

**STRATEGIES AND PREDICAMENTS:  
ART AND NEOLIBERALISM IN THE AMERICAN LONG NINETIES**

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## Abstract

This project focuses on American art and fiction in the long nineties (1989-2001). Specifically, it explores the critical strategies that artists working in this decade employ in their efforts to challenge aspects of the political philosophy of neoliberalism, in the wake of the declining power of postmodern aesthetics. My approach to this topic is structured around a series of readings of genres. This structure imitates Hal Foster's recent work *Bad New Days*, in which Foster engages with four 'terms', noting that 'some are closer to strategies, others to predicaments.' As for Foster, each genre I engage with contains elements of both strategy and predicament: they generate new ideas about remaking the word – strategies that might be considered post-postmodern – as well as manifesting intractable political and aesthetic situations beyond which the artists working in this period struggle to move. Each genre ultimately represents one specific critical approach to neoliberalism in the 1990s, from the withdrawal central to the slacker narrative to the mediation by which suburban fiction engages with financialisation, to the abject art that forces a confrontation with the outer limits of what fiction can represent and accomplish.

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## Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references.

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# Introduction

## What is the Matrix?

This thesis seeks to explore the relationship between art and neoliberalism in the American 1990s. I am interested not only in texts that comment on or make visible the conditions of life in the United States under nineties-era neoliberalism, but also in how artists including novelists, filmmakers, and visual artists respond to and challenge the phenomenon of neoliberalism as it manifests both as economic policy and—as becomes increasingly apparent over the course of the decade—as an organising principle of everyday life. My specific period of interest is what Phillip E. Wegner, in one of the few existing studies to focus wholly on the period of the 1990s, refers to as 'the long nineties'.<sup>1</sup> This 12-year decade is bookended by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the destruction of the Twin Towers on September 11th, 2001. My focus will largely be directed towards experimental, outsider texts that have received less critical exposure than canonical works from this period, but that nevertheless do vital and often innovative work in approaching the problem of neoliberalism. For the purposes of this introduction, however, I want to consider a rather more prominent text for what it has to tell us about the condition of the United States at the end of the twentieth century.

Released in 1999, The Wachowski Sisters' *The Matrix* edges into the history books as one of the most successful films of the decade.<sup>2</sup> A true cult phenomenon, *The Matrix* expertly blends cutting-edge digitally enhanced action, pop-philosophical depth, and high concept science fiction into a cinematic spectacle that manages to be both exhilarating and esoteric. And while the digital landscapes and iconic 'bullet-time' sequences represent the culmination of almost a century of filmmaking technology, *The Matrix* is, also, firmly a

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<sup>1</sup> Other studies of the 1990s include: Samuel Cohen, *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s*; Adam Kelly, *American Fiction in Transition: Observer-Hero Narrative, the 1990s, and Postmodernism*; Gil Troy, *The Age of Clinton: America in the 1990s*; and the edited collection *American Fiction of the 1990s: Reflections of History and Culture*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Matrix* was the highest grossing R-rated film in the U.S. in 1999 (see <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=matrix.htm>). It also topped the newly created DVD sales charts for both 1999 and 2000, practically single-handedly propelling this emergent technology into the public's homes (see Clover, 49).



product of its specific historical moment. Despite its creators wryly describing the film as being nothing more than a tale of 'robots vs kung-fu' (qtd. in Clover, 8), *The Matrix* has spawned an entire industry of critics, academics, and amateur analysts devoted to unravelling the mystery at the heart of the film: 'what is the Matrix?' One way to approach this question is to consider just how *The Matrix* is attuned to the specific historical conditions from which it emerges. Such a consideration, in return, can lead us to a deeper understanding of the specific issues and anxieties with which the film is engaging.

*The Matrix* tells the story of Thomas Anderson, aka Neo, as he is awoken to the realisation that the entire human world and the existence which he believes to be real is in fact a computer simulation called the Matrix, generated explicitly for the purpose of containing and pacifying the human population. The illusion of the Matrix is revealed, in the course of the film, to conceal humanity's real existence as a captive source of energy for a dominant society of machines. At the beginning of the film only a small society of rebels have escaped from the vast 'fields' in which humans are held and harvested, and their awakening allows them to re-enter the Matrix as beings of superhuman potential, able to bend and break the rules of what they now understand to be a computer program in order to perform feats of spectacular strength and athleticism as they battle rogue programs called 'agents' operating at the behest of the machines.

As a narrative of awakening, *The Matrix* represents one of a number of entries into a subgenre which Joshua Clover has termed 'edge of the construct' narratives, wherein, as Clover describes, the hero of the film 'sees the simulation as nothing more (and nothing less) than what it is, recognises the limited apparatus of what he once thought was infinite reality' (Clover, 8). In his study of *The Matrix* for the British Film Institute, Clover notes the ubiquity of these narratives at the end of the twentieth century. From John Murdoch in *Dark City* to Truman Burbank in *The Truman Show* (both 1998), the late 1990s saw a host of cinematic characters transcend, or at least awaken to, the artificial bounds of their existence. But what prompted this trope to enjoy such extraordinary popularity at precisely this moment, as the twentieth century came to a close?

With its postmodern philosophising and invocation of Benjaminian reproduction and Baudrillardian simulacra,<sup>3</sup> *The Matrix* obscures a much simpler allegorical undercurrent. Synopsising the film, Clover observes that 'a ruling class has achieved dominant power. There is a dominated class. The master class does not rule simply for the pleasures of power [...] it requires something of them for its own sustenance' (57). The meaning here is, of course, quite explicit, and barely even qualifies as allegory. Read in this way, *The Matrix* is very simply 'a plain-spoken Marxist description of capitalism and its human conditions' (ibid.).<sup>4</sup> But even more than this, *The Matrix* is a description of capitalism in 1999: of the neoliberal incarnation of capitalism particular to this period. As Clover notes, in 1999 the absolute crisis Marx foretold—in which plunging rates of profit would provoke competitive struggle, bankruptcies, and eventually class uprising—had, in fact, still not occurred. And so the question at the heart of *The Matrix* becomes 'what is the thing that stops the oppressed class [...] rising up?' (59)—a question the film phrases as: "what is the Matrix?"

## What is neoliberalism?

Before attempting to answer that question, we must consider the precise conditions of capitalism at the end of the twentieth century; of what has come to be known as neoliberal capitalism, or neoliberalism. An immediate challenge to the attempt to engage with neoliberalism is, as many critics have noted, the inherent slipperiness of the term itself. In their overview of existing literary studies that take neoliberalism as their subject, Quinn Slobodian and Leigh Claire La Berge remark upon the fluidity of the term as it has been used in recent critical efforts. They note how 'neoliberalism' alternately defines a period from the 1970s to the present marked by the deregulation of finance in the global north and a concurrent shift of industry to the global south; a 'doctrine of governance' that mandates competitive individualism over redistribution and social justice; a 'movement of intellectuals' associated with F. A. Hayek's Mont Pelerin Society; and an 'order of normative reason,' quoting Wendy Brown, that has amplified and extended features of capitalism into the arena of everyday life (La Berge and Slobodian, 603). The authors conclude that such

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<sup>3</sup> In one famous scene, the camera lingers on the cover of a hollowed-out book just long enough to reveal its title: *Simulacra and Simulation*.

<sup>4</sup> As Clover wryly notes, 'Matrix, Marxist; what's a letter between friends?' (57).

referential flexibility is not inherently a problem, cautioning rather that those of us aspiring to critique neoliberalism remain sufficiently attendant to the dangers of flattening the 'family of neoliberalisms,' quoting Dieter Plehwe, into a single, homogenous, and broadly meaningless phenomenon (612). Too often, they note, the term neoliberalism 'sutures together left-inflected investigations of all aspects of culture,' (603) without sufficient precision.<sup>5</sup>

While this thesis is less interested in the neoliberals behind neoliberalism, it will at various times refer to neoliberalism both as a doctrine of governance and as an 'order of normative reason,' as well as seeking to nuance the typical 1970s-to-present periodisation of neoliberalism that, perhaps unhelpfully, now encompasses a half-century of history.<sup>6</sup> One of the recurring questions that arises when discussing artistic responses to neoliberalism regards on which of these levels it is more efficacious to engage with the term: as a political doctrine or as an organising principle of everyday life. Slobodian and La Berge note that the two most important figures, in the context of literary studies, to have produced texts on neoliberalism are David Harvey and Michel Foucault. 'Put broadly,' they explain, 'Harvey is used to periodise; Foucault, to conceptualise.' We could also argue that Harvey provides an intellectual foundation for those analysing neoliberalism as a political doctrine. His work is also frequently to be found cited by those critics whose intellectual affinities are broadly associated with neo-Marxist and world systems critical theory, and whose interests focus less on neoliberal politics than on the systemic, globalised capitalist system that is understood to determine these politics. Meanwhile, Foucault's work is conversely drawn upon by critics interested in analysing neoliberalism as it manifests in everyday life, and

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<sup>5</sup> Will Davies, on the other hand, argues that this difficulty is an inherent, integral aspect of neoliberalism. The reason 'neoliberalism' appears to defy easy definition, he suggests, is not due to critical imprecision but because the term 'refers to a necessarily interdisciplinary, colonising process. [...] It remains endlessly incomplete, pushing the boundaries of economic rationality into more and more new territories' (Davies, 'The Difficulty of Neoliberalism').

<sup>6</sup> As Will Davies notes in another of his articles on neoliberalism, contemporary post-2008 neoliberalism 'is manifestly different from the neoliberalism that rose to power in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and different again from that which held sway from the 1990s, in the long boom preceding 2008. [...] there is [...] something problematic about ascribing governmental interventions in 2016 to the same overarching rationality or teleology as those of 2001 or 1985' (Davies, 'New Neoliberalism,' 123). As I shall explain later, I follow Davies' in his attempts to periodise *within* neoliberalism—work that is critically important but, with the exception of Davies' efforts, has gone largely neglected to date.

who fall broadly into a post-Marxist camp and whose interests lie more in subjective experience than in systemic inequalities.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning with Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, we find in the opening pages one of the most succinct definitions of neoliberalism as political doctrine. 'Neoliberalism,' Harvey writes,

is [...] a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (2)

Following this definition, Harvey identifies the lynchpins of neoliberal thought as the trifecta of deregulation, privatisation, and the sanctity of the free market. All of these ideas can be seen at work in the proto-neoliberal experiment carried out in Augusto Pinochet's Chile by the so-called 'Chicago Boys,' a group of economists influenced by the teachings of Milton Friedman, himself influenced by his participation in the Mont Pelerin Society (Harvey, 19-20). This intellectual genealogy resulted in the Chilean economists of Chicago returning to their country in 1975 to ruthlessly restructure the economy according to the principles of neoliberalism. They did so by reversing nationalisations, opening natural resources up to private and unregulated exploitation, privatising social security, and encouraging foreign direct investment and free trade (Harvey, 8). Their activities precipitated an immediate, if short-lived, revival of the Chilean economy that nevertheless provided tangible evidence to support the theories of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, who would bring neoliberalism to the UK and US respectively in the 1980s. As Harvey observes, 'a brutal experiment carried out in the periphery became a model for the formulation of policies in the centre' (9).<sup>8</sup>

But while the forceful restructuring of the Chilean economy from the top down provided the results Reagan was looking for, it did not suggest a suitable means of implementation,

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<sup>7</sup> The opposition between neo- and post-Marxist thinking is explored in much greater detail in the final chapter of this thesis, which focuses on the dialectical writing of American author Don DeLillo.

<sup>8</sup> The brutality of this experiment is not to be understated. The neoliberalisation of Chile is the first example of what Naomi Klein, after Friedman himself, calls the 'shock doctrine': the rapid and wholesale transformation of an economy according to neoliberal principals, the speed and scale of which is designed to place a public in a state of 'shock' that, according to the theory, helps facilitate the transition. In the case of Chile and of other economies that form the case studies in Klein's *Shock Doctrine*, this economic violence is accompanied by the physical violence of imprisonment and torture meted out against those perceived as obstacles to the transformation process.

nor does it account for the manner in which, by some accounts, neoliberalism morphed from a policy to a logic or ‘order of reason.’ To account for how Western capitalist countries like the US became ‘neoliberalised’ through a process of democratically achieved consent, Harvey turns to what will become a regular—if not unproblematic—narrative for this thesis. Consent, Harvey argues, is grounded in what Gramsci calls ‘common sense,’ or commonly held beliefs. These beliefs can be influenced by powerful tools of ideological dissemination,<sup>9</sup> but are rooted in the fundamental, everyday experiences and values of the mass population. In the 1970s, the preservation of individual freedom was widely held as sacrosanct, crossing political boundaries and transcending traditional divides. This desire for personal freedoms was demonstrated with particular vigour in the political upheavals of the 1960s, and Harvey notes the way in which the demands made by countercultural figures for freedom from ‘parental, educational, corporate, bureaucratic, and state constraints’ proved complementary to the neoliberal project to privatise and deregulate (41). Furthermore, neoliberal rhetoric proved particularly adept at exploiting and fomenting the tensions between collective action and individual autonomy, values which had always been at odds with one another. By promoting certain approaches to identity politics and multiculturalism, neoliberalism could co-opt these values from collective leftist organisations ranged, as Harvey describes, ‘in pursuit of social justice through the conquest of state power’ (41). And by mobilising the ideals of individual freedom against regulatory and interventionist state policies, capitalist class interests could protect their hegemonic position.<sup>10</sup> To carry out this neoliberalisation, these capitalist interests constructed a ‘market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism’

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<sup>9</sup> In Gramsci’s theory, ideology is disseminated through a process of hegemony wherein a dominant group’s values are promoted by ‘intellectuals’ who hold authority in civil society. This is in contrast to ‘political society’ which enforces ideological values through coercive disciplinary systems. These distinctions are roughly analogous to Louis Althusser’s ‘Ideological State Apparatuses,’ a category that encompasses the media, corporations, and the universities, schools, and churches that constitute civil society, and ‘Repressive State Apparatuses,’ which, like Gramsci’s political society, operates according to principals of coercion rather than persuasion. See Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 145.

<sup>10</sup> Following on from the previous footnote, I use the term hegemony here and elsewhere in this introduction as Gramsci defines it: as the ostensibly peaceful (as opposed to coercive) domination of an ideological system of governance over civil society. In this sense we can understand Western neoliberalism to be hegemonic, while the state-enforced Chilean proto-neoliberalism to which I previously referred is more accurately an example of what Gramsci would call “direct domination,” enforced, as it was, by repressive rather than ideological apparatuses. For more on this distinction see Gramsci, 145.

(42).<sup>11</sup> As such, as Harvey finds, this proved quite compatible with the emerging intellectual and cultural dominant of the time: postmodernism.

We will return to explore further postmodernism's curious intersection with neoliberalism later in this introduction. For now, it is enough to record that the same counterculture from which postmodernism emanated also oriented American 'common sense' around the absolute sanctity of personal freedom: a belief that proved highly conducive to the implementation of neoliberalism. What did this implementation look like at the level of daily life? As Harvey explains, neoliberalism entailed not just the creative destruction of institutional frameworks and powers, but also of 'divisions of labour, social relations [...] ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart,' (3) all in the name of positioning market exchange as an ethic in itself, and in bringing all human action into this domain. It is here that it proves useful to move to Foucault's account of neoliberalism in order to better conceptualise what Harvey has usefully periodised and politicised.

Here, also, the limitations of Harvey's account become apparent. While Harvey's work has undoubtedly proven a useful foundation for scholars working on neoliberalism, his definition of the term as representing a *laissez-faire* economic policy has little to distinguish it from more traditional forms of liberalism. Since Harvey's initial work, however, others have attempted to better define the specific values of neoliberalism, often by drawing Harvey's more traditionally Marxist work into alignment with the work of Foucault—much as Etienne Balibar describes the process of 'articulation' by which contemporary scholars often borrow and combine ideas from both Marx and Foucault and combine them in order to think through a problem (see Keucheyan). Will Davies, for example, notes that Foucault was 'one of the first to notice' that neoliberal intellectuals were engaged in 'a remaking of human subjectivity around the ideal of enterprise,' which involved harnessing 'the virtue of markets[:] their competitive quality' as a normative procedure for determining value and

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<sup>11</sup> While the brunt of the neoliberalisation of the US was carried out through this appeal to freedom, this is not the whole story. Quinn Slobodian's account of the formation of 'meta-economic' global institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation corrects a prevalent narrative of neoliberalism that leans too heavily on the importance of self-regulating markets and shrunken states. For Slobodian, conversely, a national free market economy was only made possible under neoliberalism by the creation of international institutions capable of 'safeguarding capitalism at the scale of the entire world' (Slobodian, 2). In other words, neoliberalism didn't do away with intervention or concern itself entirely with individualism, rather it simply moved power from one institution (the state) to another (the global institution).

knowledge (Davies, 'New Neoliberalism,' 127). Here Davies adds a fourth, vital term to Harvey's definition: competition. A further distinction between liberalism and neoliberalism, and another addendum to Harvey's definition, comes in the form of financialisation. A term broadly used to capture the turn from the accrual of profits through trade and commodity production to the generation of profits through the expectation of future interest or capital gains, financialisation indexes a shift in the US economy from the desire for immediate returns to the assumption of future returns. To see just how the neoliberal project sought to develop and extend competitiveness, and how the practices of investment were extrapolated into daily life, we can look to Foucault's pioneering work on biopolitics.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*, Foucault sets out his theory of 'neo-liberalism' as distinct from German 'ordo-liberalism.' Key to Foucault's narrative is the theory of 'human capital,' a term initially popularised by Gary Becker, another of Milton Friedman's students—and later his colleague—at Chicago. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault explains human capital as representative of a distinct process: 'the extension of economic analysis into previously unexplored domains and [...] the possibility of giving a strictly economic interpretation of a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic' (219). These twin processes entail what can broadly be thought of as the economisation of everyday life, in which economic rationality dictates 'the strategic programming of individuals' activity' (222). This leads, for Foucault, to the situation in which an individual's labouring ability becomes conflated with their selfhood, so that 'the worker appears a sort of enterprise for himself [...] and entrepreneur of himself [...] his own capital, [...] his own producer, [and] the source of his earnings' (225-226). As such, pursuits that would previously be considered either peripheral to, or entirely distinct from, the basic process of labour exchange become subject to economic rationalisation: education, pastimes, diet and exercise, and even social and romantic relationships become investments designed ultimately to enhance one's potential as an enterprise, and to maximise future successes.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Despite the apparent proximity of these ideas to certain Marxist theories, it is worth noting, as Etienne Balibar has done in his extensive work on Foucault and Marx, that Foucault's position in relation to Marx has always been uneasy. As Balibar observes, Foucault's 'materialism of the body' and his focus on governmentality and disciplinary techniques may borrow occasionally from the Marxist phrasebook, but his focus is distinct from the economics-oriented preoccupations of Marx (Balibar).

Foucault's account has received considerable attention and modification since the 1980s. Perhaps one of the most convincing and widely cited accounts of neoliberalism, deriving from Foucault, is found in Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. To the standard left criticisms of neoliberalism—intensified inequality, crass commodification, enhanced corporate influence over policy, economic instability—she adds another: the transformation of market-based behaviour into a 'normative order of reason.' Updating Foucault via the work of Michel Feher,<sup>13</sup> Brown narrates the evolution of human capital from an analogue of productive capital to one of financial capital. From Foucault's initial vision of the worker as a producer (in which, like the synecdoche of the worker as hand, the profit-earning potential of the worker comes to encompass them entirely) Brown tracks the evolution of *homo economicus* into the more nuanced notion of the subject's investments (in education, relationships, etc.) as speculative contributions to an ongoing process of self-appreciation that provides no immediate tangible rewards but enhances one's stock value on the human market, in a process roughly analogous to that occurring in the newly financialised economy. Concurring with both Harvey and Foucault, Brown ultimately concludes that this specific form of economisation leads to the situation by which 'neoliberalism governs as sophisticated common sense [...] a reality principle' (35). As such, the economic principles which it preaches come to structure the everyday lives of those living in neoliberal America, while more insidiously, this process is simultaneously disguised as natural or common-sensical: an invisible transformation that Brown terms the 'stealth revolution.'

## Why the 1990s?

In the 1990s of *The Matrix*, Brown's stealth revolution was in full swing, something the Wachowski Sisters' film exhibits an acute awareness of. As a mediation between material reality and social consciousness that offers itself as 'real' or as common sense, the Matrix in which Neo and his compatriots are at first trapped and from which they are later liberated is in fact a representation of a 'reality principle.' Beyond the 'reality principle' there are many terms for the system of control *The Matrix* allegorises: broadly speaking, the Matrix can be read as a representation of Althusserian ideology, Foucauldian discourse, Lacanian

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<sup>13</sup> Most notably Feher's article 'Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital.'



symbolic order, or Ranciere's distribution of the sensible; all of which describe variations on an ideologically informed, ordered version of reality designed to obscure the real conditions of human existence and to enforce certain behaviours, principles, and logics as natural. In the 1990s the economisation of everyday life had rendered the policies of neoliberalism into a system of ethics capable of governing human social behaviour, and *The Matrix* responds with anxiety concerning this state of affairs, in which a political ideology had come to dictate the terms of everyday existence.<sup>14</sup>

But why does *The Matrix* emerge at this particular moment, at the end of the 1990s? To read the accounts of Harvey, Brown, and others is to follow a narrative that sees neoliberalism calcifying into common sense from the late 1970s onwards. And yet the 'edge of the construct' genre emerges almost in its entirety in the last couple of years of the twentieth century. It is my contention that the 1990s can be understood as a period of 'high neoliberalism'—of neoliberalism's hegemonic phase. In his vital work to periodise within neoliberalism, Will Davies similarly terms this period 'normative neoliberalism': the period from 1989-2008 in which 'the horizons of political hope had been delimited to a single political-economic system' (127). This, in contrast to the earlier period of 'combative neoliberalism,' in which neoliberalism defined itself in combative opposition to socialism, and to the later period of 'punitive neoliberalism': of post-2008 austerity capitalism. However, where Davies and others present a picture of the 1990s as one of delimited horizons, I want to argue that the decade presents moments in which the 'reality principle' begins to fray. While the stealth of Brown's 'stealth revolution' remains intact during the decade and the term neoliberalism remains largely absent from popular discourse, the 1990s nevertheless sees, in art in particular, an insistent series of efforts to push and probe at the 'reality' neoliberalism presents. It is these efforts which are the focus of this thesis.

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<sup>14</sup> Clover observes the many instances in which *The Matrix* discloses an anxiety specifically directed at neoliberalism. Protagonist Neo's daily life as Thomas Anderson is emblematic of the 'new economy' of the 1990s, a distinctly neoliberal work environment in which those at the 'wavefront of the tech boom [...] worked in a cubicle not so different from Thomas Anderson's, for a company that wanted as many [...] hours as it could get, and had newer and better ways to get them' (15). The disciplinary speech Anderson's boss delivers to him further compounds this 'no alternative' situation: Clover brands it 'the soliloquy of middle management. [...] It presents an inescapable totality [...] This Job or Some Other Job, a choice that presumed long ago that life is made totally of labour' (62). *The Matrix*, as Clover succinctly concludes, is 'about work' (71), and about the end of the distinction between 'work and not-work' at the hands of the new economy (73).

In his account of the decade, *The Age of Clinton*, Gil Troy characterises the 1990s as emblematic of Bill Clinton's flagship policy 'the Third Way': for Troy, the 1990s represent a synthesis of 'politics and culture', of liberal belief in government's instrumentality in fostering social justice and of conservative belief in 'nurturing families and strong communities', of 'Reaganite conservatism and Great Society liberalism, the 1950s and the 1960s, traditional anchors and modern freedoms [...] America's super-ego and America's id' (3). In his introduction, Troy sets the scene for this paradoxical decade, ranging from Clinton's origins in the hippie movement to his braiding of democratic values with the Reaganite legacy of hard neoliberalism into his flagship vision of the Third Way. Continuing and modifying Reagan's neoliberalism proved key to the unification of Republican and Democrat ideals that the Third Way was intended to represent. The 'Democratic twist' Troy credits Clinton with injecting into Reaganite economic policy is one based on expanded recognition and rights for minority identity groups: an identity politics, in other words, that at times distracted from Clinton's Republican-appeasing attempts to slim-down the state and to use 'market forces to temper government' (Troy, 304).<sup>15</sup> While Clinton's policies continued to facilitate the 'stealth revolution' of neoliberalism, the decade's rapid social and technological change generated what Troy terms the 'five revolutions': of race, technology, work, society, and sex.<sup>16</sup> These cultural, economic, political, and technological changes proved so rapid as to render a 'rich and free' society of Americans as paradoxically more 'lost and unhappy' than ever before. Ultimately, Troy characterises the 1990s as a period of intense confusion: of a confusing decade governed by a confusing presidency. Subverting Clinton's famous proclamation, Troy observes that the 1990s was not a bridge, but a runway into the twenty-first century, moving America forward at terrific speed.

Troy's account of the 1990s as one of intense confusion and change is perhaps unusual, but not unique. In the study from which I borrow the 'long nineties' periodisation, Phillip E

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<sup>15</sup> For a contentious discussion of identity politics' function as a 'distraction' to the inequalities of neoliberal capitalism, see Walter Benn Michaels, 'Against Diversity.'

<sup>16</sup> Respectively: the 'rainbow revolution' which saw racial demographics increasingly diversify throughout the country; the 'digital revolution,' which encompassed the rapid expansion of personal computing and witnessed the clash of a utopian belief in 'hyperlinks subvert[ing] hierarchy' and an anxiety regarding increasing alienation; the 'information age reset' that occurred as an older manufacturing economy gave way to a new knowledge based economy; the cultural ascendance of an 'I'm-OK-You're-OK' attitude that represented an increased tolerance for 'the alternative'; and finally what Troy terms 'America's gender bender,' or, the rise in the prominence of sex as an acceptable topic of discussion, of alternative sexual orientations, and—related to the expansion of the internet—as viewing material and as increasingly diversified and taboo-breaking in practice. See Troy, 7-8.

Wegner's *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties*, Wegner describes the 1990s as a 'strange space' situated between an ending (of the Cold War), and a beginning (of the post-9/11 world). Borrowing the Lacanian/ Žižekian notion of the parallax, Wegner describes the decade as a 'non-historical [...] empty place' situated between a 'Real event and its symbolic repetition' (9). This theory is born out in the lived reality of the time, which is characterised above all by a 'Janus-faced' experience:

On the one hand it feels like a moment of "terrifying monsters", of hauntings by a living dead past. Yet it is also experienced as a moment of "sublime beauty", of openness and instability, of experimentation and opportunity, of conflict and insecurity — a place, in other words, wherein history might move in a number of very different directions. (10)

In a very tangible sense, this instability is partly rooted in the end of the Cold War, which ended also one of the twentieth century's greatest cultural and political struggles and, on the one hand, cleared space for the global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, but on the other, also 'opened up space for new kinds of political and cultural experimentation' (36) of the sort documented in greater detail by Troy.<sup>17</sup>

But the new global order was a formidable opponent to those wishing to take advantage of this new openness. In one of the most compelling accounts of neoliberalism's hegemony, Mark Fisher follows in the more conventional footsteps of Francis Fukuyama as he describes the end of the twentieth century as the moment of 'capitalist realism': of a situation in which 'not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, it is [...] impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it' (Fisher, 2).<sup>18</sup> Fisher's most valuable contribution to the discourse is his own personal account of living and working in the 1990s, a period in which, as we have already seen, political ideology was present in almost every aspect of daily life. Describing working in higher education under Tony Blair's

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<sup>17</sup> On its surface, Wegner's account represents a departure from the traditionally accepted narrative of the 'end of history' popularised by Francis Fukuyama, whose basic argument describes the end of the Cold War as the moment of 'the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government' (4). Wegner's account of the decade as one in which 'history might move in a number of very different directions' might seem antithetical to Fukuyama's account, but it is important to note that Wegner's focus is largely on a specific politics of identity and culture, and so his account of 'openness and instability' should be read in relation to the arena of cultural production and to the reorganisation of society and societal hierarchies of identity rather than in reference to broader political doctrines.

<sup>18</sup> To illustrate his point, Fisher borrows Jameson's famous assertion that it's 'easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (Fisher, 1).

government in the UK, Fisher, in conversation with Jeremy Gilbert, offers the following account:

We didn't have to believe it, we only had to act as if we believed it. The idea that our 'inner beliefs' mattered more than what we were publicly professing at work was crucial to capitalist realism. We could have left-wing convictions, and a left-wing self-image, provided these didn't impinge on work in any significant way! This was ideology in the old Althusserian sense - we were required to use a certain language and engage in particular ritualised behaviours, but none of this mattered because we didn't 'really' believe in any of it. But of course the very privileging of 'inner' subjective states over the public was itself an ideological move. (Fisher and Gilbert, 91)

Fisher's narrative of his lived experience under neoliberalism affirms the Foucauldian theory in which 'conduct' is the primary target of governmentality. Building on Foucault's definition of governmentality as the 'way in which one conducts the conduct of men' (Foucault, 186), Nikolas Rose describes the way in which neoliberalism shapes a 'meta-world of images and values [in which] the self is to be reshaped and remodelled so that it can succeed in emitting the signs of a skilled performance' (Rose, 239). This privileging of 'authentic' inner subjective states preserved against an outward-facing performance of sometimes antithetical values highlights another facet of neoliberal ideology that proved particularly pervasive during the 1990s: the supremacy of individualism. From the dismantling of labour unions and other forms of collective action to the increased emphasis on the governing of oneself and the reframing of social life as a competitive market, neoliberalism encouraged subjects to live according to Margaret Thatcher's proclamation: 'there's no such thing as society[,] there are individual men and women and there are families' (Thatcher). Fisher's account in *Capitalist Realism* would appear to present an unchallengeable system: a true 'reality principle' presenting an absolute version of the real; a smooth surface against which critique could make no impression and personal values were divorced from public performance. And yet, as is evidenced in *The Matrix*, the 1990s records the moment in which questions of this system were asked with increasing volume and urgency.

“To show them a world without you”<sup>19</sup>

In David Harvey’s account of neoliberalism’s cultural ascension, Harvey makes a point of postmodernism’s crucial facilitating role. Harvey’s account, in which postmodernism and neoliberalism flourish and commingle in the aftermath of 1968, can also be found in greater detail in Sean McCann and Michael Szalay’s article for *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, ‘Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking After the New Left.’ The authors begin by reiterating Harvey’s assertion of the fundamental importance of individual freedom as underpinning the cross-political acceptance of neoliberalism. ‘It was easy,’ McCann and Szalay write, ‘for the New Left to look past its differences with the radical right, in short, because the two movements shared a basic antipathy to big government’ (442). The authors go on to explore precisely how postmodernism contributed to the leveraging of this political position into a cultural dominant. The importance of theory to postmodern thought—the emphasis on Foucauldian discourse, Althusserian ideology, and poststructuralist concerns with language and meaning—saw the countercultural radicals of the 60s and 70s turn toward the notion that political protest should concern itself less with directly addressing state actors and fellow citizens than to provide what McCann and Szalay, after the counterculture leader Paul Potter, call ‘breakaway experiences’ (444). In literature, the authors observe, this results in the ‘fundamental opposition between a quotidian realm of banal communication [...] and the transcendent force of what [Toni Morrison] calls “word magic”’ (447). At its most extreme, postmodern politics lauded pure, experiential force shorn of all meaning, and for those authors McCann and Szalay critique, language comes to assume ‘a magical and anti-authoritarian power only to the degree that it has nothing to say’ (451).

In what has become a common position adopted by left-leaning critics of contemporary art and literature, McCann and Szalay’s response to their posed problem is to call for a reinvigoration of meaning, of a political literature that prioritises clarity over contingency

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<sup>19</sup> The title of this section is taken from the final lines of *The Matrix*, in which the now free Neo addresses the following monologue to the machines:

I don't know the future. I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it's going to begin. I'm going to hang up this phone, and then I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see. I'm going to show them a world without you. A world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries. A world where anything is possible. Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you.

and seeks to make sense of the increasing complexity of neoliberal capitalism. This notion is echoed in Franco Berardi's *The Uprising*, in which Berardi, working in the arena of poetry, describes how the 'subsumption of language by the semio-capitalist cycle of production' has effectively frozen the 'affective potencies of language' (18). When money is divorced from a concrete referent, as was the case when the gold standard was ended in the US in 1971 (meaning that a dollar could no longer be exchanged for its equivalent in gold), so the stability of the entire linguistic system of signs and referents is shaken. Just as money begets money in an M-M economy, so signs beget signs in a postmodern culture no longer concerned with meaning. Concerned less with the escapism of the 'breakaway experience' than with its individualised focus, Berardi argues for a corrective project in which poetry reactivates 'the emotional body' and therefore 'social solidarity' (20), in a direct challenge to the colonisation of actions described above, by Fisher. Fisher himself reaches a similar conclusion in *Capitalist Realism*, when he offers his own strategy to combat the seemingly unthinkable totality of neoliberal capitalism. For Fisher, the urgent work is in 'invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents us,' the 'cracks' in neoliberalism's enforced narrative which highlight discrepancies between what should be and what is—eco-catastrophe, bureaucracy, mental health crisis—and that illuminate the fundamental truth that 'capitalism is inherently dysfunctional' (18-19).<sup>20</sup> Here, like Wegner, Fisher introduces a sense of possibility back into the nihilist narrative of the end of history. As Fisher remarks at the conclusion to *Capitalist Realism*, 'the tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of [...] capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again' (81).

However, as many artists working in the 1990s came to realise, to simply tell the story of capitalism's dysfunction through art or fiction brings with it its own dangers. Jedediah Purdy's 1999 book *For Common Things* proves a neatly illustrative example of this. In the opening to the text, Purdy describes his book as a 'response to an ironic time' (2). Clearly establishing itself as a rejoinder to postmodern ironic consumerism, Purdy's book is a celebration of sincerity, earnestness, and the curtailing of rampant consumption. But as the title of his retrospective analysis of the book's reception, 'The Accidental Neoliberal,'

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<sup>20</sup> These ideas recall classic analyses of the relationship between aesthetics and politics. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Ranciere notes that the arts' contribution to emancipatory projects is in the 'parcelling out of the visible and invisible' (19), while Adorno, in 'Lyric Poetry and Society', observes that 'the greatness of works of art lies solely in their power to let those things be heard which ideology conceals' (61).

betrays, Purdy found his rejection of postmodern capitalism far from irreconcilable with the 'neoliberal knot.' Threaded into this endlessly flexible and accommodating knot, Purdy's 'substantive and structural politics' were quickly labelled according to their perceived aesthetics and sensibility, the media eye content in tagging Purdy as an emergent figure in the 'new sincerity' movement and marketing him accordingly (16). In this, Purdy resembles perhaps the most iconic figure of wearied resistance to commodification: Kurt Cobain. Writing of Cobain, Mark Fisher describes the Nirvana frontman as giving voice to 'the despondency of a generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought, and sold before it had even happened' (Fisher, 9). Recognising himself how 'perfectly [his] anticommodification style [lent] itself to a commodification that offered an anticommodification frisson among its features,' Purdy bitterly concludes that neoliberal practice consistently succeeds in disabling personal attempts to escape it, to the extent that 'trying to imagine, in public, a way of being that is not neoliberal means, mostly, making ephemera' (22).

This raises an urgent issue for this thesis and for a broader critical engagement with neoliberalism. To clarify this, I want to reconsider the narrative I have presented thus far. When we move from the historicised narrative of Harvey to the subject-oriented accounts of Foucault, Brown, Fisher, etc., we find the privileged object of study to be the individual Western subject's experience under neoliberalism. These accounts, which are understandably Foucauldian but also borrow theoretical terms from Althusser, Lacan, and others, are themselves drawing on the same postmodern critical tradition as the artists McCann and Szalay critique. And their critical work, concerned as it is with the liberation of the individual subject from a neoliberalised 'reality principle,' often fails to sufficiently take into account other overarching realities of neoliberal capitalism: of systemic inequality, class divide, and the industrialisation of the global south. In restricting their account to a focus on the subject, such critical accounts in fact contribute to precisely this reality principle and to the illusion of the absolute hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. Critiquing Brown, Slobodian and La Berge note the tendency of her account to imbue neoliberalism with a near-eschatological and omnipresent agency. As critics and artists, how then do we talk about neoliberalism in a way that recognises its hegemony but isn't complicit in reinforcing it? As Purdy discovered, to be direct and sincere is to risk either derision or co-optation and marketisation, but to dispense with meaning, as McCann and Szalay argue, is to tacitly condone an individualist and escapist politics.

Key to this predicament is the idea of autonomy. What Purdy, Cobain, and others seeking to criticise neoliberalism find to their detriment is their relative lack of autonomy from the system they are attempting to challenge—their autonomy, in other words, from the market. This lack of autonomy is similarly experienced—and even embraced—by the postmodern artists critiqued by McCann and Szalay. In his seminal work on the subject of postmodernism, Jameson notes that, contrary to the varieties of modernism that were united in their ‘hostility to the market,’ postmodernisms ‘all at least share a resonant affirmation, when not an outright celebration, of the market as such’ (Jameson 1991, 304). It is this embrace of the market and celebration of consumption that unites the various postmodernisms present in art, architecture, music and fiction that Jameson discusses. More recently, Nicholas Brown has echoed Jameson’s distinction when describing the complex mediation between autonomy and heteronomy that defines contemporary political art. Discussing *post-postmodern art*, Brown emphasises the ways in which contemporary artists can activate modernist-inspired spaces of restricted production within a broader field of heteronomous production.<sup>21</sup> Reading such post-postmodern fictions, Brown insists upon a hermeneutic project of critique that asks, ‘how and where is autonomy asserted, what are the mechanisms that make it possible?’ (Brown). Key to both accounts is the assumption that art—as demonstrated by postmodern art—cannot be authentically meaningful, and successfully critical, if the primary motivation behind its production is to appease or even celebrate the forces of commerce and the market. This, of course, raises the question of what autonomy from the market looks like—and what exactly ‘the market’ is.

