellison highlights the “importance of mutual recognition and agreement to the ethical authority of American law.”[[362]](#footnote-363) If obligation to and administration of the law rests upon a social contract of a kind, where law is the systematisation of regulative rules through social and governmental institutions, then the mutual recognition of private individuals in the social body legitimates the rule of law, its rights and responsibilities. Without the recognition *by* the social body that confers one’s participation *in* the social body, on what basis does collective justice operate? After all, “Responsibility rests upon [this] recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement.” Ross Posnock understands this axiom as follows:

Because legal and ethical duties are reciprocal, matters of shared perception and consent, the blond stranger’s failure to acknowledge the narrator transform an illegal act into an extralegal act. The narrator’s formula of responsibility, recognition, and agreement encapsulates American jurisprudences thorough grounding in a logic correlating power and liability, rights and duties, agency and responsibility […] [[363]](#footnote-364)

This formula also articulates what is at stake generally in this chapter in the context of juridified dispossession, rights of possession, and modes of belonging. It is relevant to the extent that the other, whom we have seen variously accounted for in the language of jurisprudence and authority as undocumented, *sans-papiers,* illegal, alien, infernal, and now invisible—persists in that condition of dispossession for as long as she is not recognised. The basis of the social contract, which would allow for the equanimity of liability and responsibility, rests on mutual recognition of members in the social construct.

At the outset of this section I outlined a desire to read *Jest* as a performance of unconditional hospitality. Recognition is the mode in which the performance of this hospitality is carried out. *Jest’s* theme of radical realism and its formal structure are responses to the problem of recognition, insofar as they perform the obligation of unconditional hospitality to the whole world’s dispossessed by bearing witness to their lives, while at the same time appreciating the horizons of possibility of the representation of the other. The formal concerns of speech, writing, and the symbolic order are the context in which this contradiction plays out. Consequently, what follows pays close attention to the role that imaginative and communicative forms play in the construction of worlds and regimes of representation, beginning with the Platonic tradition and on through to Wallace’s text.

### Orphans of writing

As well as being directed against the catastrophe that is the solidarity crisis, the critique of a selective and punitive decidedness, which discriminates between the elect and preterite, is one also levelled at a strain of Platonism which, in its expansion in Western metaphysics, has informed imbalanced hierarchy-formations. ‘Western metaphysics’ refers to not only the philosophical tradition of the ‘west’, but includes its everyday, prosaic language and the commonplaces of its thought. For my purposes here, I suggest that the just discrimination which serves as an organizing principle for the body politic, as seen in Calvino and Le Guin’s texts, is consistent with and derives from the general structure of Western thought, insofar as both rely on hierarchies and polarities. Western concepts of statism, sovereignty, and jurisdiction are excrescences of a western metaphysics which prescribes ideal bodies and ideal states through a productive tension between hierarchical oppositions.

The work of Jacques Derrida largely centres on an interrogation of the structuring of Western thought on the basis of such dichotomies; of good and evil; true, false; soul, body; being, nothingness; presence, absence, etc. What Derrida understands as the ethico-theoretical decision of western metaphysics introduced a way of thinking founded upon seemingly fixed and hierarchical oppositions.[[364]](#footnote-365) This is a decision that privileges “univocal meaning” and, to paraphrase Martin Hägglund, “postulates the simple to be before the complex, the pure before the impure […] and so on.”[[365]](#footnote-366) Rather than standing on an equal footing and preserving their independence, these terms are organized into a hierarchy. The western model of thought puts forward a positive term in the relation, which takes priority over the negative term, deemed corrupt, insufficient, lacking, and fugitive. The positive term “takes priority” over the negative term, “in both the temporal and qualitative sense”:[[366]](#footnote-367)

In general, what these hierarchical oppositions do is to privilege unity, identity, immediacy, and temporal and spatial *presentness* over distance, difference, dissimulation, and deferment. In its search for the answer to the question of Being, Western philosophy has indeed always determined Being as *presence*.[[367]](#footnote-368)

Presence, that is, a being “present to itself, to its signified, to the other, the very condition of the theme of presence in general,” communicates a fullness and an organic unity.[[368]](#footnote-369) In being present to itself, it ranks and orders itself up against whatever is exterior to it, acts in a way which comes to self-constitute meaning. Here, we arrive at *logocentrism,* a crucial concept in the development of western metaphysics. According to Derrida, *logocentrism,* from the Greek *logos* for word, speech, reason, defines the faith in the self-presence and the self-presentation of meaning. *Logocentrism* produces a structure of ontological unity out of the instantiation of difference e.g. presence constitutes itself in direct relation to its presupposed inverse: absence.

The hierarchy formation that most concerns us lies in the privileging of speech, which lives in attendance of a speaking subject, over writing which, in this condition of ‘orphanhood’—without an attendant—is deemed by Platonism to be improper for the task of representing the experience of the living. How Platonism deals with writing is to critically devalue it, to cast it beyond the walls of the ideal republic, based on this supposed impropriety. Consequently, the body politic, as a spatial metaphor through which certain norms of the ideal citizen and polis are produced, relies on a model of health which walls up healthy, speaking subjects within, and casts the infirm subjects of writing without. The Platonic model is formed on the basis of a just discrimination similar in nature to that announced in *IC:* “seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.” The infernal other in this case is writing and the noble being is speech; the former is cast out on the basis of its internal deficiency, whereas the latter is given space within the body politic.

The propriety and impropriety of forms of communication—as interpreted in the Platonic model—directly relates to the proper and the improper being, to the public at large, as speech and writing *embody* select values. Language, as constitutive of the morality of a public, as the basis of the formation of the idea of the public itself, has a part to play in the dispossession of those outside of the dominant linguistic majority.

At this point it’s useful to recall Apter’s concern for those “whose claims remain unlanguaged in any tongue” and Derrida’s for those who are “foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated.” In addition, Le Guin’s short story drew attention to an unlanguaged, depoliticized and orphan subject and the narrative itself functioned on the basic of a rhetorical elaboration of an authoritarian state. Finally, *IC* seemed to be caught in a paradox between an affirmation of infinitely generative practices of signification in the work of imagining space and the contradictory impulse towards an authoritative institutionalisation of filters for the governing of the unwanted. The status and uses of language at these varying levels, then, correspond to certain values, prescribe particular norms of citizenship and belonging, and produce specific types of subjects.

Derrida’s interpretation of the orphans of writing, of writing as a state of orphanhood, is allegorized in *Jest.* The affinity between writing and dispossession occasions a form of storytelling concerned with the representation of marginal narratives. In petitioning for the marginal figure, in playing father to ‘figurants,’ in adopting and giving this figure space in a more hospitable model of sociality, one which dispenses with the notion of a community based on a dispossessed outside, *IJ* attempts to perform a hospitality without condition. Derrida’s ‘Plato’s Pharmacy,’ organized around a reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus,* concerns itself with the status of writing, how it sits within these fixed, hierarchical categories of meaning, through which he develops an account of the Platonic *state* of writing. *Infinite Jest* looks to equalize hierarchy formations through formal and thematic inventions which, rather than hierarchize, practice randomization in the selection of subjects of concern and cede authorial control over the process of organizing meaning.

For Derrida, *logocentrism* and *phonocentrism* (the privileging of speech) are also bound up with *phallogocentrism*; the belief in the self-presence of thought and speech is bound up with a masculine ideal. Derrida means that the fundamental principle of how meaning should be ideally constructed in Platonic metaphysics is produced through a privileging of determinate, patronymic, “masculine” *speech*: in Derrida’s reading, Platonism confers value via paternity to this extent: speech thrives under the wing of the living, authorial and authoritative, speaking *father* whereas writing—whose author is of indeterminate and absent origin—does not. The ‘lack’ in writing consists in the lack of a *father*, a paternal authority to vouchsafe and defend *logos*. Writing or, as Derrida puts it, *logography,* the use of lettering, symbolisation or signing to represent language, suffers, in the platonic model, from the absence of a living agent to attend to it; the writer, in fact, “is a *ghost writer* who composes speeches for use by litigants, speeches which he himself does not pronounce, which he does not attend, so to speak, in person, and which produce their effects in his absence”:[[369]](#footnote-370)

Writing, on the other hand, is considered by the logocentric system to be only a representation of speech, a secondary substitute designed for use only when speaking is impossible. Writing is thus a second-rate activity that tries to overcome distance by making use of it: the writer puts his thought on paper, distancing it from himself, transforming it into something that can be read by someone far away, even after the writer's death. This inclusion of death, distance, and difference is thought to be a corruption of the self-presence of meaning, to open meaning up to all forms of adulteration which immediacy would have prevented.[[370]](#footnote-371)

Without the attestation and representation of a living steward, as is the case in an act of spoken speech, “the author of the written speech is already entrenched in the posture of the sophist: the man of non-presence and non-truth.”[[371]](#footnote-372) Paternity, in this schema, refers to a concern with ‘true’ and ‘proper’ essence, a criterion which informs and calls for the discussion of ethics given how the predilection towards such essences systematizes and normalizes what are always, in fact, value-oriented interpretations of what is proper and pure. In his reading, Derrida elaborates on Platonism’s investments in present, living, speech; a privilege which sets it above the written, whose lack of a guardian leaves it vulnerable to the violence of (mis)interpretation. The written allows for difference, ambiguity and unverifiable meaning(s): words cannot reply, cannot rebut and exist as the passive objects of external judgement—a reader who construes meaning *after* the fact.

The investments made in the father, which operates in a chain of signification with ‘capital,’ ‘the good,’ ‘the ideal,’ derives from the self-presentation, observability, and verifiability of speech, as opposed to writing, whose “specificity [is] intimately bound to the absence of a father.”[[372]](#footnote-373) L*ogos* is qualified through a deliberation of whether or not it is demonstrative of embodied, living essence in its spoken or written forms of expression.[[373]](#footnote-374) If *logos* is to remain pure, present, living, it can only do so through the patronage of the father. With the father comes authority and value, the consequence of “a Platonic schema that assigns the origin and power of speech, precisely of *logos*, to the paternal position.”[[374]](#footnote-375)

The difference, undecidability, or disappearance into ‘non-truth’ of writing, for the lack of patronage by a father, places writing into a state of orphanhood. Orphanhood, then, comes to define writing in terms of its hierarchical relation to fathered speech; its status is like that of a stray, infirm son “quite unable to defend itself or unable to attend its own needs.”[[375]](#footnote-376) The familial relationship between fathers and sons is deliberate in ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ as there is an “insistence of a paternal and parricidal vocabulary [in Plato’s *Phaedrus* which] leads Derrida to reflect both on the relations between paternity and language and on the ambiguities entailed by the fact that Plato, a son figure, is writing, from out of the death of Socrates, of Socrates' condemnation of writing as parricide.”[[376]](#footnote-377)

This is an appropriate context to introduce *IJ,* then, since it is to the orphans of language that Wallace wishes to serve as a surrogate father. Wallace engages with this trope of paternity insofar as his one meta-textual appearance in the novel comes in the form of a wraith, a ghost-writer—James Incandenza (also known as ‘Himself’). The wraith is the supernatural appearance of the deceased father of a son, Hal, who lacks the capacity to express his interior thoughts: “Hal himself hasn’t had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny […] in fact he’s far more robotic than John Wayne” (694). Hal is dispossessed of expressivity, his interior emotional life and the patterns of his speech never working in tandem, that is to say, univocally.

Himself—also a film director and optics expert—creates a film so entertaining that, upon watching it, the viewer permanently expires into catatonic bliss and can express no other motivation than to watch it repeatedly, with the intention of reversing Hal’s emotional incapacity. The film’s effect is the reverse of Hal’s condition: in the act of viewing, watchers feel an immeasurably intense, pleasurable, interior experience yet become physically incapacitated, whereas Hal is outwardly an accomplished communicator though he finds it impossible to articulate his interior thoughts and emotions. What we have, then, is a cultural object, the power of which reverses the polarities of subjectivity from expressiveness to inexpressiveness. In enabling subjective expression of an ‘unlanguaged’ figurant, there is an attempt to bring him into the fold of the linguistic majority. The paternal relationship is one of linguistic power, where the father confers expressive communicability to those who are unlanguaged.

Incandenza’s tape is an analogue for the contradiction in the logic of hospitality in literary form in two senses. For one, the disclosure of the interior life of others is presented as morally suspect insofar as it entails a debilitating effect; likewise, forms of literary representation speak on behalf of subjects and deny them the possibility of appearing in their own voices; both point to the problems and possibilities of representation. Secondly, at the level of the meta-textual writing of the novel, the creation of the entertainment signals towards the authorial function in dictating the relationship between subjects and the forms of their representation. Incandenza *finesses* the expression of the emotional life of others through the artificing of optical trickery; likewise, how the figurant speaks is an innovation of elite modes of representation which they themselves do not necessarily have recourse to.

With such an incapacitating secondary effect, “the entertainment” is a flawed and limited thing; regardless, Himself considers this limitation as unavoidable and still necessary: “No! *No! Any* conversation or interchange is better than none at all” (839). Incandenza’s tape presents another undecidable contradiction, insofar as it enables and disables with equal effect. If we take Incandenza’s creative tool for finessing the expressivity of unlanguaged figurants as one related to Wallace’s project, then the extent to which Wallace himself—like Himself—pursues that desire to represent, without reconciling the heavy compromises, articulates an irresolvable contradiction.

### The household of logos

Building on the anthropomorphic personification of speech and writing elaborated in Plato’s text, Derrida gives spatial context to their relation: “Living-beings, father and son, are announced to us and related to each within the household of *logos*.”[[377]](#footnote-378) The conceit gives an account of how speech and writing are to *relate* to *logos* and how *logos,* the ‘ground’ of knowledge, is also the space in which the propriety and impropriety of these modes of expression is deliberated.

In his reading, Derrida argues that *logos* is always indebted to a father in the sense that every premise of knowledge owes its expression, written or spoken, to a paternal author. But in doing away with the father, in inscribing itself in the perpetually deferring form of the written, which lacks the self-presentation of meaning western metaphysics lauds, the orphan son of writing suffers a lowered or peripheral position in a house that privileges those with the patronage of living fathers. Crucially, this invokes the Platonic conception of the proper constitution and character of the ideal *Republic* and the just wo/man, a republic which, due to the predilection towards the univocal in Greek thought, consolidates within the polis’ walls the pure, “well born” organisms of “noble blood” and makes fugitives of the deficient orphans affiliated with writing.[[378]](#footnote-379) The identity of the republic is thus intimately bound up in this act of differentiation and determination.

As was the case with *logos* expressed through speech, it is internal, structural, organic consistency that confirms the republic’s health and propriety, its possession of the qualities of the original “value of appearing beings.”[[379]](#footnote-380) Accordingly, at every level in Greek thought, whether at that of the individual living organism or the state itself, the internal substance of the thing discloses its quality and character. The value of speech, in “appearing” at the behest of a speaker, is demonstrated in this singularity of message and medium, or, if you wish, in the oneness of *logos* and its origin. With logographic forms unity is deferred perpetually, the message always being separate from its “ghost writer” who haunts the text with the trace of his or her absent presence. In this way, speech and writing, in their relative hierarchical positions, operate in a system of equivalence which ties presence to power and privilege and absence to orphanhood and marginalisation.

Thus, the contours of this space of writing correspond to an idealized vision, an order; that is to say, the organization of language follows a principle which manifests itself relationally, spatially, visibly, as an instantiation of difference. The fidelity to *logos*—and all *logos’* associated terms—serves as an organizing principle of Plato’s republic, in that it demarcates the zones and conditions of privilege and power in it. It is to the nature and moral character of writing that Derrida turns in ‘Plato’s Pharmacy,’ arguing that the opposition between the propriety and impropriety of writing is, in fact, analogous to “the opposition between good and evil, for the question of writing opens as a question of morality.”[[380]](#footnote-381) Moreover, in writing, “it is truly *morality* that is at stake, both in the sense of the opposition between good and evil, or good and bad, and in the sense of mores and, public morals and social conventions.”[[381]](#footnote-382)

The examination of proper conduct, the ideal citizen, and the just society is carried out on the basis of the propriety and impropriety of forms of communication. Modes of communication do not merely function as a contextual space of debate, but actually constitute notions of good and bad as such. But, significantly, it is the question of *space* and its distribution that lends itself most relevantly, here, to the discussion of hospitality and citizenship I have been seeking to trace. Through this reading of the Platonic model of writing I have been trying to articulate the following argument: the space of language is a space of differentiation, a space constituted through relations of power, shot through with concepts of good conduct and right and wrong. This understanding of the space of language as a space differentiation facilitates my complementary reading of *IJ*, in its identity with the orphans of writing, with writing itself in a state of orphanhood,as a writing concerning about inclusion and exclusion which tries to envision a more just and equitable republic. Equitable in the sense that any and all hierarchies have been flattened; that is also to say, a space that had been so encircled is now without condition.