Mark Banks provides a useful definition of autonomy that coincidentally also clarifies what exactly we are talking about when we talk about the market:

In broad terms, autonomy can be defined as the capacity of individuals (but also institutions and organizations) to exercise discretion or apply freedom of choice;

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<sup>21</sup> Brown’s examples of approaches that prove successful in this objective are: the ‘positive historicism’ of, for example, Brazilian Tropicália, which uses a pastiche aesthetic to juxtapose seemingly disparate musical elements in such a way that meaning is generated; and the ‘aesthetisation of genre,’ which involves an act of subversion within an established and marketable generic frame. Both of these approaches essentially involve the ‘smuggling’ of meaning under the cover of an essentially meaningless form, hence Brown’s insistence on a constant hermeneutic project of critique. This unfortunately also leads to some moments of apparently subjective judgement, as when Brown declares at the end of his article that ‘*Terminator II* can be a work of art, while *Avatar* is only an art commodity.’



the autonomous subject is one that has the ability to determine the pattern and shape of their own lives. Historically, autonomy in cultural production has been associated with freedom from the particular demands and constraints of the commercial world [...] autonomy [is] especially closely linked to the artist; that special, self-regulating being and 'free spirit' possessed of rare and precious gifts. (2-3)

Banks defines autonomy thus: as a broader attribute of individuals to exercise free will; and more specifically, as the capacity of artists to resist capitulating to the demands of commerce. In the latter sense, the market at work here is clearly the market as it is traditionally understood: as a network connecting producers and purchasers upon which commodities are bought and sold. Banks' former definition, when considered in conjunction with the above discussed theories of human capital, suggests the capacity for a more urgent form of autonomy: an autonomy from the market of human relations into which neoliberalism has arranged human sociality through its drawing into conjunction of ethics and economic rationality.

Let's return to *The Matrix*, to consider precisely how the film attempts to navigate the 'neoliberal knot,' as Purdy describes it, of being both *of* and *against* the system. As a narrative of awakening, *The Matrix* appears to aspire to the condition of an event which, in Mark Fisher's words, can 'tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism' (81). When Neo threatens at the end of the film to 'show these people what you don't want them to see [...] show them a world without you,' *he* is certainly aspiring to tear such a hole in the grey—or green, as the film's distinctive palette casts it—curtain of the Matrix, a curtain we have already established bears a striking allegorical relationship to the 'reality principle' of capitalist realism. However, as figures like Purdy and Cobain discovered, there is an almost indistinguishable line between challenging and reinforcing neoliberal norms. Often, this line is erased in the process of distributing the artwork seeking to mount a challenge. As fictions that challenge the market ethics of neoliberalism are translated into commodities for distribution, their impact is frequently undermined. This is precisely the problem Clover finds with *The Matrix*. As he concludes his analysis, he notes that the film encourages us to identify with Neo and the other liberated rebels; however, for the duration of the film we the audience in fact,

resemble the docile labourers, each of us enclosed in our own chair, hooked to the popcorn and coke machine, consuming digitised and mediated images that sing to us our own autonomy while returning our labour to the economy a few dollars at a time. (69)

Furthermore, the identification encouraged by the film is itself problematic. In Henry Giroux and Imre Szeman's critique of the political limits of the cinema of the 1990s, the authors remark that edge of the construct films like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* reinforce 'neoliberal individualism' by allowing the viewer to identify with their 'exceptional protagonists, those true individuals who are able to separate themselves out of the mass fantasy of contemporary consumerism' (97). This identification is further reinforced by the film's unique cinematic innovations, such as the 'bullet time' phenomenon. Clover notes that in these sequences, 'all of the power and agency is vested in a singular figure,' with whom we identify (25). In simultaneously making visible the edges of the construct, and yet still reinforcing certain neoliberal values, films like *The Matrix* demonstrate that for the audience there is 'no walking out' from our own reality principle, but there is at least the possibility of 'recognising that this is not the world as it is' (Clover, 82).

A central question that this thesis will seek to answer is whether recognition is the limit of critique. In other words, can any artists, filmmakers, or authors working in the decade advance on the work that *The Matrix* does? One possible response to this question, which I will return to explore in greater detail in later chapters, will revolve around the notion of sociality. In his chapter in the edited collection *Towards a Theory of the Image*, Scott Lash describes the subject of sociality as 'not self-enclosed, but open [...] not involved in monologic "representation" but dialogical "presentation", and whose aesthetic sensibility is not primarily productionist but receptionist' (114). Lash's theory describes a form of art that, through its aesthetic and formal strategies, rejects individualism in the form of the singular creative ego, encourages dialogic engagement and participation in the artwork's creation or meaning-making, and 'presents' the possibility of effecting material change rather than simply 'representing' the way things are. Along with a reinvigoration of meaning, Lash argues for the importance of collectivity and connection—precisely what *The Matrix*, with its focus on the hero-saviour Neo, fails to do. The importance of these qualities are echoed repeatedly in the artworks this thesis focuses on, and in the movements, like the 'new sincerity' movement that has emerged as one of the most

coherent variations of post-postmodernism, that aesthetic forms of the 1990s appear to foreshadow.

## Strategies and Predicaments

The title of this thesis is borrowed from the introduction to art critic Hal Foster's essay collection *Bad New Days*. In this introduction, Foster notes that the terms each essay focuses on—abject, archival, mimetic, precarious, and post-critical—represent 'not paradigms, but strategies or predicaments.' He clarifies that each term, which he uses to delineate a loosely related movement in post-postmodern art, 'orient some practices [but] do not regulate them, and though some follow others in time, they do not displace, much less disprove one another; so, too, no one truth is at issue, only so many questions' (1). This last point is particularly salient. This thesis is similarly organised around a series of terms which denote genres, or subgenres, of art and fiction that emerge and loosely cohere during the 1990s. Often co-existing, but also contradicting one another, each term includes aspects of both strategy (pertaining to the successful critique of neoliberalism) and predicament (regarding the negotiation of pitfalls in the process of this critique). These five genres—slacker narratives, autofiction novels, suburban fiction, abject art, and dialectical writing—each provide uneasy, contingent, sometimes wholly compromised answers to the problems presented in this introduction. Nevertheless, each also does valuable work to push beyond postmodernism and to flirt with new, post-postmodern forms of political writing. In particular, the theoretical awareness those working in these genres inherit from the postmodern tradition afford them an awareness of the interrelation between form and content, a demonstration of what Jameson calls dialectical thinking, or 'thought to the second power,' in which 'both the particular content involved and the style of thinking suited to it must be held together in the mind at the same time' (Jameson 1971, 45). As such, these artworks broadly demonstrate a theoretical self-consciousness more typically associated with postmodernism, but go on to present a post-postmodern sentiment or agenda. If this sounds abstract, it will be elaborated and made clearer as I handle specific case studies over the following chapters, which will proceed according to the following structure.

The first chapter of the thesis traces the politics of withdrawal through the subcultural figure of the slacker. I begin by historicising the practice of 'doing nothing', as it develops out of the countercultural moment of the 1960s, then delineate its specifics in the context of the 1990s. Significant to the slacker narrative is the figure of the artist and depictions of avant-garde artistic practice. I historicise the art of doing nothing, reaching back to Fluxus and the Situationist International and tracing the twin evolution of experimental 'anti-art' and socially-oriented 'participatory art' out of this earlier moment. These twin impulses uneasily co-exist in the art of the slacker and are only multiplied when one considers the slacker texts as art-objects themselves. Ultimately, the specific brand of slacking practiced by the slackers of Richard Linklater and Douglas Coupland's narratives represent a troubled and contradictory alternative art of life and an imperfect 'withdrawal'.

My second chapter looks at the genre of the fictionalised autobiography, or 'autofiction'. Focusing on female writers who present highly experimental first-person narratives, this chapter looks at the ways in which the mode of autofictional writing may be harnessed in the service of making the personal political: of generating experimental fictions that are at once both personal and universal, addressing with equal weight the authors' specific struggles and the broader issue of negotiating female agency under neoliberalism. Beginning with Kathy Acker, I observe a disjunction in critical responses to her work: on the one hand, a school of critics working in the vein of Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous focused on Acker's poststructuralist feminist exploration of language; on the other, a more recent trend of reading Acker as pro- or anti-neoliberal. I then read works by Siri Hustvedt and Chris Kraus with a particular attention to their use of the autofiction form. Undergirded by the theories of Foucault and Butler, I observe how these authors attempt to bridge the gaps illuminated by the discourse around Acker: how they attempt to speak to both the specificity of their own experiences as women and to simultaneously universalise these experiences for all women living in contemporary neoliberal America.

If the texts of chapter two privilege affective experience, my third chapter argues on behalf of the affectless, and on the possibilities inherent in a critique oriented around systems rather than subjects. In this chapter I read fictions of suburban living in relation to the neoliberal process of financialisation. Beginning with an account of how suburbia and the economic and ethical dimensions of financialisation interrelate, this chapter argues that writing about suburbia consists of a strategy of mediation between the economic and

everyday aspects of financialisation, employed in different ways and to varying degrees of usefulness, by artists working in the 1990s. Through readings of Jonathan Franzen, A M Homes, and John Keene, I read various narrative approaches to finance: from subjective, to systemic, to social. The question this chapter ultimately seeks to answer pairs with the previous chapter: each, to an extent, ask what compromises must be made in order to tell the stories of neoliberalism through the medium of fiction.

My penultimate chapter focuses on abjection, transgression, and the bodily in relation to the marginal genre of the 'new queer' and the queer fiction of Dennis Cooper. Picking up on the notion of sociality as it emerges in the previous chapters, my readings are broadly structured around Cooper's five-novel George Miles Cycle, while also considering some of Cooper's peers in the abject: from filmmaker Gregg Araki to visual artists Cindy Sherman and Paul McCarthy. The chapter further interrogates the role of affect in political critique, arguing in favour of an art that generates sociality through the manipulation of 'impersonal' or 'bad' feelings, as described in the recent works of Hal Foster, Rachel Greenwald Smith, and Nikolaj Lubecker, and with reference to the classic theories of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva. Once again, self-referentiality becomes key here, as Cooper's cycle tells a macro-cosmic story of literary failure in the 1990s: from an earnest desire to effect material change, to a collapse inwards into theory and meta-reflexivity. Nevertheless, these works also represent forward momentum and a move towards positive and productive modes of critique.

My final chapter focuses on the 1990s oeuvre of Don DeLillo as representative of DeLillo's unique mode of 'dialectical writing.' This chapter will mark a departure in the methodology of the thesis, deriving in part from research carried out in DeLillo's Texas-based archive. All three of DeLillo's texts from the decade feature artists as prominent characters, while each text also embodies formal elements discussed in prior chapters: ideas of artistic ephemerality, abject transgression, and a mode of anti-affect or 'impersonality.' I read DeLillo's work into the energetic theoretical debates of the 1990s, paralleling his literary experimentalism to the intellectual project of thinking through the antagonisms of Marxism and postmodernism and the legacy and future of Marxist critical theory. At the end of the twentieth century, I read DeLillo's *The Body Artist* as the culmination of his effort and a vision of a new aesthetics and politics of post-postmodernism: one that finally emphasises

values of intimacy, sociality, and communality as antagonistic to a neoliberal emphasis on competition and individualism.

The US in the 1990s was a strange space. Simultaneously at the end of history and at the beginning of the future, it was a decade of endless alternatives but no alternative. Rapid social and economic change saw the country transform, and yet neoliberal ideology stifled acts of resistance and radical thought. The art of the decade reflects this situation. At once desperate to diagnose the symptoms of neoliberalism and to imagine and instantiate alternative forms of living, thinking, and socialising, artists in the 1990s faced the seemingly impossible task of penetrating a 'grey curtain' of totality. Their art frequently collapses in on itself in an attempt to theorise and make visible its own machinery, as thinking about thinking—thinking to the second power—becomes a way to manage the anxiety induced by the apparent absence of alternatives. And yet, at their high moments, artworks of the decade do imagine new possibilities, beyond hamstrung postmodern posturing and the neoliberal order of normative reason. It is these moments, as well as the struggles and failures, that this thesis will ultimately seek to uncover.

# Chapter 1: Slacker Narratives

## Introduction

In an early scene in Richard Linklater's 1991 film *Slacker*, a character named Dostoevsky Wannabe sits in a coffee shop in Austin, Texas, dictating to a friend who feverishly scribbles down his stream-of-consciousness musings on art and effort:

Who's ever written the great work about the immense effort required in order not to create? Intensity without mastery. The obsessiveness of the utterly passive. And could it be that in this passivity, I shall find my freedom?

This highly quotable passage neatly captures the concerns of Linklater's film. Dostoevsky Wannabe's question concerning effort probes the tension between artistic ambition and the refusal to create, and his inquiry into passivity draws attention to the challenge of protesting mainstream society purely by disengaging from it. At the same time, the snippet of monologue is a jumble of unanswered questions and contradictions: how can passivity be obsessive? How can a 'great work' possibly hope to capture the effort of not creating, when the work itself must be created? Can this tension be resolved? And what of passivity—what are the ethics of a freedom attained through withdrawal?

This chapter will focus on these questions as they are raised and at times seemingly resolved in one of the major generic innovations of the American 1990s: the slacker narrative. Revolving around the eponymous figure of the slacker, slacker fiction as a coherent genre of media crystallised into being at the beginning of the decade with the publication of three texts: Linklater's *Slacker*, Douglas Coupland's debut novel *Generation X*, and grunge band Nirvana's sophomore album *Nevermind* (all 1991). Together, these texts introduced the figure of the slacker and the basic themes of slacker narratives to the American public, providing a blueprint for the host of imitations and co-optations that followed throughout the decade.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> While this chapter concerns iterations of the slacker narrative across a variety of media, it is undoubtedly in film that the slacker flourished in the 1990s. Slacker films from this decade include:

An iconic figure in 1990s American independent cinema, in particular, the slacker nevertheless has a long and storied heritage. In his comprehensive study *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers, and Bums in America*, Tom Lutz confirms the 1990s as the 'golden age' of the slacker narrative (295), and he positions Linklater's film as the epochal moment of this age. Emerging against a cultural backdrop in which the puritan work ethic is pushed into overdrive by a neoliberal political philosophy that imbues personal productivity with transcendent import, Lutz argues that the slacker represents an important, understudied figure of resistance in contemporary America. As his centuries-spanning study demonstrates, however, the slacker long predates the 1990s. Indeed, Lutz's account of slacking in America stretches as far back as the founding of the country, to the apparent proto-slacker Benjamin Franklin, in whose words Lutz finds the germination of the slacker ethos: to be 'idle of conduct, but of active mind' (Lutz, 77). But if the slacker, in the various incarnations Lutz chronicles throughout the history of America, is the perennial 'other' of a country built on a valorisation of 'pragmatism, purpose and productivity' (270), it is in the 1990s that 'doing nothing' catalyses into a sustained countercultural movement, bolstered in no little way by the decade's opening with the aforementioned trifecta of slacker texts. This chapter seeks to explain the slacker's blossoming at this particular moment in American history, and how the slacker of the 1990s is distinct from their previous incarnations.

My readings of the slacker narratives discussed in this chapter are grouped into three parts, each revolving around a different issue raised in Dostoevsky Wannabe's brief speech in *Slacker*. Firstly, I will consider the concept of passivity. Later on in Linklater's film, long after the narrative action has left Dostoevsky Wannabe pontificating in his café, a passer-by is offered an 'oblique strategy card' by a stranger on the street. The card he draws, inserted into Brian Eno's original deck by Linklater, reads 'withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy.'<sup>2</sup> An informing ethos of Linklater's film, this declarative also implies a

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*Dazed and Confused* (1993), *Reality Bites* (1994), *Clerks* (1994), *Kicking and Screaming* (1995), *The Low Life* (1995), and *Bandwagon* (1996). An assortment of slacker narratives in other mediums might include memoirs such as Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* (1994) and David Sedaris' *Naked* (1997), and novels such as Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, Brett Easton Ellis' *The Informers*, and Coupland's sophomore effort *Microserfs* (all 1995).

<sup>2</sup> The 'oblique strategy cards' began life as a deck of cards first produced by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt in the 1970s, as a toolkit designed to break creative deadlocks. It is this deck that Linklater references in the film, but the cards read by characters have been added by Linklater and are not present in the original deck.



distinction between Linklater's slacking and earlier forms of protest based on withdrawal. What precisely is the slacker's practice of withdrawal, then, and how does the slacker distinguish passivity from apathy? Central to this question is to understand what the slacker is withdrawing from. In the case of both the characters in Linklater's film and in Douglas Coupland's novel, withdrawal is clearly figured as a move to disengage from the working world. In the preceding introduction I delineated some of the major characteristics of neoliberalism in the 1990s, but in this chapter I will look specifically at neoliberalism's impact on daily life, particularly as it relates to the demarcations of labour and leisure. Understanding how the slacker sought to negotiate a withdrawal from the working world and to re-inscribe and reinforce these demarcations is key to understanding the slacker project.

From withdrawal, we move to creativity, and Dostoevsky Wannabe's question regarding the effort required *not* to create. If, as I will argue, the slacker figure orients their identity around a practice of creativity for the sake of itself rather than as a means to an end, then what precisely does the slacker create? Following the argument that withdrawal does not equal apathy imbues the slacker with a political potential that finds its outlet in the creative pursuits that recur throughout Linklater and Coupland's fictions. What model, then, do these slackers offer for those aspiring artists of the 1990s looking to make art capable of staging a resistance to neoliberal values? Lastly, following my discussion of the work featured in the slacker narratives, and of the art after that, in the third section of the chapter I will look to the process of producing the slacker narratives themselves: to Coupland and Linklater's creative labour, or art work. When Dostoevsky Wannabe asks who will create the 'great work' about the effort required not to create, he alights on a paradox at the heart of the slacker narrative: that these texts are works of art that required great effort to make, and yet glorify a subculture in which effort appears to be reviled. In this final section of the chapter I will step back to look at the form of these narratives as well as at the circumstances of their creation and distribution, to consider whether Linklater and Coupland offer any resolution to this problem, and if, indeed, they consider it a problem at all. Here, Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain's lyrics and public persona provide an interesting alternative vision of slacker art at work.

The slacker is a complex, at times seemingly contradictory figure. Lutz remarks that the slacker 'must mean different things to different people at different times', the figure

operating as a kind of bas-relief to the prevailing work ethic of its particular generation (Lutz, 318). The only essential attribute Lutz settles on in his study is that of ‘doubleness,’ a dialectical quality he roots in the ‘celebration and denigration’ the slacker faces at any point in history (70). By the 1990s this doubleness pervades every aspect of the slacker philosophy and the slacker narrative. Slackers are at once passive and creative, political and withdrawn, while the narratives themselves both vilify labour through their subject matter and yet celebrate it by the mere fact of their existence. By untangling and resolving some of these contradictions and complexities, I hope in this first chapter to clarify both the potentialities and the limits of resistance embodied in the slacker narrative, in order to provide both a unique perspective on slacker fiction and to introduce some of the issues central to the following chapters in this thesis.<sup>3</sup>

## Work

*Slacker*, Richard Linklater’s debut theatrically released film, is an eclectic and experimental opening salvo from a director who would become synonymous with American independent cinema, first through his activities with the Austin Film Society, and later with high profile indie hits like *Dazed and Confused* (1993), the *Before* trilogy (1995, 2004, 2013), and *Boyhood* (2014). *Slacker* anticipates all of these films with its curious mixture of experimental narrative, measured cinematography, and fixation on youthful rebellion, philosophical inquiry, and alternative living. The film documents a subculture of slackers living in Linklater’s home city of Austin, Texas. While of disparate ages, races, genders, and vocations, these slackers share a cluster of characteristics. Broadly engaged in creative pursuits, doggedly resistant to the capitalist cycle of accumulation and purchasing, and oriented towards a communal model of cohabitation and collaboration, they represent the antithesis to the Reagan-era *homo economicus* and the fast-track consumerism and

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<sup>3</sup> A unique perspective because, despite the preponderance of slacker fiction in the 1990s and through into the present day, there have been few major studies of this genre, and none that bring the slacker’s politics of withdrawal into conjunction with the neoliberalism of the 1990s. On Linklater and Coupland, arguably the two most important figures for this genre, there exists currently only one book length study each (Rob Stone’s *The Cinema of Richard Linklater* and Andrew Tate’s *Douglas Coupland*, respectively), while the most comprehensive study of Cobain is probably to be found in the essay collection *Genexegisis*. None of these sources, however, argue for the consideration of the slacker narrative as a coherent genre of fiction, as I do in this chapter.

aggressive foreign policy of the 1980s satirised in everything from Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) to John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988). Eschewing traditional naming, Linklater grants his characters titles that capture 'minor existential states of being' (Lee) that are indicative of the shared temperament of this disparate collective: from Recluse in Bathrobe to Has Faith in Groups, Co-op Guy to Having a Breakthrough Day.

While Linklater's film does a great deal to define the characteristics of the slacker as a character archetype, *Slacker* clearly draws inspiration from the real attributes of Linklater's twenty-something cohort, a generation that Coupland would soon define as 'generation X.' The attitudes of this cohort are succinctly captured in the 1990 *TIME* article 'Proceeding with Caution', a clipping of which Linklater included in the copies of *Slacker* he sent out to various producers and distributors during the months following the film's completion. Alongside sections on marriage, dating and careers, Gross and Scott's sociological study of the youngest adult generation of the 1990s devotes a subsection to the topic of activism, or 'the art of the possible.' Immediately, the authors note that while 'the impulse to give back' is strong in the twentysomethings, that impulse is paralysed to a certain degree by both the size and complexity of 'the really important problems', and by 'the great, intimidating shadow of 1960s-style activism.' The 1960s, they conclude, is viewed paradoxically. On the one hand, 'the new generation pines for a romanticized past when the issues were clear and the troops were committed,' but on the other, this romanticising is seemingly tempered by the knowledge of what came after. 'Because the '60s utopia never came,' write Gross and Scott, 'today's young adults view the era with a combination of reverie and revulsion.' This revulsion is captured succinctly in the words of 20-year-old student interviewee Sean McNally: "'A lot of us are afraid to take an intense stance and then leave it all behind like our parents did,'" Sean says. "'We have to protect ourselves from burning out, from losing faith'" (qtd. in Gross and Scott).<sup>4</sup>

The pivot away from 'an intense stance' is evident in Linklater's film in the portrayal of the few identifiably 'radical' characters. Before discussing the activism the film appears to endorse, it is worth considering the politics the film rejects. Seemingly the most politically engaged of the younger slackers, the character T-Shirt Terrorist hawks zines and shirts accompanied with radically inflected soundbites, most memorably, 'terrorism is the

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<sup>4</sup> For a more contemporary fictional account of this tension, see Dana Spiotta's 2006 novel *Eat the Document*, which arrays in parallel the story of radical protestors in the 1960s and their teenage children coming of age in the 1990s.

surgical strike capability of the oppressed.’ But the diffuse nature of his critique is telling. His brief, Burroughs-esque monologue alights on the necessity for ‘perception’ and ‘stimulate[d]’ thought in the face of ‘totally subverted’ thought processes, and it draws obviously on the Althusserian concept of ISAs as it blames ‘the church, the schools, and the media’ for this subversion. But, in line with Gross and Scott’s diagnosis of the ‘paralysis’ felt by those attempting to engage with ‘the really important problems’ in this decade, T-Shirt Terrorist’s monologue never approaches any concrete identification of targets for, or methods of, resistance. His final line in the film, ‘hey, wanna buy a t-shirt,’ seems calculated to resemble a punchline to the ostensibly radically anti-capitalist tirade that precedes it.

T-Shirt Terrorist’s speech is one of a number of paranoid monologues in the film which serve to highlight the ineffectiveness of those grappling with the large-scale problems of capitalism. *Slacker* calls back to Jameson’s description, in *Postmodernism*, of conspiracy theories as representative of a ‘degraded attempt to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system’ (38).<sup>5</sup> Such theorising is ubiquitous in *Slacker*. Characters share their beliefs on government-sponsored kidnapping and experimentation, the JFK assassination, electoral fraud, and the shadowy structure of the Freemasons. Beyond this ‘hard’ paranoia of conspiracy which tends to subsume those characters it afflicts, many seemingly more stable characters in *Slacker* exhibit a ‘soft’ paranoia related to more abstract power systems perceived to be residing in language, thought processes and apparently innocuous media and cultural products. The aforementioned Having a Breakthrough Day describes her eponymous breakthrough as a transcendence of the ‘19th Century-type [...] thought mode, construct’ in which she had previously been trapped; Papa Smurf and Scooby Doo Philosopher deconstruct the ‘whole bunch of values and junk’ concealed in Saturday morning cartoons; and Disgruntled Grad Student rails against the ‘concoction of lies [...] that drives man to do things’.

In this latter example, Disgruntled Grad Student raises an interesting example of a perceived ‘lie’: the idea of individual ‘unending potential’, which in reality reminds the character ‘of his limitations and frustrates[s] him’. The student’s frustration with the

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<sup>5</sup> In Daniel T. Rodgers *Age of Fracture*, Rodgers illustrates the ease with which conspiracy theorising can be used as a shorthand for the complexities of late capitalism when he describes Jameson’s ‘unrepresentable totality’ of late capitalism as an unfathomable diffusion of ‘cabals of back room elites, webs of influence, an all-pervasive “system” [and] new forms of class domination’ (82).

rhetoric of individual potential anchors *Slacker* in a specifically neoliberal milieu. It evokes Wendy Brown's insightful Foucauldian analysis of neoliberal subject-formation, in which Brown observes how neoliberalism 'carries responsibility for the self to new heights', such that 'the rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action' (Brown 2009, 42). Plainly it is the tension between the rhetoric of 'unending potential' and the reality of 'limitations,' or constraints, that frustrates the student; what Mark Fisher, in reference to bureaucracy, calls the difference between 'the picture presented' and 'the way in which capitalism does actually work' (Fisher, 20). This is the milieu out of which the slacker emerges, and from which they enact their withdrawal. A complex world system undergirded by an equally complex and diffuse ideology proves too abstract for the slackers of Linklater and Coupland's texts to engage with meaningfully.

Coupland's GenXer Andy neatly encapsulates the ethos informing his withdrawal when he declares: 'the world has gotten too big—way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it' (6).<sup>6</sup> Coupland's debut novel follows Andy, Dag and Claire, three thirtysomething slackers, through several weeks in their lives spent adrift in the California desert drinking, working menial jobs and, crucially, telling personal stories through which they can make sense of the circumstances of their lives. Neither *Generation X* nor Linklater's film presents the 'degraded attempt' of conspiracy theory, nor the 'intense stance' of characters like T-Shirt Terrorist, as an efficacious means of engaging with and resisting neoliberal political philosophy. This leaves only withdrawal in disgust as a viable mode of dissent. As the oblique strategy card eloquently puts it, this withdrawal is *not* apathy, nor is it neutral. Rather, it marks a concerted political-philosophical project: not a *not* doing, but a *doing* nothing. This doing nothing sits comfortably into the tradition of 'subcultural negationist practices' that John Ulrich attributes to those youth subcultures that have fallen, at various times since the 1960s, under the banner 'Generation X' (Ulrich, 3).

In their quest to do nothing as protest, the slackers of Linklater's *Slacker* expend a great deal of effort avoiding waged labour. Under neoliberalism, such avoidance demanded

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<sup>6</sup> This approach to capitalism has become a target of critique in recent discourse. In her work on abstraction, Leigh Claire la Berge has argued against the tendency when engaging with the mechanisms of late capitalism in fiction to 'suspend knowledge and description of [capitalism] by claiming its mechanisms are beyond our collective cognitive, linguistic, and epistemological reach' (93), arguing that to resign capitalism to ineffability is to give up on the possibility of resistance.

increasingly drastic strategies. The intensification of the puritan work ethic, or what Lutz refers to as the 'pragmatism, purpose, and productivity' (270) celebrated throughout American history, had, by the beginning of the 1990s, reached sinister new heights. This valorisation of constant productivity has been covered by a wide variety of critics. In *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown describes neoliberalism's injunction to be 'always on,' a by-product of the aforementioned embrace of human capital as a model of self-conduct and human behaviour as a series of calculated investment strategies. Jonathan Crary, in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, describes how this philosophy manifests in everyday life as a new temporal experience: of uninterrupted and interminable non-time, a constant activity facilitated by connectivity and enforced through surveillance technology designed, theoretically, to maximise productivity.

Against this fetishization of efficiency, the slacker takes pride in slowing down. *Slacker's* Ultimate Loser memorably describes his plans for the day: 'oh, I got some band practice in about five hours, so I figured I'd mosey on out.' Hitchhiker Waiting for "True Call" spits his disgust into a camera: 'to hell with the kind of work you have to do to earn a living.' Juan 'wakes up at 11:00 or 12:00 [and] usually falls asleep around 2:00.' This *not* doing provides a foundation onto which the slacker can begin the project of *doing* nothing. Asked in an interview about his perceptions of slacking, Linklater rejects the dictionary definition of 'people who evade duties and responsibilities.' Rather, the director argues, slackers like Ultimate Loser are people who are 'responsible to themselves' and who are not 'wasting time in a realm of activity that has nothing to do with who they are or what they might ultimately be striving for' (Linklater, qtd. in Ulrich, 18). It is from this 'realm of activity', which interviewer John Ulrich later identifies as the everyday working world, that slackers enact their withdrawal. The realm into which the slackers migrate, the space of inactivity which the working world has 'structured, colonised and marginalised', is reclaimed in the process as a realm of 'creativity rather than waste' (ibid.). This reclamation is foregrounded by the film and defines its politics: a politics Linklater goes on in interview to call his 'politics of everyday life'. The slacker's withdrawal in disgust—or as the *Criterion Collection* Blu-Ray cover calls it, their 'aggressive nonparticipa[tion]—reframes reclamation work and the territories of everyday life as the primary space of struggle against neoliberalism.

The concept of 'reclamation' in the context of a politics of everyday life is extensively explored in Ben Highmore's section 'reclamation work' in his anthology-study of conceptual

scholarship on the everyday, *The Everyday Life Reader*. For Highmore, reclamation 'suggests a transformatory practice (and politics) that works to bring the everyday to the foreground of social life so as to reorientate its practices' (224). The 'work' of reclamation focuses on 'recovering forms of pleasure and creativity that have become colonised by commodification' (ibid.). This mode of reclamation-as-recovery is central to the critic sitting at the heart of Highmore's collection, Henri Lefebvre. In his pioneering study *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre delineates the 'dialectic of work and leisure' in capitalist society, which he characterises in terms of a 'vicious circle': 'we work to earn our leisure, and leisure has only one meaning: to get away from work' (234). The specific forms of leisure available in the capitalist society prove similarly problematic for Lefebvre. 'Liberation and pleasure [...] are the essential characteristics of leisure', Lefebvre remarks—a 'liberation', specifically, from anything deemed antagonistic to modern man's relaxation (ibid.). Thus a 'mistrust' develops of 'anything which might appear to be educational', and the only acceptable forms of leisure come increasingly to resemble 'pre-digested food' (ibid.). But Lefebvre's conclusion is not entirely pessimistic, and the Marxist scholar does permit himself admiration of one 'remarkable' form of leisure: the French phenomenon of the 'Sunday painters' who spend their leisure time painting, providing for Lefebvre the possibility yet that 'at a very high cultural level, leisure transcends technical activity to become art', and thus constitutes 'an original search—whether clumsy or skilfully is unimportant—for a style of living [...] and perhaps for an art of living [and] for a kind of happiness' (235). Lefebvre's Sunday painters thus constitute one example of the reclamation of the realm of inactivity for 'creativity rather than waste'.

It is this project of reclamation which, as for Lefebvre, constitutes for Linklater a 'politics of the everyday', and the politics of *Slacker*. The disaffection of the twentysomething combines in Linklater's slackers with an 'intense curiosity' (Horsely, 217) that manifests in the misfit cast of characters as a celebration of 'half-baked *Weltanschauungen*' and knowledge in its 'strange, even screwball, incarnations' (Lee). The 'realm of inactivity', which for Lefebvre appears threateningly educationally-bereft, is reclaimed for creativity by the slackers' shared commitment to questioning, 'not necessarily to find answers but for the simple enjoyment of going deeper' (Horsely, 218). From the first frames of the film this commitment is foregrounded, as Linklater's own character Should've Stayed At Bus Station delivers an opening monologue musing on the possibilities of parallel universes and roads (and buses) not taken. From this initial salvo the film erupts into a celebration of eclectic

passions, from the anti-art of Anti-Artist and the anti-travelling sentiments of Anti-Traveller, to the Saturday-morning-cartoon philosophising of Scooby-Doo Philosopher, the rejection of 'premeditated fun' by Bathrobe Recluse, and finally the playful early-morning trip to Austin's highest peak, at which point the film terminates with the gleeful destruction of one character's 8mm camera. Continuing the spatial metaphors of Highmore and Lefebvre, we might read this mountaintop on which the slackers play as a physical incarnation of that 'realm of inactivity' in which the slackers freely pursue their celebration of 'imagination and reflection'.

In Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*, this same marginal space is to be found not on a mountaintop but in a valley: the Coachella Valley in southern California. The novel's Californian desert setting is an appropriately apocalyptic post-historical wasteland. At the beginning of the book the three protagonists travel to 'hell', or West Palm Springs Village, a 'modern ruin [...] vaguely reminiscent of a Vietnam War movie set' (17). The description recalls Baudrillard's mythic evocation of the desert of America, a space of 'superficial neutrality' (Baudrillard, 119), the 'aesthetic form' of an 'ulterior, asocial, superficial world' (6) and a vision of 'future catastrophe' (5). But Baudrillard's desert is a terminus, both the reflection and conclusion of postmodern America. For Coupland's characters, the desert embodies no such finality. Rather than a wasteland, the desert figures in Coupland's novel as a similar space for creativity as that favoured by Linklater's slackers; its *tabula rasa* topography a real, physical space into which one can withdraw. Describing the 'barren' West Palm Springs Village, Andy likens it to 'the blank space at the end of a chapter' (19), and a few chapters later Dag describes his eventual migration to the desert as motivated by the need for 'a clean slate, with no one to read it' (36). Starting with this 'blank space', Coupland's slackers begin their own project of reclamation: 'the three of us left our lives behind us and came to the desert — to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process' (10).

Like the slackers of *Slacker*, Coupland's GenXers exchange the pursuit of waged labour for a pursuit of personal expressions of creativity and intellectual inquiry. But despite their ostensible withdrawal, characters in both texts hold menial, unskilled jobs. In *Slacker*, Hitchhiker Awaiting 'True Call's' declaration 'to hell with the kind of work you have to do to earn a living,' is the exception, not the rule. Indeed, in the background of every scene of impassioned intellectual debate, there is another slacker-type character cleaning the bar,



serving coffee, or tending the till. Likewise, in Coupland's *Generation X*, two of the three protagonists work at Larry's, a local dive bar, while Claire completes the trio of menial jobs by tending the Chanel counter of an I. Magnin department store. Nevertheless, all three are college-educated and, in their respective pasts, are described holding ostensibly 'prestigious' jobs: most explicitly, Dag recalls his past life as 'one of those putzes you see driving a sports car down to the financial district' (22). Coupland captures the GenXers deliberate de-skilling with the neologism 'McJob': jobs that are 'low pay, low prestige, low benefits, low future' (5), elsewhere described as stop-gap jobs taken to fund more meaningful pursuits. Meanwhile, as we have seen, Linklater qualifies that slackers are defined as such by their resistance to 'wasting time in a realm of activity that has nothing to do with who they are or what they might ultimately be striving for.'

In a chapter entitled 'Remember Earth Clearly', Coupland's protagonists share their 'earth memories'; moments that 'define what it's like to be alive on this planet' (104). The exchange, which specifically precludes 'fake yuppie experiences', details one character's first sight of snow, another's memory of bacon cooking and for a third the recollection of his parents spontaneously dancing to shortwave radio. As well as an exemplary moment of the sort of story-sharing championed by Coupland's characters, Elvissa's specific discounting of 'fake yuppie experiences that you had to spend money on' (ibid.) at the initiation of her 'earth memories' idea highlights another shared facet of the slacker identity: a distaste for the trappings and excesses of consumerism. This distaste does not manifest in a radical negation of either working or even of consuming—Coupland's slackers evince at least some pleasure in the purchasing of a 'coiled up antique bead belt' (86) or a 'taxidermied chicken' (7)—but it does surface in the diminished importance of these practices in the slackers' lives; a clear indication of their preference for the 'realm of inactivity' over the aggressive careerism that characterises the everyday working world. Like Linklater, Coupland acknowledges the realities of living in late 20th century America and as such allows his characters access to stable incomes, but like Linklater he upholds a crucial distinction: 'if they have a job, the job doesn't have them' (Linklater, qtd. in Ulrich, 18). What does 'have them' is the creative practice of the game of 'bedtime stories', which proceeds throughout the novel and forms the bulk of the text.

While Andy, Dag and Claire do not invest energy into their jobs, they nevertheless work long hours at the behest of their bosses to earn the wage necessary to fund their

storytelling picnics and (in Dag's case) erratic trips to Mexico. At one moment in the novel, Mr M., owner of Larry's bar, takes offence at Dag and reminds him: 'I'm a person and I pay your paycheck, too' (130). Likewise, menial and low-skilled labour haunts the frames of Linklater's film, backgrounded but never entirely excised. This points, ultimately, to an element of pragmatism in the slacker position, but also to a shadow of compromise. The mental rebellion of these slackers again recalls Fisher's diagnosis of anti-capitalist action in a post-ideological society, particularly in reference to the centrality of the individualist attitude fostered by neoliberalism. Drawing on Žižek, Fisher notes:

Capitalist ideology in general [...] consists precisely in the overvaluing of belief—in the sense of the inner subjective attitude—at the expense of the beliefs we exhibit and externalise in our behaviour. So long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in the capitalist exchange (Fisher, 17).