Following on from this, it is in terms of the relation between present, live speech and the absent, dead word that I would like to frame the avowedly radical and realist representation of the other in *IJ.* As a general characterisation of the limits of literary and aesthetic forms of communication, I consider how the Platonic model’s identification of writing as a mortifying form reflects back on Wallace’s project. Since writing fails on certain qualitative measures, how useful is it as a proper foundation for the kind of ethics of representation to which *Jest* aspires? Wallace himself says the following:

If some people read my fiction and see it as fundamentally about philosophical ideas, what it probably means is that these are pieces where the characters are not as alive and interesting as I meant them to be.[[382]](#footnote-383)

Wallace’s own criteria for successful writing recall that same Platonic desire for a vital language and vital character, as opposed to modes of representation that mortify their subjects. If writing absents itself from the live and real because of its nature as a sign which is always at a remove from reality, does it then signal the failure and lack of authenticity of realism in literary form, however ‘radically real’ it purports to be?

Working through these issues reveals a presupposed affinity between the marginal character of the written form and what Wallace describes as the ‘figurant’ characters of society, the invisible citizens, the bit-part players and nonpersons. Between the hierarchized Platonic model of language and *Jest’s* cosmopolitan model of representation, lie competing accounts of citizenship.

The literary cosmopolitanisms put forward in Calvino and Le Guin’s writings are fictional correlatives of a Platonic metaphysics formulated on the basis of hierarchy formations. Wallace’s formal and thematic ingenuities offer a particular set of interventions into the logic of hospitality the work of these authors articulate. Crucially, to flatten out the hierarchy of inside and out, of election and preterition, of public and private, would be to challenge this Platonism on the grounds of an unconditional hospitality. It is a challenge to this extent: however fine the margin which separates the elect and the preterite may be, however eminently considered the metric applied is, however just the discrimination, the administration of a law which enforces and preserves b/orders makes orphans of our fellow members.

### Radical Realism

An earlycritical appraisal of Wallace’s *IJ* established a much-cited reading of the novel as a work of “radical realism.” For Tom LeClair, the novel’s verisimilitude—this so-called radical realism—consists in its multifariousness, its staging as a representational model for the whole world’s dispossessed, its overfull representation of the interior life of others.[[383]](#footnote-384) “What distinguishes *Infinite Jest*,” writes LeClair, “is Wallace’s passion for the particularities and histories of characters,” a passion communicated through the author’s own appearance as the ‘wraith’:[[384]](#footnote-385)

To a semi-conscious Gately, the wraith explains his desire to give voices to ‘figurants,’ the mute, background characters of most literary fiction. The wraith calls his project ‘radical realism,’ which accurately names Wallace's method, for no matter how story lines wander both major and minor characters dig down and articulate the childhood roots (‘radicalis’) of their personalities. ‘Radical realism’ also corresponds to the kind of fiction Wallace calls for in his interview with Larry McCaffery: ‘“Let's try to countenance and render real aspects of real experiences that have previously been excluded from art.”’ The number of Wallace's characters, the intelligence or sensitivity of some of them, Wallace's dedication to imagining the etiologies of muffled geniuses or fast-talking idiots, and the instructive value of placing these characters in contrasting cultures are some of the factors that necessarily press *Infinite Jest* to its prodigious size.[[385]](#footnote-386)

The wraith, as we observed previously, is a metatextual intervention into the novel, imparting a desire to enable the communication of the interior life of the other. This is an intervention which, in LeClair’s reading, is distinguished by the mark of “radicalism.” Radicalism is a measure of profundity, intensity, variety, depth—qualities of lived experience which the genre of radical realism seeks to “countenance and render.” Radicalism refers to several types of measure, insofar as it recalls *distant* pasts, *deep* origins, *remote* lines of connection, etc. “No matter how far story lines wander,” in the sense of how deep into origins they penetrate or how broad their scope of reference, the novel is oriented around that desire to accommodate without condition.

In the attempt to give a broad measure of all the content that pertains to a character’s background, *Jest* cultivates radical realism as its primary technique of investigation. The “imagining of etiologies” describes the writing of the life of the other as a kind of ethnographic study, where the prospection of the depths of a character’s background becomes a faithful expression of the depths of lived experience itself. If only as an allegory for the social experience, this work of imagining etiologies attempts both a quantitative and qualitative representation of the life of the other.

As a response to Nolan Gear’s earlier question, by what literary ingenuities could we house the whole world’s dispossessed, Wallace practices a polyvocal and radical realism as a generic innovation by which the life of the other can be accounted for. The novel’s “prodigious” size is an analogue for the expansive bounds of its cosmopolitanism, where size begins to take on a political value. Moreover, where writing stands for a dispossessed and depoliticized outside in the Platonic body politic, in *Infinite Jest* writing serves as a context out of which an integrative model of sociality arises.

There’s lot to be said about the efficacy and desirability of Wallace’s radical realism. Spivak’s differentiation of forms of representation is useful to a critical inquiry of that kind and I’ll turn in that direction with reference to her work in due course by way of a conclusion. For now, I’ll unpack the concept of radical realism, its relevant critical and cultural origins, and illustrate how it finds formal expression in the novel.

### The system novel

*IJ’s* heteroglossia derives from a fascination with the world’s complexity, which then inspires an elaborate fiction—systematic in design—as a reflexive portrayal of that world.[[386]](#footnote-387) An example of what LeClair defines as “the system novel,” *Infinite Jest* is a fiction conceived as an “information [system], as [a] long-running [program] of data with a collaborative genesis,” a dense fiction offered as a systematic imitation of the world.[[387]](#footnote-388)

The novel’sverbose, polyvocal fiction imitates a historical moment, a cybernetic “information age,” marked by the heightened accumulation of stimuli, data and chatter. Consumer advertisement’s sensory and psychological assault on the subject, the instant gratification of hyper-connected networks of communication, the conspicuous consumption of ‘always-on,’ ‘at-the-touch-of-the-button’ entertainment, illustrate the technological conditions *IJ* operates in:

Like Pynchon and the other systems novelists of the 1970s and 1980s who were influenced by cybernetics, Powers, Vollmann, and Wallace insist on transforming the synecdochic scale of traditional realism, ‘overloading’ their stories to reflect the accessibility and relevance of technical information in the lives of contemporary characters.[[388]](#footnote-389)

In addition to the experience of technological mediation, the historical moment the novel seeks to reflect is characterised by surface-level contact and the insincerity of images; the individual’s relation to the world is an existence lived through a series of distanciations from the real, from the other.[[389]](#footnote-390)

It is this distance that Wallace’s radical realism will attempt to close by attending to the subject radically. The realism of his text lies in its fidelity to its historical moment, to the chaos, complexity and profusion of life as it is experienced in the accelerated, globalized and mediatised culture of the late 20th century. The radicalness, though, lies in its attempt to still say something meaningful about the other, to practice a sincere kind of hospitality through a fiction nonetheless cognizant of the qualifications of its historical moment.

Considering *IJ* in terms of an irreconcilable tension between the historical qualifications placed on sincere expressions and substantive relations and the novel’s attempt to formulate a meaningful response, to still manage somehow to fulfil an ethical responsibility, reveals an affinity with Derrida’s ‘thinking according the aporia.’ In this case, the aporia, as an expression of cultural conditions no longer organized on the basis of over-arching and stabilizing narratives, is reckoned with through writing as a redemptive and affective response. Adam Kelly in his seminal study of sincerity in Wallace’s fiction, elaborates on how Wallace “claimed that while terms like ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’—concepts that have to do, like sincerity, primarily with not being false to others—might be apt for describing the era of Dostoevsky or the European Romantics, these terms had become thorny and problematic for those born in the age of television. For Wallace any return to sincerity must be informed by a study of postmodernist fiction, in order to properly take into account the effects wrought by contemporary media, particularly TV and advertising.”[[390]](#footnote-391) Therefore, thinking according to the cultural problematics of the postmodern is necessary to bring ethics and morality back into critical play.

### Contingency and information capture

Debbora Battaglia and Stephen Burn offer helpful frames of reference for the development of my reading of the novel as pursuant of an ethics of the impossible-aporia. The former suggests that contingency and complexity are indispensable to any anthropological study as those are the prevailing conditions of lived experience. I argue, then, that a literary cosmopolitanism such as *Jest* conditioned by that sense of contingency and complexity reflects a specific and appropriate conception of social life. Burn, in contrast, reads the novel as an attempt to capture and collect the flow of information and experiential units of data that Battaglia regards as fundamentally ungraspable. *IJ* attempts to textualize in its maximalist form experiential phenomena which do not readily translate into the fixed form of the novel and the authorial construct. This contradiction in the desire to represent subjects and their fundamental irrepresentability reflects the antinomy of hospitality I flagged at the outset.

In anthropological terms, Battaglia defines the incidental quality of life as an expression of “historical and social contingency.”[[391]](#footnote-392) This refers to “the particularity of people’s experiences as they manifest in the unique temporal and spatial contexts that shape subjectivities and “identities,’” a quality only intensified by the technological developments of the period in question. At bottom, contingency is shown to be the essential condition of reality and how it is experienced.[[392]](#footnote-393) The real, particularly the social real, that is described is one that regards the intricacy, involvedness, and general anatomy of reality as without derivation, for it comes large and without any means of easy catalogue or comprehension. The “self,” she says, is “a representational economy: a reification continually defeated by mutable entanglements with other subjects’ histories, experiences, self-presentations.”[[393]](#footnote-394) Wallace attempts to parse the woven skein of deeply entangled relations redolent of lived experience into the form of the novel. In doing so, Wallace looks to illustrate the self as a representational economy, intricately wrought, yet diffuse and osmotic. The novel displays characters as bound up in a set of particularised relations that are, in any event, mutable and fluid.

Battaglia’s model of the self as representational economy implies that relations are never experienced in isolation, as they are always part of some transactional exchange with others. Consequently, the self is always in a state of flux owing to its mutable entanglements. The self does not exist in a controlled vacuum, making unsustainable any attempts to essentialize identity. There is significant ethical import in Battaglia’s conception of the contingency of social experience, as indicated by Jessica Marie Falcone:

Deborah [*sic*] Battaglia’s ‘ethics of the open subject’ foregrounds the need to engage ethics without essentializing or disciplining, while remaining open to the ambiguities and multiple valences of the subject(s) of anthropology. Moral engagement and ethical fieldwork are lofty ideals worth pursuing—they represent horizons we ought to continue striving towards, and yet we must never delude ourselves into believing that we have finally arrived.[[394]](#footnote-395)

The possibility of doing justice to the representation of the life of the other is always deferred owing to the difficulty of capturing identity, despite the desire to engage with the other on some ethical level. As with the contradiction of hospitality, where the unconditional obligation to provide hospitality comes up against its contextual limitations, the desire to get to the heart of the other works against the other’s fundamental irrepresentability.

Owing to the contingency that characterises the self and the experience of the social, Battaglia’s model suggests that the proper ethical relationship to the other is always deferred. *IJ* offers a contrasting viewpoint, insofar as it attempts to “transform the synecdochic scale of traditional realism”; however much meaning and identity might escape representation, *Infinite Jest* attempts to imitate and anatomize reality’s shape in and through literary form. The novel’s radical realism, according to Stephen Burn, follows in a tradition of encyclopaedic novels that try to repeat and represent the information-rich flows of data that characterize modernity.[[395]](#footnote-396) Texts of this tradition (James Joyce’s *Ulysses,* Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow,* Don Delillo’s *Underworld*) actually serve as “vast cultural data banks created in the face of the planet’s ruin.”[[396]](#footnote-397) Like LeClair before him, who noted an increased volume of data as a result of developed technological capacities, Burn elaborates on how *Infinite Jest “*complicates its appeal by deliberately making demands on the reader with its vast size, encyclopaedic knowledge, and elusive plot.”[[397]](#footnote-398)

Wallace’s contribution to the encyclopaedic tradition, his radical realism, functions in much the same way: the dense cataloguing of experience, drawing extensively on niche and technical knowledges, conserving narratives by refusing to deprive the one of its equal status in the novel when squared up next to another, etc.[[398]](#footnote-399) By its very nature, *IJ’s* microcosmic relation to the ‘real’ world serves a conservational, redemptive end, insofar as the novel attempts to recuperate a mediatized and spectatorial culture, one without density and mediated intensely through images.[[399]](#footnote-400)

### Figurants

In addition to LeClair’s understanding of the term as a characterisation of Wallace’s project, radical realism refers to a niche aesthetic film genre of James Incandenza’s. The auteur’s system of chronicling lived experience with a focus on ‘found’ or incidental material runs parallel to LeClair’s interpretation encountered earlier; that radical realism is about the accommodation and exposition of marginal lives and peripheral stories. My previous references to Battaglia and Burn are key to understanding Incandenza’s filmography, as his radically realist oeuvre is largely motivated by this intention to *capture* the *incidental* quality of everyday experience. Moreover, radical realism’s ethic of hospitality works through a directed form of attention to marginal subjects, drawing attention to those who had been heretofore neglected because of a cultural tendency to focus on an elect few.[[400]](#footnote-401) The effect of this is the flattening or equalization of hierarchies of attention.

James Incandenza creative output abides by radical realism’s principle of a directed form of attention: as a way to compose a new film script, for example, a dart thrown at a telephone directory tacked on to a wall then points to a name “and whatever happens to the protagonist with the name you hit with the dart like the next hour and a half is the Drama” (1027-8). The randomness of the construction of the plot signifies a withdrawal of private, authorial power in favour of a free and democratic method of composing a story—a method which recalls the innovation of the aleatory in post-war American art practice.

In 1951, the first English translation of the Book of Changes, the *I Ching*, emerged into the cultural landscape of the United States. Several practitioners, including Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Philip K. Dick incorporated the aleatory mechanism offered in the *I Ching* into their creative processes. The principle joy that the radical contingency of the *I Ching* gave these practitioners is an insight beyond the particular. For Cunningham,

It’s the element of chance bringing up something my own experience might not produce. Even though I have made the movements that will be utilized in the dance, I use chance operations to devise the continuity so that what comes after what can be a new experience.[[401]](#footnote-402)

In terms of the devising of choreography, then, the oracular, chance-based methodology offered improbable options for movement, the re-interpretation of what served as the privileged locus of performance on the stage by directing attention to other loci, and the random placing anatomical positions of bodies. The *I Ching* innovated Cunningham’s choreographic practice by introducing chance into the devising process.

Likewise, for Dick, “the *I Ching* gives advice beyond the particular, advice that transcends the immediate situation. The answers have an universal quality.”[[402]](#footnote-403) To paraphrase Paul Mountfort on the use of the *I Ching* in Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle*, the book of changes, “literally and figuratively, unifies the stylistic and philosophical dimensions of the novel, leaving us with a sophisticated postmodern fiction that explores the boundaries of text and world, their overlappings and multiplicities.”[[403]](#footnote-404) Insofar as Incandenza’s found drama transcends the conventions of focalising subjects, unifying aleatory style with a civic ethic, radical realism follows in a tradition which explores insights beyond the particular. Crucially, Incandenza’s creative project invests in the methodology of chance a democratic value.

The correspondence between the aleatory and democracy is historical with roots in concepts of fair civic governance in Greek city states. In the first flushes of the democratic project, “namely the Athenian democracy, elections worked side by side with random selection (sortition) and direct participation.”[[404]](#footnote-405) Against the centralisation and abuse of power by an elect few, sortition functioned as a political technology to better serve the general public by introducing randomness and transparency as effective means of constantly innovating the democratic process.[[405]](#footnote-406) Found drama works against the concentration of power and prominence in private interests through this democratic anarchy, through the use of randomness as civic technology.

Of another of Himself’s films, *The Joke*, Orin Incandenza remarks:

*The Joke’s* theory was there’s no audience and no director and no stage or set because, The Mad Stork and his cronies argued, in Reality there are none of these things. And the protagonist doesn’t know he’s the protagonist in a ‘Found Drama’ because in Reality nobody thinks they’re in any sort of Drama (1028).

Dispensing with the more artificial rudiments of drama, the realism of *The Joke* derives from its focus on the moviegoer-as-film-subject. The film embodies Incandenza’s “concessions to realism” (834), gestures towards the irreducibility of social experience, and characterizes the director’s Found Drama through its focalization of incidental dramatic material (835). Camera lenses installed at the movie theatre’s front fix their eyes onto the audience’s expectant smiles which, as the “screen’s projection is now revealed, […] drop from the faces of the audience as the audience saw row after row of itself staring back at it with less and less expectant and more and more blank and then puzzled and then eventually pissed-off facial expressions” (398). The focus of Found Drama is that which is not sought by means of conceit and intention, but merely given by force of incident: *The Joke* functions only as long as the last audience member chooses to remain watching themselves in the movie theatre. The audience’s self-reflexive spectation of itself corresponds to a critique of a spectatorial culture which relies on the “unconscious reinforcement of the deep thesis that the most significant quality of truly alive persons is watchableness.”[[406]](#footnote-407) The privileging of certain characteristics of value, at the expense of the unwatchable, is rendered inutile in *The Joke*.

Any narrative coherence is defeated by chance, mutable entanglements thatconstitute the genre of Found Drama, a.k.a., ‘radical realism’, or ‘anti-confluentialism’. These interchangeable terms for Himself’s innovative genre come to define: “An après-garde digital movement, a.k.a. ‘Digital Parallelism’ and ‘Cinema of Chaotic Stasis,’ characterized by a stubborn and possibly intentionally irritating refusal of different narrative lines to merge into any kind of meaningful confluence” (996). The conception of reality in the films, as it is conceived in Incandenza’s artistic vision, is multivalent, provisional, without check or balance as well as being conspicuously public. It achieves this effect through a refusal “to resolve a plurality of narratives into one *conventionally* realistic central storyline (my emphasis)”.[[407]](#footnote-408) By this development—bearing in mind the author’s own identification with the auteur, an identification suggested by LeClair and Burn—Wallace intends for diversity to survive any process of cultural homogenisation, conventionalisation or, indeed, any evisceration of surplus identities or experiences, just as Himself intends in his own realism-oriented artistic practice.

To this extent, *IJ’s* synecdochic representation of the world sees its pages populated with a number of diverse voices, ranging from wheelchair-bound Québécois terrorists, Brandeis University film theorists, members of a union of the ‘improbably deformed,’ and needle-sick Boston junkies amongst others. Wallace undertakes close, intimate, forensic accounts of individual narratives, though the aggregate effect of this writing style, as it turns out, is actually the *collectivising* of experience*,* theorchestration of mixed accents into a choir of diversity.The plotting of the narrative, which weaves and incorporates chance, contingent encounters between characters into a lush tapestry of relations, makes this apparent. “So yo then man what’s *your* story” (17), a tired Cuban orderly asks Hal, having just been admitted to hospital. Because Hal’s answer, his story, is caught up amongst a woven skein of diffuse relations, this question turns out to be an open one with an irreducible answer and, as the novel unfolds, answerable only by reference to a panoply of other(s’) intersecting narratives.

The novel unfolds to us only through a hyper-referential, working-back-through the stories of others. By *IJ*’s end, the plot’s conclusion has already been given and so to connect the lines of plot, a recursive study of the narrative and the characters has to be undertaken.

As the narrative approaches its inconclusive final stages Wallace, in a metafictional remark, observes that it is moving ‘toward what's either a climax or the end of the disk.’ But as the reader who reaches page 981 realizes, the final pages are not really the climax (Wallace has already related the novel's end on page 886), but an invitation to circle back to the beginning of the narrative disk to review the crucial information from the Year of Glad. And Emerson's message is underlined because completing this circle of learning from the novel still leaves the reader's knowledge incomplete. Part of Wallace's aim seems to be to break with self-reference and direct the reader outside of the book, to find what has escaped the encyclopedia,[[408]](#footnote-409)

This circling back is partly an innovation of the novel’s structure—a Sierpinski Gasket: a fractal composed of a series of infinitely recursive, symmetrical, equilateral tringles. The Gasket is built through the iterative process of building triangles within triangles within triangles, and so on:

[The novel is] actually structured like something called a Sierpinski Gasket, which is a very primitive kind of pyramidical fractal, although what was structured as a Sierpinski Gasket was the first- was the draft that I delivered to [my editor] Michael in ‘94, and it went through some I think 'mercy cuts’, so it’s probably kind of a lopsided Sierpinski Gasket now.[[409]](#footnote-410)

Within the whole shape, characters, narratives, are placed together in intimate connection; moreover, in this concatenation, each individual element, which represents a character, their story, effectively touches another through various degrees of separation. However much the fractal subdivides, the minute details of narrative piece together to compose the larger enterprise. Reading this a theory of subjectivity, minor and major voices are always consociated with each other in this way; the novel’s body politic—if we can characterise it as such—is shown to be irreducible to unattached, unaffected, atomized individuals:

[Wallace] structured the story like a Sierpinski Gasket, a geometrical figure that can be subdivided into an infinite number of identical geometrical figures. The shape of the book—following Wallace’s natural cast of mind—was recursive, nested. Big things—*Infinite Jest*, a novel you keep having to reread to understand— find their counterpart in smaller things […][[410]](#footnote-411)

An infinite, inexhaustible depth is contained within the bounds of the gasket as the triangles subdivide in mathematical sequence. At the same time, the patterning of equilateral triangles recurs again and again. In this way, the Sierpinski Gasket possesses the qualities of endless recursion and self-same identity, the indeterminate and the determinate, the countless and the singular, the many and the alone. In the twinning of these binaries is an implicit morphology for Wallace’s conception of TV culture and entertainment:

Television does not afford true espial because television is performance, spectacle, which by definition requires watchers. We're not voyeurs here at all. We're just viewers. We are the Audience, megametrically many, though most often we watch alone: *E Unibus Pluram*.[[411]](#footnote-412)

In light of a culture of rampant individualism, of passive, consuming, viewers, conditioned to turn inwardly upon the self, deprived of the motivation to engage causes beyond the ego, *Infinite Jest’s* gesture towards a collective “formed by multiple, often interlocking cultural contexts” irreducible to a singular metanarrative then appears to be a critique of spectatorial culture. To read *IJ* is to become an active, engaged, and devoted reader who attends to the complex subject. To sanitize experience through the resolution of complexity into order would be to betray the real; rather, “*Infinite Jest* affirms that the perpetual, fundamental tension between order and disorder is precisely where ‘the real’ resides.”[[412]](#footnote-413)

### The world as larger-than-me

Through Himself and his creative output, Wallace gives examples of the radical representation of the real in action. Radical realism is developed as an innovative means of *recognising* the experiences of marginal voices, social stratification, and addiction. Moreover, it emerges as an ethical *responsibility* to the other. We could even say that radical realism is developed in such a way that its constitutive features of recognition and responsibility are actually one and the same thing. This sameness is arguable to the extent that being open and receptive to the stories of others presupposes an ethics; after all—at least in the Derridean understanding of hospitality—being welcoming to the other, being amenable to their story, is a precondition for the proper ethical relation. As Dan Bulley writes:

Our welcoming of the outside into the inside involves also interpreting and constructing the outside as outside, as not belonging (and thus produces the inside as precisely what belongs); thus, how we welcome or choose not to welcome it is the very definition of the ethical relation.[[413]](#footnote-414)

The state of welcoming, a kind of state of receptiveness, a readiness to the approach of the other from the unfamiliar outside, inaugurates acts and gestures of ethical responsibility. As articulated by Ralph Ellison, “responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement.” Recognition is the precondition for entry into a responsibility structure with the other.

The radical affections of *IJ*, which seek to further pluralize and expand our conceptions of the competing accounts of belonging and citizenship, to make reading-subjects more cognizant of those passed over, stake their claim to ethicality on the affective capacities of art. Literary art, for Wallace, is loaded with affective potential: it mines and synthesizes the diverse histories of its characters to present a utopian ideal of the world as larger-than-me, as a spell against the inward-turning and solipsistic contemporary worldview. Wallace elaborates on the dangers of limited affections in his Kenyon College commencement speech, describing the solipsism of the contemporary imaginary as a “natural, hard-wired default setting which is to be deeply and literally self-centred [which sees and interprets] everything through this lens of self.”[[414]](#footnote-415)

Likewise, Miriam Nichols in her work *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* flags “the human need for perceptual, value-laden relationships with earth and sky, plants and animals, fire and water, as well as kin and strangers of its own species.”[[415]](#footnote-416) It is this need that, beyond literary art, characterises the arts and humanities: “What seems to [Nichols] of ongoing significance for the humanities is everyone’s need for affective relations with the world as larger-than-me.”[[416]](#footnote-417) *Infinite Jest’s* realism is radical—to combine Nichols’ sense of radical with Wallace’s—in its affections insofar as it demonstrates the mutuality of social life through the affect of literary art. The novel’s inclusive and expansive model for the social extends compassion and empathy toward society’s neglected through a monumental, redemptive, and transformative art.

In giving voice to “the myriad thespian extras” (835) of television dramas and comedies, the mute, background, “nameless patrons always at tables” (835), Wallace attempts to reflect the largeness of the social world in the form of the novel through a countenancing and rendering of that world and its diverse experiences. *Infinite Jest* desires to mirror the sum total of social reality in the microcosmic text, not in the expectation of a pure likeness, but as testament to the need for more conscientious forms of attention. The artistic project of radical realism, its reproduction of social life in the synecdochic scale of the text, not only seeks to reflect the world but to decisively intervene into its traumas:

If what's always distinguished bad writing—flat characters, a narrative world that's clichéd and not recognizably human, etc.—is also a description of today's world, then bad writing becomes an ingenious mimesis of a bad world. Look man, we'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it.[[417]](#footnote-418)

Wallace’s belief in a redemptive art catalyses the novel’s extrapolation of an ideal situation out of the horror lurking in these “dark times.” Rather than restricting itself to a mere dramatization of exigency, the novel models certain hyperstitional possibilities, looks beyond the endgame of the times. Radical realism is an expression of the novel’s illumination of possibilities of being alive and human in the midst of exigency. I mean to say that the novel’s polyphonous model of social complexity both depicts the world and its overfull and overpowering vastness and yet this vastness corresponds to the idealized proportion of hospitality. *Infinite Jest* projects an ideal situation insofar as the densely orchestrated assemblage of voices, in its dynamic, inclusive variety, seems to posit certain values about the way we ought to recognize and be responsible to others. Constance Elaine Luther shares this view when she writes the following: “Wallace’s radical realism is based at least in part on staggering verbosity designed to overwhelm readers with an emotional reaction of horror and urgency.”[[418]](#footnote-419)

The novel’s polyphony gestures towards Dostoevsky, an important influence for Wallace, whose literature orchestrated a varied cast of voices on its narrative stage. Mikhail Bakhtin makes much of Dostoevsky’s fiction in the development of the concept of polyphony, bringing to focus the perspectival variety organizing the novelist’s work in contrast to typically ‘monological’ constructions oriented around an authorial voice as the singular point of focus. As such, novels like *The Idiot* present characters that are “by the very nature of his creative design, *not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse*.”[[419]](#footnote-420) Polyphony is tied to a cosmopolitan ethic or value, insofar as the text is produced by

*a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels.* What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a *plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world*, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event.[[420]](#footnote-421)

Aside from the similarities in polyphonic narrative construction, Timothy Jacobs recognises in *Infinite Jest* a Dostoevskian inheritance “in terms of plot, themes, stylistics, and in the correspondence between both artists’ unflinching eschatological depiction of debased and despairing human nature toward a redemptive end.”[[421]](#footnote-422) Both authors are said to totalize the end condition of a given dramatic situation—to force the situation to a ‘horrific’ and catastrophic climax—so as to deliberately place subjects into impossible situations. This impossible situation, which the character cannot move past, leaves them in a state of total abjection. Reduced so low, hope then emerges as an absurdity, like the Kierkegaardian ‘leap of faith.’ It is only in this situation of total failure and abjection that hope appears as a necessary innovation against all probable odds.

As indicated by Luther, overwhelming horror in *IJ* is a necessary condition for the waking of the consciousness that Wallace desires. *IJ* refers to the necessity of overwhelming horror for the process of transformation in the experience of addiction recovery. The novel describes this as the state of “bottoming out,” to reach one’s bottom—the point at which “You are, as they say, finished […] You are at a fork in the road the Boston AA calls your *Bottom*, though the term is misleading, because everybody here agrees it’s more like someplace very high and unsupported: you’re on the edge of something tall and leaning way out forward…” (347). At the precipice of self-destruction, where the user develops an intimate awareness of the fact that they can’t go on yet as they were, they go on, moved by an absurd faith in the recovery process: “it turns out this same resigned, miserable, brainwash-and-exploit-me-if-that’s-what-it-takes-type desperation has been the jumping-off place for just about every AA you meet” (349).

The necessity of believing in the fiction of the recovery process against one’s better judgement and in the face of one’s disbelief characterizes the state of spirituality in the wake of postmodernism. I develop this in fuller detail in the chapter ‘Citizens of Nothing: Belief, Hyperstition, and the Supreme Fiction,’ but for now it will suffice to say that the conception of faith in the self-aware secularity of postmodernism is constituted by a plurality of forms and “belief without content, belief in meaninglessness, belief for its own sake.”[[422]](#footnote-423) The blind movement towards faith characterises the itinerary of the ethical relation in *Infinite Jest*.

### Synecdoche, Infinite Jest

*IJ* engages the theme of hospitality as a question of scale; the novel negotiates the tension between the exponential growth of the proportions of its hospitality relative to the horizons of possibility of such performances of inclusive representation. At bottom, there is an affirmation of the possibility of idealized abstractions and a corresponding emergence of their constitutive limitations. *Jest’s* innovation of the genre of radical realism and its formal structure are read together as paradoxical formulations of unconditional hospitality, much like Derrida’s pun and notion of *pas d’hospitalité* which, in the French, combines two senses of *pas* as “no” hospitality and as “step” of hospitality.[[423]](#footnote-424) This pun describes unconditional hospitality as subject to an injunction at the same time as it is made possible through the transgression of that injunction. Derrida means to say that the categorical imperative of the hyperbolic and unconditional hospitality commands “that we transgress all the laws (in the plural) of hospitality.”[[424]](#footnote-425) For the former to succeed, an utter disregard for the qualifying conditions of the latter must be pursued.

This seems to be the case in the literary cosmopolitanisms we’ve encountered thus far. Take, for instance, Whitehead’s Valentine Farm: its useful delusion of sheltering all heedless of their name—where the “step” of hospitality would be equivalent to a threshold past which the fugitive to come will always be able to cross—suggests that such unconditional hospitality entails a disregard for protocols of hospitality. Offering the warmth of one’s hearth to this fugitive may well compromise the safety of all those at the Farm, should the authorities follow in pursuit. Regardless, to enact its useful delusion, the rules regulating the relationship between host and guest and the underlying threat to order must be foregone. The example of Valentine’s Farm falls under the category of *the* law of unconditional hospitality insofar as it is wedded to an absolute and universalistic model, whose proportions are large and uncompromising, but which must transgress certain laws (in the plural) which serve as conditions of that hyperbolic law.

As a contrast to this example, we’ve also encountered plural *laws* in action, “namely, the conditions, the norms, the rights and the duties” regulating hospitality, in Marco Polo’s utopia for some, Le Guin’s ‘Omelas,’ and the European border. In these cases, the just discrimination through which hospitality is offered, regulated, and the happy idyll maintained, inaugurates juridified dispossession—the enactment in law of frameworks of exclusion that pervert the course of the absolute law of hospitality. These cases present “pas” as no hospitality, where hospitality is conditional to certain “limits, powers, rights, and duties.”[[425]](#footnote-426)

The antinomy of hospitality suggests that these paradoxical senses of *pas d’hospitalité* are dependent on each other, insofar as any body politic which rests on the policy of open doors, wants such “limits, powers, rights, and duties” so as to arbitrate between the needs and obligations of hosts and guests:

But even while keeping itself above the laws of hospitality, *the* unconditional law of hospitality needs the laws, it *requires* them. This demand is constitutive. It wouldn't be effectively unconditional, the law, if it didn't *have to become* effective, concrete, determined, if that were not its being as having-to-be. It would risk being abstract, utopian, illusory, and so turning over into its opposite. In order to be what it is, *the* law thus needs the laws, which, however, deny it, or at any rate threaten it, sometimes corrupt or pervert it. And must always be able to do this.[[426]](#footnote-427)

I refer to this antinomy as it characterises what seems to be occurring in *IJ*. The simultaneous affirmation and qualification of the attempt to unconditionally account for figurant lives, their experiences, and forms of consciousness, regardless of how radical the project of realistic depiction might be, resembles the paradox of Derrida’s *pas d’hospitalité.* For one, the text’s formal structure and its theme of radical realism are governed by *the* law of unconditional hospitality. The novel’s formal structuring as a ‘telluric’ synecdoche, to the degree that the monumentality of the text is equal to the excess of relatable worldly experiences, is an attempt to unconditionally represent the world at the scale of the text. In much the same way, *Jest’s* radical realism imagines endless room for figurants and presents the self as a representational economy constituted by always-mutable entanglements with others; the novel’s exponential growth is oriented around an absolute principle of unconditional, chance-based representation. This is to say that the expansive model of unconditional hospitality which organizes the novel is akin to an absolute law.

In spite of that, the scope and proportion of the novel, for all its aspirations to unconditional representation, serve only to illustrate the degree to which the value-oriented project of representing the other is subject to certain limits. These limits would be the conditions which regulate the novel’s absolute law. The novel’s project is limited because the holier-than-thou role of an unbidden spokesman and/or father of the other is so untenable, specifically according to the critique of subalternity, which I explore below. Limited, too, because of the deficiency of any attempt to ‘do justice’ to the inexhaustible variety of the life of the other through literary paraphrase. The Sierpinski Gasket’s infinite recursion and post-edit damage signals towards the mutability of any attempt at systematizing univocal and universal meanings.

*Infinite Jest,* as a synecdochic representation of the world, as an attempt to countenance and render the depths of experience, therefore captures some of the essence of its object and at the same time gestures towards this object’s essential irrepresentability. This is also to say; the novel’s project could be rendered as both “step” and “no.” Its project is conjugated between an absolute law and conditional limits of hospitality.