Fisher builds on this idea in a conversation with Jeremy Gilbert, where he describes the 'Althusserian' ideology at work in UK institutions of Higher Education under Blair's labour government:

the easiest option all round would be for us to go through the motions. We didn't have to believe it, we only had to act as if we believed it. The idea that our 'inner beliefs' mattered more than what we were publicly professing at work was crucial to capitalist realism. We could have left-wing convictions, and a left-wing self-image, provided these didn't impinge on work in any significant way! (Fisher and Gilbert, 91)

In one sense, this is the same compromise afforded the slackers. They can slack, as long as they do it in their own time. And they can 'not waste any time'—where time equals intellectual or emotional labour—in the realm of work, provided they still clock in and out each day. But as Fisher notes, 'the very privileging of 'inner' subjective states over the public was itself an ideological move' (91), and so the withdrawal the slackers pursue in order to push back against the neoliberal work ethic presents, at best, a compromised version of rebellion.

It is worth remarking, however, that Fisher's invocation of Althusser in this discussion is notable because it points to an older conception of work, of the kind discussed by Lefebvre and similar mid-century Marxists. Whilst in the 1950s Lefebvre recognised in the dialectic of work and leisure the desire for a 'sharp break' between former and latter (Lefebvre, 229), by the 1990s, the neoliberal impulse to bring 'all human action into the domain of the market' (Harvey 2005, 3) had rendered society somewhat closer in resemblance to the pre-

capitalist feudal state in which, for Lefebvre, 'the workplace is all around the house; work is not separate from the everyday life of the family' (227). This is the contemporary situation of being 'always on' which critics like Wendy Brown and Michel Feher point to when they describe the contemporary state of the neoliberal subject as *homo economicus*. While the privileging of internalised rebellion, therefore, represents a complicity with neoliberal ideology, in the specifically neoliberal circumstances in which the slackers find themselves, doing the bare minimum is still a pushback against the injunction to excel, and to place labour at the heart of one's identity.

Both Linklater's slackers and Coupland's trio of storytelling thirty-somethings engage in what Rob Stone, with specific reference to Linklater, calls variously a 'voluntary exile' (1) or 'collective withdrawal' (18) from the fast-track consumerism and aggressive individualism that defines Ronald Reagan's neoliberal legacy. From the blank space of the margins to which they have withdrawn, the slackers of *Slacker* and *Generation X* construct an alternative, creative lifestyle. Yet, as Linklater himself acknowledges, 'everyday life is a cultural space worth struggling over' (Linklater qtd. in Ulrich, 19). It is the 'struggle', specifically, which informs both Linklater and Coupland's works: the 'immense effort' required to reclaim everyday life for creativity without drawing it into the ambit of the market. The next part of this chapter will focus on the slacker's creative process and their response to this struggle.

## Art

Work, then, occupies a simultaneously centralised and marginalised position in the slacker's identity. Work is the negative against which the slacker defines himself and yet also that which he depends upon for the freedom to pursue his reclamation project. If dissent begins for the slacker as an internal rebellion, it nevertheless does still manifest in external practices. While discussing the work of contemporary artist Lasse Schmidt Hansen, the curators of the 2014 exhibition *New Ways of Doing Nothing* address the dialectic (or not) of work and leisure much as I have above. 'Work and leisure flow into each other,' they write, 'meaning that the so-called creative workers have become the role model for a neoliberal deregulation and flexibilisation that adapts the concept of complete

identification with one's work, ideally perceived as self-fulfillment' (Muller and Ricupero, 39). This is the fallacy of the injunction to 'Do What You Love' which has rightly been identified as an essential rhetorical tool in the neoliberal perversion of freedom (Tokumitsu). This is also the paradox the slacker faces: when leisure has become work in the broader culture, how can one *truly* withdraw? One answer to this aporia, for Muller and Ricupero, 'might be an activity that produces nothing,' (39), or what Dostoevsky Wannabe would call an 'effort [...] not to create.' These concepts capture the tensions that plague the slacker's artistic dissent: on the one hand, slacking is a mode of lived resistance predicated on withdrawal and 'doing nothing'; on the other, the slackers hold an emphatic commitment to intellectual inquiry and artistic creativity.<sup>7</sup> These twin impulses are, to a degree, reconciled in the art of slacking; in the creative pursuits of the slacker communities depicted in both Linkater and Coupland's texts, which draw deeply on a history of artistic flirtations with absence, inertia, and impossibility as paradoxically socially engaging and invigorating. Historically, this 'immense effort' has been recognised by figures as disparate as Oscar Wilde ('to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world' (qtd. In Muller and Ricupero)) to John Cage ('there is nothing to say... what we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking' (Cage, 109)) to King Crimson frontman and Lutz's case study of hippie slacking Robert Fripp ('doing nothing is very hard'). The present section will focus on this most difficult of artistic projects by both historicising anti-productive art and considering the contemporary circumstances of art production.

*Slacker* features many instances of creativity, from live music performances to freely composed monologues on everything from the Freemasons to the Bush administration, to art performances, to an old man recording his thoughts on a dictaphone and a Postmodern Paul Revere delivering an aggressively poetic early-morning diatribe on government weapons programs from a battered car loudspeaker. These various projects share two broadly interrelated attributes: they are performance-based, and they are anti-productive. From the simple busking of Street Musician to the elaborate sidewalk installation created by Teacup Sculpter and the personal cleansing ritual led by Guy Who Tosses Typewriter,

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<sup>7</sup> I'm going to argue here that the slackers draw a distinction between the positive attribute of creativity and an injunction to productivity that should be resisted. However Dostoevsky Wannabe's speech would seem to reject creativity, also. When he talks about 'the immense effort required in order not to create,' I take his use of the term 'create' in this context to refer to the process by which an artist becomes an individual 'creator' elevated above their audience. The character's dismissive reference to 'mastery' in the same speech confirms his derisive attitude towards artistic ego. I'll return to this scene, and to the irony of Dostoevsky Wannabe's monologuing, later in the chapter.

the instances of artistic creation captured in *Slacker* are almost always what Claire Bishop, in her landmark study of participatory art, *Artificial Hells*, calls 'projects.' That is, they eschew the 'finite, portable, commodifiable' attributes of traditional art to embrace the model of the 'ongoing, long-term project with an unclear beginning and end' (Bishop, 2). Similarly, in relation to their rejection of the 'commodifiable', these art projects exclusively resist the art-commodity forms suitable for commercial circulation. The hidden video installation of Video Backpacker remains hermetically sealed inside a lone apartment room, Postmodern Paul Revere's slam-poetic ravings go unrecorded, and the pixel vision camera circulated by Pixel Visionary records without film.

In this case, these artworks reject not just the neoliberal injunction to produce, in the broadest sense, but also the neoliberalisation of art production specifically. Neoliberalism has observed great shifts in both the production and consumption of art. The former is best represented in what Noel Halifax has called 'the rise of artists [...] as "factory" owners, employing students on low wages to churn out works for the world's super-rich dealers and collectors.' These super-rich collectors have in turn transformed their relation to the artworks they buy. In an account of his visit to Singapore Freeport, a 'highly securitised luxury warehouse' built in the non-space of Changi Airport, Max Haiven observes a new process of art accumulation as financial speculation:

Secreted away in an eternal, risk-free stasis, dead and yet alive, art becomes a crypt for money: a pure asset, a distillation of the logic of private property itself, a hermetic vehicle for speculation. Artworks can be exchanged millions of times over in faraway locations without ever moving an inch from their hyper-securitized vault — simply the deed to ownership changes "hands."

As he describes it, Singapore Freeport is a vault containing a thousand smaller vaults: each artwork itself being a 'vault in which capital can be secreted,' vaults envisioned by celebrity artists and built by a casualised and largely invisible workforce before disappearing from the reach of the public entirely.

At its most dystopian, then, neoliberalism has liquidated art, transforming artistry into commodity. In its typical lifecycle a piece can be conceived of by an artist and the work of creating it outsourced to casual labourers, before it is purchased as a speculative investment and confined to freeport storage in order to appreciate in value as part of a portfolio of assets. The rise of knowledge work and the concurrent obfuscation of an

increasingly exploited labour force is visible in the transformation of the process of art production, as is the celebration of individual creativity in the narratives by which these artworks are marketed. Likewise, financialisation, or the production of wealth primarily through speculative investments, and the expanded field in which such future-oriented behaviours are practiced, now includes the consumption and collection of art. As with the creative outlets of Linklater's slackers, the 'bedtime stories' told by Coupland's protagonists resist precisely this blend of egoistic creation, diffused labour, and commodifiable production. Andy, Dag, and Claire's stories are always oral, spontaneous and unrecorded, and thus remain as ephemeral, as intangible, as Linklater's slackers' performances. They exist exclusively in the moment they are told—in one extreme example breathlessly delivered from a telephone booth in Mexico—and are never shared with an audience larger than a handful of likeminded characters. As Andrew Tate recognises in his analysis of Coupland's early oeuvre, a recurrent motif in the Canadian author's work is the concept of 'storytelling as a means to asserting identity' (Tate, 40). Just as Rob Stone recognises in *Slacker* the means by which a 'communal identity' is constructed by the slackers through a 'passed-along polyphony' of questioning and creativity (Stone, 26), so the storytelling in *Generation X* functions for Andy, Dag and Claire as means for the three characters to write their own narratives on their own terms, separate from the 'illusory language of the market' (Tate, 39) and of the market itself, which neoliberalism posits as a 'a guide to all human action, and substitut[e] for all previously held ethical beliefs' (Harvey 2005, 3).

The values these art practices uphold emerge from a century of influences and appear alongside a cluster of loosely collected movements that would lead the pushback against the neoliberalisation of art in the 1990s. In *Artificial Hells*, Bishop identifies 1989 as the third of three pivotal historical moments for the establishment of alternative, post-studio artistic practice. She traces these practices back to the influence of the avant-garde of 1921 (Surrealism and Dada), and to the 'neo' avant-garde of 1968 (the Situationist International and Fluxus).<sup>8</sup> These artistic touchstones are alighted on for their significance in the development of what Bishop terms 'participatory art' in the 1990s, an alternative, 'post-

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<sup>8</sup> These same nodes occur in *Lipstick Traces*, Greil Marcus' sprawling attempt to trace the 'secret history of the twentieth century.' Marcus maps 'the mystery of spectral connections between people long separated by place and time, but somehow speaking the same language' (4), focusing on the intertextual web that undergirds the Sex Pistols' song 'Anarchy in the UK.' This web of circumstance and serendipity encompasses 'the Situationist International [...] the surrealists of the 1920s, the dadaists [...] the young Karl Marx, Saint-Just, various medieval heretics, and the Knights of the Round Table' (19).

studio' practice that emphasises the collectivised process of creativity over the production of a finished piece. The influence of the 1960s counterculture on the texts this chapter is discussing is quite perceptible, but perhaps more important is the profound influence of the 60s neo avant-garde. One of the most significant collectives of this period is Fluxus, an obvious antecedent to the slacker art of the 1990s and a useful comparison point. Like the slacker's art, Fluxus art is concerned primarily with nothingness, but just as for the slackers, Fluxus nothing manifests in many different ways: from an apparent absence of artistic value in Duchampian readymades, to Situationist-inspired happenings and instructions for performances that cannot be performed.<sup>9</sup> Exploring Fluxus art and philosophy in more detail in turn allows for a more nuanced reflection on the slacker art that inherited Fluxus' practices.

Prefigured by Dadaism, Fluxus firmly belongs to the 'other tradition' of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant garde. This is the 'irrational/supra-rational alternative to the "high-Modernist" tendency to formal, self-referential abstraction' (Frank, 24) that Bishop finds as the inspiration for the projects of participatory art. Against a perceived turning inwards that would ultimately result in a collapsing spiral of self-referentiality,<sup>10</sup> the 'other tradition' of Fluxus and the Situationists turned outwards, to occupy (in the most affirmative sense of the word) the Lefebvrian spaces of everyday life. For Owen F. Smith, the Fluxus worldview is fundamentally a challenge to 'liberal individualism.' In a deft interrogation of the project, Smith argues that the Fluxus worldview

must ultimately be seen as intimating the rejection of the idea that the individual can have an identity apart from the social order. This recognition of self as defined not by pre-societal factors, but as developed through the self's relations to others [...] stresses the significance of relations, or difference, in identification of a concept or even an individual. [...] This facet of Fluxus is a simultaneous rejection of freedom as defined by

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<sup>9</sup> Some examples of Fluxus art include: George Brecht's *White Table with Rainbow Leg* (1962), and *Exit* (1963), the latter a Duchampian readymade salvaged and sold in various Fluxus publications; Ken Friedman's *Mandatory Happening* (1966), which reads, 'you will decide to read or not read this instruction. Having made your decision, the happening is over'; and the musical scores of Ay-O, which subvert everything that one might expect from a musical performance. *Ay-O's Rainbow No. 1 for Orchestra* (date unknown), instructs: 'Soap bubbles are blown out of various wind instruments. The conductor breaks the bubbles with his baton.'

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Brown provides an account of this collapse in his article 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption Under Capital', when he notes that the modernist tendency to produce works within a field of restricted production leads to a situation in which increasingly specific formal concerns are addressed in a constant process of 'narrowing' of artistic meaning.

an autonomy from the social order and an embrace of the other major aspect of the Fluxus world view, the freedom of play. (116)

Thus, we get the directive of George Maciunas—the catalyst and organising force behind the loose collective—to artist Ben Vautier: ‘eliminate your ego entirely [...] don’t attribute anything to yourself - depersonalise yourself!’ (qtd. in Kellein, 14). Parallel to, and reinforcing, this anti-individualist model of art production is an emphasis on play. Smith understands Fluxus play as ‘a model of open-ended discourse that stresses relations rather than a linear production and communication of discrete pieces of information’ (117), a play that embodies a ‘model of engagement to replace the model of estrangement’ advocated by Modernist autonomists. By both suppressing artistic ego and encouraging collaborative play, Fluxus anticipates the wave of ‘post-studio’, socially-engaged practices in the 1990s that form the focus of Bishop’s *Artificial Hells*. Politically, meanwhile, Fluxus rejects the idea ‘that to effect change the individual must occupy a space outside of society,’ seeking instead to manifest as a disruptive intrusion into ‘the arena of social, political and cultural debate’ (119). Thus, many of the seemingly opaque performance pieces and orchestral scores that make up the canon of Fluxus works were, in fact, performed live.<sup>11</sup> Play, for Fluxus, was a very literal, physical practice, and yet one determinedly anti-productive in a traditional sense.

The common attributes of ephemerality and collectivity that Fluxus and related neo avant-garde movements emphasised in the 60s, in the context of the neoliberal injunction to recognise everything as an asset or an investment, became in the 1990s ever more urgently desirable for the countercultural artist. In ‘The Accidental Neoliberal’, Jedediah Purdy laments the way in which his own contribution to the culture of the 90s, his book *For Common Things*, had unwittingly exemplified the very neoliberal ideology he had intended to rail against. Exasperatedly, Purdy remarks that under the insidious umbrella of neoliberalism, ‘trying to imagine, in public, a way of being that is not neoliberal means, mostly, making ephemera’ (22). While Purdy laments this state of affairs, the notion of creating ephemera as a means of combatting the commodifying grasp of the neoliberal market and the consequent modification of ‘art’ into ‘work’, is for the slackers a positive lesson in aesthetic resistance. This conflation of the realms of activity and creativity is

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<sup>11</sup> At the Fluxus *International Festival of the Newest Music*, held at Weisbaden in 1962, Dick Higgins performed *Danger Music No. 2*, the instructions for which read ‘Hat. Rags. Paper. Heave. Shave.’ Meanwhile, at the same festival, a collective of Fluxus artists including Maciunas himself performed Philip Corner’s *Piano Activities* by disassembling a grand piano over four days.



further explored in the recent work of Sarah Brouillette. In *Literature and the Creative Economy* Brouillette charts the rise, throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century, of a new creative class; a section of the workforce which adds ‘economic value through their creativity’ (20). This newly emergent class coincides with a reconceptualisation by Western neoliberal governments of the creative arts as ‘a source of wealth and competitive advantage’ (27), fostered by acts of privatisation and competitive funding designed to turn art into business. This marketisation of creativity effectively turns the act of creative production into work. Linklater’s slackers, meanwhile, attempt to create whilst resisting commodification. This is either by keeping their endeavours ephemeral, unrecorded, and thus existing only in the space and time in which they are performed, or else—as in the case of the old man recording his thoughts—remaining pointedly private.<sup>12</sup> As neoliberalism draws the realms of activity and creativity into closer proximity, as a by-product each realm has a great potential to affect, or disrupt, the other. So when art becomes work, not doing art manifests as a challenge not just to the art world—as was the case with Fluxus—but to all work, and to the entire realm of activity from which the slacker withdraws.

By the 1990s Fluxus had disaggregated, but it and the broader neo avant-garde it belonged to continued to inspire and exert influence. While the philosophy and the key players of Fluxus largely remained operational in the 1990s, the coherence of Fluxus as a project vanished with the death of George Maciunas in 1978. However, two years *after* the slacker’s landmark date of 1991, to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary since the conception of Fluxus, American artist Ben Vautier invited contributors to the international Nice Fluxus Festival of Nothing. To take part, Vautier gave artists a simple brief: ‘For this Festival you are asked to do nothing. You can stay at home and do nothing. NO PERFORMING. NO CONFERENCE. NO EXPOSITION. NO WORK.’ That the 1990s would play host to this brief resurgence of Fluxus is telling of a milieu that also harboured the burgeoning and related movements of ‘relational aesthetics’ and social practice. The former, defined by Nicholas Bourriaud in a 1998 book of the same name, is described to encompass ‘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.’ Viewing artists as facilitators rather than makers, and regarding art as an ‘information

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<sup>12</sup> Horsley posits the notion of the ‘pure artist,’ in reference to independent filmmakers, as that auteur who resists selling out by destroying or keeping hidden his works (132).

exchange', Bourriaud describes an artistic movement that seeks to reframe the traditional power dynamic of art-experience. Claire Bishop is careful to distance her own case studies from Bourriaud, describing the 'participatory art' on which her project focuses as 'less interested in a relational *aesthetic* than in the creative rewards of participation as a politicised working process' (2). These two movements together resemble two strands of the neo avant-garde project teased out and embellished. Bourriaud's relational aesthetics seek the absolute effacement of the artistic ego (albeit problematically hampered by the still-central position of the artist/facilitator and the potentially exploitative practices of delegated performance), whilst participatory art seeks social transformation brought about from within and through artistic play.

Certainly, the art practices documented in *Slacker* and *Generation X* live up to Bourriaud and Bishop's demands for artworks that are created in a communal process of play, and that rarely enter into the market as a clear commodity. However, when considering the creative practices of the slacker as a form of protest through alternative living, their success is not clearly defensible. 'Could it be that in this passivity, I shall find my freedom?' asks Dostoevsky Wannabe. As I've tried to demonstrate, this conflation of artistic passivity and freedom taps into a long tradition of doing nothing as a means to a form of collective emancipation, from the strictures of both the art market and broader societal constraints. However, much as the slackers' attitudes to work ultimately resemble a compromise, so too is their particular brand of artistic resistance open to charges of capitulation, and even failure. As we have seen, central to neoliberal ideology is the primacy of the individual. Passivity and the diminishment of ego thus becomes the ideal position from which to challenge this ideology. Ironically, however, Dostoevsky Wannabe's monologue is a *monologue*, not a *dialogue*. It is, in fact, *dictated* to another passive character in an approximate rendering of the modernist relationship between artist and audience, wherein Dostoevsky Wannabe adopts an egocentric position of individual importance and creative genius.<sup>13</sup>

Nearly every interaction and instance of creativity in *Slacker* conforms to the same pattern: one character talks *at* another. Rob Stone describes the film's structure as a 'passed-along polyphony' which concretises a sense of communality among the slackers (27). In this

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<sup>13</sup> For further reading on the distinction between monologic and dialogic art, see Scott Lash, whose theories will feature heavily in my final chapter.

respect, he's half right. In fact, *Slacker's* 'passed along' structure manifests as a series of monologues impressed upon passive receivers, such that the film's eventual effect is of a curiously monologic polyphony disguised as dialogic collectivity. This is the case also in Coupland's novel, whereby the shared storytelling of the three principle characters *does* reinforce affective bonds and a communal sense of identity, but it *does not* represent a collaborative or collective model of art production. Rather, individual texts are circulated between individuals, generating an ecology of affect that is far from resistant to neoliberal values.<sup>14</sup> In the final part of this chapter I want to pursue these faultlines in the slacker texts. To an imperfect extent, the contradictions I have described and will elaborate on further are absorbed into the slacker texts, as these texts provide a meta-commentary on the exact 'immense effort' involved in creating nothing that Dostoevsky Wannabe highlights. However, as we have seen already with the marginalisation of labour, the inability to engage with the complexities of late capitalism, the privileging of internal rebellion, and the monologic structure of artistic dissemination each text celebrates, the slacker texts ultimately fail to entirely extricate themselves, or to withdraw, from the logics of neoliberalism.

## Artwork

*Slacker's* formal experimentalism mirrors the tensions it illuminates between monologue and dialogue in the practices of its characters. The film is a deviation from the ubiquitous 'network narratives' typical of late-twentieth century cinema.<sup>15</sup> The film is structured as a sequence of connected vignettes all occurring on the streets of Austin, wherein each scene is triggered by the entrance or exit of one character, thus constructing the notion of the

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<sup>14</sup> I take the term ecology of affect from Rachel Greenwald Smith's *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, in which Smith draws a parallel between the transmission of affect through the circulation of literary works to the model of an ecosystem, in order to draw attention to the potential for certain artworks to generate non-linear, reciprocal affective relationships with their readers. For more on this see Smith's fourth chapter, 'Ecology, Feeling, and Form in Neoliberal Literature.'

<sup>15</sup> For more on network narratives, see David Bordwell's *Poetics of Cinema*. Bordwell argues that the rise of the internet, the popularity of communitarian legal theory, and the advent of 'networking' in business all contributed to a golden age of network narratives in the mid-90s. Network narratives, for Bordwell, are 'converging fates plots' drawn onto an 'n-degrees-of-separation template,' evocative of 'schematic circuits' (191-193). Examples include Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999).

‘passed-along polyphony’. So, for example, Ultimate Loser enters Juan’s house at the end of a scene involving his housemates, utters his memorable line (‘I figured I’d mosey on out’), and is then followed into the streets where he meets first Stephanie from Dallas and then Pap Smear Pusher. Following their conversation, the camera remains with Ultimate Loser until he passes T-Shirt Terrorist, who is accosting Anti-Traveller, who then passes Sidewalk Psychic, and so on. The camera never returns to a character; it simply moves on-and-on, tracing a zig-zagging pattern across the streets and buildings of Austin without looking back. While the film evokes the ‘six degrees of separation’ theory, it distances itself from the traditional network narrative and from the evocative interconnectedness of these ideas. The relations *Slacker* maps are not a network or web at all, but rather a single, linear thread. Should’ve Stayed as Bus Station is separated from Tosses Camera Off Cliff not by six characters but by more than sixty, and the kind of mythicised connectivity central to a film like Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* is eschewed in favour of the much more circumstantial connectivity of a group of people who all circulate in the same district of Austin, without ever impacting one another’s lives in a tangible way. And yet these characters share a fundamental worldview that celebrates connection and communality, and is thus seemingly at odds with the structure of the film itself.

The film’s ending sums this tension up perfectly: the gesture of the destroyed camera—which cannot really have been destroyed if the final shots of the film are understood to be captured by it—purely embodies the tension between ethos and aesthetic: between an anarchic rejection of mainstream values and ideologies and a capitulation to the demands of a market that requires creativity be exercised in the production of a marketable product. At the end of Linklater’s film the camera is at once destroyed and yet at the same moment this gesture is undone, revealed to be illusory. In a sense, this act represents the same internalisation of rebellion described by Fisher: the idea that as long as the film stages an act of creative destruction, it doesn’t matter that in reality the footage is preserved for commercial distribution. This is a failure born of necessity, one that requires the audience’s goodwill to forgive: and this is precisely the point of this scene’s inclusion, along with similar scenes in Coupland’s novel. A recurring theme of my broader project will be to focus on texts that adopt a meta-reflexive attitude towards their own limitations and failures. Such texts stage and reflect upon their own status as artworks and the extent to which they can claim agency and autonomy while remaining imbricated in the contemporary late capitalist system. This notion will be fully fleshed-out, so to speak, in a later chapter which

focuses on the aesthetics of abjection and meta-abjection in 1990s fiction. But Coupland, and especially Linklater, mark the first iteration of this critical manoeuvre in the 1990s with their hesitant, compromised portraits of the slacker ethos.

To make better sense of this idea, we can look to another figure from the early 90s: the iconic Kurt Cobain, the instrumental third figure in what John Ulrich terms the slacker's 'canonical triumvirate'. Following the release of Coupland's novel in March, and Linklater's film in July, in September 1991 Nirvana unleashed their sophomore album *Nevermind* on the American public, defining the soundtrack to a subculture. Ulrich and Harris' anthology collection of work on 90s alternative youth culture, *GenXegesis*, inevitably focuses heavily on Nirvana. Perhaps equally inevitably, critical consensus regarding Cobain's aesthetic project remains undefined. To make sense of Cobain and to make sense of the disparate critical perspectives that surround him it is necessary, I want to argue, to make reference to a movement only just beginning to emerge in the 1990s, one that in the twenty-first century has since gone on to establish itself critically and creatively as the most coherent artistic project of the post-postmodern period: the new sincerity. The turn towards sincerity in these early slacker texts represents a way forward and a renewed commitment to a productive literature after the 'impasse' of postmodernism and the end of history.<sup>16</sup>

In Neil Nehring's *GenXegesis* essay 'Jigsaw Youth versus Generation X and Postmodernism,' Nehring claims that the riot grrrl movement, taking inspiration from feminist philosophies of affect, harnessed a musical aesthetic of 'anger without an articulated ideology' (71) as an 'antidote to postmodernism' (61) and as a means of moving beyond the 'waning of affect' identified by Jameson as symptomatic of a culture no longer able to locate any meaning as a possible and appropriate source for impassioned commitment (64). Nehring goes on to identify in Kurt Cobain's vocal performance and stage persona this same 'lack of articulation' (71) that nevertheless derives subversive political potential from its authentic expression of emotion in the face of a prevailing postmodern climate in which 'we have all been trained to take nothing seriously', and in which emotion and meaning have become detached and disconnected from political significance. Eschewing intellect in favour of emotion, for Nehring, means reconfiguring political discourse on affective, not intellectual, terms, and grounding politics in personality. This, Nehring argues, involves a renewed

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<sup>16</sup> On the notion of a postmodern 'impasse', see *Capitalist Realism*, in which Mark Fisher describes the paralysis of 'pre-corporation' that plagued a generation of attempted rebels in the 1990s, as well as David Foster Wallace's 'E Unibus Pluram,' which will be discussed later in this chapter.

emphasis on 'self-creation' and the pursuit of a project to 'break with learned identities' in order to 'put together the puzzle pieces of a more authentic identity' (72).

For Catherine J. Cresswell, also writing in *GenXegesis*, Cobain's performances are notable for their deliberate *negation* of a stable, authentic identity. In what she calls a 'performance of pathology' (80), Cresswell recognises in Cobain's 'ambiguous, repetitive or simply alliterative' vocals an imitation of depressive speech modes; modes that erase signification and thus 'expose the void on which language is founded' (95). From this void, Cobain, in what Cresswell reads as a resistance to becoming a 'commodified identity', cultivates a selfhood that 'collapse[s] distinctions' and renders himself as subject 'unreadable' and thus resistant to 'easy translation into the appropriable poses of postmodern capitalism' (97). Thus, for Cresswell, Cobain politicises pathology, whilst for Nehring he politicises emotion. Yet the end result is quite different. The 'void' of language into which Cobain taps, as well as the 'void' of identity which for Cresswell is produced through Cobain's blankly parodic, contradictory onstage personas, both would seem to fit conventionally into a poetics of postmodernity—a poetics of 'involution [...] absurdity [...] sardonic fatigue [...] iconoclasm and rebellion,' to quote David Foster Wallace (Wallace 1993, 182)—and appear to eschew any claims towards authentic self-expression. Meanwhile Nehring reads Cobain's performance of inarticulate anger precisely as a means to authentic self-expression, and the foundation of a politics that is rooted in a belief in identity and a rejection of postmodern scepticism regarding the possibility of stable selfhood. What, then, are we to make of these contrasting accounts of Cobain's musical project?

Both Cresswell and Nehring read Cobain's music into a dialectic of irony and authenticity. For Cresswell, Cobain embraces irony in order to resist becoming a fixed and thus commodified identity, whilst for Nehring, rejecting irony and re-siting politics in affect allows Cobain to cultivate an authentic identity on his own terms. In both cases, the authors concede that Cobain must contend with what Nehring, drawing on the work of Larry Grossberg, calls the danger of 'authentic inauthenticity'; the 'transparently calculated emotional intensity' Grossberg finds in the work of artists like Bruce Springsteen (Grossberg, qtd. in Nehring, 64). This danger, long acknowledged as an impasse beyond which artists like Cobain struggled to move, has in the twenty-first century invigorated a turn to sincerity in a crop of authors including Dave Eggers, Jennifer Egan and Benjamin

Kunkel, all of whom owe a spiritual debt to the work of David Foster Wallace, whose own early work on the subject in the 1990s—far from an isolated phenomenon—marks a response to the cultural milieu of which the early slacker fictions I am discussing are a part.

At the conclusion to his essay 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', Wallace famously posits his vision for the future of art after irony. He imagines 'the next great literary "rebels"' championing 'single-entendre values' and treating 'with reverence and conviction' the 'old untrendy human troubles and emotions in US life' (192-193). Contrasting these imagined rebels with the 'old postmodern insurgents' who risk 'shock, disgust [and] outrage', the new 'anti-rebels' would instead risk 'the yawn, the rolled eyes' and the accusations of 'sentimentality [and] melodrama' (193). For contemporary critics, Wallace's essay, which presents sincerity as the antidote to postmodern irony, marks a crucial development in what Adam Kelly calls 'the dialectic of sincerity' (Kelly 2014). Lionel Trilling's work *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) observes a turn in the twentieth century from the ideal of sincerity, 'performed' towards others, to the primacy of the 'authentic autonomous self,' so that, in Trilling's terms, a dialectical relationship arises between sincerity and authenticity. For Kelly, Wallace's preoccupation with irony modifies this formulation to incorporate irony, not authenticity, as the dialectical opposite of sincerity. Recognising that 'the fight to preserve personal authenticity' in a society saturated with advertising and consumerism had 'proven impossible,' Wallace and his contemporaries instead pursue the 'reconstruction of new forms of sincerity' in opposition to postmodern irony (ibid.).

Emblematic of the late-twentieth century 'turn to theory', Kelly routes Wallace's new sincerity through Derrida. For Kelly, the legacy of post-structuralism denotes that sincerity 'expressed through language [...] can never be pure', in much the same way that for Derrida 'a gift' can always be (mis)taken for manipulation. Kelly suggests that it is this very uncertainty as to whether a particular 'promise of truth to the other' might be contaminated by the 'threat' of manipulation from which sincerity derives its power:

that sincerity can always be taken for manipulation shows us that sincerity depends not on purity but on trust and faith: if I or the other could be certain that I am being sincere, the notion of sincerity would lose its normative charge (Kelly 2015, 7).

Thus, sincerity ‘has the same structure as the gift’, and to be sincere means to risk that which for Wallace is the most frightening prospect for the well-conditioned subject of postmodernity: ‘leaving oneself open to others’ ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability’ (181). Sincerity becomes a radical response precisely because it pushes beyond the comfort zone of the ‘fetal position’ encouraged by postmodern irony, demanding commitment through faith to something unstable, potentially contaminated, but also potentially meaningful and connective. Undermined by the failed possibilities of ‘truth to oneself’ which for Trilling is the ‘means to the end’ of sincerity, the new sincerity, characterised by undecidability, is instead defined ultimately by ‘the affective response’ it invites (Kelly 2015, 13).

Returning to Cobain, we might better understand the singer’s project then not as a pursuit of authentic self-expression, but as an attempt to form a sincere connection with his audience. In this sense we may situate the practices identified by both Nehring and Cresswell side-by-side, as complementary aspects of the same sincerity. By rendering himself ‘unreadable’ through his pathological and parodic performances, Cobain negates any pretensions to an authentic autonomous self—pretensions Kelly rightly acknowledges had, by the 90s, proven impossible. Meanwhile, Cobain’s inarticulate ‘anger without [...] ideology’ provides a blank space for identity-formation not for Cobain himself but for his fans, who could write their own personal tragedies into the negative space of Cobain’s inarticulate shouts and unintelligible lyrics. Cobain’s performed identities—ranging from hyper-masculinity to gender-bending insecurity—render him an inauthentic self, but a potentially sincere other, should his fans agree to take the leap of blind faith necessary to the acceptance of his ‘gift’ of a sincere dialogue.

Cobain’s sincerity functions partially through his position as a performing figure. A direct, intimate connection with his audience facilitates the affective charge, thus Cobain’s inarticulacy and indeterminacy reach their apex in his live performances. In this respect, expressing sincerity through filmmaking or literary fiction presents both challenges and opportunities inherent to the distance between artist and audience. One such way Coupland’s novel overcomes this challenge is by staging scenarios in which characters must themselves reconcile their scepticism and detachedness in order to develop a connection. This value of blind faith is articulated with clarity in *Generation X*. In a story told by Claire and set in ‘Texlahoma’—a ‘mythic world [...] an asteroid orbiting the earth, where the year



is always 1974' (Coupland, 46)—an astronaut named Buck suffering from 'space poisoning' attempts to convince three sisters to fall in love with him, in order to harness the 'radiation waves emitted by a woman in love' to power his spaceship and escape Texlahoma. The catch, Buck explains to each of his prospective lovers, is that without enough oxygen in his ship, the sister who accompanies him must temporarily die, until they reach the moon and she can be revived. The first two sisters fall in love with Buck but turn down his request. The final sister, Serena, whom Buck realises is his 'real True Love', however, complies with Buck's request. Serena accompanies Buck into his rocket, and before she dies is rewarded with the sight of the 'dashing pink astronaut' shedding his space-sick skin, and outside the 'glistening pale blue marble of Earth against the black heavens' (52). On Earth, Serena's sisters watch the rocket disappear. Despite both agreeing that Buck's promise of reviving Serena is 'horseshit,' both sisters concede that nevertheless, they feel jealous (ibid.). Buck's offer to show Serena 'the views of the heavens' is a classic Derridian gift, haunted with the spectre of manipulation. Yet Serena chooses to accept the gift and is rewarded with a transcendent moment, apprehending both Buck and the Earth in a manner inaccessible to her Texlahoma-bound sisters. Despite Buck's betrayal, Serena's leap of blind faith is thus framed by the novel as its own reward.

Beyond staging scenes of faith, narrative fiction may also manifest sincerity through a mixture of formal experimentalism and meta-commentary, whereby the artist can either mobilise the text's aesthetics to energise an affective response, or can reveal themselves by shedding the illusion of fiction in order to directly communicate with their audience. Coupland's novel manifests its own form of sincerity aesthetically distinct but thematically akin to Cobain's performative work through a metatextual blending of 'unillusioned acknowledgement of formula'—the formula of the modern novel—and a 'genuine and real' expression of feeling (Kelly 2014). This self-awareness is evident from the opening chapters of the novel, which feature the author's now iconic use of marginalia as well as the paragraph markers and cloud pictures that for G. P. Lainsbury draw attention to 'the conventions of the literary presentation of [the novel's] material' (186). The marginalia, which Lainsbury describes as 'a mutant crossbreed of the continental aphoristic tradition and the pragmatic considerations of magazine journalism' (185), at once acknowledges both the history of the novel as an art form and the immediate, material reality of the novel as commodity. Once safeguarded against accusations of naivety, Coupland allows himself to be 'downright sentimental' in regard to 'the sacredness of friendship [...] love [...]

and the value of narrative itself' (Ulrich, 16). Indeed, as Ulrich notes, whilst the novel appears to 'epitomise [...] the postmodern aesthetic of surface play and self-conscious irony', in actual fact it is 'surprisingly concerned with [...] the search for depth and meaning' (16). Like Cobain and Wallace, Coupland adopts postmodern literary means, but applies them to sincere, not ironic, ends.

Furthermore, in *Generation X* the reader frequently finds themselves invited into dialogue. This invitation is necessarily extended by Andy, Coupland's narrator, and is often advanced at the expense of the characters surrounding the protagonist. Whilst the majority of the storytelling acts in *Generation X* are social ones, at points in the novel Andy specifically appeals to the reader to share in a story with him alone: 'a secret story, a story I won't even tell Dag and Claire' (53). Andy's first 'secret story' concerns a man named Edward who, after a ten-year withdrawal from society, is forced out of his hermetic library and into 'a vast city, built not of words but of relationships' (57). Forced to negotiate this city alone, Edward vows eventually to build a tower, a 'beacon' for the voyagers like himself, and from this tower to sell maps (58). The story, an allegorical retelling of Andy's own late arrival into the human world of relationships and feelings, is a personal confession of inadequacy and failure to connect. Andy's own narration becomes a 'map' for the reader, a fellow voyager slouching through postmodern America. Once again, the reader is invited into a 'transaction' with Andy, one paralleled in the transactions Andy imagines between Edward and the voyagers seeking to buy his maps. Coupland's decision to have Andy narrate his story to the reader rather than his friends allows the author to work through the opportunities unique to the novel form—opportunities not accessible to Andy in his everyday oral storytelling routine. Andy, Dag and Claire's face-to-face storytelling practice perpetually risks being infected by the 'carapace of coolness' (10) from which the three friends struggle to liberate themselves; preoccupied as they are with the same accusations of 'sentimentality and melodrama' theoretically endured by Wallace's 'anti-rebels'. The novel form, however, with its depersonalised reach and its material distance from the originating voice, provides Andy a safe space in which to take his own leap of blind faith into sincere dialogue with a reader who must likewise cross the gulf opened up by the material realities of the novel. By eschewing authenticity in favour of artifice, Andy, and by extension Coupland, posit the novel as a simultaneously distant and intimate form of communication, in much the same way Kelly recognises that Wallace's own self-conscious

novelisation of sincere sentiment allows ‘potential triteness’ to be simultaneously ‘embraced and held at a distance’ (Kelly, ‘Dialectic’).