The pervertibility of *the* law of hospitality is an integral part of hospitality’s realisation:

For this pervertibility is essential, irreducible, necessary too. The perfectibility of laws is at this cost. And therefore their historicity. And vice versa, conditional laws would cease to be laws of hospitality if they were not guided, given inspiration, given aspiration, required, even, by the law of unconditional hospitality.[[427]](#footnote-428)

To realize *the* law of absolute hospitality requires its contextualisation into a concrete situation, its realization in practical terms and, therefore, the perversion of this law. Conversely, particular instances of hospitality are motivated by that originary desire to accommodate the other unconditionally. This structure of pervertibility is, in much the same way, is a critical aspect of the work of representation, according to Spivak, as the attempt to represent the other is always prone to fallibility:

It seems to me that finding the subaltern is not so hard, but actually entering into a responsibility structure with the subaltern, with responses flowing both ways: learning to learn without this quick-fix frenzy of doing good with an implicit assumption of cultural supremacy which is legitimized by unexamined romanticization, that's the hard part.[[428]](#footnote-429)

The work of attending to the subaltern is fraught with imbalances and inequalities of various kinds which condition the success of acts of representation. How one reconciles a desire to attend to the subaltern subject, to “do good,” within the limits of representation recalls the inbuilt structure of pervertibility Derrida signals toward.

I draw an analogy between the paradox of *pas d’hospitalité* and the work of representation on the basis of Spivak’s reading of the two opposing senses of representation, *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*. *Infinite Jest,* as I have read it, is concerned with representation of figurants, of a cosmopolitan model of relating to others, and therefore desires to do the kind of “good” Spivak speaks of. In these varying gestures, the novel conflates—I argue—the contrasting senses of representation which, according to the editors of *The Spivak Reader*, are expressed in the German words *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*:

Treading in your shoes, wearing your shoes, that’s *Vertretung*. Representation in that sense: political representation. *Darstellung*—*Dar*, ‘there,’ same cognate. *Stellen*, is ‘to place,’ so ‘placing there.’ *Representing*: 'proxy' and 'portrait'.... Now, the thing to remember is that in the act of representing politically, you actually represent yourself and your constituency in the portrait sense, as well.[[429]](#footnote-430)

LeClair characterises Wallace’s radically realist representation of figurants as “giving voice to,” that is, as *Darstellung*: “the wraith explains his desire to give voices to ‘figurants,’” writes LeClair. Contrastingly, the formal structure of the novel, the Sierpinski Gasket, as a “portrait” of the social, re-presents in the sense of V*ertretung*. Between these two performances of representation as portrayal and as voicing lies the fundamental tension in ideologies of representation:

As we have observed elsewhere, the danger lies in collapsing the two meanings, mistaking the aesthetic or theatrical sense of representation—as re-staging or portraiture—for an actual being-in-the-other's-shoes. This collapsing leads to the fundamentalist mistake: assuming that always imagined and negotiated constituencies based on unstable identifications have literal referents: ‘the workers,’ ‘the women,’ ‘the word.’ But there is no *Vertretung* without *Darstellung,* without dissimulation; the two terms are locked into complicity with one another.[[430]](#footnote-431)

Acts of representation are conditioned by this complicity between these two definitions. Therefore, the performance of representation of so-called ‘figurants,’ given the instability of the identifications of the subjects of representation, must concede its status as dissimulation, however vital its project is deemed to be. The staging of the expressivity of the other through forms of representation operates in this tension between portrayal and giving voice.

Spivak arrives at this appraisal of the transgressive and productive tension in the performance of representation through the work of the *Subaltern Studies* group. The group, desirous of “doing good” by attending to the subaltern were faced with the problem of how to represent subalternity while being mindful of the gap between representations and the singularity of the experience of the subaltern, who communicates through alternative forms of expression. Spivak works on the assumption that “all the speech acts exchanged in subalternity are only accessible to oral history, or a discursive formation different from the investigation” of those who seek to speak on the behalf of the subaltern—academics, ethnographers, writers, etc.[[431]](#footnote-432) Faced with this situation, Spivak writes, the *Subaltern Studies* group had to consider how “to attend to the subaltern when all the texts that were available were from the other side,” given that the subaltern could not directly speak through “official institutional structures of representation.”[[432]](#footnote-433) In other words, how to “do good” through critical examination of the situation of the subaltern in full acknowledgement of the structural inequalities of the acts of reading, writing, and representation? In Derrida’s conception of hospitality, this might be phrased as follows: how to aspire to the unconditional law of hospitality while still remaining mindful of the conditional laws of hospitality?

Spivak suggests that these terms are irreconcilable and that the act of representation entails the perversion of the laws of representation. The texts that the group produced, like her own, were necessarily “texts from the other side,” texts from the side of power, that fundamentally could not touch on the experience of the subaltern given that theirs was a form of representation which was not that of the subaltern.[[433]](#footnote-434) But this was the only choice available as to *not* involve oneself in the work of representation would posit the alternative: the privileging of “the unexamined mode of catching living subalterns for the international book trade.”[[434]](#footnote-435) To not involve oneself in the work of representation would leave the critical labour unfulfilled; the work of attending to the subaltern would be paralysed in the face of the injunction to critical thinking and representation:

And, so, nobody would do anything. And therefore, the alternative of *not* attending to the subaltern past with all of its difficulties would be not to attend to it at all. So, to an extent, yes, it is necessary to learn how to attend. And you make mistakes. Big deal. One is making mistakes all the time.[[435]](#footnote-436)

“Subaltern insurgency,” as she calls this illicit work, is conditioned by the pervertibility of the laws of representation in that involving oneself in the work of representation involves making the fundamental mistake of working from “the other side.” I do not wish to make a direct comparison between subalternity and the work of representation that *Jest* engages in: the social, historical, political stakes of the former are distinct and contextually incompatible with those of Wallace’s novel. Rather, I’m interested in how the trajectory of the subaltern in Spivak’s work, as she recounts it, moves beyond the question of the stability of subaltern identities, moves beyond the question of the *propriety* of representation, in a way that is useful to the understanding of Wallace’s relationship to the figurant:

My project has become more not to study the subaltern—always in the sense of ‘cut of from lines of social mobility’—but to learn […] from them in order to be able to devise a philosophy of education that will develop what […] for want of a better phrase I will call the habits of democratic behaviour, or rituals of democratic behaviour, or intuition of the public sphere.[[436]](#footnote-437)

I’d argue that Wallace’s project traces this trajectory insofar as his cast of characters, his polyphony of fully valid voices, does not and cannot dwell on the elaboration of *stable* identities or infallible practices of identification; in fact, *Jest* is making mistakes all the time.[[437]](#footnote-438) The novel works with the qualification that we “countenance each other from either side of some unbridgeable difference” and attempts to think according to that aporia, with the intention of cultivating practices of radical affection. Radical realism elaborates a critical model for the intuition of a hospitable and cosmopolitan body politic.

As Spivak states, “it is necessary to learn how to attend,” especially when the work of attending skirts fundamental principles of ethical responsibility to the other. I reference Spivak in my analysis of *Infinite Jest* as her work on subalternity exposes the trap of the ideology of representation, especially as it manifests in textualizations of marginal voices. Having said this, any work—including this one—that claims an insight into the interior life of the other, whether it be through ethnographic study or representative democracy, necessarily negotiates this tension between voicing and portrayal.

### Hyperstitional Movements

In asking “*how* does the body politic move?” there was an inbuilt implication of active movement on the part of mobile populations which, as it turns out was at least partly unwarranted; rather, we’ve encountered a situation where the question ‘how is the body politic *moved*?’ seems more apt. Movement, when permitted or denied on the basis of the just discrimination of who is deserving of the right to mobility or hospitality, turns out to be something that is *conferred* to mobile populations. So how *does* the body politic move, given the juridical, political, moral, limits which regulate movement, given the appearance of mobility as an axis of difference? Well, the body politic moves fugitively for one, through evasive manoeuvres of political and linguistic play which finesse movement beyond the ken and scope of infrastructures of regime. It moves silently, where silence is a doctrine of non-participation in linguistically and politically elaborated structures of differentiation. It moves limitlessly, where the itinerary of an unconditional ethics necessitates an impossible movement, one that traverses the established horizons of possibility of hospitality.

These movements are hyperstitional in the sense that they’re aspirational fictions, like Cowen’s “infrastructures of resistance,” assembled to build “alternative worlds”; notional infrastructures “assembled to do different things, for different people, and according to different systems of value” in defiance of the status quo.[[438]](#footnote-439) The thesis tracks and traces the movement of hyperstition or, fictions becoming real, and these fictions have appeared in the guise of various inventions, ingenuities, strategies of belonging, styles of imagining communities, fugitive infrastructures.

The work of fictions against the grain of the status quo, against reality, is the subject of the following chapter. Whereas ‘How does the body politic move?’ enumerated several hyperstitional possibilities in response to the politics of mobility, this chapter instead elaborates how hyperstitional fictions themselves function. In what way does a fiction become real? Moving away from a consideration of what fiction is to what fiction does, as the concept of hyperstition motivates us to do, directs our analysis to questions of belief, credulity, and the effectiveness of fictions. The chapter begins by referencing the example that drew my attention to the concept of hyperstition: Café Society, a conjectural space arranged with the attention of suspending—if only for a few isolated evenings—the hard realities of American racism by enacting a subjunctive hiatus of racial segregation within the theatre inside its walls. The Café Society is a curious case of the correspondence between fiction and reality, idealism and realism, conceptual maps of meaning and the territory of the real world. The practice of fiction in this place, where alternative hierarchies, ways of doings things, ways of relating to one another, were staged and performed, implied the overlaying of fictions *on top of* reality. As if oriented by the direction of the overlaid map, the proprietors of the club hoped the real-world territory could be differently understood and navigated. In this example, a general formulation for how constructed fictions can be brought to bear on the world comes to light.

Beginning with a consideration of the mechanics of Café Society as a hyperstitional fiction, I move to a discussion of literary fiction in its relation to lived experience, how the former works on the latter, transmitting its effects, eliding the separation between the two. Beyond that, I stake the effectiveness of fiction on the credulity of belief in them; to become an “effective form of culture,” as hyperstition is defined, depends upon belief. This claim draws its evidences from the structures of belief in Wallace’s *Infinite Jest.* The novel plays with the map/territory distinction, exploring the possibilities that emerge out of the confusion of categories, before putting into practice fictions in lived experience. As a complement to Café Society’s affirmation of belief in abeyance of the reality of discrimination, *Jest* considers what it means to affirm belief when the predicates for belief and credulity are unavailable. As another variation on the reciprocal relation between fiction and reality which organises my thesis, this chapter tracks and traces the movement of fictions becoming real; between Café Society and *Infinite Jest* is a mutual reflection on the work of fiction in not only re-describing but reconstructing reality. In affirming this possibility these texts develop fiction as a cultural technology for the production of new futures, discontinuous from reality as it is known.

# ‘Citizens of Nothing’: Belief, Hyperstition, and Fiction

## Café Society’s fiction becoming real

In the basement room of 1-2 Sheridan Square, where Washington Place intersects and merges with West 4th Street, there used to be a small jazz club. It is here at this location in December 1938 that businessman-impresario Barney Josephson sunk $6,000 borrowed from friends and family into a speculative venture: Café Society, a new jazz nightclub set up with the intention of showcasing established and upcoming African-American talent in a setting that effected a progressive policy towards race relations.

Josephson had cultivated a love of the genre from time spent in jazz halls, like the Cotton Club, where he’d enjoyed performances from the likes of Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway.[[439]](#footnote-440) On earlier travels to Europe, he’d also been immersed in non-segregated cultural spaces, alien to both the mandated and conventional forms of separation implemented in the public spaces he’d frequented back home, specifically in the form of political European cabarets, where acts, venue staff, and audiences performed, worked and were entertained in a context that abjured discriminating references to race. Drawing on this free-spirited bohemian tradition, Josephson sought to open “a club where blacks and whites worked together behind the footlights and sat together out front […] There wasn't, so far as I know, a place like it in New York or in the whole country.”[[440]](#footnote-441) Other prominent venues such as the Cotton Club permitted only ‘sanctioned’ black celebrities to be seated at tables, while the rest of the general black population were relegated to the obscurity of back corners and out of view, ‘inoffensive’ areas. Worse still, black people were not permitted entry into clubs further out of Harlem, like at the segregated Kit Kat Club, marking Café Society out as a rarity in the cultural scene of New York.

Café Society’s walls were festooned with commissioned paintings and murals from local Greenwich Village artists ranging from Abe Birnbaum, John Groth, Sam Berman, and Adolph Dehn. Its cultural program was largely run by Josephson’s close collaborator, John Hammond, and featured a “90 percent Negro talent house policy,” including acts such as Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, John Coltrane, Nat King Cole, and Mary Lou Williams, as well as the attendance of several African-American intellectuals.[[441]](#footnote-442) According to writer Gail Lumet Buckley, “Café Society was the favorite night spot of the intellectual black middle class. […] [C]onversation was terrific. Barney Josephson basically considered his nightclub to be a seminar with drinks and entertainment.”[[442]](#footnote-443) A program and audience composed thusly reflected the cultural and intellectual contribution of African-Americans to the nation, specifically as a “decisive element” in the history, development and course of jazz music.[[443]](#footnote-444)

Having participated in the opening of Café Society and made an acquaintance of Hammond and Josephson, Billie Holiday scheduled a run of shows over nine months at the club. The first public performance of Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’ was delivered at New York’s first integrated nightclub located in Greenwich Village the following year as part of these shows. With the help of ghostwriter William Dufty, Holiday recounted the gestation of the song in her biography *Lady Sings the Blues:*

It was during my stint at Café Society that a song was born which became my personal protest—‘Strange Fruit.’ The germ of the song was in a poem written by Lewis Allen. I first met him at Café Society. When he showed me that poem, I dug it right off. It seemed to spell out all the things that had killed Pop.[[444]](#footnote-445)

Already motivated by Barney’s intention for the club to be “one club where there was going to be no segregation, no racial prejudice,” the song displayed a mutually shared and vital commitment to a changed America.[[445]](#footnote-446) Holiday said the following of ‘Strange Fruit’: it “still depresses me every time I sing it, though. It reminds me of how Pop died. But I have to keep singing it, not only because twenty years after Pop died the things that killed him are still happening in the South.”[[446]](#footnote-447) Given the intensity of the song and its subject, Josephson intended the performance and its staging to be a ritualized affair, always delaying it till the end of her set, instructing the white front of house staff to cease waiting tables prior to its performance, and ensuring Holiday’s performance concluded without an encore. The stage would be set in darkness, Holiday’s spot-lit face the only point of light, arresting the gaze to poignant effect. To the extent that these gestures were vectors for the conveyance of certain sympathies or commitments, at the level of the performance and its staging, a critical theory of diversity in public America, invested in inverting hierarchies of power and questioning rights of place, intersected with artistic practice. Holiday, as a key representative of a vibrant African-American cultural scene, found herself in league with a liberal leftist community similarly motivated by a desire to rebel against and realign the course of race relations locally and in public America at large. Her visceral litany against lynching found a home in an orchestrated cultural space also engaged in performative acts aimed against the established racial order.

The space was organised with a view to ‘suspending,’ if only for an evening, the *de facto* and *de jure* segregation at work in public America. The context and target of the Café Society’s project were the ‘separate but equal’ policies regulating public spaces and the wider historical legacy of American slavery that dominated social, political, and economic life. The club sought to challenge the domestication of racism—its naturalization in the familiar settings of work, play, and leisure—and the attendant claims about public space and the distribution of rights within it that implicit and explicit forms of segregation established.

The Café Society Club drew from local experiences—racism as it was experienced ‘on the ground’—in order to undermine the mechanisms that link the unequal distribution of access, prosperity, threat and risk with the environments in which people live. Josephson recounts his motivations as follows: “One thing that bugged me about the Cotton Club was that blacks were limited to the back one-third of the club, behind columns and partitions. It infuriated me that even in their own ghetto they had to take this.”[[447]](#footnote-448) The positioning of African-Americans at the margins of local public spaces spoke to a marginalization in the wider social order. Environmental Justice Studies have shown us that this intertwining of environment and social difference is a function of narrative inscription; a ‘reading into’ the latent symbolic potential present in architectural forms which then goes on to structure a story of lived experience.[[448]](#footnote-449) Doreen Massey dedicates much of her work to the spatial organisation of society which, she writes, “is integral to the production of the social, and not merely its result. It is fully implicated in both history and politics.”[[449]](#footnote-450) For my part, I’m concerned with how, through the experience of local spaces, the *signs* of systematic racism are made legible. On this, Michel de Certeau elaborates on the role of language in the construction of space in his *The Practice of Everyday Life,* writing “space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions.”[[450]](#footnote-451) De Certeau makes reference to the store of possible meanings latent in space out of which the construction of the related terms of ‘place,’ ‘identity,’ ‘culture,’ arise; moreover, he suggests that the construction of space emerges out of the practices or ‘conventions’ of its users. Space, as a fundamental category of social experience, is produced through practices including, but not limited to, linguistic practices.

  Through an inversion of the forms segregationist policies had taken with an open, inclusive, non-hierarchical space of their own, the proprietors, performers, workers, and audiences of the Club created a situation in which the disenfranchisements of the racial order were lifted upon entry into it. As such, the experience of the Café Society Club, framed as it was through these sustained practices, acts of meaning-making, and performative gestures, was in a sense experienced in *the condition of fiction.* Such a statement refers to a situation in which the subjunctive fictions of Café Society Club remained in abeyance of the undeniable fact of segregation: this social evil existed and still continued to function as an abiding cultural force. What is key, nonetheless, was the margin that such a performance left open for change through this imaginative denial of the reality of segregation as the inevitable end of American society.