Fundamental to new sincerity is the rebirth—after an apparent death in the postmodern period—of the author. New sincerity fiction frequently blurs the boundaries of the ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ not in order to undermine the former, but in order to reinforce the latter. So Dave Eggers writes the fictionalised autobiography *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, or David Foster Wallace populates *The Pale King* with David Wallaces, or Coupland writes himself into his 2005 novel *jPod*. All of these metafictional flourishes respond not only to the advent of reality TV and the perceived intensification of the very Baudrillardian postmodern simulacra, but equally to a desire to short-circuit the impersonality of the novel as a means to affectively connect with a reader.<sup>17</sup> Such a move speaks to the ubiquity of paratextual information that accompanies contemporary texts and that, to an extent, facilitates the desired effects of new sincerity writing. No longer is it possible to read Jonathan Franzen or Bret Easton Ellis without the authors’ looming personas crowding out the text, their controversies colouring the reading experience. The reinvigoration of this connection between author and text, even at a moment in which many artists desire the aforementioned effacement of such an artistic ego, further complicates the artistic projects of the post-postmodern.

Returning momentarily to the 1960s, central to Fluxus was the movement’s would-be architect, the aforementioned George Maciunas. An enigmatic figure, Maciunas’ contradictions figured him as much a proto-Linklater as his art tastes did a proto-slacker. From 1962 onwards Maciunas began organising concerts and events under the Fluxus umbrella, which he saw ‘developing into an organisation which would protect the copyright of the individual artists and successfully market and monopolise their work’ (Kellein, 10). Though ‘insoluble economic problems’ and artistic disfavour conspired against Maciunas, he nevertheless ‘continued to aim for a dictatorship of the artistic proletariat’ on the foundation that ‘Fluxus production depended entirely on him, like a one-man factory’ (ibid.). Existing in a permanently precarious financial situation brought about by spending up to 90% of his income on Fluxus projects (ibid., 12), Maciunas embodied the contradictions of slacking as articulated by Dostoevsky Wannabe: he devoted an ‘immense

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<sup>17</sup> This move is taken to its logical conclusion in the genre of autofiction, the subject of the following chapter.

effort' to the art of doing nothing. A further tension between his dictatorial ambitions and his advice to Vautier—'eliminate your ego entirely [...] don't attribute anything to yourself - depersonalise yourself!'—are likewise mirrored in the uneasy reconciliation Coupland and Linklater are forced to make between their celebration of ephemeral art and the material realities of the products they produce.

Like Maciunas, Linklater's directorial persona sits uneasily alongside the philosophies espoused in his oeuvre. Anecdotes regarding the production of the film—that it cost only \$23,000, that it was funded by a credit card and a loan from the director's parents—and Linklater's intensive efforts to establish the Austin Film Society and with it the Texas city as a bastion of alternative filmmaking, contribute to the mythos of Linklater as a 'one-man factory' in the style of Maciunas. The comfort his career reflects with flitting between independent and major studio productions further compounds Linklater's ambiguously anti-establishment persona.<sup>18</sup> Linklater's name is synonymous with the indie wave of the early 1990s, the moment of 'the triumph of the under \$100,000 film' that Pierson identifies occurring between '91 and '94 (Pierson, qtd. in Savlov). Yet as ambiguous as the director's philosophy is the label 'indie' itself. Various critics have attempted to define the term, usually shying away from concrete signifiers of 'indie-ness' to instead portray it as a mindset, an attitude, or an approach to filmmaking. For Payne, indie is an 'authorial and personal spirit' (qtd. in Horsley, 131), while for Lee, it is an 'ethical vision' of 'democratic filmmaking.' But these accounts have their limitations: after all, due to the necessarily collaborative process of filmmaking, isn't all filmmaking 'democratic'? And regardless of the 'spirit' or 'vision' of the process, isn't it true that, as Horsley eventually concedes, 'no matter what has gone into it, the artist's work winds up as just another product' (132)? The closest to an agreed consensus among critics would appear to be that any attempt to define a binary relationship between independent and mainstream is a vain effort. For Horsley, ultimately, 'the dividing line between 'independent' and 'mainstream' is both blurred and constantly fluctuating' (130), and for Lesley Speed, 'the relationship between independent and mainstream feature films has become one of "sliding" inter-dependence' (100). This ambiguity of purpose and process necessitates in the indie film a particular embrace of the values and aesthetics of the new sincerity. At once imbued with a greater earnestness derived from their perceived authenticity, and yet in their very production,

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<sup>18</sup> Linklater's oeuvre ranges from the arthouse experiments of *Tape* and *Waking Life* (both 2001) to family-friendly blockbusters like the Jack Black vehicle *School of Rock* (2004).

promotion, and circulation co-opted by the same machinery that perpetuates the existence of the Hollywood blockbuster, to view an indie film is always to enter into a pact with the director to believe in the sincerity of the film's sentiment.

On the surface, the proposition of the slacker narrative seems simple: to reject the working world and the neoliberal values of productivity, profit, and self-interest, and to turn instead to a peripheral and bohemian existence in which creativity is king. However, the reality presented in these texts is much more complicated. Withdrawing from the world of work entirely proves impossible for those slackers not radical enough to commit to voluntary impoverishment, and thus their withdrawal remains at all times compromised, where internal rebellion and a lack of commitment to work must be reconciled with the necessity of earning a living. When not working, the slackers divert their energies into creativity, but again must take care to maintain the boundaries between themselves as artists and the rapaciously neoliberal art market. To do so, they engage in communal art practices that result in intangible rewards, and yet even still these practices risk drawing the realms of activity and inactivity together as undifferentiated labour time, rather than as subversive play time. The texts don't resolve these problems, standing instead as tributes to compromise and to the immense challenges neoliberalism presents to those artists attempting to generate narratives that resist, or at least resist complicity with, neoliberalism's core philosophies as they manifest in everyday life. What *Slacker*, *Generation X*, and the performances of Kurt Cobain do in fact do, however, is to invite their audiences to look beyond their failures, in order to appreciate their attempts. Early gestures towards formal practices that would become standard with the flourishing of new sincerity writing in the twenty first century take steps not to reconcile the contradictions at the hearts of these texts, but to move beyond them. In doing so, the slacker narratives of the early 1990s anticipate the texts discussed in the following chapters. This chapter, however, can only provide an answer to Dostoevsky Wannabe's question: who will make the great work about the immense effort not to create? The answer: Linklater, Coupland, and all those directors, writers, and artists who contributed to the slacker's 'golden age' of the 1990s.

## Chapter 2: The Autofiction Novel

### Introduction

The 1991 release of the slacker triumvirate of *Generation X*, *Slacker*, and *Nevermind* inaugurated a certain approach to the political that, throughout the decade, would be imitated again and again in American art. Coupland, Linklater, and Cobain narrate projects of passive resistance and considered withdrawal, and in doing so they provide the blueprint for a generation of artists, filmmakers, and writers who would continue to develop and expand the canon of slacker narratives. But while the slacker's vision of ephemeral, communal, and post-ironic art is specific to the slacker genre, some of the broader strategies put to work by Coupland and Linklater surface repeatedly in a broad variety of texts from the decade. Such strategies include the exploitation of the tensions between form and content, in an echo of Jameson's 'thought to the second power'; the soliciting of complex affective responses to texts through direct entreaties to an audience; and the bringing into confluence of an aesthetic challenge to postmodernism with a political challenge to neoliberalism. These strategies are particularly prominent in another genre that would experience a moment of relative popularity in the 1990s, following the publication of a number of novels throughout the decade that share unmistakable aesthetic and thematic preoccupations. Grouped together, Kathy Acker's *My Mother: Demonology* (1993), Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold* (1992), and Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick* (1997) all represent entries into the genre of autofiction. This genre, and these representative autofiction texts, will be the focus of this chapter.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the figure of the slacker as a fictional archetype occludes certain realities of everyday life. That labour is marginalised in these texts situates the slacker as a figure of some privilege. In Linklater's film, particularly, labour and money figure only incidentally in the lives of some of the many slacker characters depicted.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I define the term labour here in the Arendtian sense, as distinct from the 'work' of world-making to which the slackers devote their lives. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the basic philosophy of

Similarly, the demographics of the slacker community are inordinately skewed towards the white and male. In a sense, these issues may function reciprocally. That the historically wealthiest demographic in America should also be the one most equipped to withdraw from the business of labour should come as no surprise to any viewer of Linklater's film. Nevertheless, the limited vision of these texts fails to meet the requirements of a truly inclusive critique of neoliberalism: an aporia that the texts discussed in this chapter will redress, and that will, in turn, redress the balance of this thesis itself.

The slacker vision of withdrawal as protest also proves problematic. As Lee Konstantinou rightly observes in the introduction to *Cool Characters*, 'We should [...] remain critical of anyone who would pursue symbolic political projects at the expense of organizing efforts and coordinated activism' (28). There is, undoubtedly, a gulf between the art projects depicted in the slacker narratives—storytelling, happenings, improvised performances—and direct collective political action. Linklater and Coupland attempt to overcome these problems by using formal techniques that can instantiate or at least imitate collective action in their broader audience; however, in being confined to the realm of aesthetics these attempts are naturally limited in effect. This compromise preoccupies the slacker artists to a lesser degree, perhaps, than some of the more theoretically inclined figures studied in this project. Indeed, the focus of this chapter will be on the much more self-interrogating work of Acker, Hustvedt, and Kraus. These writers all produce what Joan Hawkins, in reference to Chris Kraus, terms 'theoretical fiction,' fiction in which 'theory becomes an intrinsic part of the "plot"' (247).<sup>2</sup> These fictions mark a turn from the utopian ideals of the slacker narratives to a focus on the pragmatics of everyday life and the circumvention of compromised or restrictive artistic forms. As in the previous chapter, my focus when reading these texts will be divided between content and form: between what

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the slacker can be defined as an attempt to disrupt the reversal of the *vita activa* described in Arendt's *Human Condition*: an attempt to distinguish and to privilege work—particularly art-work—over the Sisyphean drudgery of labour, and to reclaim action as the highest principal of daily life. Of course, by divesting themselves from labour, the slacker runs the risk of living what Arendt calls 'the life of the exploiter' (176), a life in which labour is cynically outsourced to the less privileged. In Coupland's case, the 'McJobs' each character maintains shifts the issue of labour slightly more into focus, but these jobs are mostly figured in the novel as sort of sociological curios, and never prove to overtly impair the protagonists in their primary business of withdrawing from society.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Currie, in *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, also uses the term 'theoretical fiction' to define fiction texts that contain 'theoretical intent' (51). In contrast to metafiction, Currie describes theoretical fiction as 'a performative rather than a constative narratology [that] performs what it wishes to say about narrative while itself being a narrative' (52). It is this balancing of commentary and narrative, or, for Hawkins, theory and plot, that makes autofiction such a powerfully self-reflexive form.

Acker, Hustvedt and Kraus depict in their narratives, and the way in which they frame and present their fiction.<sup>3</sup> Their attentions are directed towards the female experience under neoliberalism and meta-textually ask not only what this experience looks like in everyday life, but also how it might be represented. This immediately involves interrogating some of the assumptions that lie un-prodded at the heart of the slacker texts of the previous chapter. As Kathy Acker notes bitterly in her retrospective essay 'A Few Notes...', 'the hippies [and we might say by extension the slackers] had been mistaken: they had thought that they could successfully oppose American post-capitalism by a lie, by creating a utopian society' (Acker, 'A Few Notes').

The first text featured in this chapter is Acker's 1993 novel *My Mother: Demonology*, which abrasively deconstructs the utopian ideals of the hippie-slacker continuum in favour of a nihilistic vision of life in contemporary America. Following that, I turn my attention to Siri Hustvedt's 1992 debut novel *The Blindfold*. Like Acker's novel, Hustvedt's follows a young woman as she attempts to claw together some essential sense of selfhood in the face of pressures both material—particularly financial—and existential, as a series of surreal psychosexual encounters threaten to erode her identity. Finally, I consider Chris Kraus' 1997 novel *I Love Dick*. Kraus' novel, mostly epistolary in form, tracks the protagonist's deepening obsession with an academic named Dick, as well as providing a platform for a broader reflection on what it means to create art as an occupation for women in 1990s America.

At their essence, each of these texts represents a personal narrative contained within an ambiguous, pseudo-fictional frame, and each narrative is at its most efficacious when exploiting this tension between content and form. To make sense of what is at stake at the narrative level, we can turn to a representative example of one text's reception. In late 1992, David Foster Wallace reviewed *The Blindfold* for the *Philadelphia Review* in a piece titled 'Iris's Story: An Inversion of Philosophical Skepticism.' Despite Wallace's enthusiasm for Hustvedt's work, his review is nevertheless problematic. While Wallace appreciates the way in which Hustvedt explores 'the ontological insecurity of a female whose sense of her

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<sup>3</sup> As mentioned above, the tension between content and form is central to much of the work this thesis will discuss. What Jameson, in *Marxism and Form*, terms 'thought to the second power' or 'a thought about thinking' determines the approach of a variety of artists in the decade to the problem of authentically representing radical challenges to neoliberal hegemony within the strictures of traditional modes of cultural production.



own authentic existence is bound up with how she herself is perceived by other (male) subjects,' he also goes on to note that what is specifically under threat in the novel is Iris' 'sexual (the equivalent, for these feminists, of ontological) security.' Wallace's conflation of the ontological with the sexual represents a flattening of the female experience that Hustvedt attempts to narrate. In *I Love Dick*, Kraus signals that she is alive to the possibility of such a flattening when she laments that 'to be female means being trapped within the purely psychological [...] because emotion's just so terrifying the world refuses to believe it can be pursued as discipline, as form' (180). She goes on to entreat Dick, the object of her epistolary writing: 'Dear Dick, I want to make the world more interesting than my problems. Therefore, I have to make my problems social' (ibid.). With this, Kraus rebuts reductionist accounts of female experience that limit themselves to the sexual or the psychological at the expense of affective experience, and the politicisation of that experience. Kraus' declaration echoes the famous dictum of second-wave feminism that 'the personal is political'—an observation that originates with writer Carol Hanisch but quickly spread to undergird the consciousness-raising techniques of feminist collectives in the 1970s. One problem that this chapter will be concerned with, then, is how the earlier feminist realisation that 'personal problems are political problems' (Hanisch) is modified or subverted by feminist writing in the 1990s in response to the intensified neoliberal politics of the decade.

This politicisation of the personal is framed within a formal exercise in autofictional writing. While none of the texts discussed are entirely autobiographical, all incorporate aspects of autobiography: Acker's protagonist Laure—a recurring figure in Acker's work—shares striking similarities with the author, from her penchant for motorbikes to her mother's death by suicide; Iris, the protagonist of Hustvedt's *The Blindfold*, inverts the author's name and similarly shares biographical details, including studying for a literature degree in New York; Chris Kraus' novel veers closest to the biographical, featuring in its cast of characters both Kraus herself and her husband Sylvere Lotringer, himself a prominent academic in both the novel and in reality. Drawing on a potted critical history of the term, Alison Gibbons labels Kraus' novel as autofiction in her essay for the edited collection *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*. In her chapter, Gibbons writes that contemporary autofiction, far from being simply 'a postmodern version of autobiography,' represents neither 'a straightforward, uncritical return to the affective subjectivity that defined modernism nor is it a complete rebuttal of postmodern

disintegration but a vicissitude of both' (119). As we have already seen, central to an investigation into American art in the 1990s is the legacy of postmodernism and the artistic responses it invites. By drawing autofiction into the canon of metamodernism—which, for the contributors to the *Metamodernism* collection, at least, should be considered postmodernism's successor—Gibbons suggests that texts like Kraus' somehow move beyond postmodern irony. How Acker, Hustvedt, and Kraus achieve this, and how they utilise the autofiction form to address everyday life under neoliberalism in 1990s America—how, in other words, these authors make the personal political or social—will be the ultimate focus of this chapter.

### The Remnants of a Common Language: Kathy Acker

*My Mother: Demonology* (henceforth abbreviated to *Demonology*) is typical of the literary style Acker honed and maintained throughout her writing career. The novel is a patchwork of transgressive surrealism, candid life writing, and pastiche appropriations from a range of intertexts, from the epistolary correspondence between Georges Bataille and Colette Peignot, to Dario Argento's 1977 cult horror film *Suspiria*. Loosely binding together the core plot and extended hallucinatory sequences that punctuate the novel is the protagonist, Laure's, maturation; a journey from abusive childhood, through torturous boarding school years, and eventually into the motorcycle-riding bohemian figure that closes out the novel. In a sense, there is little to distinguish *Demonology* from Acker's broader oeuvre—indeed, constant repetition and reiteration of material is a hallmark of Acker's style, and this contributes to the sensation, when reading her, that each individual work is a fragment of a broader whole. As Chris Kraus notes in her biography of Acker, 'Acker worked and reworked her memories until, like the sex she described, they became conduits to something a-personal, until they became myth' (58). This constant revision of the same source material in the service of myth-making means that, by the time one reaches the 1990s texts, the essential sameness of Acker's work can often eclipse the subtle differences each reworking evinces. *Demonology* is no exception, and the novel's core plot follows the same 'primal narrative' that Glenn Harper attributes to all of Acker's fiction:

a young woman, sometimes called Kathy, in a loveless but wealthy family; her father abandons her mother; her stepfather rapes her; her mother, having spent

her fortune, commits suicide in a cheap hotel; and Kathy lives in poverty and becomes an artist. (44-45)

Further to this, individual sections of a novel like *Demonology*—like, for example, the ekphrastic account of Argento's *Suspiria*—by their very nature could easily be transposed into another of Acker's novels. All of which is to say that *Demonology* is a fascinating, but not a distinctive, text. It treads little new ground for Acker, though its politics are updated for the 1990s—most prominently in the long, grotesque parody of the Bush administration at the centre of the novel. As an emblematic Acker text, for the purposes of my discussion, *Demonology*'s true value lies in this continuity. Acker's formulaic narratives have invited a robust critical response over the decades, and my interest, in this section of the chapter, is in how this critical community has divided into distinct schools of seemingly opposing thought. Earlier responses to Acker's work hailing from the 1980s and 1990s tend to offer poststructuralist feminist readings performed in the tradition of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous; while a more common trend since the 2000s has been to read Acker from a political-economic position that takes the author's work to be, to varying extents, either pro- or anti-neoliberal. Juxtaposing these two veins of criticism serves to bring to light a deeper schism between brands of feminist and Marxist criticism. This schism has been highlighted in recent critical work on the topic of so-called 'neoliberal feminism,' and Acker's work provides a useful entry point into these debates. The ways in which liberal feminist and neoliberal thought equally draw on a countercultural ethos and prioritise the concerns of the individual is echoed in Acker's autofictional writing, despite the ostensibly progressive and highly politicised tenor of the author's work. These tensions prompt several questions: is it possible to connect a feminist critique to an anti-neoliberal critique of Acker's work? Has this reading of Acker's work been neglected thus far because of an aporia in criticism, or because of an aporia in the texts themselves? Is this aporia grounded in the autofictional form Acker chooses to use, or can other authors mobilise this form in different ways? Asking these questions ultimately leads to another: can highly personal writing also be political writing?

To answer these questions, we must first confront the personal and the political aspects of Acker's writing in turn. *Demonology* begins with the adult Laure on a mission to lose her sense of self through a series of dysfunctional and dangerous relationships with others: 'once I had fucked,' she claims, 'the only thing I wanted was to give myself entirely and

absolutely to another person' (14). This wilful self-erasure can be read as an immediate and radical defence of bodily agency and an argument in favour of the supreme right of the individual to engage in behaviour that may result in self-harm or even self-destruction. As we shall see, this question of agency was a cultural flashpoint in America as Acker was writing, as a discourse around bodily autonomy erupted from debates over abortion rights. The implications of the loss of selfhood through sex also resonates with a broader critique of patriarchal power, while at the thematic level, Laure's self-destructive urges coincide with her struggle to articulate her anger, with both struggles emanating from her gendered experience of language and, partly by extension, power. Acker directly addresses the gendered dimension of language when she has Laure remark to another female character, 'for us, there is no language in this male world' (168). This problem is explored in more detail in a conversation Laure holds with a male lover, during which Acker's narrator highlights something fundamentally at odds in their experiences of reality: "you believe that everything that's outside of you ('reality') is a reflection of your perceptions [...] that you can see, feel, hear, understand the world. [...] I believe that I am so apart from the world' (28). This condition is an inversion of the state of Cartesian doubt.<sup>4</sup> For Acker's narrator, Cartesian doubt is an affirmation of one's own sensory power, but the self-confidence required to place faith in one's own perception of the world is a uniquely masculine attribute.

Laure's condition emblematises a core anxiety in feminist poetics relating to the phallogocentric nature of discourse, summarised by Adrienne Rich as the problem of how 'our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative [...]' (Rich, qtd. in Showalter, 182). In the 1980s this problem captivated feminist philosophers in the West, and particularly in Europe, provoking responses from the *écriture féminine* of French philosophers like Cixous and Irigaray, to the 'feminist reading' of American Elaine Showalter. Nelly Furman usefully summarises what is at stake in these disparate movements:

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<sup>4</sup> David Foster Wallace credits Hustvedt with a similar manoeuvre in his review of *The Blindfold*, and as I continue to refer to this concept of Cartesian doubt, I do so with Wallace's formulation in mind: The problem of skepticism is Cartesian and phallogocentric and presumes the ontological priority of the Subject: I know I exist all right, but how can I trust my perceptions enough to be equally sure that any of the non-me Objective stuff I seem to see around me exists? [...] this skeptical Subjective insecurity [...] sits brooding astride the whole canon of Anglo-American 20th-century lit. [...] A defining characteristic of this century's important feminist fictions, though, has been its obversion of the skeptical dilemma.

It is through the medium of language that we define and categorise areas of difference and similarity, which in turn allow us to comprehend the world around us. Male-centered categorisations predominate in American English and subtly shape our understanding and perception of reality; this is why attention is increasingly directed to the inherently oppressive aspects for women of a male-constructed language system. (Furman, 182)

Acker's Laure, finding her own 'understanding and perception of reality' tainted by the gendered quality of language, is unable to trust in her own perceptions. The narrator's identity fractures, and to resolve this problem, Acker's narrator turns to self-dissolution, following the author's favourite bodybuilding maxim: that identity, like muscle, 'must be broken down before it can be rebuilt better' (112).

Unsurprisingly, Acker's writing has resonated with critics working in the tradition of Irigaray, Cixous, and Furman, whose interests lie in how Acker engages with the challenges of phallogocentric discourse. Nicola Pitchford observes how Acker's use of pastiche resonates with Jameson's critique of the term as the 'wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language' (Jameson, qtd. in Pitchford). Pitchford quotes Acker's *Don Quixote* in support of this claim:

BEING DEAD, DON QUIXOTE COULD NO LONGER SPEAK. BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WEREN'T HERS. (Acker, qtd. in Pitchford)

This notion of language being subject to male ownership is similarly raised in *Demonology*, in the above quoted moment in which Laure observes that 'for us, there is no language in this male world' (168). Martina Sciolino also quotes the passage from *Don Quixote* to justify her observation that 'any fiction by Acker engages a poststructural skepticism regarding the constative efficacy of language' (437). Returning to the notion of repetition and the 'primal narrative' or 'myth-making' that undergirds Acker's literary project, Sciolino notes that Acker's critique of phallogocentric discourse is articulated through the technique Sciolino terms 'autoplagerism': the mixing of autobiography and pastiche that defines the formal experimentalism of Acker's fictions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sciolino remarks that 'the autoplagerist takes the phrase "life-story" literally—as a literary term.' Acker's fictionalising approach to her own biography takes issue with 'the notion of artistic authenticity underlying conventional authority,' (440) by which Sciolino suggests that a principal function of Acker's work is to celebrate the death of the artist and by extension the death of 'the incredible egotism [of] phallic centrism' (Acker, qtd. in Sciolino, 440). Thus, Acker's autoplagerism is

What Sciolino calls autoplagerism we can also call autofiction. It is the technique of autofiction, the melding of modernist subjectivity and postmodern disintegration as Gibbons defines it, that Acker harnesses to articulate her critique: a critique that focuses on how the valorisation of individual subjectivity is made inaccessible to female language users due to the hostility of the patriarchal symbolic order. The term 'autofiction' is frequently attributed to French novelist and critic Serge Doubrovsky, who first coined the term on the back cover of his 1977 novel *Fils*.<sup>6</sup> Since Doubrovsky's introduction of the term it has received considerable attention and various competing definitions have been offered in the attempt to delineate the exact borders between fiction, autofiction, and autobiography. The most useful and comprehensive of these attempts can be found in Marion Sadoux's work on French writer Christine Angot. In a discussion of Angot's autofictions, Sadoux notes that 'notions of truth and fictionality in literature are extremely complex and at times highly paradoxical,' but nevertheless attempts to concretely define autofiction as distinct from both fiction and autobiography:

Autofiction is fundamentally and willingly ambiguous in that it borrows discursive strategies from first-person narrative and autobiography at the same time.

Autofictions never allow the reader to identify the real from the fictional at the level of enunciation. (176)

Fundamentally, for Sadoux, autofiction is 'willed ambiguity.' More pertinently for my discussion, Sadoux also alights on one common theme to the many otherwise competing definitions of the term: the notion that autofiction is always, fundamentally, 'a resilient attempt to deal with notions of self and subjectivity in writing in an age of multiple crisis' (177).<sup>7</sup> Combined, Sadoux's definitions situate autofiction as a formal strategy appropriate for describing exactly the crisis of Cartesian thought found in Acker's work.

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a particularly feminist one: it presents a challenge, at the level of form, to an individualised phallogocentrism.

<sup>6</sup> Doubrovsky writes that 'fiction, of facts and events strictly real, if you prefer is called *autofiction*, where the language of adventure has been entrusted to the adventure of language in its total freedom' (np, italics mine).

<sup>7</sup> Sadoux notes that for Doubrovsky, 'autofiction [...] is a form of writing in which autobiographical and fictional elements are intertwined in a creative activity linked to psychoanalytical experience.' See also Mortimer, who notes that 'one thing that has characterized all versions of the idea of autofiction, at least, is the idea of the self. [...] Whatever the precise definition, autofictional writers of today seem to want to tell the truth about themselves, in fiction' (23); and Tuck, who defines autofiction as the 'search not only for truth and justice but for the self.'

Acker's work is certainly relentlessly focused on her own selfhood. When Acker has one artist-character explain his process in *Demonology*, she may well be invoking her own practice: 'to paint horror,' her character explains, 'I have to eradicate all distance between horror and me: I have to see/show my own horror, that I'm horrible' (109).<sup>8</sup> *Demonology* is filled with these moments of horror. Laure is radically candid, sharing at various moments in the text everything from perversely sexualised dreams of her father ('the maggot, huge, translucent, and slimy, was my father' (54)) to intimate details of her own bodily functions ('I decided that I must be having one of those periods that are so heavy they could be natural miscarriages (52)). The candour of Laure's narrative voice takes on particular resonance when one considers the aforementioned similarities the character shares with the author. From a fascination with motorbikes and bodybuilding to the formative details of her life, including the loss of her mother to suicide, Laure's biography intersects regularly with the heavily publicised and widely known details of the author's life. This candour constitutes a melding of fiction and fact that represents the autofictional impulse to 'eschew [...] the entire truth vs. fiction debate in favor of the question of how to live or how to create' (Sturgeon, qtd. in Gibbons).

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The autofictional form of Acker's *Demonology* mirrors the psyche of its protagonist: a fragmented assemblage cobbled together from a seemingly incoherent selection of unsuitable texts. Read in this light, *Demonology's* adherence to Acker's mythic ur-narrative and deliberate signalling of the issues defining contemporary feminist philosophy marks Acker's novel as another entry into her career-long exploration of language and gender. However, in recent years an entirely different reading of Acker has also been advanced,

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<sup>8</sup> In her taxonomic work *Aggressive Fictions*, Kathryn Hume labels Acker a proponent of 'complaint.' For Hume, Acker's principal aim is the 'relentless articulation of discontent' (44), likening the act of reading the author's work to 'manning a suicide hotline' (50). This affective content has particular repercussions at the formal level. Hume describes the way in which aggressive fiction like Acker's 'tramples reader sensibilities, offends and upsets wilfully and deliberately' in pursuit of its intent to 'expres[s] and provok[e] emotion.' The proper response, Hume suggests, is 'surrender [to the text]. We should open ourselves to the emotions, and eventually, after full exposure, we should think our way through the ideas' (8). This recalls the recent work of Nikolaj Lubecker, who argues in *Feel-Bad Film* that films which refuse to deliver 'satisfaction and narrative containment' (3) do so in order to demarcate a space in which 'society can engage with and negotiate its relation to that which is socially problematic' (14). Hume and Lubecker join a whole canon of critics whose recent work has focused on the ways in which unpleasant, disturbing, or subversive fiction can engage with a viewer's intellect by first provoking a strong affective response. For more on this, see my later chapter on 'Abjection.'

one less concerned with Acker's feminist politics than with her engagement with neoliberalism as it has emerged and evolved along the same timeline as her career. Since around 2010 Acker's work has enjoyed renewed attention by a series of critics intent on mapping the political projects of postmodern and contemporary fiction. These critics seek primarily to map Acker's varying shades of resistance to, or complicity with, neoliberal ideological values.

In *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945-2000*, Michael Clune sets forth his theory of 'economic fictions' as fictions that 'open a space in which market relations are set to work organising experience' (15). Clune positions Acker as a key proponent of economic fiction, and he finds in her work an underlying commitment to the principles of the neoliberal free market including deregulation, privatisation, and the restructuring of non-market relationships according to market ideals, going so far as to parallel the author's hostility towards societal convention and control to Friedrich Hayek's rejection of artificial controls over the market (109). Lee Konstantinou's *Cool Characters* follows this argument, again using Acker as a paradigmatic example of an essentially pro-free market literature.<sup>9</sup> Konstantinou argues that Acker's anarchistic liberal philosophy is compromised by her infatuation with a very capitalist-compatible vision of freedom—a compromise, he suggests, that sits at the heart of the subculture of punk to which Acker belongs. Konstantinou ultimately arrives at the controversial conclusion that punk is a form of 'management theory,' one that 'aims to teach a mass audience how to overturn convention' (115) in much the same way that neoliberal economic theorists like Hayek and Friedman constructed 'fantasies of spontaneous order in response to centralised state power, relatively strong unions, and bureaucratic corporate forms' (136). For Konstantinou and Clune, the anarchic self-expression central to Acker's work constitutes not primarily an engagement with feminist theories of language, but a celebration of neoliberal theories

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<sup>9</sup> Both critics specifically focus on Acker's favoured pirate imagery. For Clune, Acker's work captures the zeitgeist of post-1989 America. In this late period, Clune argues that the key conflict in Acker's work is between 'sovereignty' and 'piracy'; or between a market subordinated to non-market rules and an anarchic, radically free market. Paying specific attention to *Empire of the Senseless*, Clune argues that 'For Acker, the pirate is the revolutionary avatar of an entirely economic world, with the free market imagined as the open sea, the horizon of the possible' (104). Meanwhile, Konstantinou argues that Acker's plagiaristic literary technique and her vocal rejection of artistic 'creation' supports her view that piracy 'overcom[es] capitalist property relations in the name of making, friendship, and use value' (150). Konstantinou suggests that Acker's association of piracy with anti-capitalism ignores the laissez-faire ideology at the root of piracy that justifies an existence of deregulated market activity. The problem with reading Acker's politics as anti-capitalist is that 'a world without state-enforced property rights would not necessarily be a noncapitalist world' (ibid).



that hold as sacrosanct the uninhibited freedom of the individual and the market. This argument bears particular relevance to Acker's use of the autofictional mode. While, in the eyes of a poststructuralist feminist reader, autofictional techniques critique phallogocentric norms; a sceptical reader addressing Acker's work alongside Konstantinou and Clune might see in the relentless focus on the individual, and in the self-promotion and packaging of life experiences as a commodity to be sold on the literary marketplace, a model of literature that neatly follows a neoliberal logic. Indeed, Acker's calculated 'myth-making,' as Kraus terms it, may be considered a shrewd marketing technique in which the author's life experiences—her human capital, in neoliberal terminology—is the product.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly there is a disjunction between these latter readings of Acker's work and the earlier critics I cited above. Neither school incorporates aspects of the others' reading into their own theories, leading to a distinct split between those reading Acker through a poststructuralist feminist lens, and those through an economic lens. In fact, this split is one that has similarly plagued feminism more broadly. As Nancy Fraser has argued, contemporary liberal feminism—like punk—has developed a 'perverse, subterranean elective affinity' with neoliberalism, based on a shared commitment to individual freedom and a focus on the critique of culture at the expense of the critique of political economy. Fraser notes that neoliberal capitalism 'would much prefer to confront claims for recognition over claims for redistribution, as it [...] seeks to disembed markets from social regulation in order to operate all the more freely on a global scale' (Fraser 2009, 113). The proper response, for Fraser, ought therefore to be to 'reconnect feminist critique to the critique of capitalism' (ibid., 116). Fraser's intervention is but one in a series of critiques focused on the ways in which liberal feminist thought and neoliberal logic intersects.<sup>11</sup> These critiques pitch a narrative that reads liberal feminism as either unwittingly co-opted by, or actively colluding with, neoliberal ideology. Returning to Acker, we can see this in the critical division between poststructuralist readings of Acker's work as a radical challenge to phallogocentrism and economically-oriented readings of her work as a complicit endorsement of the free market. In a sense, Acker's work contains within it two feminisms in tension:

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the intersection of life-writing and neoliberalism see Walter Benn Michaels critique of memoir in 'Forgetting Auschwitz,' Pablo Larios on self-representation and the sharing economy for *Frieze*, and Niels van Doorn's article 'Measuring Human Capital in Information Economies.' The latter's observation that 'self-branding has become one of the preeminent communicative activities of the neoliberal subject of value,' seems particularly relevant when discussing Acker.

<sup>11</sup> See also: Eisenstein on 'free market feminism'; Roberts on 'transnational business feminism'; Elias on 'post-feminism'; and Prügl on 'the neoliberalisation of feminism.'

poststructuralist, with its focus on critiquing deep structures of inequality as they manifest in language and perception; and liberal, with its focus on an individualised inequality capable of being rectified through the exercise of personal agency, congruent with a broader neoliberal worldview. This division is neatly encapsulated in the autofictional form of Acker's text, which might equally be read as a critique of an unequal language system or as an attempt to exercise personal agency. These two readings seem incompatible, however, and for those looking to Acker's work for a narrative that engages with and challenges both patriarchal and neoliberal hegemony, *Demonology* disappoints.

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To conclude my reading of Acker, I want to consider a moment in *Demonology* when the patriarchal and the neoliberal *do* appear to be challenged concurrently. In an extended and hallucinatory scene of Burroughs-like surrealism at the centre of the novel, Acker paints a parodic vision of the Bush administration as a corrupt Papalcy, replete with doctrines that resemble neoliberal policies intensified to their extremes: biopolitical control becomes open torture, bureaucratic obfuscation becomes nonsensical language, and deregulation and privatisation are imagined as the decimation of education and the replacement of the state prison system with outsourced mass executions. Alex Houen, in his recent study *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing Since the 1960s*, contextualises these biopolitical aspects of Acker's novel specifically as an engagement with George H. Bush's war on abortion (Houen, 186). The decimation of the education system becomes a particularly heinous crime of Acker's fictional Bush in this respect, as he vows to simultaneously end 'human termination,' and to determine that 'education in the primary and secondary schools shall be completely devoted to learning how to change diapers' (Acker, 180). Meanwhile, 'there will be no more university education [...]' (181), and as Acker remarks just pages later, the limits of education will be 'third grade [...] when babies turn into girls' (187). By drawing together gendered experiences of education and language acquisition with the bodily agency represented by abortion rights, Acker demonstrates how women are oppressed equally by the explicit power of government and a subtler power dynamic expressed through the gendering of language. In a frothing speech, Acker's Bush rails against the 'scum-mangy artists' responsible for depicting his funeral and appropriating his speeches. His secretary responds, "'that can't be possible, sir, [because] no one understands a word of what you say.'" Bush's semi-coherent response—"this

century is finally coming to understand itself. This use of My language. The homeless [artists] are not allowed to use my language because they turn truth into lies" (186-187)— is suggestive of the way in which tension in the novel is focused almost entirely at the linguistic level: language in the novel is both patriarchal and capitalist, a threat to both Laure's sense of self and her agency as a subject.

Houen's study uniquely reads Acker's work through her engagement with these ideas of power, specifically in relation to Foucault, to argue that Acker's focus on poststructuralist critiques of language and the symbolic can also be read as a critique of neoliberalism. Houen argues that Acker's later narratives (from 1988's *Empire of the Senseless* onwards) constitute a blueprint for methods of resistance to biopolitical control. Taking Foucault's call for an 'aesthetic of existence' as a response to the effects of biopolitics as his foundation, Houen combines this with the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri on the intimacy of communication and language as a pillar of biopolitical regulation. Hardt and Negri argue that language's power to 'create subjectivities [and put] them in relation,' is key to the function of biopolitical power (Hardt and Negri, 404). In light of this, for Houen Acker's work with language exceeds feminist poetics to become an equally resonant stand against late capitalism. As Houen argues, 'The antipathy and fantasy that Acker levels against Bush is [...] intended to parody and combat the circulation of his *speaking* image as a regulating biopolitical power' (186). That Acker's Bush would direct particular vitriol towards artists compounds Acker's sense of victimisation, raising the stakes of what her novel can hope to accomplish. Reading Acker in this way, Houen approaches a marriage of the poststructuralist feminist and political-economic readings of Acker's work that represents an effective form of critique: by incorporating a feminist critique of language into a Foucauldian analysis of biopower, one can begin to recognise how, in Acker's work, being female and being a subject under capitalism are bound and intertwined states of being.

However, Houen's reading of Acker is limited, and the limits of Houen's account illuminates the limits of Acker's project. *Powers of Possibility* demonstrates a consistent interest in the capabilities of literature for 'realising individual potential' (5) and 'altering the way individuals feel, think, and interact with their social environment' (10). The operative subject here is the individual, and throughout his study Houen couches the 'possibility' of change in terms of small-scale, concrete resistance, as when he declares Alan Ginsberg's

poetry a successful demonstration of ‘how one can combat symptoms of a war’s “Myth rationalization” *in oneself*, even when the pervasiveness of those symptoms are at their zenith’ (61, italics original). What’s missing from the account Houen offers is any version of the narrative seen above in the work of Clune and Konstantinou: of the notion that perhaps seemingly radical oppositional movements like punk and like the 60s counterculture—movements that championed individualism and anti-institutionalism—in fact may have abetted the rise of neoliberal thought.<sup>12</sup>

This brings us full circle back to the problem of ‘neoliberal feminism,’ something that Acker, in her own unique way, struggles to move beyond. As the parallels between Laure and Acker’s everyday life become more explicit as *Demonology* develops, the question of ‘how to create’ increasingly dominates the text. Here, Acker begins to harness the potential of the autofictional form, marrying her personal circumstances to an implicit, broader critique of the social conditions that determine them. At the end of the novel, Laure, now an author, takes a motorcycle trip across Germany as part of a European tour of American writers. Referring to her bike as a ‘pirate ship,’ Laure reveals the mundane obstructions to her personal agency that this occupation represents:

The pirate ship was sitting on a cobblestoned street in the town of Weimar. Before I could be free, I had, because I was a dog, to attend the lunch to which the German publisher was treating all of the American writers. (230)

These frustrations continue throughout the text:

I realised that the bike was out of gas. I rode through small village after small village, all of whose houses were stone, and stopped by three mechanics. They looked like mechanics. It happened that we didn’t share even the remnants of a common language. (232)

Throughout this episode, Laure seeks to leave behind the group she is travelling with, and yet she is consistently hampered: her bike breaks down, she gets lost, she is forced to attend functions as part of her work as an author, and so on. The freedom that her biking represents is a poor approximation of the true freedom of the pirate life Acker so often reveres in her work. An acute awareness of the infrastructure to which she belongs pervades description in this section: the geographical realities of *autobahns* and backroads and the mechanics of the motorcycle and its constant need for gas. Furthermore, we are

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<sup>12</sup> A more detailed critique of Houen’s work from this perspective can be found in Adam Kelly’s review of *Powers of Possibility* in *Comparative American Studies*.

frequently reminded that Laure, and by extension Acker, is dependent on earning her living through writing, and is beholden to the obligations this generates. These realities—of gas and roads and books—are the realities of late capitalism.

Laure's approach to these problems is to turn inwards, and the novel ultimately ends in failure. Focusing on the absent 'remnants of a common language,' we are returned to the earlier moment in the novel when Laure explains her inability to function as a cohesive self in a society organised according to phallogentric discourse. Once again, Acker's focus remains on the inability to articulate oneself using a language that is not one's own. As the novel draws to a close, Laure reflects on her approach to this problem: 'I tried everything: to lose myself, to get rid of memory, to resemble whom I don't resemble, to end. [...] In my search in myself, I found nothing' (266-267). Ending in Laure's dissolution, Acker's novel performs a pendulum swing towards the 'postmodern disintegration' which for Gibbons should be equally balanced with a 'return to affective subjectivity' in autofiction. The erosion of such subjectivity constitutes a kind of implosion at the *denouement* of the novel, a collapse into extreme solipsism and an emphasis on the individual, internal crisis of Laure that constitutes a critique of phallogentric culture and an articulation of the pressures leveraged against bodily and artistic agency, but no deeper engagement with the neoliberal undercurrents that taint such feminist critique or the autofiction form. The question remains at the end of Acker's work as to whether such a balancing act is possible.

### Out of Sight: Siri Hustvedt

Siri Hustvedt's 1992 debut novel *The Blindfold* takes up the autofiction form to tell several interrelated stories in the life of Iris Vegan, a literature student living in New York who enters into a series of complex, dangerous, and surreal relationships with a cast of characters around her. The novel is structured as a series of a-chronologically presented parts. In the first, Iris takes a job recording descriptions of objects for Mr Morning, an inscrutable man whom Iris begins to suspect is guilty of murdering his neighbour. The second part of the novel describes Iris' masochistic relationship with her lover Stephen, and the disintegration of this relationship when a third figure, Stephen's friend George, photographs Iris and places the resulting image in an exhibition. In the third section, Iris is

admitted to a hospital with extreme migraines, and there encounters the domineering Mrs. M and the altogether more insidious character of Mrs. O, a disturbed woman who begins harassing Iris. Finally, the longest and final section of the novel describes Iris' relationship with Professor Rose. Rose initially invites Iris to translate a short German novella, *The Brutal Boy*, about a young boy named Klaus who experiences uncontrollable sadistic impulses. Following the rape of one of her neighbours, Iris begins wearing a man's suit and assumes the identity of Klaus, mimicking his illicit exploration of the city and submitting to increasingly dangerous desires, including attempting to steal a police officer's gun. Iris is eventually discovered by Professor Rose and enters into an affair with him that culminates in his increasingly controlling behaviour and a climactic scene of attempted rape.

Hustvedt's novel, like Acker's work, is intently interested in the condition of the female subject in late capitalist America. Like Acker's text, Hustvedt's novel balances a poststructuralist feminist interest in an unequal language system with an economically-oriented critique of life under late capitalism. As we have seen, Acker's novel draws these strands of thought together in a way that ultimately privileges the individual struggle over the systemic critique (whether this be the individual's struggle to assert their identity within the strictures of a repressive symbolic order, or their struggle to assume a form of agency based on their value as an embodiment of capital), and thus opens itself to the charge of promoting certain neoliberal values. Hustvedt's novel, however, attempts to harness the autofiction form to realign the balance of these two critiques in order to challenge these neoliberal values. This is first of all achieved by Hustvedt through her foregrounding of the issue of labour. While Acker's Laure finds herself inhibited by the demands of her work—of publisher's dinners and other obligations—for Hustvedt's Iris financial insecurity is a seemingly more vital, perennial problem.<sup>13</sup> From the opening pages Iris informs us that 'I had always been poor as a student' (10), and the precariousness of her everyday life determines much of what follows. It is this precariousness that pushes Iris to respond to an advert for work posted by Mr Morning, an enigmatic and potentially dangerous figure who hires Iris to record a series of tapes describing everyday objects that Morning (it seems) salvaged from the apartment of a murdered woman who lived in his building.

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<sup>13</sup> Returning again to Arendt, there is a distinction between Laure's complaint, which focuses on the unpleasantness that arise when artistic work shades into labour, and Iris' much more fundamental struggle with pure labour as a necessary and urgent means of subsisting.

It is in her interaction with Mr Morning, during which Iris negotiates a price for her labour, that the poststructuralist themes concerning language and identity are introduced alongside the more pragmatic commentary on late capitalist living conditions. Iris' first interaction with Morning proves prescient of later events in the novel. Describing sitting with Morning, Iris reports, 'he looked at me, taking in my whole body with his gaze. [...] I felt assaulted and turned away from him, and then when he asked me my name, I lied. [...] I became Iris Davidsen. It was a defensive act...' (11). Assuming a false identity as a means of defence, Iris finds herself cast as a subject under Mr Morning's scrutiny. This moment of identity formation echoes the Cartesian doubt evoked by Acker at the beginning of *Demonology*. As Alise Jameson argues of *The Blindfold*, 'the protagonist [experiences] nothing less than a self-shattering, a dangerous destabilization of any sense of personal identity' (422). The gender dynamics of moments such as these inevitably place the male figure in the dominant position, and so for Iris, divested of control of the situation, it 'becomes impossible to consider oneself a unified subject, centered around a solid core' (ibid).

In the second section of the novel, Iris reluctantly submits to be photographed by George, an acquaintance of her inscrutable on/off boyfriend, Stephen. In an early encounter with George, the three friends are sitting on a New York rooftop when a woman in the street below suffers an epileptic attack. George, standing above her, takes several photographs of the woman as she seizes and urinates herself. Iris accuses George of callousness, arguing that 'photographing an epileptic fit entails some kind of responsibility' (50), but she is ridiculed by the two men. The gender dynamics of this scene—the man in an elevated position *taking* the image of the vulnerable woman without consent or concern—resonates with later events in the section. After George photographs Iris, she is unhappy with the image he selects for his upcoming art show, but he goes ahead and uses it anyway. Iris describes how the act of being photographed begins to pressurise—and ultimately breaks—her and Stephen's relationship: 'for Stephen I had become invisible. An unexpected turn had been taken, and I had dropped out of sight' (64). In typically postmodern fashion, the image begins to replace the reality it captures: Iris' photograph takes on a life of its own, spreading around her university and causing strangers to recognise her. When one confronts her, Iris denies she is the woman in the photograph. Reflecting after the incident, she remarks, 'the ease with which I had sidestepped my identity alarmed me' (76). George's camera lens, like Mr Morning's gaze, robs Iris of her

sense of self, forcing her to become something or someone other. The last time Iris sees Mr Morning, he requests an object from her. Initially resistant, she eventually gives him ‘an old green eraser, blackened with smudges,’ before fleeing his apartment and disposing of the object he had entrusted her to describe. Both George and Mr Morning explicitly take something from Iris, but it is the effect of their apprehension of her that resonates more deeply. Despite ostensibly benefitting from these relationships, each interaction is sinisterly exploitative and takes an untold affective penalty that Iris surrenders without reward.

Hustvedt’s and Acker’s novels see, to varying degrees, the ultimate dissolution of their protagonists’ subjectivities through these sustained assaults, whether willingly invited, as in Acker’s case, or unwillingly inflicted, as is the case for Hustvedt. In both cases the novels posit a potential strategy of performativity, as Judith Butler describes it, as a means to negotiate the patriarchal societies that inflict such violence, only to demonstrate the eventual failures of this strategy. One of the most influential feminist philosophers working in the 1990s, Butler’s theories of identity and performativity resonate through the texts studied in this chapter. Indeed, I want to suggest that there is a loosely observable parallel between the trajectory of Butler’s thinking from *Gender Trouble* (1990), through *Bodies That Matter* (1993), to *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) and the distinction between Acker’s nihilistic, and Hustvedt and Kraus’ somewhat more optimistic, attempts to translate their life experiences into autofictional texts.

When Acker’s Laure reflects on her attempts ‘to resemble whom I don’t resemble’ she invokes Butler’s basic theory of performativity, explicated in the author’s 1990 text *Gender Trouble*. Here, Butler argues that ‘identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics,’—that is, categories of gender—‘simultaneously work to limit and constrain the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up’ (147). Butler thus advocates for practices of parodic signification, or ‘performativity,’ as a means of ‘destabilising substantive identity’ and ‘expos[ing] the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance’ (146). Laure practices precisely this resignification process throughout Acker’s text, but the ultimate ‘deconstruction of identity’ advocated by Butler brings Laure to the point of finding ‘nothing’ within herself.<sup>14</sup> Hustvedt’s *The*

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<sup>14</sup> This, we might assert, is one logical conclusion to the processes sketched out in Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. Butler’s hostility to the notion of a pre-existing subject, a Cartesian identity, and her assertion that ‘gender is always a doing’ suggests that performativity is a constant process. When Laure stops performing, then, she finds in herself an absence of any pre-existing identity.



*Blindfold* in many ways represents the refining of this theory as Butler builds on it in her follow-up texts to *Gender Trouble*, the 1993 work *Bodies That Matter* and 1997's *The Psychic Life of Power*. In these later texts, Butler clarifies and reiterates her initial theories. *Bodies That Matter* addresses those critics who, reading Butler, wonder where one might locate the agency in Butler's theory from which is derived the decision to perform, or construct, a specific identity. To which Butler retorts that 'if gender is constructed, it is not necessarily constructed by an "I" or a "we" who stands before that construction in any spatial or temporal sense of "before," rather, since gendering is 'the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being, [...] the "I" neither precedes nor follows [...] but emerges within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves' (8). This matrix represents a continually reiterated process of interpellation, and it is by virtue of this reiteration that, for Butler, the 'gaps and fissures' (9) that represent transgressive possibilities open up.<sup>15</sup>

In line with Butler's theories, performativity in Hustvedt's narrative is not freighted with the same purely destructive potential as in Acker's work. Indeed, there are glimmers in Iris' story that hint at a sense of possibility bound up in the act of performance. The fourth and final section of the novel is by far the longest, taking up 104 of the novel's 221 pages. This section, which temporally spans and brackets the other three stories, tells of Iris' relationship with Professor Rose, her translation of the novella *The Brutal Boy*, and her experiments in cross-dressing, during which she assumes the identity of a man named Klaus, loosely based on the child protagonist of the novella. Iris' transformation is prefigured when Iris is called upon to recall the details of Giorgione's painting *The Tempest* at a dinner party. Iris describes the painting with forensic accuracy but omits to mention the male figure that occupies the foreground of the image, causing her fellow dinner guest Paris to exclaim, "'You became the man [...] You stepped into his shoes and promptly deleted him from the painting'" (152). Later, Iris 'becomes the man' again, when she dons a man's suit as a means of protection following a rape in her building. As she begins to wander the streets of New York at night, visiting dive bars and becoming acquainted with

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<sup>15</sup> To clarify: if performativity constituted an agent's choice prior to interpellation into the social order, the fixity this implies would not allow for the possibility of flux that transgression depends on. Clarifying her (misread) theories, Butler argues that understanding performativity as a reiterative process responding to a continued process of interpellation offers innumerable moments for the subject to perform transgressively.

their various misfit denizens, Klaus' grip over Iris increases. Iris describes the seductiveness of her alter-ego:

The gap between what I was forced to acknowledge to the world--namely, that I was a woman--and what I dreamed inwardly didn't bother me. By becoming Klaus at night I had effectively blurred my gender. The suit, my clipped head and unadorned face altered the world's view of who I was, and I became someone else through its eyes. (170)

By inventing Klaus, Iris learns to exist within a patriarchal world, modifying and subverting her own image in order to manipulate its rules. Iris comes finally to recognise that 'the line can't be drawn, that we're infected at every moment by fictions of all kinds, that it's inescapable' (190). Rather than resist, Iris takes charge of her fiction, and of the possibilities inherent in the Butlerian 'reiterative' process of interpellation.

At the end of the novel, and in the scene from which the novel draws its title, Iris is blindfolded by Professor Rose, with whom she is having an affair. In her apartment, Rose begins to kiss Iris, who at first enjoys the sensation of a lack of sight. 'It was good not to see him,' she says. 'Like a child, I felt that my blindness made me disappear, or at least made the boundaries of my body unstable' (203). Rose, however, becomes aggressive, and attempts to rape Iris as she tries to resist. She bites his finger and causes him to withdraw, and in the aftermath he is repentant. "'Tonight [...] I was someone else,'" Rose tells her (207). Sitting on her bed, he implores Iris to "'look at me [...] I'm an old man, absurd, contemptible'" (203). She does, and sees his once attractive body as 'a thing of comic horror, vulnerable, aging, the site of decay' (206). With Iris blindfolded, Rose had been free to become something different, something Iris associates with 'unspeakable acts, seizures of cruelty, Klaus' (204). With her eyes back on him, he resumes his identity as an aging and essentially harmless professor. This represents an important moment in Iris' development. Throughout *The Blindfold* Iris endures an existence defined by marginality. For Mr Morning she acts as a conduit, channelling the essence of objects while divesting her descriptions of any traces of herself. For George she is the anonymous subject of a photograph that obscures her identity and yet paradoxically also absorbs it. When she is committed to hospital, she is fixated upon by a madwoman who eventually comes to believe Iris is her daughter. Finally, for Professor Rose Iris works as a translator, transfiguring someone else's story while being entreated by Rose not take 'liberties' (139). In each of these situations, Iris' own subjectivity is elided. However, in the act of creating fiction—the fictional figure of

Klaus—Iris comes to understand how she can make herself visible. This visibility comes at the cost of her authentic self—or perhaps, in Butlerian terms, is made possible by an initial absence of a self. However, this price allows Iris access to spaces within both New York City and her own psyche that are normally shuttered to her. When she finally shrugs off the identity of Klaus and embarks on her affair with Rose, she finds that her vision, as much as his, has the power to shape in both its presence and, startlingly, its absence.

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Returning to the issue of labour with which I opened this chapter, Iris' performativity, particularly in the fourth section of the novel, invites being read in congruence with the notion of human capital. As Foucault explains it, human capital is a 'conception of capital-ability which, according to diverse variables, receives a certain income that is a wage, and income-wage, so that the worker himself appears a sort of enterprise for himself' (225). This condition is specific to neoliberalism, driven as it is by the imperative to extend market rationality into all aspects of life. The neoliberal *homo economicus* is, for Foucault, 'his own capital [...] his own producer, [...] the source of his earnings' (ibid.). The stress Hustvedt places on Iris' identity in her negotiation of various labour contracts, and the affective toll these contracts take on her, would seem to suggest that Iris engages in this entrepreneurialism. Certainly, one could be tempted to read Iris' exchanges with Professor Rose and Mr Morning as figurative examples of the marketing of selfhood that defines the concept of human capital, given how intrinsic each employer views Iris' personality and identity to their contracts. However, in trying to hold in tandem both the feminist focus on gendered identity formation and an economically-oriented critique of late capitalist living, Hustvedt's vision of the latter becomes less focused.

Hustvedt is keenly aware of the implications of the parallels between her character's performativity and the performative aspects of her own writing, and she reflects this dynamic back onto the form of the novel. Despite ostensibly being a work of fiction, we may certainly consider Hustvedt's novel to fall under the umbrella of autofiction. Similar to Laure in Acker's fiction, Iris' identity is complicated by her obvious relation to the author, Siri Hustvedt. Clever postmodern tricks like inverting her own name to name the protagonist of her story signal Hustvedt's commitment to the tricky mode of autofiction, and shared biographical details like the study of literature at a New York university further

compound this. Hustvedt's novel is keenly interested in how the self becomes a commodity for exchange under neoliberalism, and how this economising of human relationships intensifies the stakes of the process of subject formation. By using an autofictional form and thus introducing herself and the process of life writing into the novel, Hustvedt parallels her own work writing autofiction with the entrepreneurial endeavours of her protagonist. Crucially, by using the autofictional rather than the biographical form, the picture of Hustvedt's self is incomplete, balanced as it is by the fictional elements of the novel that grant the same distancing effect Iris' performativity affords her. This constitutes a self-awareness that seems absent from Acker's text, and that contributes to the latter's failure to meaningfully engage with the broader social conditions that determine her personal struggles. In the same vein, however, Hustvedt's self-awareness does not automatically translate into a successful challenge to the neoliberal ideology that structures both her and her character's attempts to create as a means of subsistence.

There is little doubt that Hustvedt at least aims to critique neoliberalism. Her continued return to the impoverished circumstances of her protagonist highlight the precarity of an underclass that, in the late 1970s, were facing a future of increased persecution, dismantled support networks, and shrinking sympathy.<sup>16</sup> The New York setting is particularly significant in this regard. If Chile is to be considered the epicentre of neoliberalism globally (see introduction), New York was Ronald Reagan's domestic testbed. As David Harvey remarks throughout *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, New York set the precedent for all aspects of neoliberal practice: from the first dismantling of municipal labour unions in 1975-7 (Harvey 2005, 52), to Manhattan's rise as a centre of financial power and as a 'spectacular island of wealth and privilege' (157). Writing with hindsight in the 1990s, Hustvedt's description of the underbelly of the city as being at once dangerously precarious and yet liberating manages to simultaneously make visible those to whom neoliberal policy would be most punitive, and lament the process of gentrification applied to the city and often regarded as proof of progress. The success of this critique, however, diminishes when read in dialogue with the novel's other concerns regarding gender and identity. On the one hand, *The Blindfold* narrates a dynamic of performativity that allows Iris to resist submitting to a patriarchally dictated process of identity formation. On the

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<sup>16</sup> The novel doesn't clarify when it is set. However, given that *The Blindfold* is a work of autofiction and that biographical details of Hustvedt's time as a graduate student at Columbia University, NY, match Iris' employment as a student at an unnamed New York university, we can assume the date of these two academic careers is also the same: 1978-9.

other hand, the novel seeks to mount a critique of neoliberalism partly through the dehumanisation of the protagonist as a Foucauldian ‘ability machine.’ These two conceptions of Iris—as performative and polymorphic, and as entrepreneurial investor—are fundamentally incompatible. The theory of *homo economicus* relies on a self in which to invest, while Butler’s performativity disavows precisely this selfhood. It is here, I suggest, that Hustvedt’s critique breaks down.

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While Hustvedt’s novel would seem on the one hand to endorse Butler’s theories of performativity, *The Blindfold* ends not with Iris’ triumph but her despair. Confessing the events of the novel to the character Paris, Iris finds herself mocked and belittled by him, and the narrative ends with her fleeing into the night. Exposing herself to a hostile Other, Iris demonstrates the limits of Butler’s theory and the aporias in Butler’s work which are reflected in Hustvedt (and to an extent Acker’s) texts. As I have already discussed, Acker’s work is ultimately hampered by a fixation on the self that can be boiled down to a shade of identity politics not incompatible with neoliberal logic. Butler’s work on performativity displays a similar fixation on the individual. In 1997’s *Excitable Speech*, Butler demonstrates how performativity can be put into practice, arguing that ‘insurrectionary speech becomes the necessary response to an injurious language’ (163), and that ‘resignification’ or ‘reversed interpellation’ can act to generate resistant rather than conformist subjects. As several critics have noted, this stance places the onus on the individual rather than the institution to act as a corrective to perceived injustices, and disregards the role of socio-political power in the process of interpellation.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps registering these critiques, Butler’s much documented ‘ethical turn’ in 2005’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* recalibrates performativity to encompass an ethics of sociality, and it is noticeable that Hustvedt’s formal use of autofiction to an extent anticipates this turn.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler rebuts the poststructuralist argument—one she previously endorsed—that ‘if a subject is to be ‘divided, ungrounded, or incoherent from

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<sup>17</sup> Martha Nussbaum identifies Butler as a prime example of a ‘feminist thinker [...] of the new symbolic type,’ a type that holds the linguistic subversion and transgression promised by ‘symbolic verbal politics’ as the only possible politics, and that views large-scale social change as unachievable in the face of imprisoning structures of power (2). See also Boucher’s critique of Butler’s ‘thorough-going individualism’ (130), and McNay’s observation that Butler’s theories ‘disregard [...] the specificity of socio-political power’ (178).

the start,' it will be impossible to ground a notion of personal or social responsibility (2005, 22). Instead, Butler argues that the subject's opacity to itself can prompt self-scrutiny and thus the forging of important ethical bonds derived from the act of narrating, or 'giving an account,' of oneself—however fragmentary or incoherent—as a means to both self-knowledge and the formation of a social community. This revises Butler's earlier theories of power to recognise that interpellation is not always a form of violence, but also a collective and reciprocal process of identity-making that, if an ethics of responsibility is adhered to, can lead to a positive process of subjectification. Central to Butler's account is the work of philosopher Adriana Cavarero, whom Butler quotes at length in support of her argument for this social conception of storytelling:

In [Cavarero's] view, I am not, as it were, an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions of myself alone. I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. [...] In her view, one can only tell an autobiography, one can only reference an "I" in relation to a "you": without the "you," my own story becomes impossible. (24)

For Cavarero and Butler, the self depends not on a system of subjection, but on an Other. Butler's work provides a useful framework through which to understand the dynamics of Hustvedt's novel at the formal level, as a piece of autofiction.

In *The Blindfold*, as in *Acker's Demonology*, spaces in the narrative fulfil the dual purpose of pinning the text to a specifically American context, and metaphorically allowing the author to engage with the novel form as a space to be occupied in itself. The abject state of America is central to both texts, with the 'belly of hell' (np) that is Acker's United States paralleled by the urban decay of Hustvedt's New York. *The Blindfold* is replete with dimly lit, claustrophobic spaces, from Iris' spartan apartment to her hospital ward and Mr Morning's 'tiny, stifling room' (10). These spaces—indicative of the coercive and restrictive systems that govern Iris' daily life—are drawn into relief by Hustvedt's frequent use of spatial metaphors to describe the effects of fiction. Referring to her actions in imitation of the protagonist of *The Brutal Boy*, Iris explains, 'I don't mean to blame a work of fiction for my own behaviour. That would be stretching the truth. I'm saying that the story was a door to another place, and in the end we chose to open it and cross the threshold.' This recalls the Heideggerian metaphor with which Michael Clune begins his work on economic

fiction—the idea that fiction ‘opens up [...] regions’ (12).<sup>18</sup> This is echoed in the form of Hustvedt’s novel, which J. A. Fleiger has noted follows the classic model of the postmodern paranoid narrative.<sup>19</sup> For Fleiger, ‘paranoia is not just a theme of the novel; it is a structural device. [*The Blindfold*] explicitly links delusion with the reading and writing game, as well as with a certain projective mode of thinking’ (105). Fleiger explains this in more detail:

The novel leaves us to wonder if Paris, and the other persecutors, are projections, figments of Iris’s own fevered imagination. In other words, the “paranoid” point of view of the narrative itself lends a certain undecidability to the reader’s experience—the reader too is caught in the collapse or failure of the Symbolic order, beginning to suspect that simple things harbor more significance than the reality they appear to reflect. (ibid.)

The unreliability of Iris’ narration draws the reader into her paranoid psyche. This is evident from the first story, when Iris’ impressions of Mr Morning turn from suspicion to conviction that he is a murderer, despite her having no material evidence to base this idea on. The surreality of Morning’s tasks, alongside other coincidental events that pressure the believability of Iris’ narrative (who is the omnipresent figure of Paris? Why does Rose discover Iris/Klaus in a New York dive bar?) undermine the assumed veracity of the text. At the same time, Iris’ candour regarding such traditionally sensitive topics as her ailing finances and shameful neuroses invite us to empathise with her character. As Fleiger concludes, paranoia in the novel exceeds plot or character and enters into ‘the dynamic of reading itself [...] engrossing the reader in a lurid delirium’ (106). Just as Iris recognises that *The Brutal Boy* ‘was a door to another place’ that she chose to ‘open [...] and cross the threshold,’ so *The Blindfold* invites a similar crossing from its reader.

Returning to Butler, the implications of Hustvedt’s invitation is that the novel itself—at least the element of the novel pertaining to the ‘auto’ of autofiction—represents Hustvedt’s account of herself, and invites her reader to do the work necessary to parse fact from fiction. Quoting once again from Cavarero, Butler observes that ‘the you is a term that is not at home in modern and contemporary developments of ethics and politics. The “you” is ignored by [...] individualistic doctrines...’ (25). By relinquishing the importance of the “I” in favour of the you, these narratives begin to instantiate a sense of community with

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<sup>18</sup> Clune quotes Heidegger: ‘Where does a work belong? [...] It belongs uniquely within the region it itself opens up’ (Heidegger, qtd. in Clune, 12).

<sup>19</sup> Fleiger is one of the few critics to have published work on *The Blindfold*, a text that has received a surprisingly small amount of critical attention.

likeminded readers. Both *Demonology* and *The Blindfold* extend an invitation to their reader which amounts to a reciprocal relationship, but one that is not unaware of the dangers of economic rationality seeping into the non-market arena of reading and writing. Hustvedt's novel proves Butler's observation at the end of *Giving an Account*: that 'all of us are already not precisely bounded, not precisely separate, but in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy' (39). Where Hustvedt succeeds, however, Iris fails, and while *The Blindfold* gestures formally towards the possibility of a progressive participatory relationship between reader and text, Iris' own fate resembles Laure's: a complete disintegration of identity. The reader is left at the end of the novel wondering, then, to what degree the ratios of 'auto' and 'fiction' are balanced.

Yours Sincerely: Chris Kraus

In a sense, Chris Kraus' 1997 novel *I Love Dick* picks up where *The Blindfold* leaves off, with a man looking at a woman, and with an author giving an account of herself. In Kraus' case, the man is Dick and the woman/author is Chris Kraus herself. Kraus, unlike Hustvedt's Iris, luxuriates in Dick's gaze, relishing the attention he is paying her at their dinner at his house: 'Dick's attention,' Kraus writes of herself, 'makes her feel powerful' (3). This night, which Dick will eventually, shatteringly, describe as a 'genial but not particularly intimate or remarkable meeting,' catalyses an obsession on Kraus' behalf that leads her to leave her husband and business partner, the theorist Sylvere Lotringer, and produce a novel's worth of epistolary writing directed at the enigmatic Dick. At first Kraus' infatuation with Dick is encouraged by Sylvere, as the two take it in turns to write letters to Dick, and then envision delivering them as part of an art performance. When that doesn't happen, Kraus eventually leaves Sylvere at the end of the first part of the novel and continues her correspondence to Dick. Increasingly, these letters take on a 'dear diary' format, as Kraus writes reams of text that fluctuates between the intensely personal and the incisively philosophical. The novel is self-admittedly a 'new genre, something in between cultural criticism and fiction' (Kraus, 27), or what Joan Hawkins calls 'theoretical fiction [...] the kind of books in which theory becomes an intrinsic part of the "plot"' (Hawkins, 247). Indeed, central to the novel is Kraus' belief that 'it's possible to do something and simultaneously study it' (Kraus, 137), and it is this parallel condition of performance and theorising that allows Kraus, even more



so than Acker or Hustvedt, to present a text that is resolutely concerned with understanding how the condition of being a single—as in singular—woman in late capitalist America can be fictionalised in a way that does not also preclude social or political commentary, either thematically or formally.

Like Acker and Hustvedt's narrators, Kraus' literary persona in *I Love Dick* is radically candid. Once again, this candour is particularly notable when it comes to Kraus' discussion of her finances, about which she is unapologetic and unashamed. When asked how she 'really' made money, Kraus responds with an abruptness calculated to force a reaction: "'It's simple," I told [the questioner]. "I take money from Sylvere"' (70). In a clear break from the slackers' treatment of money, wherein 'making a living' is a concern that is marginalised by texts like Linklater's *Slacker* without acknowledgement, Kraus characteristically lays bare her simultaneous need for and rejection of money, contradictions included. In an early description of her and Lotringer's daily routine, Kraus writes,

the conversation usually peaked with a passionate discussion of checks and bills. So long as Chris continued making independent films they'd always be juggling money. [...] Luckily [...] with Chris' help, Sylvere's career was becoming lucrative enough to offset the losses incurred by hers. Chris, a diehard feminist [...] smiled to think that in order to continue making work she would have to be supported by her husband. "Who's independent?" [...] In late capitalism, was anyone truly free? (16)

With the Thatcherite dictum of 'no alternative' echoing across the Atlantic, Kraus rightly asks if freedom can be considered a possible or even desirable condition. However, Kraus also makes it clear that participation, for her, is not equal to approval. After discussing the 'very long leash' (65) she had woven for herself from a mixture of real estate and managing her husband's career, Kraus idiosyncratically remarks that 'money's abstract and our culture's distribution of it is based on values I reject' (71).

Kraus' inward rejection of the capitalist distribution of wealth combined with her outward investment in real estate recalls Mark Fisher's evocative description of the ideological bind of neoliberalism, which he succinctly summarises with the phrase 'we didn't have to believe it, we only had to act as if we believed it' (91). For Fisher, 'the very privileging of 'inner' subjective states over the public' was itself an ideological move characteristic of neoliberalism (91). As such, Kraus once again seems to subscribe to the neoliberal fetishization of individualism negotiated by Acker and Hustvedt. However, by making visible

these contradictions, Kraus' use of autofictional writing allows her to speak back to precisely the 'ideological move' that neoliberalism seeks to keep hidden. Just as Kraus experiments with a radical transparency that depends on her privileging her individual selfhood in sections of the novel, she is equally interested in how the personal can be diluted in service of a broader political goal. These experiments in individuality, which constitute neither a retreat inwards nor a fragmentation but are more akin to the tuning in-and-out of an analog radio, are perhaps the most important aspect of *I Love Dick* and of the promise of the autofiction form.

In the second half of the novel, titled 'Every Letter is a Love Letter,' the narrative propulsion of the plot is slowed almost to a halt in favour of a ranging exercise in genre blending, from memoir to art criticism. Throughout the letters-cum-essays that make up the text of this section, Kraus refers frequently to her own writing activity, including her experiments in form. Central to this process, for Kraus, is the mode of the first-person narrative. Facing, at the end of the first part of the novel, the collapse of her marriage, Kraus asks "'Who's Chris Kraus? [...] She's no one! She's Sylvere Lotringer's wife! She's his 'Plus-One!' [...] In ten years, she'd erased herself' (100-101). This sense of erasure recalls the predicament of Iris, and like Iris, Kraus seeks to give an account of herself through her writing. Crucially, Kraus' erasure is directly tied, by her account, to her financial reliance on Lotringer. Tying the gendered sense of erasure in marriage to an economic form of erasure based on her inability to access an art market that welcomes Lotringer enables Kraus to be successful where we have seen Acker and Hustvedt ultimately fall short. While Hustvedt, in particular, holds her gendered experience in balance with her experience of financial precarity under neoliberalism, these conditions are not presented as interrelated. Kraus, on the other hand, recognises that economics and identity each impact one another. This in turn freights Kraus' attempts to assert her identity with a broader political potential.

Kraus' experiments in the first-person stem, by her own telling, from her initial avoidance of the form: 'I'd chosen film and theater, two artforms built entirely on collisions, that only reach their meanings through collision, because I couldn't ever believe in the integrity/supremacy of the 1st person (my own)' (122). Once again, this harks back to the problem of Cartesian doubt that likewise plagues Laure and Iris—the idea that female subjectivity is pressurised by a hostile symbolic order to the extent that even the reliance on one's own perceptions—the minimum requirement of Cartesian solipsism—is beyond

reach. Kraus' eventual realisation is to understand that 'there's no fixed point of self but it exists and by writing you can somehow chart that movement' (122). Writing, here, becomes a means of pinning down the self in a single moment, parcelling it out from the constant state of flux it enjoys. This is precisely the recognition Butler advocates, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, when she emphasises the importance of recognising one's epistemic limits and advocates for the acceptance of fragmentation, incoherence, and contradiction. This viewpoint allows Kraus, therefore, to simultaneously value and reject the value of money, not by embracing a neoliberal privileging of inner subjectivity, but by harnessing a fragmentation of that subjectivity emanating from her gendered experience of the symbolic order.

And yet, the first-person mode of writing still ostensibly performs the privileging of the individual which Fisher attributes to neoliberal ideology, and which clings to poststructuralist and liberal feminist critique alike. When Kraus complains, for example, that 'every act that narrated female lived experience in the 70s has been read only as "collaborative" and "feminist" [while] the Zurich Dadaists worked together too but they were geniuses and they had names' (134), she risks undermining the potential located in collective work in service of individual recognition. And yet, as she rightly recognises, collectivity is frequently a gendered attribute of art. As my previous chapter suggested, Fluxus artists like Ben Vautier and George Maciunas may have advocated producing works of total anonymity and the erasure of ownership, but their individual names are still associated with the movement and are still the subject of articles and retrospectives. How, then, can one create art that holds the individual and the collective in tandem? In a quote with which I opened this chapter, Kraus offers Dick an answer to this problem: 'Dear Dick,' Kraus writes, 'I want to make the world more interesting than my problems. Therefore, I have to make my problems social.' In my introduction, I connected this line to the famous dictum of second-wave feminism that 'the personal is political.' In the essay that popularised this maxim, Carol Hanisch argues that for women, 'personal problems are political problems.' There is an obvious similarity between Kraus and Hanisch's positions here, but also important differences. What is the distinction between making something political, and making it social? To answer this, we can look to another difference between the two statements. When Hanisch argues that personal problems are *always already* political, Kraus argues for a more active role: a need to *make* problems social. To do this requires an act of self-synecdoche that Kraus models on one of her artist-heroes, Hannah

Wilkes. As Kraus explains, the question that underlies Wilkes' work is, '*If women have failed to make "universal" art because we're trapped within the "personal," why not universalize the "personal" and make it the subject of our art?*' (195, italics original). Echoing this, Kraus herself observes, 'the only way to understand the large is through the small. It's like American first-person fiction' (138). Herein lies the difference between the political and the social: in stressing recognition of the *process* of universalisation, Kraus holds the 'I' and the 'we' in tandem, stressing a sociality that does not impinge upon her individuality (which returns us to the problem of collaborative art). Meanwhile, writing from the 1970s perspective that Kraus critiques, Hanisch argues that 'there are no personal solutions [...] there is only collective action for a collective solution.' In other words, to make problems political, one must sacrifice one's individuality for the greater cause.