Away from the legacy of systemic racism, Café Society served as a theatrical stage on which a kind of ‘subjunctive hiatus’ was carried out. This term is borrowed from Chris Goode, theatre director, who speculates: “If any manoeuvre can be taken to make possible a pause in the act of living under capitalism, surely it might be the performance of a subjunctive hiatus.”[[451]](#footnote-452) For Goode, the theatre—broadly or narrowly understood—is just such a space, which Café Society is reminiscent of through its activation of space through subjunctive techniques. Within what Hakim Bey would define as a ‘temporary autonomous zone,’ the members of the Club hoped that the performance of subjunctive illusions would go on to have a material effect *outside* of that zone. On hearing Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” and leaving the confines of Café Society, Josephson wanted audiences “to remember every word of the song or at least to go out thinking about it.”[[452]](#footnote-453) By performing the fiction, reinterpreting and describing a new narrative of openness and inclusion, and forming a conjectural reality around this practice, Café Society’s members hoped a new chapter in race relations could not only be written but lived. Through a new, progressive, fictional discursive frame, a new set of possibilities could be performed with the intention of conjecturing them into being.

What underlies the Café Society’s project is a belief in the possibility of realising utopian potential and radical change through spatial practices pitted against the prescribed account of reality regulating the status quo, practices which were also subjunctive in form. In light of this, the legacy of Café Society is to make relevant the following key questions: what if we were to *rewrite* the spatial narrative of such local spaces; to affirm that alternatives to exigent situations are ‘compossible’ alongside dominant economic, political, and social forces; to employ fictive strategies in the service of environmental justice and socio-political action?  This chapter takes up the practices of fiction signalled by these questions in the context of the literary to better understand their hyperstitional character. The subjunctive mood, a condition which negotiates the limits of the possible and the actual, recalls the movement of hyperstition in that “[t]he hyperstitional object is no mere figment or ‘social construction’ but it is in a very real way ‘conjured’ into being by the approach taken to it.” The staging of the performance of Café Society, as an “element of effective culture that makes itself real,” leads me to consider how the category of the literary and its speculative fictions is implicated in the activity of “worlding.” Donna Haraway applies “world” as a verb, as in “to world,” gesturing to the creative virtualities of fiction, how fiction itself might be nominalized into a verb, as in “to fiction.”[[453]](#footnote-454)

### The Real and the Ideal in Literature

Hyperstition is formed of the movement between fiction and reality, ‘fictions becoming real.’ The literary has always been implicated in questions related to the nodes of this binary, sparking formal and critical interest in the paradox, significance, and synchronicity of the real and ideal. Moreover, this relationship—how the concrete ‘everyday’ corresponds to ideals and universal values—has accompanied ‘the literary’ throughout its emergence as a distinct organisation of language. New Criticist William Kurt Wimsatt Jr. talks of how “a work of literary art is, in some peculiar sense, a very individual thing or a very universal thing or both” in reference to the historical continuity in structures of poetic thought.[[454]](#footnote-455) Wimsatt’s view is an inheritance of Romanticism, out of which interest in the relationship between the concrete and particular emerged, as suggested in Nicholas Halmi’s *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol.* The romantic symbol was a “theoretical construct, the purpose of which […] was not to describe objects but to condition the perception of objects.”[[455]](#footnote-456) Halmi elaborates on the emergence of the distinctive concept of the symbol which “was supposed to be the point of contact between the contingent and the absolute, the finite and the infinite, the sensuous and the supersensuous, the temporal and the eternal, the individual and the universal.”[[456]](#footnote-457)

Mapping this correspondence on to social life, Martha C. Nussbaum in *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* argues that the literary imagination is an essential condition for the realisation of ethics and justice in day-to-day public discourse.[[457]](#footnote-458) Nussbaum elaborates on the “literary imagination as a public imagination,” useful to the development of a public rationality “that will steer judges in their judging, legislators in their legislating, policy makers in measuring the quality of life of people near and far.”[[458]](#footnote-459) By this she suggests the need for an ideal representation of ethics through which a specific ethical encounter with the other can be contemplated. In the history of literature, then, a theoretical construction formed of the relationality between the general and the particular emerges, which is used to intercede in our perception of reality and the experience of the everyday. Nussbaum’s application of this binary opposition confirms what, for Jameson, is an inevitability with regard to “such play of opposites: each of them becomes inevitably invested with political and even metaphysical significance.”[[459]](#footnote-460) Their play, interaction, forms a kind of cognitive mapping integral to how we orient ourselves in the world.

Despite the persistence of a fundamental distinction between the particular and the general, the real and the ideal, it seems what is really sought in this is, in fact, the reconciliation of culture and life. Nussbaum, in particular, attempts to schematize the idealistic and idealizing force of public emotion immanent in novels which maintains a fidelity to the reality of existence—to reconcile the two—so that each may proceed from the other. Devoting a significant proportion of her argument against various delegitimizations of emotional thinking in favour of an austere rationality, Nussbaum instead argues “that none of these reasons suffices to dismiss emotions from public reasoning, and that, properly limited and filtered, they provide an irreplaceable kind of guidance for this reasoning.”[[460]](#footnote-461) Oriented by a kind of reasoning that coordinates the emotional and rational, Nussbaum seeks to elaborate the ways in which “theoretical issues find their embodiment in the represented worlds of literature.”[[461]](#footnote-462) The novel, specifically, “takes as its theme, we might say, the interaction between general human aspirations and particular forms of social life that either enable or impede these aspirations, shaping them powerfully in the process.”[[462]](#footnote-463)

This play back and forth between the general and the concrete is, I claim, built into the very structure of the genre, in its mode of address to its readers. In this way, the novel constructs a paradigm of a style of ethical reasoning that is context specific without being relativistic, in which we get potentially universalizable concrete prescriptions by bringing a general idea of human flourishing to bear on a concrete situation, which we are invited to enter through the imagination.[[463]](#footnote-464)

The sense of reciprocity between the concrete and the universal has a long tradition, extending from Aristotelian mimesis, the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus, Oscar Wilde and Dostoevsky’s theories of art too. Of the latter Ravi Zacharias writes: “Fyodor Dostoevsky predicted that at first art would imitate life then life would imitate art and finally that life would draw the very reason for its existence from art.”[[464]](#footnote-465) Zacharias extrapolates from this the essence of literature’s concern with “the imagination and […] its role in conveying to the mind intimations of reality.”[[465]](#footnote-466)

In engaging this theme, my thesis repeats a familiar, characteristic conception of what literary art does, but attempts to develop an account of fiction in particular as a cultural technology for the production of new futures. However, this should not be understood as a vague and uncharacteristic conception of what fiction can do, for what I find of interest in the works at the heart of this thesis is the fluid hyperstitional movement from the nodes of fiction to the real; moreover, I’m interested in the functional aspect of fiction, of creative virtualities, in not only conveying to the mind intimations of reality but producing reality too. The kind of fictional activity I’m concerned with resembles a Lukácsian realism, then, in that the realisms he perceives in literary fiction seem “to surrender voluntarily their specificity as forms in the transparency of reflection.” The broader context of this critical reading of Lukács by Galin Tihanov reads as follows:

[Lukács concept of Realism] provides the ideal situation in which the writer neither imitates reality (thus avoiding the bogus dilemma “narrate or describe,” as the title of one Lukács key essays has it), nor departs from it. Realistic works of literature remain loyal to the versatility of life without abdicating their essence as works of art. Thus realism is about the reconciliation of culture and life through literary forms, which do not claim any significance of their own, but seem instead to surrender voluntarily their specificity as forms in the transparency of reflection.[[466]](#footnote-467)

Lukács’ notion of realism questions the very consistency of the concept itself in that, in its ideal representation, it articulates itself through forms that do not consistently or neatly fit in either category of the real or ideal; these works “grasp the salient features of their world with a bold and penetrating realism. But they do not see the specific qualities of their own age historically.”[[467]](#footnote-468) This, taken from Lukács’ *The Historical Novel,* gestures towards the critical work’s interest in the relation between a renewed historical consciousness after the French Revolution—a moment where, according to Robert Southey, “Man [had] been born again”—and its articulation through versatile works of historical fiction. The dialectic between the totality of history and the concrete experiences of the everyday, as they are expressed in the form of the novel, emerges in *The Historical Novel* as not only a formal innovation, but a purposeful reconciliation of Marxist polemic and aesthetic form. According to this formal requirement for the historical novel, if it fails to encapsulate everything under the broad category of ‘life,’ the work of fiction is then reduced to a partial thing, one which bears false witness to worldly experience. To return to Tihanov, “Realistic works of literature remain loyal to the versatility of life without abdicating their essence as works of art.” The manifestation of life in literature is conditioned by a sense of responsibility which requires it to be fully representative of life in all its scope, recalling the radical realism we encountered before. Lukács elaborates a genealogy of historical fiction that eviscerates the separation between culture and life, art and politics, fiction and reality, and develops their intersection as the context for a practical, revolutionary art.

The so-called “ideal situation” which emerges out of Lukácsian realism is rooted in a utopian thinking embedded in and substantiated by the real—one which runs parallel to the ‘relational art practice’ of Nicolas Bourriaud: “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”[[468]](#footnote-469) Through this practice, the contextualised, embedded, artist ceases to be an autonomous producer but a facilitator, a catalyst, for/of the social body. Simon Critchley extends the idea of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics when he describes it as “art that is the acting out of a situation in order to see […] if something like collective intelligence might exist.”[[469]](#footnote-470) Critchley seems to mean “acting out” as in the manner of theatrical performance, where the acting out of a situation is the taking place of a variety of performed acts of possibility, inscribed within the present space of the art work. The manner in which art *works* on reality comes in the form of an activity, event, ‘happening,’ equipoised between the particular “private space” of the art work and the whole of human relations and their social context.

This kind of art work, then, is a testing out of the possibilities of art forms, their various possible fictions, with the hope of producing actual, communal, models for being with others, as was the case with Café Society. In this way, Goode, working from his own field of theatre, inscribes the concerns of the place of art in relation to the world in the form of the following question:

If theatre is a special category of a place one in which a certain license pertains that can throw into question the normative construction and condition of our social relations, how then can what is discovered within the bounds of that license be exported into our everyday lives? How can it change us for good, when the very factors that open up that possibility of change belong to the distinctive speciality of theatre’s own operating terms?[[470]](#footnote-471)

Goode’s concern in his *The Forest and the Field* is with the place of theatre and its capacity to effect change on the world. In this passage he articulates his concern with the mechanisms by which the subjunctive ideas that theatre produces, given their specific origins in that place, can have some traction on the ‘real’ world outside. This chapter takes up Goode’s inquiry as one that signals towards what is at stake for literary fiction too. In the context of terminal culture, where capitalism and crisis seamlessly occupy the horizons of the thinkable, how is the radical otherness that inheres in fiction to be introduced into the frame? The over-determining realism that conditions the contemporary suffers no alternative fictions. In this highly regulated space, where rationality serves as reality control, what are the options for rendering porous the barriers that separate the differentiated spaces of fiction and the everyday?

### The need for a new fiction

This thesis is concerned with the disappearance of the future in contemporary terminal culture and how this is bound up with the persistence of crisis and catastrophe. It seeks to interrogate a terminal culture which hypostatises apocalypses over and above creative artistic practices that struggle to articulate for themselves new fictions beyond these eschatological ends. To return again to Goode’s powerful invocation of fiction, “If any manoeuvre can be taken to make possible a pause in the act of living under capitalism, surely it might be the performance of a subjunctive hiatus.”[[471]](#footnote-472) The discovery of such fictions is, according to Alain Badiou, the most pressing issue of our time:

And in fact I believe that the most difficult problem of our time is the problem of a new fiction […] And in fact, when the world is sombre and confused, as it is today, we must sustain our final belief by a symbolic fiction. The problem of young people in poor neighbourhoods or *cités* is the problem of the absence of a fiction. It has nothing to do with a social problem. The problem is the lack of a great fiction as support for a great belief. This, the final belief in generic truths, the final possibility of opposing the generic will to normal desires, this type of possibility and the belief in this sort of possibility, in generic truths, has to be our new fiction. No doubt the difficulty lies in the fact that we must find a great fiction without possessing a proper name for it. […] In the last century, all the great fictional dispositions of the political field had their proper names. For me the problem today is not to renounce fiction – because without great fiction we can have no great belief and no great politics – but probably to have a fiction without a proper name.[[472]](#footnote-473)

Fiction, against the grain of ever-hardening crises of the social, economic, and political, holds in reserve that store of possible meanings out of which will and belief can be mobilised. Without such mobilising fictions, the regulative, determinative tendencies of the status-quo continue their processes unabated. The glaring question that arises to this statement is that of the recently reenergised fascisms, the mobilisation of fictions of return to pre-Lapsarian, ethnocentric, de-gobalised pasts; what Badiou describes as the “generic will to normal desires.” I differentiate the aspirational “new fiction” from these retrograde fictions based on the latter’s origination in the established political paradigm and the conditions of the culture of crisis. I mean to say that these retrograde fictions do not posit a radical discontinuity from terminal culture; in fact, they are its logical outcome—the metastasizations of an ossifying politico-economic order in whose face many, if we recall Berardi’s *The Age of Impotence,* are impotent with rage and find themselves unable to confect a radically discontinuous future.

To recall Gramsci again, “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” Like so, “[t]he insurgencies of our time […] have many local causes—but it is not an accident that demagoguery appears to be rising around the world.”[[473]](#footnote-474) As Gramsci and Pankaj Mishra suggest, the predations and depredations of a culture of crisis prognosticate divisive fictions of their own. The challenge is not to renounce fiction, blaming its collusion with the processes of apocalyptic runaway, but to redouble the desire and search for a “fiction under a new form.”

Nussbaum’s ‘The Literary Imagination’invokes the literary imagination and the act of novel-reading as necessary categories for the development of a public rationality and emotion, as a means to critically engage general, normative commitments within the context of “particular forms of social life.” Badiou extends this view by gesturing to the capacity of fiction itself as a means of cultivating the necessary belief and motivation to develop alternatives to exigent forms of social life. Rather than discount them, Badiou would do well to recognise the centrality of “social problems” in the inhibition of belief in alternative fiction, nonetheless.

Recent theory takes up this concern with “the problem of a new fiction,” a foundational narrative around which a collective belief can be organised, as “the most difficult problem of our time” and as one with apocalyptic consequences.[[474]](#footnote-475) Fredric Jameson’s often quoted maxim that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism,” signals towards the conflation of disaster with capitalism. He proceeds to say the following: “We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.”[[475]](#footnote-476) Disaster and capitalism run parallel to each other in that the world envisioned as the logical corollary of capital resembles the end of the world.[[476]](#footnote-477) The creative work of the cultural and political imaginary, through which political fictions are produced, is critical to the construction of possible-futures. The cognitive deadlock that Jameson refers to, which sees the cultural imaginary hasten visions of apocalypse over the prospect of the end capitalism, implies the failure of imagination and belief rather than actually asserting the absolute unassailability of capitalism.

This cognitive deadlock can be read in the context of contemporary science fiction which, according Srnicek and Williams, “is dominated by a dystopian mindset, more intent on charting the decline of the world that the possibilities for a better one. Utopias, when they are proposed, have to be rigorously justified in instrumental terms, rather than allowed to exist in excess of any calculation.”[[477]](#footnote-478) Against the movement of capitalist modernity towards disaster and our impotence in the face of it, the intention behind this thesis is to explore fiction as a cultural technology for the hyperstitional production of futures. In this direction, this chapter seeks to further investigate this movement from fiction into reality, theory into practice, maps of meaning into worlds; after all, to return to Lukács, “The main task of a critic is—and here Lukács seems surprisingly close to Sartre—the elucidation, the ‘unveiling’ to use the Sartrean term, of the relation between aesthetic form and reality.”[[478]](#footnote-479) What is at stake is the discovery of aesthetic forms and fictions that militate against crisis and apocalypse. Strangely enough, “the word Apocalypse comes from the Greek, and literally means ‘a revelation’ or ‘an unveiling.’ It can be used to describe cataclysmic changes of any sort.”[[479]](#footnote-480) The act of interpretation, the creative construction of meaning, is a rupturing act as it unveils meaning forcefully. Given this, the following chapter references *Infinite Jest* as a text which takes up the concern with fictional constructions of meaning and their relation to life and apocalypse—civilizational and personal—in a way which reveals something crucial about the function of creative virtualities in the mapping of a new world. The world of *Jest* becomes a map of the world in a way which draws out the transactional relationship between reality and the idealizations of thought. In doing so, the novel is faithful to the movement of hyperstition by suggesting, in the words of Žižek, that “beyond the fiction of reality, there is the reality of the fiction.”[[480]](#footnote-481)

## Eschaton

In *IJ,* students of the Enfield Tennis of Academy (ETA) regularly enjoy an apocalyptic role-playing game which makes much of the distinction between map and territory, fiction and world. Through its example I hope to describe several principles relating to the role of fiction in producing a structural effect called reality. At the start of each game of Eschaton, the necessary conditions for play are set: the practitioners of “an atavistic global-nuclear-conflict game” (327) give themselves over to its “logic and axiom and mathematical probity and discipline and verity and *order”* (338)*;* they carefully lay “pieces of tennis gear […] within each Combatant’s territories to mirror and map strategic targets” (323); and “engage in a complete disassociation from the realities of the present” (322). This scene concerns the curious, elegant, complex case of Eschaton: a gamification of not only geopolitical conflict played by ETA students, but also a testing out of Alfred Korzybski’s ‘the map is not the territory’ distinction.[[481]](#footnote-482)

Eschaton ‘tests out’ Korzybski’s distinction in the manner of Bourriaud’s relational art practice by putting forward a scenario in which the distinction is initially upheld, but which then proceeds to consider what happens when the map (of game concepts, gameplay elements etc.) is taken to *truly be* the territory through deliberate map/territory confusion. These aberrations disrupt the consistency of both the simulated fantasy world established by the game and ‘reality’ itself. Mark Bresnan argues that Wallace’s complex treatment of this consistency is intended to “ensure that the boundary between the game and the ‘real world’ remains absolute.”[[482]](#footnote-483) For my part, it seems also that the ease and fluidity with which this gap between the map and the territory is elided actually reveals that the kind of experiences of play dramatized in this passage not only rely upon a kind of fantasy supplementation of reality, but that these two things are inextricable from each other. Rather than confirming the ‘absolute sanctity’ of the boundary, what is presented is a world always-already “shot through with conceptual content.”[[483]](#footnote-484)

Both Korzybski’s distinction and the game of Eschaton elaborate on this relation between concepts and the world. This is in the way they both schematize the kinds of conditions that allow a concept to serve as a referential framework for reality, as a map does for a territory, or as gameplay elements do for a player of a game. *IJ* is replete with maps of this kind, with mapping and the destruction of maps, where map seems to also serve as a symbol for the individual. To ‘eliminate one’s own map’ becomes an ancillary definition of suicide—the annihilation of one’s being; for example, “you can either take up the Luger or blade and eliminate your own personal map” (348). When parsed in these terms, this neologism suggests that the self is figured as a body formed of concepts.