Following this line of reading, which of Kraus' personal problems does the author seek to make social? One answer is surely the financial circumstances discussed above. If, as Kraus suggests elsewhere, 'by understanding one simple thing—a strike—it's possible to understand everything about corporate capitalism in third world countries,' (37), then similarly, by reading of Kraus' own struggles to access the critical and artistic markets that seem to frustratingly welcome Lotringer while leaving her rejected, one can understand the gender and class dynamics of contemporary art history. This is something Kraus returns to, more explicitly, as the novel progresses into the series of art-critical essays which appear in the latter half of the text. Kraus describes, for example, a series of photos of artists 'living, drinking, working' in the 40s-70s. 'It was the first time in American art history,' she writes, 'thanks to allowances provided by the GI Bill, that lower-middle class Americans had a chance to live as artists, given time to kill' (107). Implicit in this observation is the understanding that these 'lower-middle class Americans' no longer enjoy this access, and that, like Kraus, one needs the luxuries of real estate investments and a successful husband to make art in 1990s America.

Kraus' personal candour regarding her artistic failures universalises the reality of contemporary art production. An entirely more complex problem similarly addressed involves the act of writing. In a quote I have already returned to several times in this chapter, Joan Hawkins calls Kraus' novel a 'theoretical fiction [...] in which theory becomes an intrinsic part of the "plot"' (247). I have already demonstrated how Kraus relentlessly self-theorises everything from her attitude to money to her attitude to first-person writing,

but perhaps the most complex manoeuvre involves Kraus' theory of fiction itself, which begins with the question of first-person writing but soon far exceeds it. Key to this idea is the form of the novel, which is broadly epistolary, with some exceptions. The bulk of the text, though, is composed of Kraus' letters to Dick, which until the final pages of the novel either go unsent or receive no response. Dick's blankness allows Kraus to convert Dick into something of service to her—a 'Dear Diary,' as she later observes (90). The inscrutability of Dick is a 'blank screen,' for Kraus, one onto which Kraus and Lotringer can 'project [their] fantasies' (13). Later, when Kraus is writing to Dick on her own, she observes that Dick is 'a perfect listener [...] my silent partner,' and that consequently her writing has taken on a previously unimaginable quality of 'direct communication' (80).

Kraus' relationship with Dick, therefore, melds with her relationship with the reader. We as readers are interpolated into Kraus and Dick's epistolary correspondence by Kraus' consistent hailing of a mute and unresponsive other. Prior to her project writing Dick, at the very beginning of the novel this is made even more explicit, as Kraus asks of the reader, 'shall we attempt a reconstruction?' (8). Even as it changes form, Kraus' prose is typified by direct address. In an early short story she refers to, the object of address is her deceased friend David Rattray; then it's the reader, and then, of course, it is Dick. Dick and the reader share an impassiveness that facilitates Kraus' candour, allowing her to express herself to someone she believes can provide non-judgemental understanding. In her first meeting with Dick, Kraus notes how 'Dick [was] flirting with her, his vast intelligence straining beyond the po-mo rhetoric and words to evince some essential loneliness that only she and he can share' (4). Explicitly signalling her own move beyond postmodern 'rhetoric'—implied as the emptiness of a philosophy intent on disproving meaning—Kraus feels a connection to Dick that the reader can similarly enjoy in surrogate form. In this sense, Kraus, like Acker and Hustvedt, extends to the reader an invitation to participate in her account of herself, using the personal, mobilised by the form of autofiction, to instantiate a social relationship that includes a core of political critique. Kraus' personal problems, then, become social.

Just as Hustvedt's writing ultimately depends on an Other for validation, so for Kraus the situation is no different. In fact, Kraus takes this relationship one step further when she observes that 'the ideal reader is one who is in love with the writer' (116). While Dick shows no signs of this romantic connection, it is clear from Kraus' prose that this is the

effect she desires of her writing. Later in the text, as her theorising begins to return answers, Kraus acknowledges this idea explicitly:

my personal goal here [...] Is to express myself as clearly and honestly as I can. So in a sense love is like writing: living in such a heightened state that accuracy and awareness are vital. [...] The risk is that these feelings'll be ridiculed or rejected, & I think I'm understanding risk for the first time: being fully prepared to lose and accept the consequences if you gamble. (114)

As I have demonstrated, when Hustvedt and Kraus attempt to write fiction that depends on the acceptance of the reader, they begin to work towards a circumvention of the problem of the idea of the primacy of the individual. It is with this technique that Kraus can overcome the problematic of privileging the individual while simultaneously resisting the subsumption of her identity into a catch-all collectivity which denies individual female agency in favour of a homogenised feminist mass. When Kraus recognises the need of being 'fully prepared to lose' and to 'accept the consequences' of gambling with the frankness and transparency that her fiction embodies, as well as with the flirtations with values that may be construed as neoliberal, she signals a movement beyond the 'po-mo rhetoric' that dogs both her flirtations with Dick, and her textual experiments.

This preparedness to lose recalls the theory put forth by David Foster Wallace in his 1993 essay 'E Unibus Pluram,' to which I made reference in the previous chapter when discussing the post-postmodern literary movement of new sincerity. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Wallace's vision of new literary 'anti-rebels' who would instead risk 'the yawn, the rolled eyes' and the accusations of 'sentimentality [and] melodrama' (193), posits an aesthetics of sincerity that prioritises meaning and feeling while acknowledging the essential impossibility of authenticity. Adam Kelly underpins Wallace's theory by introducing the notion of the Derridian gift, which serves as a model for communication in the face of a legacy of post-structuralism that denotes that sincerity 'expressed through language [...] can never be pure.' For Derrida, 'a gift' can always be (mis)taken for manipulation, just as for Kelly, so can literary sincerity. To be sincere means to risk that which for Wallace is the most frightening prospect for the 'well-conditioned' subject of postmodernity: 'leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability' (181). Sincerity becomes a radical response precisely because it pushes beyond the comfort zone of the 'fetal position' encouraged by

postmodern irony, demanding commitment through faith to something unstable, potentially contaminated, but also potentially meaningful and connective.<sup>20</sup>

When Kraus talks of being ‘prepared to lose’ she echoes Wallace’s injunction to ‘leav[e] oneself open to others’ ridicule.’ This is the gamble that Kraus makes with her autofiction, opening herself up to the ridicule of both Dick and, by the process of universalisation that her formal experiments with the epistolary genre enable, the reader also. Kraus asks of Dick, ‘don’t you think it’s possible to do something and simultaneously study it?’ This is precisely Kraus’ approach to sincerity—an attempt to both perform it, and simultaneously to theorise it. This allows Kraus to apply her problem with the first-person universally, and by overcoming this problem through writing to another Kraus signals a way beyond the inward-looking, ontologically preoccupied postmodernism towards a form of literature that can attempt to generate meaningful affective-intellectual bonds between writer and reader. This conception of sociality similarly anticipates Butler’s turn, in the twenty-first century, towards an ethics of interdependence. With the incorporation of the social into Kraus’ novel the problem discussed throughout this chapter becomes surmountable. Kathy Acker’s work, while radically drawing attention to, and subverting, the gendered language system exposed by poststructuralist theory, ultimately treats both the problem of systemic inequality and individual restriction of liberties as something that can be resolved through personal expression conveyed through the autofiction form. Siri Hustvedt’s novel works, to an extent, as a corrective to this impulse by using autofiction as a means to comment on the performative work needed, particularly by women, to function successfully in both a symbolic and capitalist patriarchy. But like Acker, Hustvedt’s solution remains mired in individualism, and furthermore problematises the possibility of a form of protest anchored in authenticity. Kraus, finally, offers some resolutions to this complex knot of issues. By substituting performativity for candour, and authenticity for sincerity, Kraus acknowledges the importance of collectivity even as she simultaneously holds in balance the necessity of personal, experiential accounts of life under late capitalism.

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<sup>20</sup> That is not to say that sincerity is automatically anti-neoliberal. Indeed some of the principles on which new sincerity writing is founded, namely the embrace of risk and the appeal to a future moment of return, are the same principles which guide the neoliberal phenomenon of financialisation—the topic of the following chapter. For the purposes of this reading, however, I prefer to take Kraus’ work in good faith. The emphasis Kraus places on sociality and her candid embrace of contradiction, for me, trumps any elements of self-interest at work in the novel.

## Chapter 3: Suburban Fiction

### Introduction

This chapter seeks to correlate the phenomenon of financialisation, as it emerges as a structuring principle of American daily life under neoliberalism in the 1990s, to the abundance of suburban fictions released during this decade. The 1990s saw the release of a slew of satirical and often bitingly critical fictions focusing on the lives of American suburbanites.<sup>1</sup> Working in the tradition of the genre's leading figures, including Richard Yates, Richard Ford, and John Updike, the authors of these fictions position the suburban lives they document as symptomatic of a broader cultural milieu.<sup>2</sup> Despite popular portrayals of the suburbs as a timeless, changeless space (most prominently in Gary Ross' 1998 film *Pleasantville*) the suburban setting frequently holds a mirror up to the specific societal conditions of its historical moment. In the 1990s daily life in middle-class middle America found itself overwhelmingly organised around the phenomenon of financialisation. In this decade, financialisation emerges as both an integral economic principle for global finance and the personal finances of everyday Americans, and as a system of ethics that encourages these same individuals to approach traditionally non-market activities and relationships with the same rational analysis and mindfulness of cost and benefit ordinarily reserved for financial decision-making. Suburbia, as the traditional home of the white middle-class Americans for whom financialisation as both economic principle and everyday logic proves particularly important, is thus an ideal setting for fictions seeking to probe and critique this phenomenon as a representative branch of the neoliberal project. As we shall see, the myths that shape contemporary understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of novels, see David Yates, *Jernigan* (1991); Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993); and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, A M Homes' *Music for Torching*, and John Keene's *Annotations*, all discussed in this chapter. In film, see Todd Haynes' *Safe* (1995); Richard Linklater's *SubUrbia* (1996); Todd Solondz's *Happiness* (1998); Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999), among many others.

<sup>2</sup> Some recent work on suburban fiction can be found in Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*; Bernice Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*; and Martin Dines and Timotheus Vermeulen (eds.) *New Suburban Stories*.



suburbia correlate closely with the contradictions that, when exposed, put pressure on financial logic.

The story of financialisation and the story of modern suburbia are intricately woven together throughout the history of the twentieth century. Chronologically, the story of the modern American suburb begins in 1868, when Emery E. Childs commissioned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted to design and build the planned community of Riverside, Illinois, the first of its kind in the United States. Riverside's development was intended to resolve a crisis in the urban cores of the country that a 'laissez-faire urban economics' had rendered as inefficient tangles of competing uses (Fishman, 12). In Europe the resolution of this crisis—the 'reclamation' of the urban centre for the middle-class—came about through massive governmental intervention. In the United States, developers looked instead to the urban periphery for the distance and potential for innovation it offered (ibid., 119). Olmsted, working for Child's Riverside Improvement Company (RIC), built his community at this periphery. The success of Riverside is in direct inverse proportion to the failings of the RIC, however, and the principles of land speculation and financial legerdemain by which the company financed Olmsted's vision would eventually lead to the company's bankruptcy. The project was, by Olmsted's own admission, 'a regular flyaway speculation' (qtd. in Fishman, 132). Even from its inception, then, the bourgeois playground of suburbia belied a certain fragility; a dependence on the whims of a market kept barely at bay behind white picket fences.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the failings of the RIC, the twentieth century nevertheless became the century of the suburb in the history of United States housing development. The Second World War proved a catalysing influence as a severe housing crisis and labour shortage led to a rash of rapidly assembled prefabricated neighbourhoods designed to accommodate an influx of returning veterans. These developments catered to, or in a sense created, a very specific subset of American individuals. The first wave of suburbanites were white veterans newly minted into the middle-class by the generous benefits of the 1944 GI Bill.<sup>4</sup> The enclaves they occupied prompted further migration, drawing previously city-dwelling families in

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Fishman observes that the history of Riverside reveals an essential contradiction inherent to the suburban project: that suburbia 'exclude[s] the urban world of work which is the ultimate source of its wealth' (x), and that it nevertheless depends for its survival on 'market forces' that comprise a 'frighteningly unstable economic base' (113).

<sup>4</sup> See Claire Suddath's *TIME* article 'The Middle Class' for a brief history of how the GI Bill contributed to a 1950s defined by 'backyard barbecues [and] black-and-white TVs.'

such numbers that the phenomenon of their exodus from the urban cores earned the nickname 'white flight.'<sup>5</sup> Together, the emigres and the veterans coalesced into the contemporary American middle class. As Andrew Hoberek has demonstrated, the post-war period saw the transformation of this middle class as it had existed in the previous century through what Hoberek calls the 'managerial turn,' by which an old middle class of small producers and business owners became a new middle class of salaried employees—in short, a turn from entrepreneurship to employment. This 'managerial turn' saw the middle-class ceding control of their 'historical control over property' (9) to the minority of capitalists at the head of a handful of rapidly expanding corporations at work absorbing the small businesses of the pre-war period at an unprecedented pace. The loss of productive property was substituted, by these workers, with a fetishization of home ownership that suburban developments could readily address.

In Hoberek's narrative, this loss of autonomy is perceived by the middle class on an individualised basis, as a sense of alienation rather than as the systemic proletarianization it really represents. In fiction, this alienation is explored in a slew of mid-century novels from Yates, Ford, and Updike that speak to what Auden, in 1948, terms the 'age of anxiety.' This turn inwards to an individualised sense of loss can then also be considered one of a number of factors that would, in the 1970s and 80s, make the neoliberal promises of freedom and personal entrepreneurship such an enticing proposition, as they transform alienation into a renewed opportunity to engage in affirmative entrepreneurial behaviour. As several critics have noted, the mid-century suburb seemed primed to accept the values of privatisation, individualisation, and personal autonomy decades before neoliberalism proper would come into ascendancy. Robert Fishman observes that suburbia in the mid-twentieth century onwards fundamentally subscribed to a vision 'of community [built] on the primacy of private property and the individual family' (x), a vision that would foreshadow Margaret Thatcher's famous declaration that 'there's no such thing as society[,] there are individual men and women and there are families' (Thatcher). A common misconception of suburbia regards its promotion of conformity.<sup>6</sup> In fact, as many

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the demographics of suburbia in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, see: David Thorns, for whom suburbia accommodated a 'flood of middle class people' (64); Robert Fishman, who describes suburbia as 'the collective creation of the Anglo-American middle class: the bourgeois utopia' (x); and Roger Silverstone, who reads suburbia as the embodiment of the desire 'to create middle class middle cultures in middle spaces in middle America' (i).

<sup>6</sup> See for example John C. Keats critique *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956) which attacks the 'singular monotony' of suburban living. Keats' critique was echoed in fictional form by the likes of Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961), and the 1962 protest song 'Little Boxes.'

have since noted, the notion that identical houses signifies identical lives—the association of ‘the physical structure and a particular way of life,’ as David Thorns describes it—deflects from the actual ideologies most often found lauded in suburban communities: self-determination, private ownership, local control, and an emphasis on the individual and the family above all else.<sup>7</sup> Suburbia was thus a demographic primed and ready for neoliberalism to legitimise as policy the beliefs suburbanites had already internalised as lifestyle.

The neoliberal policy of financialisation has proven particularly fundamental to suburbia and the suburban lifestyle. As an economic policy, financialisation connotes the turn from the accrual of profits through trade and commodity production, to the generation of profits through financial channels, where ‘financial’ refers to ‘activities relating to the provision (or transfer) of liquid capital in expectation of future interest, dividends, or capital gains’ (Krippner). Fundamentally, financialisation can be understood as what Leigh Claire La Berge calls a ‘temporal displacement’ (95) of value into a future expectation of payment or profit. The history of the RIC demonstrates the importance of speculative investment to the development of planned communities, but equally important is financialisation’s effect on individual borrowing and specifically on the extension of mortgage borrowing. As Paul Langley has demonstrated, neoliberal policies like Margaret Thatcher’s ‘right to buy’ scheme predicated on the ideology of ‘property-owning democracy’ both relied on the financial system of mortgage lending and further intensified financial activity by extending the possibilities of mortgage-backed securitisation. The individual suburban house is made accessible through the mortgage, an investment which is then bundled into a security and sold on as another investment product. The existence of the suburban housing market thus intensifies economic financialisation in an ostensibly endless feedback loop that, of course, came crashing to a halt in 2008. This economic financialisation lead also to what Langley terms the ‘financialisation of the suburban subject’ (290). The loss of entrepreneurial autonomy through the expansion of big business documented by Hoberek left an ideological vacancy in middle class Americans that neoliberal policy eagerly filled.<sup>8</sup> As the

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<sup>7</sup> See Nancy and James Duncan’s study of Bedford, NY featured in *Visions of Suburbia* for more on the politics of suburbia.

<sup>8</sup> There is a sense in this context, too, that a temporal displacement is at work: one which defers the middle-class’ realisation of their proletarianization through the illusion of wealth provided by credit. This illusion arguably did not truly come to an end until after the 2008 recession, when movements like Occupy finally succeeded in introducing terms like ‘the one percent’ into the everyday vocabulary of Americans.

suburban home became financialised, Langley demonstrates how the liberal suburban homeowner also became a neoliberal property investor, engaging in home improvement or practices of 'flipping' and buying-to-let as entrepreneurial investment schemes designed, on a micro-scale, to mirror the financial behaviours of the hedge-funds and investment banks whose securitisations were in fact derived from these homeowners' own mortgages.

Home ownership via mortgage, by the end of the twentieth century, was just one of a number of ways in which individual suburban subjects engaged in financial practices. In *The Financialisation of Daily Life*, Randy Martin tracks the expansion of the market into everyday life. Martin describes how developments in personal computing enabled middle-class individuals in the 1990s to take an active role in their own personal finance, offering them the freedom to participate in personal investing, day-trading, and other previously inaccessible forms of money-management to complement their home-ownership. 'Personal finance,' he notes, 'becomes the way in which ordinary people are invited to participate in that larger abstraction called the economy' (17). But this is a two-way street, and as individuals began to participate in the market, so the market began to infect ordinarily separate areas of daily life, leading eventually to the condition of financialisation not just as an economic principle but also a 'moral code' that valorises calculation and accumulation, investment and return, as the principles to be abided by for a fruitful and prosperous life not just financially, but ethically, affectively, and spiritually also.<sup>9</sup> The suburbanites dabbling in day-trading and property flipping gazed into the abyss of the market, only to find that it also gazed back at them.

What emerges from this potted history is a twofold account of financialisation: financialisation as an economic principle of temporal displacement; and financialisation as a moral code and structuring logic of everyday life. Each of these principles of financialisation are strongly tied to the history of the middle-class suburbanite. As an economic principle, financialisation both makes possible suburban home ownership and encourages a new entrepreneurialism as well as an illusion of wealth through credit that satiates this proletarianized class' desire for an autonomy lost in the post-war intensification of capitalism. This economic entrepreneurialism, in turn, begins to influence the daily lives of these suburbanites, intensifying the neoliberal values already present in

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<sup>9</sup> This story of financialisation is told in greater detail in Stan Davis and Christopher Myer, *Blur: The Speed of Change in the Connected Economy*.

the suburban community and infecting ordinarily non-market relationships and behaviours with a financial logic of value, investment and return.

Annie McClanahan, whose work on credit crisis fiction proves invaluable to this chapter, argues in the introduction to her study *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First Century Culture*, that cultural texts 'perform the urgent work of mediation' between the scale of the visible and experienced and the complex, global, and systemic.<sup>10</sup> As a nexus of economic financialisation and everyday financialisation, suburbia offers itself as the ideal territory in which to perform this work. Many artists in the 1990s rise to this challenge, and this chapter will focus on just three of the dozens of suburban fictions produced in this decade in response to the intensification of financial logic at both the economic and everyday level. Jonathan Franzen, A M Homes, and John Keene all take the suburbanite and the suburban space and organise a critique of financialisation as the market's extension into the domain of everyday life. They do this by documenting the effect of financialisation on the individual (Franzen), by allegorising the suburban house as an embodiment of market patterns (Homes), or by drawing attention to aporias in the 'good life' narrative of accumulation which the suburban home signifies (Keene).

### Subjective Critique in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*

Jonathan Franzen's 2001 novel *The Corrections* is a decade-spanning profile of the midwestern Lambert family and their troubles. Alfred and Enid are an elderly couple living in the fictional midwestern city of St. Jude, their relationship wound increasingly taut by the authoritarian impulses of Alfred and his gradual decline into dementia. Their three children, Gary, Chip, and Denise, are, respectively, a suburban-dwelling banker struggling with alcoholism and depression, a Marxist academic whose affair with a student leads to

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Langley notes a similar aporia in accounts of finance in his work on mortgage-backed securities. Langley's 2006 article presciently analyses the phenomenon of MBS and calls for greater critical attention to be placed on them. Their neglect, he writes,

is largely typical of common sense and critical representations of contemporary finance that tend to overlook the interdependencies between the capital markets on the one hand, and the apparently routine, habitual and mundane practices of everyday borrowing and saving on the other. [...] The predominant metaphors used to describe finance such as "flow", "movement" and "circulation" posit it above and beyond [...] our everyday "real" economic practices. (284)

his dismissal and involvement in a Lithuanian investment fraud scheme, and a successful chef who loses her job after sleeping separately with both her boss and his wife.<sup>11</sup>

This section of the chapter will focus on Gary, the oldest of the Lambert siblings and an archetypal denizen of suburbia. Gary is depicted living in a large house with an attractive wife and three sons, working an unchallenging job at a local bank while dabbling in speculative investments on the side, and with a considerable disposable income which he spends mostly on expensive consumer products. But Gary also struggles throughout his section of Franzen's novel with an escalating cocktail of anhedonia, alcoholism, and paranoia; a cocktail that eventually culminates in a depressive breakdown. Despite these weighty issues, Franzen portrays Gary as a comic character, ripe for satirical skewering. When we first meet Gary we are made privy to his internal monologue:

As he entered the darkroom, he estimated that his levels of Neurofactor 3 (i.e., serotonin: a very, very important factor) were posting seven-day or even thirty-day highs, that his Factor 2 and Factor 7 levels were likewise outperforming expectations, and that his Factor 1 had rebounded from an early-morning slump related to the glass of Armagnac he'd drunk at bedtime. He had a spring in his step [...] his seasonally adjusted assessment of life's futility and brevity was consistent with the overall robustness of his mental economy. He was not the least bit clinically depressed. (159-160)

As the narrative progresses, Gary's 'mental economy' continues to be charted in its decline, consistently rendered in the language of stocks and investments. His interiority colonised by market rationality, Gary proves an archetypal example of the subject living by what Martin calls the 'moral code' of financialisation. In this respect, he is an exemplary example of *homo economicus*.

In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown laments neoliberalism's 'economisation of everyday life' for its part in the intensification of human capital (30). Briefly, Brown charts the development of labour theory from Marx, through Foucault, to arrive at a position roughly analogous to that of Belgian philosopher Michel Feher. In this narrative, Marx's understanding of labour power as an exchangeable

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<sup>11</sup> The Lithuanian investment scheme narrative represents another instance of Franzen's treatment of financialisation in *The Corrections*, but I will not be discussing it in this chapter as I wish to keep my focus on the genre of suburban fiction, which, as we shall see, is Franzen's primary means of engaging with financialisation as both an economic and ethical principal.

commodity, possessed by but not intrinsic to the worker, transmutes into Foucault's reading of the worker, or subject, as human capital wherein the subject as a 'human individual' is inextricably bound to the income-generating 'ability machine' (Foucault, 226). Foucault articulates his theory of human capital in the 1979 lectures collected in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. In the years since, during which the theoretical 'neo-liberalism' of interest to Foucault became the real neoliberalism of Thatcher, Reagan and Volcker, human capital underwent a further transformation. With economic dominance moving from productive capital to financial capital, both Brown and Michel Feher observe a similar secondary shift in human capital. For Feher, Foucault's human capital is a 'pre-neoliberal' or 'utilitarian' human capital (27). Where utilitarian subjects 'seek to maximise their satisfaction' based on a short-term exchange model, their true neoliberal counterparts 'are primarily concerned with the impact of their conducts, and thus of the satisfaction they may draw from them, on the level of their self-appreciation or self-esteem' (27). So while Foucauldian subjects are 'entrepreneurs of the self', Feherian subjects are, by contrast, 'investors in the self', engaged in what Brown calls a process of 'speculation on the self's future value' (Brown, 33).

Thus, we arrive at Gary. Gary's value as human capital is speculative, and therefore fictitious in the same way that for Marx, financial capital is fictitious.<sup>12</sup> It is, in Marx's terms, an illusory appearance of value predicated on an endless process of deferral which, if halted, would surely precipitate crisis. In *The Corrections*, Gary's specific crisis is depression, the 'Warning Signs' of which abound throughout his section of the narrative. Faced with a manipulative spouse and two disloyal sons, Gary comes to a realisation in the course of the novel:

a "sense" that he survived from day to day by distracting himself from underground truths that day by day grew more compelling and decisive. The truth that he was going to die. That heaping your tomb with treasure wouldn't save you.  
(182)

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<sup>12</sup> In the third section of *Capital*, Marx describes how credit can be understood as fictitious capital: With the development of commerce and of the capitalist mode of production, which produces solely with an eye to circulation, this natural basis of the credit system is extended, generalised, and worked out. Money serves here, by and large, merely as a means of payment, i.e., commodities are not sold for money, *but for a written promise to pay for them at a certain date.*

This promissory system requires 'no eventual transformation into actual money' (Marx, italics added for emphasis).

Gary's mental distraction, or deferral, is the internalisation of the speculative practices on which his life is built: the land speculation that financed his house, the mortgage that he bought it with, the small-scale investments that pay the mortgage. Everything in Gary's life is deferred. The pressure of this deferral builds up over the course of the novel until, inevitably, he threatens to default.<sup>13</sup>

The most significant event in the history of financialisation as an economic phenomenon is undoubtedly the closing of the gold standard in 1971 and the consequent rapid boom in speculative, high-risk investing driven by a belief in future profitability and a general faith in the certainty of increased returns on any investment.<sup>14</sup> As Annie McClanahan has persuasively argued in the *Journal of Cultural Economy*, such a belief equates to what is essentially a 'temporal fix' for the market, wherein any present deficit is 'fixed' by invoking the certainty of future profit. Gary embodies—and pressures—this 'temporal fix' by which crisis is occluded through deferral. His status as a father further reinforces this embodiment. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault offers several material examples of the ideology of human capital in action. One such example is the 'formation of a genetic human capital'—or, of producing and raising a child—through a long-game of capital accretion, strategic matchmaking, and 'educational investments', the culmination of which is a capital-rich child (Foucault, 29).<sup>15</sup> In Gary's section of Franzen's novel, children are repeatedly figured as contested sites: as assets that characters speculatively invest in on the promise of a later return. Frequently, this return is understood in terms of its rhetorical value in the various family conflicts that play out throughout *The Corrections*. Gary hugs Jonah, his youngest son, whilst questioning whether it is 'love' or 'coalition-building' that the hug represents (186). During Enid's 'campaign' for Christmas in St. Jude, she 'enlist[s] Jonah [...] exploiting [him] for leverage' (205). Elsewhere Caroline's campaign to force Gary to admit his depression necessitates using her three sons to achieve 'strategic advantage[s]' through a manipulation akin to 'wartime tactic[s]' (231). These manipulations

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<sup>13</sup> This notion of warning signs is particularly evocative of Giovanni Arrighi's notion of 'signs of autumn'—the warning signs that precede the imminent decline of a hegemon in Arrighi's oscillatory long history of capital in *The Long Twentieth Century*.

<sup>14</sup> Arrighi refers to the breakdown of Fordism-Keynesianism and the Bretton Woods system as the moment at which states became 'at the mercy of financial discipline' and, quoting Harvey, simultaneously saw an 'explosion in new financial instruments and markets' (Harvey, qtd. in Arrighi, 3).

<sup>15</sup> In this example, Foucault also comes close to breaching the 'pre-neoliberal' division by which Michel Feher segregates Foucault's idea of entrepreneurship from his own model of human capital as investment.



all require speculative emotional investments that promise a deferred return at an unspecified future moment of conflict, and this further confirms Gary's status as an archetypal figure of financialisation.<sup>16</sup>

In McClanahan's treatment of financialisation, she twins the 'temporal fix' of investment to a parallel 'spatial fix,' the concept of which she borrows from David Harvey's seminal work on neoliberalism, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Combined, these 'fixes' provide an ostensibly stable platform for neoliberal economic policy. Harvey's 'spatial fix' is a process of re-narration by which the de-industrialisation of the Global North and the subsequent industrialisation and exploitation of the Global South is masked by a rhetoric of post-industrialism and the providence of 'knowledge work.' This 'fix,' for McClanahan, is similarly integral to financialisation as it severs the connection between value and labour, allowing for a 'fantas[y] [of] frictionless, immaterial, labour-free value,' that leaps over the 'physical and historical limits' of capitalist accumulation, thus eliding any objection to the limitless potential the 'temporal fix' foretells.

If, in Franzen's novel, Gary's crisis represents the unravelling of the 'temporal fix' of financialisation, then we might equally read the sections of the novel concerned with his father, Alfred, as Franzen's evocation of the 'spatial fix' that makes financialisation possible. Alfred's nostalgia for, and devotion to, the Fordist-era rail company Midland Pacific Railroad remains a constant of his personality even as his dementia begins to erode his sense of self. This dementia, a 'betrayal' that had 'begun in signals' (78), continues alongside a very literal deindustrialisation as the Orfic group acquire Midpac and tear up the railroads, which Alfred maintained, for copper salvage. Alfred's disease, meanwhile, pushes him through a series of increasingly humiliating situations, the most graphic of these undoubtedly being the bout of incontinence Alfred suffers on a cruise holiday, which is accompanied by hallucinations of a taunting fecal character. A quintessential Fordist individual, Alfred's debilitation and infantilisation functions metonymically to reflect a similar decline in American industry. And yet the solution offered—significantly, by Gary—is a gleaming embodiment of the new knowledge economy that rushes in to fill the space left vacant by Midpac: a wonder drug named 'Corecktall,' still in its seed-funding stage. Gary's investment in Corecktall unifies the twin 'fixes' with which the plot is concerned, as

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<sup>16</sup> Gary's behaviour embodies what Franco 'Bifo' Berardi has described as neoliberalism's impact on 'the subsumption and subjugation of the biopolitical sphere of affection and language to financial capitalism' (13) in *The Uprising*.

he seeks simultaneously to ensure a significant return for his own future, and to rectify the damaging effects of de-industrialisation on his father.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Gary is unable to secure his investment in 'Corecktail,' and Alfred thus proves ineligible for the drug's trial and ends up dying in a care home. Just as Gary's personal crisis undermines the boundless optimism of financialisation, so the shining allure of the knowledge economy is proven a poor corrective to the damage done by the de-industrialising of the American Midwest.

Through Alfred and Gary, Franzen would seem to pressure the temporal and spatial fixes that define neoliberal financialisation, respectively exposing the rewritten history and future of capital. However, far from being regarded as a uniformly successful skewering of neoliberal ideology, *The Corrections* has been the subject of significant debate, down in part to the novel's structural conceit, which mirrors the eponymous 'correction.' After Gary's breakdown, the last time we see his character in the novel he has regained some of his former authority and recovered from the moderate financial losses that he suffered at the burst of the dot-com bubble. The rest of the Lambert siblings experience similar narrative arcs: from success, to problem, and then back to a more moderate form of success. In *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, Rachel Greenwald Smith problematises this narrative structure. Through the character of Gary, Smith writes, Franzen satirises 'the emotional consequence of neoliberal ideology' (7). However, turning to the 'corrective' structure, Smith finds in *The Corrections* a troubling affirmation of the very neoliberal ideology that Franzen is at a thematic level ostensibly critiquing. In the narrative arcs of the characters, Smith finds a logic resembling the neoliberal vision of the financial market: 'the notion that independently generated upward movement is ultimately achievable, and that problems along the way are likely to merely signal the end to an unusual bout of euphoria and a return to less spectacular but more predictable progress' (9). Furthermore, the individual trajectories of each character are guided through a process of self-management and moderation that seems to reinforce the neoliberal vision of personal emotional responsibility. What this leads to, for Smith, is no less than Franzen's complicity in naturalising neoliberal ideology:

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<sup>17</sup> Alfred's condition is also central to Susanne Rohr's argument that Franzen's novel can be read as a 'novel of globalisation'. As I have done, Rohr reads Alfred's decline as symptomatic of the changing landscape of capital. She observes that the novel 'follows the dynamics of a disease that makes reality vanish', the result of which is 'the gradual loss of familiar structures that have constituted a known reality' (96). This, for Rohr, is the essence of both dementia and globalisation.

Through the apparent naturalness of its patterning—the rise and fall of its characters, the separation of points of view, and the vision of the market that informs both—the novel trains readers to see those patterns in their daily lives. The novel can therefore be read as affectively reinforcing neoliberal norms as a result of its formal operations. (11)

Franzen's text, then, is a very sophisticated critique of neoliberalism articulated through the subjective experiences of his characters. But in privileging the subject, Smith suggests that Franzen neglects the structural implications of his work.<sup>18</sup> This notion—that Franzen's novel is somehow complicit in contributing to the ideological foundations of the system it ostensibly critiques—is not unique to Smith, nor is the terms on which this critique is based confined just to Franzen's novel.

The question of formal complicity underwriting subject-based critique—or of the importance of a consideration of form—recalls a perennial debate, in Marxist theory, regarding the roles of form and content in critique. While this topic receives perhaps its most comprehensive treatment in Jameson's *Marxism and Form*, a more contemporary text deals in more detail with the specific juxtaposition of humanist and anti-humanist narratives: Walter Benn Michaels' 2015 book *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, in which Michaels advocates for a reinvigoration of form over pathos. The 'beauty' in *Beauty* is borrowed from Brecht: in the notes to *Mother Courage*, Michaels tells us, Brecht famously says that 'if the actress playing Mother Courage invites the audience to identify with her,' it would be 'disastrous,' because it would deprive spectators of the opportunity to feel 'the beauty and attraction of a social problem' (38). Brecht's quote sets up the conflict between politics and pathos that Michaels' pursues throughout his book. For Michaels, works of art that mobilise pathos in order to critique inequality typically do so to draw attention to 'hierarchies of vision': the identity-based inequalities that for Michaels hinge on 'ways of seeing'—discrimination against race, gender identification, sexuality—whilst simultaneously denying class-based structural inequality. To draw attention to capitalism, the deep structure which is the true root of inequality in America, Michaels thus advocates for a form of art that denies identification with the subject, or pathos, in favour of a formal

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<sup>18</sup> For a similar critique of Franzen, see James Annesley's response to Susanne Rohr. Annesley argues that Franzen's novel, by stripping its characters of agency, embraces a narrative of complexity that portrays globalisation as 'a defining and definitive reality'. In doing so, Franzen 'closes off the possibility that his characters (and indeed his own writing) may have a dialectical relationship with the conditions of globalisation', the result of which is a work of fiction 'that actually strengthen[s] the ideological and conceptual foundations of globalising consumer capitalism itself' (123-124).

'beauty' which illuminates structural inequalities. In Michaels' terms, *The Corrections*, through its invocation of identity crisis as an analogy for financial crisis, largely represents a fiction of hierarchies of vision. Franzen's emphasis on what Smith calls the 'emotional consequences of neoliberal ideology' places Franzen firmly in the camp of pathos, his critique routed through the subjectivity of his characters.

The debate which Michaels enters into with *Beauty* is an energetic one in the study of contemporary art. There is an increasingly vocal discourse critiquing what could broadly be called the 'humanist turn' in post-postmodern fiction; the turn which is most often celebrated by those critics who welcome the end of postmodern 'sterility' and 'coldness'.<sup>19</sup> But equally vocal are those critics championing anti-affective art. In *Bad New Days*, Hal Foster exhorts the sort of abject art which 'troubles subjecthood'. In *The Feel-Bad Film*, Nikolaj Lubecker endorses the Haneke ethos of filmmaking: to bludgeon the viewer 'into independence' (Haneke, qtd. in Lubecker, 33). In their introduction to the 'Fictions of Finance' issue of the *Radical History Review*, Carico and Orenstein criticise the 'facile humanism' with which art predominantly tries to represent the abstractions of financial capital (4), and argue as a matter of urgency that artistic representations of finance move beyond the currently dominant question: 'do the rich have inner-lives?' (10). And in *Affect*, Rachel Greenwald Smith challenges the sort of affective identification that appeals to a 'contract' model of reading. In the context of the suburban fictions with which this chapter is concerned, this debate, which pits a humanist aesthetics against an anti-humanist one, offers a framework through which to read the efforts of suburban fiction writers' efforts to narrate financialisation. Suburbia, as a signifier of the processes of financialisation and a space of intensified neoliberal rationality, offers artists working in the genre of suburban fiction the opportunity to enter into this debate prior to its articulation in theoretical terms. It asks of these artists a question: how should one attempt to represent, and thus critique, financial capital?

Franzen's efforts certainly represent one response to this question. As several critics have suggested, *The Corrections* represents the resurrection of a down-to-earth realism after the

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<sup>19</sup> I'm thinking particularly here of the works of critics such as Mary K Holland, Marshall Boswell, and Robert L. McLaughlin, all of whom have offered distinctly pro-affect takes on this debate grounded in readings of one of the 1990s' most important literary figures, David Foster Wallace.

excesses of postmodernism.<sup>20</sup> There is certainly an argument to be made that the narrative form of the correction is in fact representative of any conventional drama—what narrative *doesn't* put a character through a journey of transformation, of trial and redemption? Certainly, this structure can be generalised to a great deal of realist fiction. But as a host of recent studies have argued, the realist genre holds particular relevance in the discussion of finance. From Deidre Lynch's *The Economy of Character* to Mary Poovey's *Genres of the Credit Economy*, a strong case has been made that realist fiction served to produce a confidence in fiction, preparing readers to take the leaps of faith necessary to jump wholesale in the equally fictional (or fictitious, in Marx's terms) world of financial capitalism. Franzen's embrace of the untrendy realist genre and its core conceit of the 'correction' and the articulation of a critique through the individual, humanist subject, all represent facets of the same project: to represent finance subjectively, at the expense of formal consideration for financialisation's systemic qualities. The formal reinforcement of financial logic thus betrays the novel's failure to properly do the essential work of 'mediation' of these two levels critical to a successful critique.

### Systemic Critique in A M Homes' *Music for Torching*

Turning to A M Homes' 1998 novel *Music for Torching* offers an opportunity to consider the way in which a writer might take an alternative response to the problem of representing and critiquing financialisation. Thematically speaking, Homes' novel is similar to Franzen's: it is another suburban tale documenting a milieu of misfortune, depression and transgression. The plot of Homes' novel follows Paul and Elaine's marriage as they attempt to navigate shattering mid-life crises. Plagued by *ennui* and constrained by each other's foibles and failures, the couple try to burn down their house by kicking over a barbecue. Unfortunately, the fire doesn't properly take, and the house is left standing with a gaping hole in one wall. Neither does the fire have the desired effect on the couple's lives. The destructive behaviours the two pursue at the beginning of the novel, prior to the fire, continue throughout: they engage in fraud, they conduct affairs, they fight and they

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<sup>20</sup> See for example David Gates, who calls *The Corrections* a 'conventional realist saga of multigenerational family dynamics'; or Sam Tanenhaus, who writes of the novel, 'like [Dickens and Tolstoy], Franzen attended to the quiet drama of the interior life and also recorded its fraught transactions with the public world.'

scheme. Finally, the novel climaxes with their youngest son, Sammy, being taken hostage in his school by his best friend Nate. In the ensuing struggle Sammy is shot in the head. The novel closes as Paul and Elaine pile into a helicopter, headed for the hospital, looking down on their lives from a new 'peculiar perspective' (357).

In this climax, and in other strategies that Homes pursues throughout her text, I want to suggest that *Music for Torching* offers an alternative approach to the representation and critique of financialisation. Homes takes steps to repress the 'inner lives' of her characters through a stylised prose and authorial detachment that consciously shirks the 'facile humanism' derided by Carico and Orenstein. An early sex scene is typical of Homes' artfully affectless narration:

He fucks her, his feet pressing against the armrest, using the sofa for leverage. She begins to cry. "I'm bored," she says. "I'm so bored, it's not even funny." She digs her fingers into his back; her nails sink into his flesh and stay there. "I'm unhappy," he says, still humping her. His few remaining strands of hair come unglued and fall forward, hanging in his face. He stops humping her for a moment, flips them back, then starts humping her again. "I'm unbelievably unhappy," he says loudly and begins to cry.

They stop fucking. (15)

The characteristically dry humour with which the mechanics of the couple's sex is narrated, along with the flatly delivered lines—ostensibly emotive but drained of vitality—suppress the sense of the couple's 'inner lives.' As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that instead of subjects, Homes critique of financialisation is mounted through structures: the structure of the suburban house, and the structure of the novel itself.<sup>21</sup>

Where Franzen's novel very explicitly evokes the concept of financialisation through the internal monologues of Gary, Homes' novel takes a more roundabout route, raising

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<sup>21</sup> My account here of Homes aesthetic project goes against one of the few published readings of her work. In *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*, Mary K Holland sets forth a vision of post-postmodernism as a resistance to the 'emotional sterility' of postmodernism. Post-postmodernism 'seeks to salvage much missed portions of humanism, such as affect, meaning, and investment in the real world and in relationships between people', in a project Holland terms 'anti-antihumanism' (8). In the tradition of 'anti-antihumanism', Holland reads Homes' novel as entering into a 'nostalgic abandonment of its own postmodernist principles in order to secure some kind of recuperative valuing of the family' (10). For Holland, Homes' novel is a morality play: it dramatises the consequences 'when apathetic adults fail to define and protect their homes and families' (96). My reading, in contrast, argues for the centrality of anti-humanism to Homes' project.

financialisation indirectly through a variety of background details that illustrate how the logics of financialisation both economic and everyday structure the reality of Paul and Elaine's suburban lives. Economically, finance is everywhere in the novel. When Elaine goes shopping, she does so on credit (121). When interviewed about their house insurance, Paul reveals they have 'not much' debt, just 'the house, the car, and a little home-equity loan we took out a couple of years ago to fix up the bathroom' (131). The downplaying of this debt indicates both the normalisation and essentialness of finance for everyday Americans, while the 'home-equity loan' flags Paul and Elaine as the typical neoliberal investors, borrowing against the value of their house in order to increase its future profitability in an act of double-displacement. Later in the novel, one of Paul and Elaine's neighbours is revealed to be a housewife and day trader, a 'financial whiz' who, 'when she was home with their first child [...] started tinkering with their investments' (193). Paul, meanwhile, is employed in a vague role that is never fully disclosed. He travels into 'the city' and covets a corner office, but his business conversations are conducted entirely as meaningless exchanges. In a meeting with his boss and colleagues he is asked about 'the program', to which he replies, 'I think we have to look at return. We have to think about giving less and getting more' (159). A colleague chimes in: 'Return is fine, but what about the future?' to which Paul replies, 'we can go further if we go deeper' (160). While this exchange is undoubtedly vacuous, it is also held loosely together by the thread of temporal displacement: the concern, for all involved, is the future, the return. Meanwhile, the function of the family unit is similarly cast in economic terms throughout, as when faced with the perfection of their neighbours, Paul and Elaine reflect on their household as 'every man for himself, each hoarding what little he has, each wanting his own' (54). Like Gary Lambert's household in *The Corrections*, Paul and Elaine are depicted in constant, calculated competition. As both economics and ethics, financialisation is subtly but fundamentally present in Paul and Elaine's lives.

In *Dead Pledges*, Annie McClanahan devotes a chapter to the eponymous 'dead pledge,' the mortgage—or *mort gage*—as it is represented in contemporary horror films. Typically, in the decades preceding the 2008 crash, her argument goes, anxieties around home ownership found their fullest manifestation in haunted house horror texts like *Amityville Horror* (1977). These texts tended to manifest the effects of financialisation indirectly, as a subtext—just as *Dawn of the Dead* allegorises consumerism, so finance in these texts is

rendered metaphorically, in a move typical of the horror genre.<sup>22</sup> And, as is often the case with this genre, the ultimate inclination of the narratives towards the restoration of stasis and calm belies an essentially conservative bent to these stories. Texts like Homes' novel borrows tropes from gothic horror<sup>23</sup> but in this case it is the gothic that functions almost as a subtext to the more direct engagement with economic financialisation, its language and its everyday consequences. Likewise, while horror tends towards resolution, Homes' novel will radically subvert this narrative structure, concluding not with resolution but with terminal crisis, as it rebuts the sort of realist structure that Franzen's novel disinters. Central to this subversion is the motif of 'payback,' which is key to the home invasion-cum-revenge thrillers McClanahan is interested in, but equally so to Homes' novel. From the beginning, when Elaine and Paul try and fail to burn down their house deliberately, the couple evince an anxiety regarding what they may have earned—a poisoning of the traditional sense of earning a return as connoting the reward for a successful investment. This double meaning of 'paying for' as both economic transaction and punishment is evoked when Elaine worries that the couple deserve to go to jail, as she argues to Paul: 'we have to pay for our mistakes' (40). This double meaning returns again, towards the end of the novel, when Elaine contemplates the house: 'she remembers the last time she was happy with the house. [...] They hadn't started to pay for it yet' (245). Despite subscribing to the neoliberal ideal of home ownership and improvement as investment, Paul and Elaine's assets have become poisoned, no longer signifying profit but instead unpaid debt.

Both Homes' and Franzen's novels feature the repeated refrain of 'warning signs' that imbue each novel with an anxious foreboding. *The Corrections* begins with the metaphor of a ringing alarm bell, which in Gary's section later translates into the subtle fluctuations in mental economy that foreshadow the character's eventual crash. In *Music for Torching a*

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<sup>22</sup> Franco Moretti's seminal work on genre, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms*, describes how horror 'filters' ideology through its generic conventions and tropes, both expressing but also masking a text's politics.

<sup>23</sup> In this sense Homes' novel is emblematic of the genre of the 'suburban gothic.' For more on this subgenre of suburban fiction see Dines and Vermeulen, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*. Briefly, in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), the physical house of Usher falls into disrepair in tandem with the decaying lineage of its inhabitants, the House of Usher, which collapses into a ferment of incest and interment. Like Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) before it, Poe's totalising vision yokes structural disrepair to subjective deterioration. As Dines and Vermeulen's study demonstrates, in the late-twentieth century this literary conceit was transported to the suburbs, as a number of fictions sought to allegorise the spiritual decay of suburban living by detailing the structural disrepair of the suburban dwelling, leading to coining of the term 'suburban gothic.'



similar sense of anticipation pervades the novel. Alongside the anxiety each character displays regarding the moral debts of their behaviour—signified by the real debt of mortgaged property—the opening passage of the novel predicts how Elaine will ‘later [...] regret’ hosting the dinner party that just precedes the beginning of the narrative. From this moment on, both Elaine and Paul consistently demonstrate a fluctuating and contradictory fear of both stasis and change: a fear, on the one hand, of being ‘stuck’, and a sense, on the other, of ‘impending disaster’ (173). Franzen’s narrative, as we have seen, ultimately ‘corrects’ for this anxiety; for Homes, however, such resolutions are withheld. In the process, the structure of the novel (like the structure of the house) is marshalled by Homes in her critique of suburban financialisation in a way that it isn’t by Franzen, leading to a critique that ultimately draws attention not just to the subject of financialisation, but also to how financialisation operates at a systemic level.

When Sammy is kidnapped and shot in the head by his friend Nate, this crisis comes seemingly at random at the end of the novel, as a kind of *deus ex machina*. On revisiting the novel, however, a reader may notice the warning signs that Homes liberally but subtly places throughout the text. Indeed, Sammy frequently tries to tell his parents of the vague and insidious situations that occur at his friend Nate’s: from him playing the rhino to Nate’s hunter in the school play, to his complaints of being forced to ‘do push-ups’ at a sleepover or calling his parents to request rescuing in the middle of the night. Yet Paul and Elaine are too narcissistically absorbed in their own lives to take notice of Sammy’s complaints. Even when the two adults are pushed to metaphysical observations, as when Paul makes his aforementioned remark whilst caught in a storm that ‘everything is happening at a strange pace. There is a sense of impending disaster’ (173), these implicit warning signs are ignored, the specific shape of the disaster remaining frustratingly undefined. When the disaster finally happens, Paul and Elaine find their perspectives properly reoriented.

If Franzen’s novel structurally replicates a market correction, then, Homes’ by contrast embodies a cycle of crises. In her article ‘Investing in the Future’, McClanahan attempts to probe the gulf between the material and ideological realities of the 1990s. In doing so, she reveals the financial rhetoric of ‘investing in the future’ as an attempt to defer profit into an unspecified tomorrow, as a way also of deferring crisis. McClanahan asserts the critical urgency of ‘the observation that financialization not only forestall[s], but also foretells, a structural crisis’ (84). It is this foretelling which Homes’ novel seems to replicate: a first

crash (the fire) that warns of a greater crisis to come. In pursuing this structure Homes evokes a vision of finance's function in the vein of Nikolai Kondratieff's popular 'wave-theory', which, as Paul Mason has recently demonstrated, began life not as a theory of 'waves', but of 'cycles'. For Kondratieff, the discourse of the cycle activates a valuable scientific sub-language: 'of phases, states and their sudden alternation' (Mason, 33). Kondratieff's vision of cycles—of upswings and downswings, crises and recoveries—drew him to the attention of Stalin because it implied that capitalism would not, ultimately, fail. But as the financialisation of neoliberalism has flourished under the ideological blanket of capitalist realism, Kondratieff's cycle theory comes to be more challenging to the system itself—which narrates a perpetual upswing—than to the possibilities of revolution it forecloses. Kondratieff's theories have influenced the work of Giovanni Arrighi, who nevertheless rejects Kondratieff's cycles in favour of the 'systemic cycle,' a broader model that 'describe[s] and elucidate[s] the formation, consolidation, and disintegration of the successive regimes through which the capitalist world-economy has expanded' (9-10). In Arrighi's model, the end of an economic hegemon's life cycle is marked by the primacy of financialisation. It is important to note, however, that unlike the first three powers to which Arrighi devotes attention in his account, the author observes that the current hegemonic reign of the US exhibits the hallmarks of decline but *without* the presence of a waiting successor. As such, the turn to financialisation—or more specifically, neoliberal financialisation—in the US economy, marked initially by the closing of the gold standard, heralds a terminal crisis in capitalism.

The structure of Homes' novel maps onto this long view of capitalism. While the repetitive behaviours of Homes' subjects seems throughout the novel to foretell a cyclical pattern of collapsing and rebuilding, the shooting of Sammy and the novel's abrupt closure suggests something terminal, the reaching of a figurative limit to the rhetoric of investing in the future heralded by the metaphor of the death of a child (a child, recalling Foucault, being a powerful image of investment both in the traditional financial sense and as a figure of human capital). As Paul and Elaine take off in a medical helicopter with the injured Sammy, Homes offers the following commentary:

they are up and away [...] looking down on the familiar [...] a crooked cartography  
[...] they are looking in on themselves from a peculiar perspective—everything in  
miniature, their lives made small. (357)

With this second crisis comes a sort of ‘telescoping’ of the couples’ life. Flying above the suburban geography, Paul and Elaine are made privy to the ‘crooked cartography’ of the planned community, the networks and patterns that form it but that are invisible from within. In this way, the narrative imitates diegetically the manoeuvre that is carried out at the formal level. The moment of terminal crisis, as I have already suggested, draws attention to the fragile temporality of the upswing cycle. This closure is dependent on the structure of the novel in line with Arrighi’s model of financialisation as a period of foretelling. Sammy’s injury represents the crisis moment to which financialisation is inevitably oriented and makes it visible, and like Paul and Elaine, it catapults the reader up a level, to a sudden awareness of the meta-structure, the ‘crooked cartography’, of the novel itself. Just as for the occupants of the helicopter, the lives of the novel’s characters are ‘made small’, superseded by the larger pattern the narrative enacts.<sup>24</sup> In this way, Homes answers another of Carico and Orenstein’s questions, posed in the *Radical History Review*: ‘how do we narrate the repetitive cycles of capital?’ (9).

As Sammy’s pressure begins to drop, Elaine addresses the final lines of the novel to Paul: ‘Elaine looks at him. “It’s over,” she says.’ (358). These final words are loaded with signification. “It’s over” must first of all be understood to refer to the novel itself, a reading which further reinforces the sense that the cartography made visible in the final passages is not just that of suburbia, or of the financial system on which suburbia depends, but also of the text, too. The narrative of the couples’ ‘inner-lives’, always partially subsumed by the novel’s other preoccupations, is in its final moments indelibly effaced. Then, “It’s over” in a less figurative sense declares the death of Paul and Elaine’s marriage, the precariousness of which likely couldn’t survive the twin shocks of the death of a child and Elaine’s implied discovery, moments earlier, of Paul and Nate’s mother’s affair. These dual meanings—the line referring both to the personal dramas of the protagonists and to the formal qualities of the text—signal Homes’ awareness of the necessity to mediate: to write fiction that attends to the human, but that attends equally to the formal logics structuring the human lives; in this case, to the systemic qualities of financial capitalism. Key to Homes’ project is the idea of ‘making visible’ the illusions of financialisation by

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<sup>24</sup> Mary Holland concludes her reading of *Music for Torching* with what to me is a severe misreading of this ending. Holland first notes that she ‘can’t help but wish that Homes had stopped with [the] tenth neat and redemptive chapter’ (95), before then arguing that Sammy’s ‘death’ ‘bring[s] [Paul and Elaine] together over his dying body,’ ‘finally convert[ing] the parent’s indefinable lack into a specific and terrible loss they can grieve’ (93). Conversely, I contend that the closing chapter of Homes’ novel is essential to the cyclical narrative structure of the novel.

modelling the structure of her novel onto the systemic pattern of capitalism's growth and decline in a way that reinforces, rather than undermines, the critical content of the text.

### Social Critique in John Keene's *Annotations*

McClanahan's call for artworks capable of mediating between the systemic and the subjective demands a negotiation between a critique grounded in humanist subjectivity and a critique articulated via an anti-humanist formal play. The best examples of the attempt to narrate financialisation achieve a delicate balance between these two poles. In preface to the final text I will discuss, I want to return, momentarily, to Franzen's Gary Lambert. If Gary's suburban house and financialised life don't qualify him sufficiently as a representative character of the 1990s, then his aforementioned status as a white patriarch surely does. The middle-class white male father, the 'ideal' suburban subject, underwent its own special crisis in the 1990s as the white male found themselves culturally (if not politically) decentered in favour of an increasingly popular identity politics that exalted queerness and difference. Emblematic of this shift was the Whitney Biennial, which in 1993 played host to 'a glorification of identity and difference, transgression, sex and sexuality, and the diminishing importance of the great white male', encapsulated in the visitor badges, designed by Daniel Joseph Martinez, that displayed fragments of the sentence 'I CAN'T / IMAGINE / EVER WANTING / TO BE / WHITE' (Troy, 78). This crisis similarly percolated into the literature of the decade. In *Do You Feel It Too?* Nicoline Timmer reads *Infinite Jest's* Hal Incandenza in the context of this 'crisis of masculinity'—'masculinity', in this case, signifying a very specific white, patriarchal, heterosexual masculinity. Mark Storey reads the very different character of Patrick Bateman in Brett Easton Ellis' 1991 novel *American Psycho* as reacting to a cultural crisis in which 'the rise of the marginalized threatens his central position as hegemonic male' (Storey, 64.). Citing several other examples of 1990s texts that deal with this crisis, texts like *American Beauty* and *Magnolia* (both 1999 and both, significantly, suburban narratives), Timmer notes that such texts tapped into a specific feeling 'that a certain group lacked a constructive way to approach their identity':

The white, heterosexual, middle or upper middle class, Western male was the implicit 'center identity', if we could call it that, in contrast with which "marginal

identities” were construed. In a sense the identity of white western males had thus for a long time been viewed mostly in negative terms.’ (137)

Franzen’s Gary is another archetypal character in this vein, but as with the novel’s complicated negotiation with neoliberalism, it is unclear whether Gary’s complaint is shared with, or satirised by, Franzen—an ambiguity that many suburban narratives share.

In *White Diaspora*, Catherine Jurca notes that the classic suburban narrative produced by the likes of Ford, Yates, and Cain, can fundamentally be understood as a narrative of ‘complaint.’ That is, these novels lament the ‘affective dislocation’ suffered by their white, male, suburban-dwelling characters, who are commonly described as ‘spiritually and culturally impoverished by prosperity’ in what amounts to a literary ‘fantasy of victimisation’ (6). This observation is similarly recorded in Hoberek’s work, when he observes that the newly proletarianized middle class of the mid-century translates their loss of property ‘into narratives of individual dispossession that enforce its cultural dominance rather than seeking a potentially more useful affiliation with those already outside the magic circle of capital’ (32). The consistent focus on the woes of these patriarchal figures complements non-fiction narratives of suburbia. As Rachael Waldoff notes in her study of race and suburbia,

many anecdotal stories of white flight conclude when whites make their mass exodus from a neighbourhood. [...] It is assumed that what will transpire is known: the inevitable, clear-cut, neighbourhood racial change “death spiral.” (213)

In fact, Waldoff notes, ‘rapid white flight often creates conditions that lead to a later phase of black flight’ (ibid.). John Keene’s short novel *Annotations* (1995) narrates precisely this ‘black flight,’ functioning as a corrective to the overwhelming dearth of accounts of suburban living that incorporate a consideration of race. While the eponymous ‘annotations’ of which the novel consists may be understood to refer to Keene’s commentary on his own early life, the novel can also be read as an ‘annotation’ to the standard narrative of white flight, which tracks the exodus of the white fliers into suburbia without considering the impact on the territories from which they flee, or the stories of those who follow.

Keene’s novel is a highly experimental narrative of the author’s own coming of age from birth to college, punctuated by aphoristic encounters with a variety of opinionated characters, and peppered with observations on the condition of growing up black and

working class in a central St Louis neighbourhood afflicted by white flight, and his family's attempts to follow in the trail of the white emigres to suburbia. The eighty-something page novella is structured in three parts, each part divided into shorter sections with confounding titles like 'A FATHOMING BENEATH A FLOURISH OF NOTES, AN EXEGESIS' (37). Each of these sections tells an anecdote or anecdotes from Keene's youth, and together they are assembled into a roughly chronological tale that traces Keene's family's passage from the inner city to the suburbs. The narrative begins with the birth of 'another Negro child' to working class parents. From there, we hear of Keene's early childhood, his school life as a gifted but unpopular child, until the narrative closes as he attempts to gain entry to Harvard. Beyond this quite skeletal narrative, the novel is remarkable for the way in which Keene blends his account of the everyday with a keen eye for the theoretical stakes of transposing this material into narrative, and a lyrical style that foregrounds the transformation of life into literature. As Colson Whitehead observes in his 1995 review of the novel, *Annotations* is fundamentally a novel about 'becoming,' and about finding a voice somehow liberated from 'parental admonitions, the codes of the black bourgeoisie, and societal double-talk.' Such 'becoming' is evident throughout the text, as for example when Keene translates a parental invective to eat his greens into a burst of poetic lyricism: "'Clear the peas off your plate, please," achieved with the aim to appease' (47). The novel is bursting with wordplay, unusual verbosity, theoretical digressions and philosophical musings, all of which serve to foreground the mediation of the autobiographical matter of Keene's life into prose in such a way that it is this transformation, and the act of narrating, that becomes the central drama of the text.

Keene's airy wordplay and self-reflexive digressions are anchored, however, to a very concrete account of the material conditions of his upbringing. At the beginning of the novel, Keene's family are based in the St. Louis neighbourhood of Walnut Park, where 'brick houses as uniform as Monopoly props lined the lacework of streets for miles' (2), in a compelling image that yokes the urban house to the ruthless acquisitiveness of the capitalist 'game.' The narration flits between optimism and retrospection, as Keene juxtaposes the beliefs of the family on their arrival with his own recollections of the neighbourhood's decline:

A home in which to watch the seasons pass, to grow old within a chosen "community." Now names of most neighbours have shifted past his consciousness like afternoon shadows across the living room floor. Everyone, except the

neighbours, marvelled at the size of the basement. Then no one used heroin because they lacked for “family values.” (4-5)

As the author of an autofictional novel, Keene occupies the unique roles of both subject and narrator, and as such is able to blur together temporally distinct viewpoints to create a patchwork voice of simultaneous boosterism and pessimism. Both of these rhetorics are couched in economic terms. Keene describes the ‘haemorrhage’ of whites from the neighbourhood and the attendant ‘unravelling’ of his family’s ‘internal social fabric,’ marked by the ‘creditors calling night and day’ (30). While narratives of white flight of the sort described by Jurca and Waldoff describe a rush into credit as an investment in one’s future, Keene’s account of those left behind tells a contrasting tale of debt’s true effect.

The reality of creditors calling provides an abrupt rejoinder to the dominant discourse of financialisation. Unlike the Lamberts and Weiss’s of Franzen and Homes, for whom the promises of economic financialisation have at least been realised, Keene’s family buy into a rhetoric that, Keene implies, proves false. One of the competing discourses around which Keene must negotiate in his process of ‘becoming’ is the neoliberal rhetoric of financial betterment. A repeated refrain of the novel becomes the notion, first introduced on page four as the family choose their house in Walnut Park, that Keene’s black, working class family ‘quite naturally assumed that they, like others who worked for a living, would eventually own their own property’ (4). This refrain is repeated again in part two, when the source of the assumption is identified as ‘the TV families’ (26), and in part three, when the family eventually complete their ‘black flight’ to the suburb, it is repeated again:

No one, you understand, carped at the size of the downpayment, since it was assumed that they would eventually own their own property. Ignorance is incapable of concealing itself. (51)

Beyond the accusation of ‘ignorance’ that Keene levels at this assumption, the beliefs of his family are never categorically proven wrong. Rather, Keene allows the reworked syntax of his refrain to implicitly undermine the logic of financialisation, which promotes a colour-blind faith in home-ownership to potential suburbanites. As Jurca has observed, the reality for black families looking to move into the suburbs is that they faced (and still face) a series of racist and exclusionary laws and practices designed to put white residents at a permanent ‘economic and social advantage’ over non-whites (6).

Like Homes and Franzen, Keene tells a tale of urban and then suburban living that strongly implicates financialisation. What makes Keene's novel particularly distinctive, however, is the way in which he tells this tale. When Franzen can be understood to provide a subjective critique of financialisation marshalled through his portrayal of Gary, and Homes develops an account of suburbia that draws away from the subject to lay emphasis on the structural qualities of financialisation, Keene's novel does something quite different again. One of Keene's most experimental techniques in the novel is his play with subjectivity. Another repeated refrain in the novel, commenting on the idea of 'the subject,' makes clear Keene's ambitions in this area. When describing the way in which summer heatwaves gather 'every living and inanimate thing in [their] folds,' Keene remarks that this 'entails no notion of the "subject"' (7). When, later, he describes the epidemic of drug and alcohol addiction that grips the neighbourhood post-white flight, Keene modifies his observation, calling this time on a 'decentered' notion of the subject. Many more fluctuations abound in the novel, and these complement Keene's problematisation of his own position as subject and narrator of the narrative. As many critics have noted, Keene's novel is an example of autofiction—Colson Whitehead, for example, calls it an 'improv memoir'—but the autofictional element of Keene's text is complicated by a constant flux of pronouns and narrative voices.<sup>25</sup> Consider the proliferation of pronouns in this short section in which Keene describes his victimisation at the hands of schoolyard bullies (*italics added for emphasis*):

He learned to create small diversions for *himself* [...] as he crumpled near the swingset like a ravelling, forgotten husk-doll. One option proposed seriously was that of skipping a grade, though they feared that might warp *her* emotional development. In other words, neither parent had expected such a fragile character. [...] Neither Bolivia nor Paraguay has an ocean port, *you* learned from encyclopedias at the great-aunt's house. (20-21)

Yo-yoing between pronouns and persons, Keene builds up precisely the 'decentered' notion of subjecthood he observes as appropriate for his account, refusing to alight on a single organising consciousness around which the novel can cohere.

This subjectlessness is described as both a condition of, and response to, the marginalisation of black lives in suburbia, just as white suburban fiction both critiques, but

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<sup>25</sup> For other references to Keene's text as autofiction see Harold Augenbraum, who calls the novel a 'disguised autobiographical narrative'; Brian Evenson, who refers to *Annotations* as a 'pseudo-biography'; and Philip Gambone, who less ambiguously labels Keene's effort a straightforward 'autobiographical novel.'



also risks contributing to, the complaint of cultural impoverishment by prosperity. As symptom, Keene frames the decentering as an impact of attempting to integrate into the white world of suburbia. He notes with vitriol the way his family try to associate with a 'bourgie crowd' when they move to suburbia, despite still holding 'menial jobs' (65). Of his own attempt to gain entrance to Harvard in the 'new climate of conservatism' heralded by the election of Reagan, Keene observes that 'the strain of our ruse quite rightly blinded us, until we lost sight of who we were' (76). In this sense, Keene corrects for the 'loss of sight' with his own project of making visible, in this case illuminating the overwhelming whiteness of contemporary accounts of suburbia—the other fictions in this chapter included.

Keene's loss of sense of himself as individual is reframed, in the final, explanatory pages of the novel, as something to be harnessed creatively even as it is mourned personally. Earlier in the novel, Keene remarks that his pursuit of fashion—wearing the 'coolest picks [...] upright in our afros like coxcombs'—signified a 'desire to be seen [and] an attempt to escape alterity, [...] to shift from the margins to the centre' (27). At the close of the novel, Keene scales up his ambitions from the personal to the political, to locate his 'personal development within the broader historical record.' He cites his ability to do this in the accounts he has recorded, 'set down as carefully as tesseract [...] gradually melded, gathered shape, solidified.' Keene finally recognises that he has 'accomplished [...] the construction of an actual voice' (78). In this sense, dissolving the individual voices—the 'he,' 'she,' 'they,' and 'you' of the narrative—into a collective group becomes another way of narrating his experience. Given the notion that the suburb, far from being a social space, is in fact an individualistic one, *Annotations* reads as a rebuttal to the dismantling of society by fracturing the author's subjectivity into a collective as a means of writing a sort of 'choral' critique. Rather than subtracting from the humanistic, as Homes does, Keene multiplies it, unifying his experience under the umbrella of an entire demographic's experience—precisely what 'white narratives' of suburbia, desperate to resist rather than embrace their own subject's decentering, are unable to do.

Formally, Keene's narrative experimentation also represents a wholesale rejection of the realist aesthetic which has dominated the genre of suburban fiction and which, as Hoberek, McClanahan and others have demonstrated, also reinforces the ideologies of financialisation. But Keene's challenging, elliptic style does not therefore represent an unproblematic disavowal of the discourse of financialisation. In Hoberek's account, the fact

that mid-century authors of suburban fiction revolt against modernist experimentation as the representation of an ossified bureaucratic system says less about modernism as a specific target as about the way in which any literary form can become the avatar of a social institution. Thus, the rejection of those institutions shifts importance from 'the lineaments of style itself to the act of opposing the previous style (any style)' (Hoberek, 24). What is problematic in this act of revolt is that,

While postwar authors' engagement with stylistic innovation thus links their work to the transformation of the middle class, it does not necessarily constitute a politically desirable response to this transformation. On the contrary, the inherently individual and formal nature of such stylistic interventions necessarily forecloses the sorts of collective struggle and organization that a political response to the transformation of mental labor would call for. (24-25)

Keene's novel, interestingly, both succumbs to and avoids this pitfall. Stylistically, Keene's adoption of a cluster of modernist hallmarks—Hemingway's minimalism, Stein's wordplay—doesn't seem to signify anything politically. However, when one considers that Keene's enigmatic, episodic style most closely resembles Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), it becomes apparent that Keene is consciously drawing on a legacy of specifically African American modernism in his work. Furthermore, the manner of his rejection of realism and his commitment also to a choral form that deemphasises his role as the individualised author rejects the image of the petulant rebel, reopening the possibility for 'collective struggle' desired by Hoberek.

To return finally to the notion of spatial and temporal 'fixes' central to the logic of financialisation, Keene rewrites the utopian rhetoric of 'investing in the future' by introducing racial experiences of debt and refused credit into the narrative. The dual temporality of the text, made possible by the autofictional status of the narrative, allows Keene at once to imitate and undermine a rhetoric of financialisation that promotes economic autonomy through home ownership, and to make visible the aftermath of the flourishing of suburbia on the inner-city neighbourhoods abandoned in the rush to escape to the periphery. Keene's own focus on 'shift[ing] from the margins to the centre' reverses this trajectory, shifting the decaying and de-industrialised urban cores back into the foreground of his account of black flight, much as McClanahan argues for a reacknowledgement of the newly industrialised Global South in a larger account of globalised financialisation. And as is essential according to McClanahan and others, it is

Keene's formal play in the form of his 'choral' critique that allows the novel to meaningfully resist the dominant discourses this chapter has discussed, reintroducing a sense of the social into a space infected by the Thatcherite ideology of the primacy of the individual and the family.

Suburban narratives produced in the 1990s harness the suburbs' imbrication in the phenomenon of financialisation as a means of making concrete a critique of an ordinarily abstract phenomenon. Each novelist responds to the challenge of representing financialisation in a different way: by narrating the impact of financialisation on the everyday life of the individual subject, by structurally transcribing the 'true' patterns financial rhetoric attempts to occlude, or by drawing attention to aporias in the utopian logic of investing in the future. That each fiction is suburban is no coincidence, as the suburban space both contains the financialised subject and itself embodies the rewards promised by the ideology of increased returns. In each case, these narratives kick over the barbecue in the backyard (in Homes' terms) and set alight to the myth of financialisation, though none, of course, can raze this house to the ground.

## Chapter 4: Abject Art

### 'A backwards reflection of itself': The George Miles Cycle

As Dennis Cooper himself tells it, the author produced and published the five novels that comprise the George Miles Cycle between 1989 and 2000. The novels, chronologically, are *Closer*, *Frisk*, *Try*, *Guide*, and *Period*. Together, they form a memorial to George Miles, a formative figure from the author's past. Cooper conceived of the novels as a tribute to George, whom he first met when he was fifteen and George was twelve. They became friends and eventually lovers but fell out of contact when Cooper moved to Holland in 1985 to begin work on *Closer*. Unbeknownst to him, Miles committed suicide in 1987, shortly before Cooper returned to the US. For ten years Cooper worked on the cycle, finding out only after the publication of *Guide* in 1997 that Miles had died before even the first novel had been published. Devastated, Cooper resolved to finish the cycle, and published the final novel, *Period*, in 2000.

The George Miles Cycle revolves around a central, essential contradiction: in his own words, Cooper's 'unqualified love and support for George Miles' and his 'unqualified fascination with the sexual fantasy of possessing, exploring, and destroying young men like him' (Cooper, 'DC on...'). To elucidate this contradiction, Cooper developed a complex dual structural conceit for the cycle: on the one hand, the cycle would 'take the form of a novel being gradually dismembered to nothing', whilst parallel to this dismemberment would be 'a mirrored structure where the first novel would seem to gradually move through a mirror and eventually, over the course of the cycle, become a backwards reflection of itself.' Within this premise, Cooper mapped out a structure in which *Closer* would make the opening gambit, constructing the themes, archetypes, subjects, style, and atmosphere of the cycle. Each of the middle three books would provide a concentrated surgical dissection of a single facet of Cooper's response to his subject: first libidinal, then emotional, then cerebral. The final novel would present what remained, 'creating *Closer*'s decimated, resolved twin' (ibid.).

But perhaps all of the above ought to be taken with a pinch of salt. After all, part of Cooper's project is the shattering of the boundaries between the real and the fictional, to the extent that any commentary wrought by the author on his own works must be considered at best suspect, if not a deliberate extension of the cycle's fictionality into the 'real world'. Such elisions of meaning abound throughout Cooper's novels. In *Guide*, for example, when Mason meets the fictional bass player Alex Johns of the fictional band Smear outside his apartment, the amoral Mason capitalises on the chance encounter. He drugs Johns with rohypnol and fucks him 'harder than he'd fucked anyone in his life' (91). Cooper makes little effort to hide Alex Johns' resemblance to Alex James, real bass player of the real band Blur. In real life, this elision earned Cooper a burst of infamy when *Guide* was first published. After reading the novel, Alex James famously expressed a desire to meet Cooper, only to fearfully back out of the arranged interview at the last minute. Meanwhile the fictional Dennis who narrates *Guide* shares his own remarkable similarities with the author. Both are novelists and occasional journalists, and Dennis' fictional moments of autobiography echo Cooper's various admissions in interviews and online. Even the synopsis on the book's rear cover gestures towards a conflation of the two figures when it indicates that the narrator's voice 'may be construed as the author's own.' When Dennis successfully convinces his (unrequited) love Luke to move in with him, this blurring (or smearing) of identities is complicated further. When Luke tells his friends of his plans to move they warn him against Dennis, their fears grounded in Dennis' novels. "Have you read them?" Coffee asks Luke. "They're all about serial murderers. And all the victims are boys. And all the boys look like you" (155).

Cooper displays a clear disinterest in upholding the strict ontological boundaries of his texts, mobilising, like Acker, Hustvedt, Kraus and Keene, the autofiction form throughout the cycle. This formal play renders the texts both inscrutable and compelling, his willingly offered paratextual information only enhancing this effect further. Like the itinerant youths of Cooper's novels, readers of the cycle find themselves stranded in the hinterlands of Cooper's world, adrift in the suburbs of meaning. This is the space in which Cooper's fiction flourishes. The author's purposeful elisions deliberately erode solid footholds in the text, frustrate interpretation, and block identification. They create a strange space, marginal, liquid, full of unstable identities and inconstant ontologies: a liminal space for a liminal decade. Anthropologist Victor Turner theorised liminality as a property of interim spaces

that function as sites of recuperation, as ‘escape valve[s]’ or ‘exhaust[s]’ for ‘pent-up, taboo and impermissible acts [...] rituals, [things] that need to be addressed in the culture, but aren’t addressed in any other way’ (qtd. in McCarthy, 28). To read Cooper is to enter, through the escape valve of the body, into such a space.

Critical work carried out on Cooper is, to date, admittedly limited, and often confines itself to familiar territory. Cooper’s strange space has been mapped in relation to its aesthetics, its philosophical implications, its subcultural and identitarian affiliations, and most frequently in regard to its lineage, wherein Cooper’s debts are traced back to everything from French avant-gardists like de Sade, Lautreamont, and Bataille, to the Southern Gothic, to Black Mountain College. Despite Cooper’s own insistence that his ‘politics were involved in the aesthetic of the cycle’, however, little critical work has been published on the politics of Cooper’s novels. James Annesley, for example, has attempted to ‘contextualise Cooper’, but he tantalisingly leaves the project of tying Cooper’s aesthetic of ‘placelessness [to the] conditions of globalisation’ (77) as work for another day.