What Eschaton and Korzybski’s distinction have in common is their focus on the mental representation of things through concepts and how our behaviours are oriented through their use. Our facility with words, ideas, symbols, concepts etc. speaks to the innate possibility of manifesting realities and experiences mediated by their force, that is, in the words of Anne Marie Barry, “perception always intercedes between reality and ourselves.”[[484]](#footnote-485) We could even also say that our mental maps orient us in reality. At bottom, what we conceive with our minds has a role in shaping reality or, in the vocabulary of *IJ,* “the world becomes a map of the world” (693). I wish to focus on the ways in which *Jest* understands and explicates this maxim; to speculate whether the novel’s maps of meaning come into material effectiveness in the manner of hyperstitional fictions becoming real. Café Society, I believe, is a performance of the operations of fiction that the Eschaton section of *IJ* interrogates. After that, I would also like to explore the significance of such an emphasis in terms of *Infinite Jest’s* own ideological constellation, especially what it says about the effect fictions may have in the living of one’s life as a therapeutic model. To paraphrase Chris Goode “how then can what is discovered within the bounds of [the license of fiction] be exported into our everyday lives?”

### Mapping Fictions

The word ‘eschaton’ can be defined as the theologically ordained dénouement of all history, which brings to the mind ideas of predestination and the Christian eschatological tradition. John Gray’s *Black Mass: How Religion Led the World into Crisis* is instructive in this regard: “Such was the faith that inspired the first Christians and though the End-Time was re-interpreted by later Christian thinkers as a metaphor for a spiritual change, visions of apocalypse have haunted western life ever since those early beginnings.”[[485]](#footnote-486) The movement toward spiritual salvation or divine retribution orients Christian eschatology’s vision of the future and, more broadly, western culture’s conceptualization of ‘endings.’ Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* elaborates on the crisis of theological meaning, that the coming possibility of divine justice draws anxious attention to how one lives their life relative to the word of god, which Christian eschatology introduces as the occasion for the ‘immanentization’ of apocalypse in the life of each individual:

No longer imminent, the End is immanent. So that it is not merely the remnant of time that has eschatological import; the whole of history, and the progress of the individual life, have it also, as a benefaction from the End, now immanent.[[486]](#footnote-487)

The immanentization of apocalypse in the life of the believer, in the import, interpretation, and meaning of her life in relation to the end is tied, then, to questions of hermeneutics. The question of ‘unveiling,’ which is etymologically related to apocalypse, is intensified even more after the Protestant reformation where the critical importance and difficulty of attaining meaning is left as a question for the individual. One’s relationship to faith, scripture, and the interpretation of eschatology supplants that received from those ‘authorized’ to confer meaning. The development of Christian religious doctrine develops alongside the systematization of hermeneutics in western political and cultural life.

Beyond these broadly Christian eschatological roots, in *IJ* Eschaton entitles a game which fetishizes nuclear catastrophe and holds this possibility up as the logical corollary of global conflict.[[487]](#footnote-488) The game moves through a number of levels of intensification, each relating deepening, critical states of crisis; the movement through these levels signals a general trend towards apocalypse; Eschaton “metastasizes from a controlled set of Spasm Exchanges—SPASEX—to an all-out apocalyptic series of punishing Strikes Against Civilian Populations — SACPOP” (324), “Utter Global Crisis” (336), to “worst-case-&-utterly-decontrolled-Armageddon-type situation[s]” (340). Beyond this game, crisis and disaster penetrates the conceptual world of *Jest,* giving context to the various characters’ attempts to construe meaning in a world always in peril.

Having said this, played without risk as it is in the fantastical imaginations of ETA’s youthful cohort, Eschaton’s nuclear catastrophe clearly only exists notionally. Founded as it on simulation and dissimulation, *IJ’s* version of Eschaton is a turn-based strategy game concerned with the eschatological, with apocalypse via nuclear warfare, with catastrophic finalities born out of the play of “staid, sober, humane and judicious twelve-year-old leaders” (327). Of course, this is a jarring juxtaposition. Understand, Wallace seems to say, that these “responsibilities to nation, globe, rationality, ideology, conscience and history, to both the living and the unborn” (327), as they are conceived in the game, are far and away removed from what is warranted for young minds to know. As such, what we are constantly reminded of, despite the suspension of disbelief we are encouraged to engage in, is that these are merely assumed not actual statesmen manning the nuclear hotlines, playing at killing. What I mean to say is the unreality of the situation is explicitly referenced in order to pull at the seams of the simulation, to expose its conceit and, by extension, the fragility of the conceptual structures which regulate (the perception of) action and behaviour, read reality.

For the kids, Eschaton is a wish fulfilment of a violent desire that sees the adversarial matchups of the ETA students’ day-to-day tennis bouts, “their longstanding personal bones to pick” (340) with one another, given violent fictional representation. Despite this, what is key to note is that this living out of fictions, the bringing about of fantasy through play, is not only indicative of the staging or dramatization of sporting competition; rather more pertinent is how Eschaton comes alive through the staging of the structural effect called reality, an effect enacted through acts of symbolisation and simulation.

The fiction of the game is mapped onto the territory of real tennis courts, real tennis gear etc., but no logical correspondence exists between these material things and the fiction aside from in a facilitatory capacity—the objects act as referents for concepts in the fictional game-world. There is a symbolic attachment between what is pretended, feigned, imaginary, on the one hand, and the actual, grounding apparatus of the game, on the other. The game sees its young participants, “queerly adult, almost Talmudic, from a distance” (327), simulate conflict situations, act on behalf of assumed global actors, and play out these roles and scenarios through actual, physical tennis tricks and tennis apparatus. The actions of the players, the values of the various pieces of tennis equipment they use during a game, the very terrain on which they play, are all determined by a simulated set of rules and circumstances laid out in the game’s mechanics—determined in the sense that they have regulating meaning conferred onto them. For example, “Each of the 400 dead tennis balls in the game’s global arsenal represents a 5-meagton thermonuclear warhead” (422)—to lob the ball with a tennis racket means to launch a warhead etc. The “realities of the present” are given a kind supplementation through fantasy that gives meaning to reality in the same way that any given map is a supplement to a territory.

If we turn our attention to Korzybski’s distinction, we can understand it in the following way: territory is to map what an object is to its referent or, better yet, to the representation of that object. This referent—the abstraction gleaned from the object—is not the actual thing itself. Korzybski writes that “A map *is not* the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a *similar structure* to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness.”[[488]](#footnote-489) Whether it approximates or bears a resemblance to the territory (in structure, content etc.), the map, nonetheless, is not actually the territory. The map is a representation of meaning, a coded depiction, distinct from, but expressive of, the territory; the territory, on the other hand, relates to the actual object, to the thing in itself. Such is the structure of Eschaton, the court, gear, manoeuvres and actual objects of which are encoded with a symbolic and representational meaning through simulation. Eschaton proceeds out of the structural effect of reality produced through fiction in the sense that fictional concepts used in the game operate as thickly descriptive and referential signifiers from which a kind of effective meaning is conferred—a meaning which can be used to make sense of reality. At bottom, Eschaton discloses a system of concepts that produces a meaningful effect we call reality.

### Structured play / Structured Belief

What, then, does it take for those playing the game to actually believe in it? What article of faith must be held on to with firm belief to sustain the simulation of Eschaton? We could maybe consider the following as an answer: without exception, games have their rules—their own language, even. In Eschaton these rules, the necessary conditions for play, refer to the simulated, textual, theoretical, fabric of Eschaton, the immersion into which suggests that to play Eschaton is to be under the control of a fiction.[[489]](#footnote-490) Activities such as map-reading and playing games that depend on this relationship between concepts and reality have in common one constant, unchanging variable: control. This control function is whatever force or agency is at work which sustains the structured play of a game or the representational function of a map. Eschaton resolves these various elements of control, concept, and reality into itself and from it we can derive a partial and instructive knowledge of what our faiths and beliefs in conceptual structures consist of and how these structures intervene in our realties more broadly.

The nature of the game, how the game is played out is—like all games—regulated by a structure; a game, after all, is structured play. An orchestration of the various gameplay elements that compose it through an ordering structure makes the game possible, though it is possible only for whoever accepts and commits to its stipulation. This is to say that there are certain rules by which the game is played; without these, without the acceptance of them, the game collapses. The game is a highly regulated thing to which authority is ceded for the pleasure of play. This happens to such an extent that the mechanical effect of the game is precisely the marshalling of bodies and wills to its order. What we do with our bodies within the set moves to which we are constrained, the limited scope of activities to which we are permitted, both attest to this sense of control.

To exist in the game-state is to constantly give oneself over to this marshalling authority, to be rooted in and directed by it, to be circumscribed in its time and space.[[490]](#footnote-491) We know, for instance, in chess that with the knight in hand we can move only two squares horizontally or vertically and then one more square at a right-angle within a sixty-four square board; this, amongst other rules, sets out the conditions for the game of chess and how we as participants within it are to act.[[491]](#footnote-492) The game-state is *sui generis*, or of its own kind, and we play to achieve a particular set of circumstances under the constraint of established rules which regulate the means by which the game is to be played, “where the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules, and where the sole reason for accepting such limitation is to make possible such activity.”[[492]](#footnote-493) We can put Bernard’s definition of the game more forcefully: to play the game is to, in a sense, impose a limit on oneself. It is, in fact, a self-imposed denial of one’s own autonomy and capacity to facilitate the game and realise what it makes possible. With regards to Eschaton, as Bresnan corroborates, “[t]o Play Eschaton is not challenge its limits but rather to act with as much efficacy as possible.”[[493]](#footnote-494) Whatever pleasure, stimulation, or sense of immersion we may seek to derive from our gameplaying activity owes its success to the rules we wilfully take up, that is also to say, *the autonomy and disinterestedness that we give up.*

Crucially, we do this to ourselves as this is a choice that is made. It seems that this act of self-regulation is also one of self-abnegation: the renunciation of one’s individual will for the sake of a concept or belief, interest, or value. Something is desired or can be derived from the game so we wilfully impose a certain limit on ourselves—in full knowledge that the game’s rules hold up only with the support of our belief in them—in order to achieve it. And this is how we can understand Eschaton. The order of the game is subject to different levels of regulation: it is codified in a rule book, scenarios are calculated via a computerised ‘decision tree,’ it is overseen by a game master who participates within proceedings, and the whole process is adjudicated by Michael Pemulis, a sort of *eminence grise* of Eschaton, based on his high-level skill and experience. Eschaton is subject to different forms of authority and this *de jure* governance over the game depends upon the absolute sanctity of the map. What I mean to say is that in order to sustain the game-state, a suspension of disbelief, which permits real-territory objects to act as analogues for their simulated and symbolic referents, has to be engaged in. “Socks,” we are told, “are either missile installations or antimissile installations or isolated silo-clusters or cruise-capable B2 or SS5 squadrons […] depending on whether they’re boy’s tennis socks or boy’s street-shoe socks or girls’ tennis socks with the little bunny-tail at the heel or girls’ tennis socks w/o the bunny-tail” (323).

Overwrought in its description, the Eschaton section goes into painstaking levels of detail and fact to establish the consistency, depth and feasibility of the map. For the world of Eschaton to be realized, the abstract and fictive facts and details must bear out the modelled simulation of Eschaton. The tennis gear “*maps* what’s real” (338); the gear, nonetheless, does not correspond with the map’s scenario. This is the logo-epistemological machinery of Eschaton, the algorithm that sees the language of the map engineer the knowledge of the territory. We give ourselves over to the game against the grain of what actually lies outside of it or beyond its scope—how things are in the real world outside of the game-state—and in abeyance of the circumstantial and conjectural quality of the game itself. The game-state is a counterfactual approach to reality. Eschaton demands our attention because it is indicative of how fiction or conceptual structures reconstitute and intervene in reality. It does so by articulating their dismantling of orders of reality by supplementing reality with new concepts, new frames of reference, and new belief systems. Effectively, it reimagines the borders of the map of what is possible in reality through fictive strategies.

### The map/territory distinction elided

During one particular game/simulated play of Eschaton, the map-territory distinction escalates into dispute, given the stresses placed on the game’s meta-theoretical model by the precipitation of snow on the territory, which some bring to bear upon the map. J. J. Penn, by citing the possible effect of territory-snow on map-terrain, invites the ire of Michael Pemulis, as he “threat[ens] the game’s whole sense of animating realism (the realism of which depends upon believing the artifice that 13000m2 of composition tennis court represents the whole rectangular projection of the planet earth)” (333). Other stresses come by way of a shot—the nonlethal tennis ball kind, mind—fired by the hand of one Evan Ingersoll, which finds as its target the “butch and suspiciously muscular” (330) Ann Kittenplan—the reality of her embodied form—as opposed to the symbolic landmass she represents. Ingersoll and Penn, whether radical practitioners of dissensus or sore losers rendering uncertain the theoretical groundwork upon which Eschaton depends to serve their own ends, incite an insurrection of knowledge.

What happens when the foundations of the fiction are broken down in this way? Ostensibly, the dramatic action of the scene in which the consistency of the fiction begins to break down can either be read in the condition of either map or territory, that is, in either simulation or reality.[[494]](#footnote-495) “A 10 kiloton tactical-artillery device air-bursts over the Command Center of the Czech 3rd Army in Ostrava” (326) can just as easily and feasibly be read as ‘kid lobs tennis ball across a gear-strewn tennis court.’ At the outset, Wallace deals with these two modes separately and we read the text either in language that befits the simulation or the reality without having them confused. For the initiates of Eschaton, the *logos* of the game is the occasion for their immersion into its fiction; it is this textual fabric upon which the map depends. Casual outside observers of the game are denied these textures and observe the scene stripped of its simulation: “A couple ostensible world leaders run here and there in a rather unstatesmanlike fashion with their open mouths directed at the sky, trying to catch bits of the fall’s first snow” (332). Regular observations of the scene such as this, made from a detached perspective, remind us of the truth of the scene—that these are still children gambolling through a tennis court, not crypto-fascist aggressors on the political world stage.

The snow that falls, so crisp and biting, that the children are so sensible to interrupts the simulation. In fact, “[t]he snow is coming down hard enough to compose an environment” (338), “[t]he snowfall makes everything gauzy and terribly clear at the same time, eliminating all visual background so that the map’s action seems stark and surreal” (341). Snow is a true and palpable object that denudes the scene of its pretensions but, at the same time undermines the fabric of reality. It eliminates the visual—therefore territorial—background so that the map’s *simulated* action seems stark and surreal. When the game breaks down as a result of its now confused set of circumstances, Wallace fluidly shifts between the mapped and the territorial modes of voice:

Kittenplan shakes Chu’s arms loose and darts over [T] and extracts a warhead [M] from SOVWAR’s portable stockpile [M] and shouts out that well OK then [T] if players [M/T] can be targets [M] then in that case: and she fires [M] a real screamer at Ingersoll’s head[T], which Ingersoll barely blocks with his Rossignol and shrieks [T] that Kittenplan can’t launch anything at anything [M] because she’s been vaporized by a 5-megaton contact-burst [M] (339).[[495]](#footnote-496)

What were at first strictly differentiated distinctions of map and territory are in the end destabilized. Destabilized and yet there are no intimations of a collapse: the text still functions after all. The textual instability derives from the breakdown in the dramatic situation, but it does not follow it, by logical necessity, into a collapse of its own. The necessary conditions of the game fail through their exposure to a rupturing of knowledge and yet the simulation, enforced by the persisting language of the simulation, still functions.

Of course, I take the implications of what goes on this scene to be wider and of more significance than mere game-playing and abstraction. The scene pertains to faith and belief, “the mental action, condition, or habit of trusting to or having confidence in a person or thing; trust, dependence, reliance, confidence, faith.”[[496]](#footnote-497) What sustains faith in a concept to such an extent that our activities and our orientation in the world is directed by it? What does the confidence and trust in and fidelity to a concept consist in?

### Counterfactual approaches to reality

The playful make-believe observed in Eschaton—the machinery which makes this activity work—has a fascinating philosophical and literary interest: “What is the relation between our thoughts and the things to which those thoughts are said to be about?”:[[497]](#footnote-498) Simon Critchley invokes this as the central question of philosophy, one which is concerned with the operation of perception and conception in interceding between us, the world, and the objects that constitute it. How “things appear *as* and *like*” recall, too, the general premises of phenomenology, according to R. D. Ackerman, who continues on to assert that “[t]he phenomenological return to things is also a turn to fiction.”[[498]](#footnote-499) Ackerman refers to Husserl’s claim that “If anyone loves a paradox, he can really say . . . that the element which makes up the life of phenomenology ... is fiction.’”[[499]](#footnote-500) The central philosophical interest in the relationship between words and things invokes a phenomenological contradiction regarding the paradoxical operation of fiction in the experience of things through the nominative processes of language; that things appear *as* and *like* likewise *pre*supposes that things are not as or like they are said to seem; the phenomenological reduction that seeks to distinguish the ‘truth’ of the matter uncovers the operation of fictions in the perception of reality. As follows, Ackerman writes, “the problem of belief is the question of appearance and representation.”[[500]](#footnote-501) The process of identifying things in the world entails the classification of them by their truth content—“Each of the 400 dead tennis balls in [Eschaton’s] global arsenal represents a 5-meagton thermonuclear warhead” or it could not. Regardless of the fact, there is a decisive *need* for belief, a need to believe that something is *as* or *like* in order for the game to function. Therefore fiction, the non-true, is a fundamental category in the structure of belief and the ‘seeming’ of reality.

The relationship between fiction and belief thrown into sharp belief by Critchley’s inquiry serves as a point of entry into the varied function of fictions—the non-true woven skeins of concepts of the mind—and how they intervene in our realities. In the case of Café Society, the performance of a subjunctive fiction reconfigured its local space, how the individual was to move in it, how they were to relate to others, as if marshalled by the fiction. Like so, in *Jest*—beyond the example of Eschaton—the concepts and ideas brought to bear upon the world give rise to and make possible *new* worldly experiences. In considering Critchley’s question regarding the relationship of words to things in light of *Infinite Jest*, the conditions for the production of new futures arise, as the kinds of activities made possible through the play of fictions can be catalysed into futures.

If concepts are always ours—of our own making—the question that follows from the affirmation of the effective role of fictions concerns how the maps we formulate for ourselves, which do not directly or veritably correspond to the world, end up determining and directing our experiences within it. Were we to understand the mechanics behind the work of concepts in the formulation of reality, we would go some way to understanding what it would take to put our hyperstitions of the future to use in the world. Moreover, if “hyperstitions of progress form orienting narratives with which to navigate forward,”[[501]](#footnote-502) this inquiry would help us further understand how they communicate their credulity and generate their force.

What is at stake in my mind is the elaboration of a counterargument against the overdetermination of ‘capitalist realism’—an ontology of no possibility, no alternative—oriented by that which is (economically, politically, socially etc.) necessary. Why is it, as many critics and commentators have observed, that Hollywood glories in depictions of catastrophe, invasion, and threat but lacks the resolve to offer scenarios of alternative forms of social organisation, utopias and egalitarian communities? The problem of a new fiction, flagged by Badiou, Sontag, Jameson, Berardi, and others around which foundational belief can be built is related in this way. If the work of cultural imaginary is in a state of cognitive deadlock, unable to produce new foundational fictions, because of the horizons of possibility delimited by capitalist realism and its disaster imaginary, then a new fiction must always be against the grain of the status quo. In order for the conceptual structures that we conceive to work for us, to work in our everyday lives—to be real for us—it would require a counterfactual approach to reality. As a radical departure from capitalist realism, Critchley suggests the need to ‘exist counterfactually,’ to position oneself against that which we are told by capitalism to be necessary.[[502]](#footnote-503) Given that the problem of a new fiction is the central problematic of our time, “the need for *belief*—for an image or idea of totality”—it throws up “forces the issue of fiction and reality.”[[503]](#footnote-504) For David Foster Wallace, the stakes are profoundly human, as he questions what would it take for us to marshal our fictional beliefs against all too real and exigent circumstance reality, as spells against human catastrophe(s)?

## Can I still believe […] if I don’t believe?

Wallace’s essay ‘Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky’ deals implicitly and explicitly with the problem and necessity of belief with reference to the intellectual legacy of the Russian writer. Dostoevsky’s ideological commitment, articulated against the grain of “a repressive government, state censorship, and especially the popularity of post-Enlightenment thought,” stands as an anachronism in a contemporary intellectual context where, according to Wallace, “certain cultural expectations […] severely constrain our own novelists’ ability to be ‘serious.’”[[504]](#footnote-505) For Wallace, modernism’s elevation of aesthetics to the level of ethics and metaphysics inaugurates an association of “‘serious literature’” with an aesthetic distance from real lived life. Moreover, the self-consciousness and ironic detachment governing the orientation of postmodernism to considerations of text, authorship, and meaning cultivate a situation in which seriousness becomes an ‘impossible’ posture to assume. Of contemporary writing, Wallace questions the following:

Frank’s bio prompts us to ask ourselves why we seem to require of our art an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions, so that contemporary writers have to either make jokes of them or else try to work them in under cover of some formal trick like intertextual quotation or incongruous juxtaposition, sticking the really urgent stuff inside asterisks as part of some multivalent defamiliarization-flourish or some such shit.[[505]](#footnote-506)

He plays with the idea of the cynical writer and the various distanciations he makes away from the ‘serious’ by inscribing “the really urgent stuff” in his own text through asterisks, intertextual quotation, and juxtaposition:

\*\* Does this guy Jesus Christ’s life have something to teach me even if I don’t, or can’t, believe he was divine? What am I supposed to make of the claim that someone who was God’s relative, and so could have turned the cross into a planter or something with just a word, still voluntarily let them nail him up there, and died? Even if we suppose he was divine—did he know? Did he know he could have broken the cross with just a word? Did he know in advance that death would just be temporary (because I bet I could climb up there, too, if I knew that an eternity of right-hand bliss lay on the other side of six hours of pain)? But does any of that even really matter? Can I still believe in JC or Mohammed or Whoever even if I don’t believe they were actual relatives of God? Except what would that mean: “believe in”?\*\*[[506]](#footnote-507)

Wallace questions what are the grounds of belief when belief is engaged with in a condition of radical doubt? What does it mean to believe when the caveats of bad faith and reasonable doubt condition how one believes? Wallace’s questioning of the possibility of belief in a state of radical doubt thus invokes the structure of gnostic faith.

Gnostic faith functions through a structure of disavowal reminiscent of the model of belief articulated in Wallace’s literature and thought, insofar as the basic structure of disavowal consists in the preservation of belief in spite of the absence of credulity. Gnostic faith, according to Žižek, “concerns the basic question of “who is responsible for the origin of death”:[[507]](#footnote-508) Designating responsibility for the sum total of human suffering, which the fact of human mortality represents, recalls a Christian conception of justice, one which presents judgement as a ruling meted out by a remote God by Harold Bloom:

If you can accept a God who coexists with death camps, schizophrenia, and AIDS, yet remains all-powerful and somehow benign, then you have faith. […] If you know yourself as having an affinity with the alien, or stranger God, cut off from this world, then you are a Gnostic.[[508]](#footnote-509)

Bloom maintains that belief in God—a Gnostic belief, denuded of false illusions of a divine and judicious moral and ethical order—is held on the basis of a disavowal of the fact of that God’s fundamental disinterestedness in mortal suffering. The condition of Gnostic belief relies on the capacity to hold two opposed ideas, that of an all-powerful, omnibenevolent God alongside his posture of aloof detachment, all at the same time and still retaining fidelity to the theological fiction. Jesus’ cry of “Eli Eli lama sabachthani?” at the cross, which translates as “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” attests to a persistence of enduring and unconditional faith in a God both indifferent to suffering and beyond comprehension. Job’s blind faith is a similar case of devotion to an abstruse God, despite his instruction to commit a cruel, nonsensical, act of sacrifice.

The gnostic structure of belief, which functions in abeyance of material suffering—the fact that God has forsaken us to the mortal coil of existence—is redolent of postmodern secularity, itself conditioned by a ‘contentlessness’ of belief. Blind faith implies a faith without authenticating meaning or reason. Likewise, recent critical work concerned with the contemporary theological imaginary identifies a culture desirous of an authentic spirituality abstracted from formal, institutional structures.[[509]](#footnote-510) As implied in the title of Critchley’s *The Faith of the Faithless*, the contemporary religious imagination, as also conceived by Michael Szalay and Sean McCann, Jannine Jobling, and Amy Hungerford, relies upon a conception of belief in a state of radical incredulity, dislocated from formalized religion, and recontextualized in “religious traditions and sub-traditions, historico-cultural contexts, roots in particular discourses such as feminism, mysticism, biblical Christianity or postcolonialism and the unique perspective of a particular individual.”[[510]](#footnote-511) Rather than doing away with the sacred, sacralization in postmodern secularity is marked by a new diversity of forms, hollowed out of doctrinal religious content. For Hungerford, the idea of the sacred proffered in contemporary self-aware secularity inheres in “belief without content, belief in meaninglessness, belief for its own sake.”[[511]](#footnote-512)

In its inscription in literary form and content, this incredulous faith involves a fascination with the “unlikely promise of ‘magical serendipities,’”[[512]](#footnote-513) according to Szalay and McCann who we encountered in the first chapter. Whereas the general trend towards secularization denudes the modern consciousness of its need of the consolations of an authorized religious architecture of meaning, in favour of a sober, judicious rationalism,[[513]](#footnote-514) post-war literary thought is marked by a “sacralization of the sublimely irrational.”[[514]](#footnote-515) The “magical and anti-authoritarian power” of literary language supplements the fantastical, anti-rationalist bent of this resacralized cultural imaginary. The power of literary language has power only “to [the] degree that it has nothing to say.”[[515]](#footnote-516) Language derives its potency from its evacuation of authoritative meaning; belief sustains itself by focusing on the process of believing rather than the content of the belief itself. Critchley distils this paradox as

the seemingly contradictory idea of the *faith of the faithless* and the *belief of unbelievers*, a faith which does not give up on the idea of truth but transfigures its meaning. […] On the one hand, unbelievers still seem to require an experience of belief; on the other hand, this cannot […] be the idea that belief has to be underpinned by a traditional conception of religion defined by an experience or maybe just a postulate of transcendent fullness. […] This faith of the faithless cannot have for its object anything external to the self or subject, any external, divine command, any transcendent reality.[[516]](#footnote-517)

Having done away with the underpinning elements of institutionalised religion and its transcendental authority, the pressing concern becomes how “we are and have to be authors of [the] authority” precluded by our incredulity in the face of absolutes of the past. Critchley turns towards a conception of “faith […] as a declarative act, as an enactment of the self, as a performative that proclaims itself into existence in a situation of crisis […].”[[517]](#footnote-518) Critchley describes a “lived subjective commitment,” a faith drawn from internal subjective resources. In the absence of external predicates for meaning and faith, the self becomes the foundation for faith. Generally, postmodern spirituality consists in a radical departure from the classic spiritual and theological frameworks, though it nonetheless finds its resacralisation through a negative capability—a faith constructed out of non-normative sources.

### No such thing as atheism

The persistence of believing while belief is itself disavowed is also a concern of Wallace’s. The novelist understands belief in contemporary America through the structure of gnostic disavowal as it communicates the persistence of believing despite the emptying out of the contents of belief:

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it J.C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.[[518]](#footnote-519)

In *This is Water: Some Thoughts: Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life,* Wallace focuses attention on the structure rather than the content of belief. Wallace cycles through several sets of ethical beliefs, clarifying that the differences between these are immaterial, given that what is vital in them is the architecture of belief’s role in organizing one’s experience. We find in Wallace’s work, according to Dreyfus and Kelly,

no hope for salvation by God, nor even any resignation to the loss of this hope. […] He seems to have lost even the memory for the sacred as it was traditionally understood; any notion, that is, of an external source of meaning for the return of which one could legitimately hope or to the loss of which one could properly be resigned.[[519]](#footnote-520)

Dreyfus and Kelly diagnose the withdrawal of the idea of God from Wallace’s field of belief—certainly the sacralised God of Christian orthodoxy, the credence of belief in which is no longer sustainable or desired in the self-aware secularity of the late twentieth century—and suggests that what sustains belief instead is the “will of individuals.”[[520]](#footnote-521) The transcendent dimension of God finds its material instantiation in the thought and action of ordinary people. In restoring the values constitutive of God as such—love, wisdom, benevolence—Wallace follows Feuerbach’s critique of religion to its logical conclusion. *The Essence of Christianity*, written by Feuerbach in 1841,argues that religion abstracts values innate to the human, exteriorizes, then sublates them into the appearance of God. Alienated from its own essential nature, the human shrinks in the shadow of an aggrandized God. Restoration of the values abstracted into the form of god requires an intimate knowledge of “religion as the alienated human essence” and “that theology is a kind of misdescribed anthropology.”[[521]](#footnote-522) Wallace’s fiction, then, in re-describing this anthropology in the language of human potential, returns the *structures* of belief and its potency back to individuals.

God dies and is recast in the form an “indwelling human goodness” (970) in *Infinite Jest*. Towards the novel’s conclusion, we encounter the “sudden and dire spiritual decline,” of a practicing twenty-five-year-old Jesuit, close to being ordained as part of his religious order, who despairs “at the apparent absence of compassion and warmth in God’s supposed selfmimetic and divine creation” (969). His younger brother, Barry Loach, “a spiritually upbeat guy,” “challenges his brother to let him prove somehow […] that the basic human character wasn’t as unempathetic and necrotic as the brother’s present depressed condition was leading him to think.” They settle on a simple challenge; for Barry

to not shower or change clothes for a while and make himself look homeless and disreputable and louse-ridden and clearly in need of basic human charity, and to stand out in front of the Park Street T-station on the edge of the Boston Common, […] and for Barry Loach to hold out his unclean hand and instead of stemming change simply ask passersby to touch him. Just to touch him. Viz. extend some basic human warmth and contact (969).

Being so regularly and soundly denied and physical contact by a public reticent about sharing in an act of compassion with him, “His own spiritually upbeat constitution starts taking blows to the solar plexus” (969). He persists for nine months with the challenge, ending up in a state of material and spiritual destitution till he meets one Mario Incandenza “who is too innocent, and too good, to do anything except reach out and touch Barry—to extend to him the basic human dignity, and personal contact, that all other people have denied him.”[[522]](#footnote-523) For Michael O’Connell, “Mario Incandenza […] represents the possibility of human decency, and thus the existence of God in the world,” who through his simple, unaffected gesture leads Barry “through a convoluted but kind of heartwarming and faith-reaffirming series of circumstances,” a spiritual reaffirmation of a kind.[[523]](#footnote-524)

What’s at stake in believing beyond belief is the use value of believing and how a fabricated belief can be of material use to individuals like Barry and, consequently, the relationship between individuals and the social body at large. The use and value of fictional belief recalls Wallace Stevens’ understanding of the concept of belief in his work; he “suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfilment.”[[524]](#footnote-525) The religious imaginary—religious in the sense of a state of life conditioned by faith—communicated through these brief tours into Wallace’s thought suggests, firstly, that the content of belief is irrelevant in the self-aware secularity of the contemporary. Moreover, the structures and processes of believing supersede the content of beliefs, as *believing* happens regardless of the formal or doctrinal predicates for belief. Out of this Wallace explores the possibility of a manner of believing constituted by invented beliefs. More simply, Wallace is concerned with how to make fictions—that we know to be fictions—practicable.

Wallace contends with the unassailable fact of belief and its ethical implications in the context of postmodern secularity and consumerism, by restating its practical value as a therapeutic model. Wallace’s fiction, according to Turnbull, is the conduit for a critical and directed form of attention, which cultivates a moral discipline, as it “both show[s] us how attention and imagination may be used in ways that are essential for a deeper moral responsiveness and lead us to use our own faculties in this way.”[[525]](#footnote-526) However, the fiction is not prescriptive and didactic in that it tells “us what concrete actions we ought or ought not to be taking”; instead, it directs us to consider “that the way we choose to attend to and see situations is absolutely central to the way we react to the world.[[526]](#footnote-527)

### Citizens of nothing

What follows attempts to draw out the broader implications of the model of belief offered through the ‘final belief’ of Stevens’ supreme fiction in *Infinite Jest,* how this fiction maps onto the tension in contemporary American culture between a disbelieving scepticism, on the one hand, and the necessity of the persistence of belief on the other. To be typically American is to be divided between two competing impulses, as Wallace notes through his own sense of self-division: “I’m a typical American […] Half of me is dying to give myself away, and the other half continually rebelling.”[[527]](#footnote-528) America resembles an arena on which a congenital scepticism comes up against a naivete of belief rooted in a pseudo-secular consumer culture, caught between forms of worship ruinous to individual wellbeing:

America is one big experiment in what happens when you’re a wealthy, privileged culture that’s pretty much lost religion or spirituality as a real informing presence. It’s still a verbal presence—it’s part of the etiquette that our leaders use, but it’s not inside us anymore, which in one way makes us very liberal and moderate and we’re not fanatics and we don’t tend to go around blowing things up. But on the other hand, it’s very difficult to think that the point of life is to double your salary so that you can go to the mall more often. Even when you’re making fun and sneering at it, there’s a real dark emptiness about it.[[528]](#footnote-529)

Whatever the terms Wallace chooses to diagnose contemporary society with, “desperately removed [as it is] from what’s really important: motive, feeling, belief and its absence,” what remains certain is how fidelity to an ideal is compromised by the sceptical ‘suspension of belief’ particular to the postmodern, hyper-capitalist, sensibility.[[529]](#footnote-530) The “real dark emptiness” lurks over the individual when a ‘fulfilling’ belief is lost or, as Timothy Jacobs summarizes Wallace’s argument in his essay on Dostoevsky, “contemporary American culture has lost something important when ‘belief’ is confused with sentimental or fanatical religious belief.”[[530]](#footnote-531) Remy Marathe, a member of the Quebecois separatist group, *Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants,* characterises the American religious imaginary as follows in a sociological debate with Hugh Steeply, government operative and fulsome supporter of ‘American values’:

[Y]our temple is self and sentiment. […] you are a fanatic of desire, a slave to your individual subjective narrow self's sentiments; a citizen of nothing. You become a citizen of nothing. You are by yourself and alone, kneeling to yourself.' […] 'In a case such as this you become the slave who believes he is free. The most pathetic of bondage. Not tragic. No songs. You believe you would die twice for another but in truth would die only for your alone self, its sentiment’ (108).

Marathe rails against that element in American spirituality which lauds the superficial, indulgent forms of belief, especially those deeply affected by the concerns of the individual personality, detached from any sense of commonality or rootedness. The American is a “citizen of nothing,” insofar as he lacks the capacity to develop what Miriam Nichols describes as “radical affections,” a cultivated sense of the ‘world-as-larger-than-me,” through the nurturing of “perceptual, value-laden relationships” with others and objects that is a fundamental component of literature.[[531]](#footnote-532) The givenness to something beyond the limited bounds of the self, at least for those dislocated from communal structures, catalyses experiences of isolation, addiction, loneliness in Wallace’s characters.

Hal Incandenza typifies what happens when a sense of orienting belief is lost, at the point where he loses faith in his lifelong pursuit of tennis. “We sort of play” (68), Hal ruminates with respect to a renewed perspective on the game he’d grown up with and inherited from his father, now that his belief in it has been diminished as a result of a drug-induced anhedonia.“But it’s all hypothetical, somehow,” he continues, “[e]ven the ‘we’ is theory: I never get quite to see the distant opponent, for all the apparatus of the game” (68). Hal is in a state of disbelief. His language is couched in uncertain terms, never quite asserting itself: it renounces faith in any grounded sense of reality. Something *happens*, he submits, but the action, though apparent and measurable, seems abstracted from reality. If indeed a game is being played here, he asks, why does my opponent in this matchup seem so distant? The metatextual apparatus of the game seems to be the cause of this unreality, since the credulity and faith in its structures of meaning, a necessary condition for the realization of the play and enjoyment the game makes possible, is repudiated. Though the game is all bodies and sweat and footfall and hard court surface, it depends upon a certain structure of belief. In his depressed state of mind, the court has become too complex, too obscure to believe in: “The lines that bound and define play are on this court as complex and convolved as a sculpture of string. There are lines going every which way, and they run oblique or meet and form relationships and boxes and rivers and tributaries and systems inside systems” (67). Hal’s descriptions of the game deepen in their use of mathematical abstraction, geometrical textures and arrangements weave themselves into the skein of the bodied game: “lines, corners, alleys, and angles deliquesce into a blur at the horizon of the distant net” (67).

This is the language of mathematical abstraction, by which Hal is left petrified and immobile: “The whole thing is almost too involved to try and take in all at once. It’s simply huge. And it’s public” (67). Complex, radial, and abstract, this theoretical aspect of the game is huge and unforgiving. The conceptual map of its rules and regulations has, in this instance, become boundless and tenebrous while, at the same time, the territory, the composition of the tennis court, is obscured and hard to make out. The game is ostensive, kinetic no longer: it is disembodied and without the possibility of containing it. As Hal’s anhedonia deepens, his capacity to believe in the game’s fiction diminishes further; the maps of meaning which have heretofore organized his belief and enjoyment in the game no longer ‘mean’ in the same way.

### Here but for the grace of God

Wallace’s take on the experience of AA in *Infinite Jest* seems to say that the success of rehabilitation of the individual depends upon unswerving faith in the institution and its working concepts in the absence of any proof. The faithful surrender to the logic and axiom of a fiction, of a map, the kind of faith that Hal loses through a state of anhedonia, is necessary to the functioning of belief. It is also one that also requires a casting out of doubt and solipsistic thinking—one has to look and believe in something outside of the self. In the “binding commonality” of the AA “[you start] to have an almost classic sort of Blind Faith in the older guys, a Blind Faith in them born not of zealotry or even belief but just of a chilled conviction that you have no faith whatsoever left in yourself” (351). What Wallace describes here is a renunciation of the self vis-à-vis an ascetic faith in the institution and its concepts. Faith, he seems to say, consists in faithful surrender, self-abnegation, and a togetherness with others. O’Connell sets the framework of this argument:

*Infinite Jest*, for instance, for all of its verbal virtuosity, does not present itself as religious experience; rather, it depicts a path of submission as the proper relation between the addict and the Higher Power of AA, and not only that, […] this process necessitates a community of faith if it is to be successful. This pattern of surrendering one’s sense of self-interest in favor of something larger than oneself, which can be aligned with the transcendent, recurs throughout *The Pale King* as well.[[532]](#footnote-533)

Recalling the construction of postmodern forms of spirituality on forms outside of the classic frameworks of theology, O’Connell points to the communitarian aspect of AA as an alternative context of and for faith in *IJ.* O’Connell cites Don Gately as a case study of believing beyond belief, given the latter’s initial scepticism at the possibility of AA working for him. Gately regards the seemingly intractable intensity of his Demerol addiction, unresolved traumas, and hardened attitudes towards an unforgiving world as fundamental impediments to believing:

The only times Gately had ever been on his knees before were to throw up or mate, or shunt a low-on-the-wall alarm, or if somebody got lucky during a beef and landed one near Gately's groin. He didn't have any God- or J.C.-background, and the knee-stuff seemed like the limpest kind of dickless pap, and he felt like a true hypocrite just going through the knee-motions that he went through faithfully every A.M. and P.M., without fail, motivated by a desire to get loaded so horrible that he often found himself humbly praying for his head to just finally explode already and get it over with. Pat had said it didn't matter at this point what he thought or believed or even said. All that mattered was what he *did.* If he did the right things, and kept doing them for long enough, what Gately thought and believed would magically change. Even what he said.

Gately struggles with the possibility of the efficacy of a belief which he knows not to be true but that he still has to believe in. The “knee-stuff,” as he describes surrender to a higher power, lacks the force of rationality he assumes it would require for it to result in the kind of effect AA elders enjoin him to believe will occur. Gately’s incredulity at the apparently ‘magical’ properties of this belief system shake the foundations of his understanding of cause and effect, evidence and consilience, as the AA’s superstitions come at the expense of a sober, judicious rationality:

How could some kind of Higher Power he didn’t even believe in magically let him out of the cage [of addiction] when [he] had been a total hypocrite in even asking something he didn’t believe in to let him out of a cage he had like zero hope of ever being let out of? (468)

The way that a reaction is seemingly conjured out of arbitrary and meaningless belief leaves Gately feeling “like a rat that's learned one route in the maze to the cheese and travels that route in a ratty-type fashion and whatnot. W/ the God thing being the cheese in the metaphor” (443). Gately has learned a method but lacks the wherewithal to explain the logic behind the method; he “still feels like he has no access to the Big spiritual Picture” (443).

This state of initial disbelief is the absolute norm for new initiates to the AA program, we learn; in fact, as one Geoffrey Day learns during his initial meetings, “only one newcomer in a million doesn't belong [in AA], and if quote *You* think *You're* that one-in-a-million, You *definitely* belong here” (1002). Day responds with horror to this suggestion, “The *horror* of acknowledging that you do apparently have some sort of problem with mild sedatives and fine Chianti, and wanting with all sincerity to give every fair chance to a treatment-modality which millions swear up and down has helped them with their own problem,” of “want[ing] very much to believe in it, and to try, and then to your *horror* [to]find the Program riddled with these obvious and idiotic fallacies and reductia ad absurdum […] (1002).” Day is incredulous of the rational program of AA, which is replete with these seemingly illogical fallacies, yet the stakes for its adherents are desperate and serious. AA defies logic and rational sense and requires that these things be set aside in order for the program to work.

Even at the level of language, the illogical inconsistencies of the AA program defy belief as Joelle remarks during one meeting in which she’s “finding it especially hard to take when these earnest ravaged folks at the lectern say they’re 'Here But For the Grace of God'” (366):

except that's not the strange thing she says, because when Gately nods hard and starts to interject about 'It was the same for —' and wants to launch into a fairly standard Boston AA agnostic-soothing riff about the 'God' in the slogan being just shorthand for a totally subjective and up-to-you 'Higher Power' and AA being merely spiritual instead of dogmatically religious, a sort of benign anarchy of subjective spirit, Joelle cuts off his interjection and says that but that her trouble with it is that 'But For the Grace of God' is a subjunctive, a counterfactual, she says, and can make sense only when introducing a conditional clause, like e.g. 'But For the Grace of God I would have died on Molly Notkin's bathroom floor,' so that an indicative transposition like 'I'm here But For the Grace of God' is, she says, literally senseless, and regardless of whether she hears it or not it's meaningless, and that the foamy enthusiasm with which these folks can say what in fact means nothing at all makes her want to put her head in a Radarange at the thought that Substances have brought her to the sort of pass where this is the sort of language she has to have Blind Faith in (366).

“Literally senseless,” “meaningless,” counterfactuals abound in the AA phrasebook, bending language to the needs of an irrational cause, effecting purposeful reactions in its followers, despite their contradictory sense and grammar. The point Joelle is yet to concede is that the content of the belief is irrelevant and does not require a formal coherence to function. “[T]he whole thing,” about incredulous belief and how it manages to function, “is so improbable and unparsable” (367), in a way which confirms what Wallace stated elsewhere: the stuff that’s truly interesting about religion is inarticulable.”it is the doing away with that need for coherence that the process requires to work: “you have no faith in your own sense of what's really improbable and what isn't, since AA seems, improbably enough, to be working, and with no faith in your own senses.”[[533]](#footnote-534) The arbitrariness of belief and sense is not an impediment to the functional aspect of faith and it’s capacity to effect one’s world. As is “suggested in the 3rd of Boston AA's 12 Steps that you to turn your Diseased will over to the direction and love of 'God as you understand Him’” (445).

Wallace articulates a model of belief, illusory yet materially effective belief, redolent of the concept of hyperstition. Hyperstition, which “signals the return of the irrational or the monstrous ‘other’ into the cultural arena,”[[534]](#footnote-535) is dependent on similar structures disavowal, of believing in abeyance of certifying meaning or logic, yet those “‘beliefs’ hyperstitionally condense into realities.”[[535]](#footnote-536) That material efficacity is the crucial aspect of hyperstition, the potency to effect a change ‘out of nothing’ and what’s at stake in this for Wallace and practitioners of hyperstition as I have discussed them, is the ‘fulfillment,’ value, or models of therapy and being with others they can provide. A formal and thematic interest in these issues abounds in literary history and finds its cultural expression in the conflicted forms of belief in American culture. Crucially, though, the relationship between fiction as a non-true element of effective culture that holds at stake the possibility of actualizing real-world change speaks to our current predicament: Badiou’s problem of a new fiction in contemporary society. Returning to and restating the case for forms of believing invalidated as inoperative dreamwork remains a necessity, given the circumscribed horizons of possibility rigidly settling what counts as real.

# Terminus: Conclusion

Throughout this work, I’ve sought to track and trace the antagonisms and productive tensions of the concept of hyperstition, that is, fictions *becoming* real. Situated firmly in the conflict between a terminal culture—a culture of crisis—trained towards futureless ends and the opposing forces of fictional ideation, hyperstition is a concept that proposes several opportunities for critical reflection and creative experimentation.

The stakes were laid at the outset with the invocation of an imminent third world war in Ballard and Pynchon’s fiction; as the future or its imagining fails, crises metastasizes, and apocalypse manifests. Through a series of readings into the limits of representation in the context of the apocalyptic runaway of post-war culture, the politics of mobility, and postmodern structures of belief, I sought to track and trace the movement of fictions becoming real to discover the possibilities for aesthetics in the shadow of a terminal culture embroiled in crisis. Accordingly, my explorations of hyperstition demonstrate that prospects for revitalised images of the future open to us in the form of the various fugitive infrastructures, strategies of belonging, useful delusions, practices of fiction, enumerated in hyperstition’s endless archive of possibilities.

In fact, the current complexion of the assorted practices of hyperstition address and explore these futurities. Through the effusive concept production of hyperstition, the contingency of the future lost to terminal culture is reintroduced into the frame via the radical otherness of effective fictions in the arena of culture. While terminal culture speeds towards its apocalyptic telos, counterfactuals, the work of arbitrary invention, ciphers, and conjectural realities emerge as necessary foils to the fixed points of the contemporary.

Fiction, as a practice, has been invoked as a means of recuperating the future; the various fictional models of escape, sociality, movement and cosmopolitanism encountered throughout invoke fiction as a means by which they might make themselves effective or to realise themselves. This work, at least in the cases we’ve interrogated is motivated by a certain ethics—of responsibility to others or the future. We have found that fiction is in complicity and affinity with the fugitives, ghosts, and orphans of writing; those passed over appeal to that capacity in hyperstition which invites and imagines alternative futures. Where fiction is a cultural technology for the production of new futures, we have observed how the future is apprehended through the cultural technology of seeing. To produce the future is, in one sense, to manifest its image, in the manner of hyperstition, as if it is becoming real.

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328. The sentence “Nothing’s going to go grow in this mean cold, but we can still have flowers” communicates the structure of the useful delusion, a structure which resembles that of gnostic disavowal. In fact, this sentence resembles Allen Ginsberg’s dedication to Gary Snyder in ‘Laughing Gas’: “The red tin begging cup you gave me, / I lost it but its contents remain undisturbed.” Ginsberg explains this statement as a positive affirmation in the face of negation and voidness, as reflected in Prajñāpāramitā, a worldview and a collection of sutras in the tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism influential to Ginsberg. See Edward Conze, 'The Ontology of the Prajñāpāramitā', *Philosophy East and West,* 3. 2 (1953), 117-29 (pp. 120-21). In his own words, Ginsberg writes: “I realized this, that the gift, the charm of the gift, had been received, and—it really wasn’t my fault, it just got lost, you know, I didn’t feel guilty. So therefore, there was no guilt to fill the void.” Likewise, in the absence of the proper conditions for cultivation, Lander nonetheless affirms the possibility of flowers. The slave enjoying his freedom is thus also a performative contradiction; though his freedom breaks law, contravenes the possibilities of his historical situation, his living against the grain of the possible nonetheless enacts his freedom. For Ginsberg’s full explication, see Michael Schumacher, 'Montreal 1969 Q & a – 16 (Buddhism and Breathing – the Red Tin Begging Cup)', The Allen Ginsberg Project, (2016) <https://allenginsberg.org/2016/04/montreal-1969-q-a-16-buddhism-and-breathing-the-red-tin-begging-cup/> [accessed June 18] [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
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353. Hilbert’s lecture doesn’t introduce the notion of payment and the service economy into the frame—a dimension that may well alter the formulations of responsibility in this situation. How changed is the problem of accommodation if a paying guest is inconvenienced for the need to house a destitute guest? In rendering the paradox of the infinite hotel as question purely of accommodation and presenting all guests as on an equal ontological footing, the issues of interest are rather more simplified. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
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370. Johnson, p. ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
371. Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
372. Ibid. p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
373. The personification of speech is deliberate as Greek metaphysics understood *logos* as a living, sentient form: “*Logos* is a *zoon*. An animal that is born, grows, belongs to the *phusis*. Linguistics, logic, dialectics, and zoology are in the same camp” From ibid. p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
374. Ibid. p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
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398. Burn gives a number of accounts of characters in the novel who seek to conserve, preserve, and catalogue with an obsession compulsiveness. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
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533. D.F. Wallace, *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, (Penguin Books Limited, 2014), p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
534. Carstens. [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
535. Carstens. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)