This chapter picks up where Annesley leaves off. Taking as my cue Cooper’s fascination with the abject, I read Cooper’s cycle in the light of Julia Kristeva’s classic study *Powers of Horror*. Complementing Kristeva’s politicised vision of abjection as an invocation of the Real in the face of a seamless Symbolic Order, I employ Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* to delineate the politics of Cooper’s aesthetics. Far from a unique case-study, this chapter also reads Cooper’s work alongside several of his contemporaries in the worlds of art and filmmaking. In an essay from which this chapter takes its inspiration, art critic Hal Foster observes in the American art scene of the 1990s ‘a general culture of abjection’ (24), and an accompanying politics of alterity ‘pushing towards nihility’ (27).<sup>1</sup> This is the cultural climate into which Cooper’s words emerge, and they find many reflections in the art and film of his contemporaries, including filmmaker Gregg Araki and artists Paul McCarthy and Cindy Sherman. All of these figures use an abject aesthetic to articulate a political critique.

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<sup>1</sup> This culture of abjection, and its equally virulent opposition in the form of senator Jesse Helms’ jeremiad against the National Endowment for the Arts, spawned the first of many celebrations of the abject and the objectionable in the decade: artist-cum-curator Joseph Kosuth’s 1990 exhibition *The Brooklyn Museum Collection: The Play of the Unmentionable*. Two years later, the 1992 Whitney Museum Biennale helped ‘set America’s cultural agenda’ for the 1990s with an ‘angry, edgy grotesque burlesque of eighty-two artists, with gays and minorities heavily represented, asserting difference, assailing sensibilities, flaunting their bodies and body parts, revelling in the emissions and secretions’ (Troy, 78). Following these early events, many more celebrations of the abject followed suit throughout the 1990s.

Their works play complex aesthetic games designed to invert hierarchies and subvert structures, to celebrate artistic creation and denigrate commodity production, and ultimately to sketch out a space autonomous to contemporary culture, in which philosophical inquiry and transgressive desire may be exercised free from repression or constraint.

While each novel in Cooper's cycle dismembers the last, as Wayne Kostenbaum has observed, 'the second book [also] eats the first: the relation of text to text, is orgiastically cannibalistic' (189). In this sense, each text consumes the previous and converts it into energy, fuelling the forward momentum of the cycle. A chronological analysis ought then to follow suit. The chapter thus begins with Cooper's early novels *Closer* and *Frisk*, which set the stakes for abject art in the 1990s, both dramatising its potential and formalising its limitations. With these stakes established, I move on to a critical inquiry into the projects of Araki, McCarthy, and Sherman, respectively. Finally, I turn back to Cooper, to bookend the chapter. Cooper's latter novels in the cycle both suture shut Cooper's abject experiment, and at the same time celebrate the unique capabilities of the abject as demonstrated by his contemporaries.

Ultimately, I intend to claim that abjection—like the other terms this thesis engages with—is, to borrow Hal Foster's terminology, both a predicament and a strategy. Evolving in the wake of a postmodern scepticism towards authentic meaning, abject art attempts to move through postmodernism towards a post-postmodern position that incorporates the limitations of expression without succumbing to them. The various convergences of postmodernism and neoliberalism have been well documented in recent years and covered elsewhere in this thesis, and this chapter continues to concern itself with art attempting to negotiate the intersection of these aesthetic and political projects, respectively. The abject, as an aesthetic, stages many of the concerns I have argued are typical of the 1990s: an (at best) ambivalence towards affect, an enthusiasm for formal play, a self-reflexivity necessitated by preceding postmodern intervention, and a political antipathy to neoliberalism that manifests at both a thematic and formal level. Ultimately, the politics of abjection are derived from the reciprocal relationship that abject art stages with its reader. In the liminal space between a politics of anti-neoliberalism and an aesthetics of abjection, the texts discussed in this chapter find their home.

## 'I think I was after perfection': *Closer*

The George Miles cycle begins with *Closer* (1989). Cooper's novel introduces the tone, themes, and philosophical preoccupations of the cycle, as well as its eponymous central figure, George Miles. In Cooper's schema, the novel presents the 'body' of the project prior to its dismemberment and pre-cannibalisation. The narrative of *Closer* focuses on the character of George and the milieu of disaffected, gay, suburban-dwelling teenagers to whom he is variously an object of infatuation, obsession, and abuse. Each chapter is dedicated to a different character in George's orbit: John, a punk and an amateur artist obsessed with capturing George in sketch; David, a delusional teen who wavers between the reality of his school life and a fantasy world in which he is a famous popstar; Alex, an aspiring porn director; Cliff, another of George's sexual partners; and Pierre. Two chapters on George punctuate this array. In the first, George meets Pierre, and the two engage in an abject sexual and scatological relationship. In the second, Pierre introduces George to the serial killer Tom. George confusedly submits to Tom, who mutilates but refuses to kill George when, during the act, George reveals his reluctance to die. The novel finally closes with Steve, who embarks on a tentative relationship with George despite his now scarred physical appearance.

In Steve's chapter, the eponymous character opens a club in his parents' garage. On one of the club nights, David is killed when a car crashes through a wall into the club. Witnessing David's death prompts in Steve a revelation of sorts. His awkward attempts to articulate this newfound self-knowledge—in the stumbling, slacker-teen-patois typical of Cooper's novels—draw *Closer* to a close:

It's like this: I think I was after perfection, but wouldn't admit it. [...] I had this dualistic thing going on in my head, loving George—a mess—and wanting David—a perfect mess. I was a lot more confused than I let on. This sounds crazy, I know, but when I saw David there with his insides exposed, the perfection thing uglified. Is that a word? I mean, perfection's like God. It only works if you want it to badly enough, or... Shit, I'm all tangled up.

I'll try again. (128)



With the 'perfect mess' uglified, Steve can accept the straightforward 'mess' of George, and George's mutilated ass: 'I can look at it now, like you can look at a horror film' (128). This revelatory moment discloses the central preoccupation of *Closer*: the dialectic between surface and depth; or between a kind of formal, superficial beauty and a disguised grotesque. Appropriate to Cooper's intentions for the novel-as-body, *Closer* exhibits a fascination with the visceral, sticky materiality of guts, and of the truth they conceal. Early on, John observes how George is really 'just skin wrapped around some grotesque-looking stuff' (7). Later, David describes himself—prophetically—as 'a bunch of blue tubes inside a skin wrapper' (22). In both cases these observations juxtapose an implicitly false reality situated at the skin-level—David's belief that he is 'famous for [...] being gorgeous' (22), John's romanticising of 'warm [...] familiar' (7) George—with the truth of 'what everyone actually is,' i.e. guts, gore. When Steve is faced with David's insides 'pushed through some holes in his shirt, blue and greasy and jumbled' (127), the illusion is broken, the accompanying revelation given an air of transcendence by Steve's conflation of perfection with God.

*Closer's* obsession with the body, and especially with the moments in which the smooth perfection of the skin is breached, is an integral feature of the abject aesthetic of Cooper's cycle. In Julia Kristeva's seminal *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva ruminates on the abject in all its incarnations: the skin on a glass of milk, the psychic shock of the holocaust, and the corpse, whose presence is 'the utmost abjection' (4). These things 'disturb identity, system, order,' and disrespect 'borders, positions, [and] rules' (4). Abjection marks the eruption of the Real into everyday life and the rupturing of Lacan's Symbolic Order, the 'social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the law' (Dino). When Steve sees David's guts, no longer held in order by his skin but a 'blue and greasy and jumbled' mess, he experiences this eruption of the Real, and it profoundly alters his worldview. Faced with the abject, he is at once repelled and absorbed, newly looking—'like you look at a horror movie'—at George's abject ass.

Steve's response confirms Kristeva's theory that what is abject is also perversely compelling—that abjection is limned with the sublime. Our relationship to the abject is one of constant struggle, in which 'subject' and 'object,' for Kristeva, 'push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable' (18). It is here at this boundary that 'great

modern literature unfolds' (18). The works of Lautreamont, Artaud, and Celine are celebrated by Kristeva for their function as wounds or temporary transgressions, portals that blurs the boundaries of subject and object. These works 'keep open the wound' rent in the Symbolic Order, a wound into which a reader may 'enter [...] into the analytic adventure' (27). This adventure rewards the intrepid reader with a cathartic self-knowledge of the sort experienced by Steve: a sudden awareness of the Symbolic Order, of the constructedness of everyday life, of the 'uglified' Real latent behind perfection.

'[U]glified. Is that a word?', Steve asks. The stumbling hesitancy with which Steve narrates his revelation is emblematic of Cooper's prose, a stilted cocktail of teenage slang, ellipses, semi-vocal utterances, and half-finished sentences. Failed instances of communication punctuate the novel. John declares "'my portraits speak for themselves'" rather than explain his work to an assembly (6); teenage infatuations go unrequited or are consummated with a lacklustre, awkward fumble; and at the novel's climax, George misinterprets the murderous Tom's intentions to devastating effect. All of which points to Cooper's abiding preoccupation with the inadequacy of language as a communicative form. This anxiety spills over into the text of *Closer* itself, which Cooper positions as a flawed and limited container for his complex libidinal desires. To take Cooper at his word and read *Closer* as a tribute to the 'real' George Miles is to be faced with a monument perpetually crumbling at the foundations.

Our first introduction to George comes as he offers to sit for John, the punk-turned-sketch-artist with whom *Closer* opens:

One afternoon a sophomore name George Miles took a seat in John's bedroom and tried not to blink. He'd looked cute, maybe even a little too cute, across the school cafeteria but one-on-one he twitched and trembled so much he made John think of a badly tuned hologram. John tried to draw but George was already ruined without his help. (4)

By the end of the novel, this 'badly tuned hologram' is already fading out. When Steve sleeps with George in the last few pages, George's post-coitus form is described by Steve as 'facedown [...] like he's dead or has left his nude body idling in my room' (123). Throughout the novel George flickers in and out of existence, eluding representation by John's pencil and Cooper's prose alike. For Kristeva, the 'utmost abjection' of the corpse is owed not to its appearance but to its signification. A fresh corpse and a rotten one are equally abject:

they are both 'death infecting life.' Their symbolic power derives not from their rotting flesh but from their status as both human and not-human, as 'the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (4). For Kristeva, 'abjection is above all ambiguity' (9), and if ambiguity is the key register of abjection, then it is George who of all Cooper's subjects has the strongest claim to the abject.

Cooper's self-transposition into John—each trying and failing to adequately capture the essence of George—marks the first in a long and increasingly intricate series of meta-textual manoeuvres performed by the cycle. With George's elusiveness Cooper both performs and comments upon abjection as an aesthetic strategy. The breached body, in Kristeva's text, is symbolic of a breached social order. David's ruptured body, read through Kristeva, is a metaphor for a ruptured Symbolic Order of laws and ideological conventions. Steve's exposure to the abject and the illusions it shatters models the eruption of the Real into the ideologically mediated reality of superficial high school sexual politics. When Kristeva expounds upon the abject, wound-opening literature of Lautreamont, Rimbaud, etc., she implies that abject art may have the same effect. But here Kristeva and Cooper diverge. For Cooper, abjection once removed—in the representations of the artist—is abjection compromised: a belief encapsulated in the text's struggle to contain George.<sup>2</sup>

Steve's experience in the text fractures the smooth surface of the Symbolic Order like a car to a soft body, granting Steve an experience of catharsis as only abjection can provide. But the Real that Steve apprehends remains elusive to Cooper, ultimately collapsing the text. In the final lines of the novel, Steve decides to sleep with George again. Before he does, however, he has to 'cross the room, [and] switch off the lights.' The novel closes with his final observation: 'it's really black in here' (131). This last line neatly unifies the diegetic and extra-diegetic manifestations of the dialectic of surface and depth, Symbolic Order and Real. As the novel fades to black, Steve censors the horror of George's appearance. At the same time, the structural prerequisites of the novel form—the need for an ending—sutures

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<sup>2</sup> In a chapter contributed towards his co-edited collection *Dennis Cooper: Writing at the Edge*, Danny Kennedy notes how George 'tests and degrades' the novel, how Cooper's text 'buckles and is violated' when it tries to represent him (79). For Kennedy, Cooper's work embodies a 'structurally compromised attempt [...] to narrate experiences and manifestations of excess', such as 'sex or death' (72). The auto-commentary implicit in Cooper's faltering descriptions of George—and the character's subsequent disappearance from the cycle, to be replaced by a series of substitute characters—as well *Closer's* stumbling, ill-articulated prose, point to this structural compromise.

closed the wound momentarily opened by Cooper. The Symbolic Order reasserts itself over the Real. The 'analytic adventure' is brought prematurely to an end.

### 'Still, you can see the fingerprints': *Frisk*

Justifying Cooper's significant presence in a thesis on political art in the 1990s is, at first glance, a hard sell. But Cooper's cycle does important work in the decade through its use and complication of abjection. The abject's challenge to the Symbolic Order suggests of the aesthetic an implicitly political dimension, a politics which fuelled a slew of abject work in the 1990s, from the art of Cindy Sherman and Paul McCarthy to the films of Gregg Araki and the 'queercore' movement. These artists pursue an implicitly political project, one that takes advantage of abjection's political aesthetics in the face of the near-impenetrable ideology of neoliberalism. Capitalist realism's colonisation of the 'horizons of the thinkable'—encapsulated in Jameson's famous claim that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'—necessitates a turn in the decade towards 'indirect' political strategies: an art that manifests its politics aesthetically rather than polemically. Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* narrates neoliberalism's project of the 1990s to naturalise a 'business ontology' such that it appears '*simply obvious*' that everything in society conform to a business model of operation (17). His account of capitalist realism as a 'pervasive atmosphere' that conditions not only the production of culture, but that acts 'as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action,' is self-admittedly Lacanian, and makes clear the suitability of abjection as an artistic register for the decade. The 'ideological conventions' that define Lacan's Symbolic Order, kicked into overdrive by neoliberalism's naturalising project, generate the 'ideologically mediated' reality of capitalist realism. In the face of this reality, Fisher offers a suitably Lacanian solution:

For Lacan, the Real is what any 'reality' must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is the unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality. So one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents us. (18)

The 'traumatic void' is precisely that which the abject accesses, the invocation of the Real the same end pursued in Cooper's first novel. But as I have demonstrated above, whilst a

vision of a corpse provides access to this 'traumatic void' for Cooper's characters, the limitations of language hamper Cooper's attempt to invoke this same void for the reader of *Closer*. This ostensible failure is dramatised in Cooper's second novel of the cycle, *Frisk*, in which the politics 'involved in the aesthetics' of the cycle are more explicitly articulated.

A kind of depraved *bildungsroman*, *Frisk* (1992) follows the character Dennis as he tries to reconcile himself with his own psychosexual urges. Beginning with his formative encounter, at age thirteen, with a sequence of snuff photographs, the novel checks in with Dennis at crucial moments in his life: his sexual experiments with his friend and lover Julien and a series of transient gay youths, his near-murder of a punk hustler named Samson, and finally his retreat to a windmill in Holland, in which he carries out a series of increasingly sadistic and involved murders described in an epistle intended to reconnect him with Julien. In the final chapters, Julien and his younger brother do indeed travel to Holland to reconnect with Dennis, but in doing so discover that the murders described in Dennis' letter have all been imagined; that Dennis has, in fact, not killed anyone. Instead, Dennis' writing—first a failed 'artsy murder-mystery novel' (40), then a journal, and then finally his letter to Julien—allow Dennis to imaginatively act out the fantasies that he is unable to carry out in real life. As a liminal space of the sort described by Victor Turner, Dennis' writing functions as an 'exhaust' for 'pent-up, taboo and impermissible acts' (Turner, qtd. in McCarthy, 28).

In his short, posthumously published piece 'Notes on Frisk', William S. Burroughs writes of Cooper: 'he sees the male body as symbol of—what? He wants to take it apart, like a boy dismantling a clock, looking for what makes it talk, eat, move, fuck' (80). In *Frisk*, everything is information. Dennis describes sex with Samson, the punk hustler, as 'all information' (33). Joe, the subject of Dennis' failed novel, experiences violence as 'forms of information' (50). Later, Dennis muses on his own desire for information through violence: 'I'm pretty sure if I tore some guy open I'd know him as well as anyone could' (53). When he pays for the company of a pornstar hustler in Paris, Dennis resists sex but instead massages Pierre from head-to-toe, 'logging [his] tastes, smells, sounds, textures', before requesting a sample of Pierre's piss and shit, qualifying that it's 'information.' Prohibited by his inability to kill Pierre, Dennis mournfully confesses his desires: 'I want to know *everything* about you. But to really do that, I'd have to kill you' (67). Finally, when his letter to Julien reaches its morbid crescendo at the mutilation and murder of a ten-year-old boy, Dennis explains how, at least in his fantasies, he could achieve what he could not with Pierre, describing

how he 'cut [the body] apart for a few hours, and *studied* everything inside' (106, my emphasis), and in doing so, discovered a form of 'transcendence.'

But, of course, this transcendence is imagined. Whatever absolute knowledge Dennis believes might be gleaned from the 'big, off-white shell' of a dead child is forever foreclosed to him. *Frisk* is ultimately a story of failure. Dennis' 'analytic adventure' into the abject concludes with a last-ditch attempt at closure: Dennis has the idea to recreate the snuff photographs which he first saw as a teenager, and which—though he later discovers them to have been faked—indelibly marked his psyche. With the help of Julien and a local boy, Chretien, Dennis creates a poor replica of the original images. A description of the fifth and final picture, a close-up of a papier-mâché wound, brings the novel to a close: 'It's a bit out of focus. Still, you can see the fingerprints of the person or persons who made it' (128).

As Burroughs draws his analysis of *Frisk* to a close, he returns to the image of the body-as-clock:

You take a clock apart, knowing as much about a clock as the physicist knows about the universe or as much as anyone knows about the ultimate meaning of the human body, and you got a handful of parts that don't fit, not quite—some essential piece missing in the Field Theory and the dismembered human body doesn't walk, talk, fucky. Neither the dismembered universe nor the dismembered body function (82).

The simulated photographs pale in comparison to the originals. Their subject matter—a boy, a mutilated ass—recall George Miles as we last saw him, in *Closer*. In which case the 'fingerprints' visible in the copy might be both Dennis' and Cooper's: each engaged in a doomed project to recall to life a formative presence from their past, to make visible a Real that promises catharsis. Each are hampered by the limitations of their medium: papier-mâché, a camera, words, the novel. Dennis' writing fails to bring him into proximity with the information he believes the body contains. Meanwhile Cooper's novel—as it confronts the arbitrariness of invented meaning through the revelation of Dennis' fabrications—collapses in on itself in a dramatic demonstration of the limitations of the novel form. The gap between language—bearing Cooper's fingerprints—and what it invokes, is ultimately unbridgeable. This is also the gap between our experience of *Closer*, and Steve's experience *in* the novel.

Abjection, in Kristeva's terms, marks the eruption of the Real into the Symbolic Order, and as such, it promises to invoke the 'traumatic void [...] underlying the reality capitalism presents us.' But abject art, one step removed from this visceral confrontation with the Real, must always be a poor imitation, constrained by form and marred by the fingerprints of the maker. Writing in the 1990s, Cooper belongs to a cohort of novelists living in the wake of postmodernism. As Lee Konstantinou observes at the beginning of his recent study of contemporary fiction, '[p]ostmodernism as a literary style, set of theoretical claims, or socioeconomic phenomenon cannot simply be evaded, sidestepped, or wished away' (5). Cooper, like his contemporaries in the decade, must instead reconcile themselves with the deconstructive forces of postmodernism. A corpse and a description of a corpse are not the same, and by foregrounding his fingerprints, Cooper acknowledges this shortcoming. His confrontation with the Real is always, at best, imperfect and quickly foreclosed. This is the unresolvable dialectic of Cooper's cycle and, in a decade strewn with the wreckage of postmodernism, a central tension of abject art of the 1990s. Faced with the endless, seamless horizon of capitalist realism, this dialectic becomes doubly charged: where the limitations of language constrain art *and* life, an abject political aesthetic promises to carve out a space for both. Cooper's work then functions as a kind of meta-commentary on abjection. His aesthetics don't articulate an explicit politics so much as they explore the political efficacy of aesthetics; that is, the ease or difficulty with which abjection might be harnessed to effect political change in the face of the 'grey curtain' of capitalist realism.

In the next section of this chapter I want to consider some of those artists and filmmakers exploiting the politics latent in the abject. Making visible an abjected Real, these artists challenge the ideologically naturalised institutions simultaneously structuring American society and concealing the 'aporias' of capitalist realism. As with Cooper, though, these artists are unified by an awareness of the limitations of abjection as a political aesthetic strategy. As such, their aesthetic practices comprise both a challenge to the 'reality' of capitalist realism and a Cooperian commentary on the limits of this challenge. Together, their project begins to resemble something akin to a post-postmodernism: a politics of aesthetics that absorbs its own impossibilities, and by doing so effects a critical distance from the pincers of postmodernism and neoliberalism.

## 'I fucking hate Bette Midler': Gregg Araki's *Totally Fucked Up*

While Dennis Cooper was spending the 1990s writing the George Miles Cycle, another significant queer artist was working on his own decade-spanning sequence of works. Gregg Araki's film *Totally Fucked Up* (1993) marks the first entry into the filmmaker's Teen Apocalypse Trilogy, later to be followed by *The Doom Generation* (1995), and *Nowhere* (1997). Much like Cooper's *Closer*, *Totally Fucked Up* follows a milieu of gay youths as they navigate the turbulent wasteland of an L.A. adolescence. The film—part mock-umentary, part proto-mumblecore avant-garde—follows Andy and friends as they wrestle with sex, sexuality, infidelity, depression, and the omnipresent threat of AIDS. Drugs are taken, parties attended, relationships form and collapse. The film ends as Andy fulfils the promise of the film's opening shot—a reference to the prevalence of suicide in the gay teen community—by drinking a lethal cocktail of cleaning products.

While the later films in Araki's trilogy increasingly embrace an overtly stylised, hysterical-pastiche aesthetic, *Totally Fucked Up* pursues a more subdued tone. The visual language of the film resembles a sort-of cinematic equivalent to the stumbling slacker-patois of Cooper's *Closer*. Araki's camera imitates Cooper's awkward prose with a hesitant, amateurish cinematography: scenes are poorly framed, with characters turning their backs to the camera and blocking each other with their bodies. Performances are similarly flat, with the majority of the dialogue delivered in awkward hysterics or, as with James Duval's lead Andy, mumbled in the tone of the terminally bored. Cooper's L.A. is ill-defined and geographically ambiguous. Likewise, Araki's L.A. is composed of flat surfaces and generic settings. Characters prop themselves against fences and billboards and 7-Eleven walls or loiter in motel parking lots and on cut-and-paste streets shot in closely-cropped frames, absent any landmarks or larger sense of geography. Travel scenes are non-existent. Ironically, for a low-budget film shot on location at least partly out of necessity, the impression Araki's cinematography conjures is of the artificiality of a film set.

This sensation is as deliberate on Araki's part as it is on Cooper's. The filmmaker foregrounds the unreality of his cinematic images, and by making visible this artifice he also makes visible the limitations of the medium in a way akin to Cooper's demonstration of the limits and limitations of the novel form. To emphasise this, Araki capitalises on the



opportunities afforded by his medium to generate what Dustin Goltz, after Teresa de Lauretis, calls 'space-off': the 'queer periphery existing beside represented space', unique to the cinematic image (Goltz, 103). Scenes in *Totally Fucked Up* are frequently disturbed by passers-by: a dominatrix and her slave wander across the screen, a costumed woman drags an unconscious man down a stairwell, a chicken-suited figure strolls through a parking lot, a screaming woman stands shrieking under a billboard. These diversions—a kind of (paradoxically) artificially generated Barthesian *punctum*<sup>3</sup>—are deliberately included and deliberately ignored: the camera sticks with the same small cohort of characters. For Goltz, an impression 'that there is more happening beyond the camera's lens, in the margins of the shot, severed by the narrative progression' (103), is the result. This 'severing' is necessitated by the limitations of film, in terms of both the borders of the frame and the linearity of narrative progression. In drawing attention to events beyond the scope of his lens, Araki points to the prohibitive constraints of his linear form.

Unreality, for Glyn Davis, is a defining feature of Araki's 'queer camp' aesthetic. Davis sites Araki's 'queer camp' in the context of the New Queer Cinema movement, a loosely defined collective of independent queer filmmakers operating in the early 90s, who produced innovative and aesthetically experimental work that redefined gay cinema. Situated firmly within this movement, Araki refined the aesthetic developed in his earlier, landmark film *The Living End* (1992) into the 'queer camp' of the Teen Apocalypse Trilogy. Davis defines queer camp as a cocktail of metatextual play, pastiche appropriation, and a reverence for trashy cultural ephemera. Significantly, he also notes the ways in which queer camp breaks with a more conventional gay camp by pursuing a policy of 'non-assimilationism' through an emphasis on transgression and alterity: what Davis identifies as a 'nostalgia for abjection' (57). This nostalgia permeates New Queer Cinema, manifesting as a resistance to 'mainstream' gay culture. New Queer filmmakers untether their work from both hetero- and homo-normativities with an aesthetic that at least partially suggests Davis' 'nostalgia [...] for a time when being gay/lesbian was still dangerous, furtive, criminal' (ibid.). Araki's portrayal of the subculture of queer teens—complete with non-binary sexualities, punk

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<sup>3</sup> Barthes' *punctum* is defined in *Camera Lucida* as 'that accident which pricks, bruises me' (Barthes, 26). Key here is the notion of the *punctum* as accident, 'aberrant.' In Barthes' discussion of photography, the *punctum* is that element of the photograph which the photographer cannot control, which by its very accidental nature become perversely compelling. In Araki's film, this element of uncontrollability is obviously artificially generated, yet the intended effect is the same. Our attention wanders past the characters in the foreground, to the chicken-suited figure strolling through the parking lot behind. 'Who is that?' we ask, 'and what's their story?'

music and aesthetics, and an outright rejection of ‘everything homos are supposed to like’ (Tommy: ‘God, I fucking hate Bette Middler’)—reinvigorates the ‘danger’ of queerness by placing the queer subjects at another remove from the expanded mainstream of hetero-/homonormativity.

In an early essay on Dennis Cooper, Mark Storey finds in Cooper’s novels a similar desire for marginality. Storey observes the paradox that with ‘the celebration of difference that we find at the center of postmodernity [...] those who wish to remain different find their place in the darkness being dragged into the light,’ thus ‘to deliberately exist outside the mainstream, one must cultivate new extremities of behavior’ (Storey). The extreme transgressivity of *Closer*, and especially of *Frisk*, clearly attempts this cultivation. Meanwhile Tommy’s disavowal, in *Totally Fucked Up*, of ‘everything homos are supposed to like’, is echoed in a *3:AM* interview with Dennis Cooper in which the author wilfully rejects a gay community that he perceives to be about ‘conformity and narcissism’ (Cooper, *3:AM*).

Refusing incorporation into the homogeneity of gay identity, Araki and Cooper thus step outside of the umbrella of identity politics, a move which resonates in complex ways with a resistance to neoliberalism. From David Harvey to Nancy Fraser to Walter Benn Michaels, many contemporary critics have posited the ways in which a liberal politics based on gender, sexuality, or race might in fact be complementary to a neoliberal political philosophy. Harvey finds in the social justice movements of the 1960s, which gave birth to contemporary identity politics, the kernel of the desire for freedom which neoliberalism wilfully exploits to undergird its emphasis on small government, privatisation, and self-care (Harvey 2005, 41). For both Michaels and Fraser, meanwhile, the continued pursuit of identity-based social justice at the expense of a focus on systemic economic inequality serves to at best distract from, and at worst reinforce, neoliberal philosophy. In her critique of liberal feminism, Fraser argues that, rather than fighting for equal access to existing social hierarchies, the feminist project ought to challenge ‘the structural sources of gender domination in capitalist society,’ namely the ‘institutionalised separation’ of productive and reproductive labour (Fraser 2015). Lastly, Michaels succinctly frames the debate with his assertion that ‘it is not discrimination that has produced the almost unprecedented levels of inequality Americans face today; it is capitalism’ (Michaels 2008, 36).

Araki's brand of abjection is, then, much like Cooper's: abjection once-removed, or an abjection that articulates its own failings as a 'nostalgia for abjection.' Araki incorporates the impossibility of being abject—in this case, the impossibility of a subculture to abject itself, to remain marginal, when defined against a mainstream culture that celebrates precisely the difference of marginality—into his aesthetics of abjection to make a complex, self-reflexive political point about the seamlessness of a neoliberal monoculture that paradoxically celebrates individual identity. Araki's formal play, much like Cooper's, both underscores and undermines his content. By highlighting the restrictiveness of the cinematic medium in the face of the multiplicity of human experience, he marries the formal traits of the film to its thematic preoccupation with the restrictiveness of identity politics. Both, the viewer is made acutely aware, are constructs, and by drawing attention to this constructedness, Araki points to an aporia in capitalist realism. One of Mark Fisher's examples of an aporia, in *Capitalist Realism*, is bureaucracy, the presence of which—in the face of its ostensible eradication—highlights the difference between the way things are presented and the way they really are. Araki's presentation of identity politics fulfils this same role: by pointing to the constructedness of 'homonormativity' Araki uncovers a gulf between the liberation promised by a celebration of difference and the real neoliberal project of subjection it conceals.

*Totally Fucked Up* ends with Andy's suicide. The event receives no build-up: Andy calls his friends, and when he can't get through to them, he drinks a glass of bleach. It's almost rote, and certainly not the typical narrative treatment of suicide, wherein the act marks the final capitulation to a whole text's worth of applied pressure. Andy's act seems almost destined or fated—and in fact it is. Araki's film opens on a shot of a newspaper clipping describing an epidemic of suicides among gay teens. The article focuses on one *Romeo and Juliet* style double-suicide, a conventional, tragically romantic tale of two star-crossed gay teens. From the beginning, Andy, as a gay teen, is fated to this end. As Andy moves towards homonormativity (from bisexual confusion to homosexual convention) he moves closer to this fate, closer to assimilation, and closer to death. Like Cooper's *Closer*, the film's end twists together two strands of the same project. Andy's death springs from a nostalgia for abjection that cannot be sustained in the face of the 'seamless horizon' of capitalist realist identity politics. Like the extra-marginal queer subculture which he represents, Andy's assimilation or excision is ultimately irresistible. Meanwhile, as the credits role, the film's

ending operates once again on a formal level too, to suture shut the wound momentarily—but imperfectly—opened by Araki.

### Art of confusion: Paul McCarthy's *The Garden*, *Cultural Gothic*

From around 1970 to 1985, artist Paul McCarthy spent his days nauseating audiences with a series of uniquely masochistic performances. Live events like 1974's *Hot Dog* and 1975's *Sailor's Meat* were stomach-churning exercises in abjection of the 'milk-skin' variety, featuring the artist nude, smeared in condiments, gagging on hot dogs and raw mince, masturbating and vomiting. It would seem, then, that the artist's mid-1990s offerings, coinciding with his commercial discovery in line with a renewed attention to the bodily in the contemporary art scene, would mark something of a 'taming' of McCarthy's customarily violent aesthetic. And yet pieces like *Bear and Rabbit* (1991), *Tomato Heads* (1994), and the subjects of this chapter, *The Garden* and *Cultural Gothic* (both 1992), are, in their own ways, just as abject. Furthermore, McCarthy's turn from performance to visual art serves to highlight his value to this study. Both Cooper and Araki go to lengths to problematise their respective mediums: for the former, the insufficiency of language and the disconnect between words and their referents forms an impassable obstruction, while for the latter, the linearity of narrative and the restrictions of cinematographic framing constrict the filmmaker's focus. The following two sections of this chapter will consider how abjection functions when these limitations are jettisoned: when neither language nor narrative exist to be exploited or subverted by the artist.

Both *Cultural Gothic* (fig. 1) and *The Garden* (fig. 2) are motorised tableaux featuring life-sized, Disneyland-inspired animatronic figures set in realistic artificial environments. *The Garden* places a pair of male figures into a forest setting originally used as a stage set for the television western *Bonanza*. Simultaneously realistic and obviously artificial—with the trees cut to the height of an imagined television screen frame—the forest encloses the two figures engaged in a perverse sex act. Trousers around his ankles, the older figure thrusts himself repeatedly into a tree, while the younger figure, lying stomach-down, humps a hole in the ground. *Cultural Gothic* renders a similarly transgressive scene of patriarchal pedagogy. A father reassuringly nods and rests his hands on the shoulders of his son, who

grasps the hindquarters of a goat and thrusts his hips in a simulated act of bestiality—simulated, both in the sense of the artificiality of the robotic tableau, and because the boy is fully clothed.<sup>4</sup>



fig. 1. McCarthy, Paul. *Cultural Gothic*. Sculpture. 1992.

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<sup>4</sup> It is, as Ralph Rugoff pointedly observes, 'a dry run, an air fuck' (65).



fig. 2. McCarthy, Paul. *The Garden*. Sculpture. 1992.

Even twice removed, the act at the centre of *Cultural Gothic* is no less taboo. It is, however, more explicitly political than the artist's anarchic earlier work. *The Garden* and *Cultural Gothic*, both featuring male figures in heavily implied paternal relationships, squarely take aim at the 'fascist and oddball construction'—in Cooper's terms—that is the American family unit (Cooper, *Try*, 182). In *Pay for Your Pleasures*, Cary Levine offers a succinct



reading of these two pieces in these terms. Levine suggests that the ‘deranged pedagogic ritual’ of *Cultural Gothic* taps into the idea that masculinity and male dominance is produced through ‘systematic and obligatory indoctrination,’ and that McCarthy’s works parody this indoctrination as it manifests in ‘rites of passage [...] handed down from one demented generation of men to the next’ (139). As in Cooper’s *Try*,<sup>5</sup> McCarthy identifies something toxic at the heart of ‘heterosexual-style bliss’. McCarthy’s younger figures are literally *fucking* nature, at once parodying destructive institutions like father-son hunting trips, and gesturing—through their obviously artificial, and endlessly replicated movements—to the way in which these institutions encode a pathology of masculine aggression and domination that is absorbed and repeated generation after generation. Ralph Rugoff argues that this work represents an extension of, rather than a break with, McCarthy’s earlier work. In his career retrospective of McCarthy, Rugoff observes how ‘all along McCarthy’s depraved patriarchal figures have simply insisted that the Father’s laws [...] are not the neutral mechanism of a transcendent authority, but are tainted and besmirched with irrational desires’ (84).

As Lee Edelman has demonstrated, the figure of the child is rarely neutral. In political discourse, the child often features as a signifier shoring up the shaky ideological foundations of the ‘telos of the social order’ (11) with an appeal to the politics of ‘reproductive futurism’ (2), which justifies the preservation of existing orders and hierarchies through an act of extended deferment. Levine appeals to this idea when he notes that the ‘puritan construct’ of the child is ‘central to American cultural politics’, and that McCarthy’s evocation of that child resists ‘justify[ing] a particular politics’ in order to ‘challenge the inevitability of acculturation’ (143). McCarthy’s perverse tableaux, then, gesture to something rotten in patriarchal traditions, but also synecdochally to something equally rotten in the way great patriarchal institutions—the state, the media—condition their subjects. The media, particularly, is specifically invoked by McCarthy’s repurposing of the *Bonanza* television set to stage his unnatural carnal scene. Levine observes in McCarthy’s career trajectory an increasing preoccupation with ‘the politics of entrenched thought-systems—the ways in which norms, conventions, and ideals are socially conditioned’ (11), such that by the 1990s, ‘the trauma of cultural conditioning in the consumerist family is McCarthy’s great motif’ (171). Rugoff takes this notion and applies it

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<sup>5</sup> Which features at its heart the perverse relationship between Ziggy and his fathers, who each sexually exploit their adopted son. Regrettably, I do not have the space to discuss Cooper’s text in further detail here.

directly to the 1990s tableaux: for Rugoff, the figures in McCarthy's later work are 'molesting [...] the fundamental scaffolding of civilisation: the operations [...] that make up the aesthetic foundation on which our conception of the law is founded' (35).

In a reading that could just as easily be of Cooper's novels as of McCarthy's tableaux, Rugoff notes that in McCarthy's work, 'the human body is pre-eminently a social body, a metaphor for systems and conventions that define our world [...] the body's defilement and hybridisation in McCarthy's art thus comprises a discourse about structures of ideas, as well as ideal structures...' (75). As I—and Kristeva—have demonstrated, the blue guts inside Cooper's bodies invoke the Real, bursting in all its uglified glory through the artificial perfection of a teenage torso. The exposed genitals of McCarthy's figures, plunged into trees or ground against goats, do the same thing, making visible the animal, the abhorrent, that systems of social construction sanitise and deny. And like Cooper or Araki, McCarthy uses an aesthetic of deliberate unreality to intensify or incorporate what would otherwise be diminished by art's remove from the Real. Beyond the aforementioned clash of realism and artificiality bound up in the use of the *Bonanza set*, *The Garden* also features exposed, whirring motors that shatter any vestiges of realism. The forest itself, erected on a platform, simultaneously 3D and yet inaccessible, holds the viewer at arm's length. One cannot enter the world of *The Garden* but must remain an outsider, feet planted firmly on polished gallery floor. *Cultural Gothic*, meanwhile, features a jarring blend of materials: a realistic taxidermied goat is fondled by an obviously artificial boy constructed from mannequin parts, while the father figure's face and hands are latex life-casts with a fleshy, realistic texture. Both pieces are fundamentally incoherent.

Pointing, at least in part, to the same formal limitations foregrounded by Cooper and Araki, McCarthy's anti-mimetic techniques point to another unifying—and in fact integral—aspect of abject art: its reliance on reciprocity, on the viewer and artwork co-creating meaning. At its simplest, abjection generates a visceral and involuntary response in its beholder.<sup>6</sup> Artists in the 1990s complicate this by adding a self-conscious quality to the abject aesthetic, but meaning remains located in the interaction between the text and its reader. With the aid of the linear narrative inherent to the novel form, Cooper's *Frisk* suckers its reader into a visceral response only to belatedly reveal the text's artifice. The transformation of meaning

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<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes her involuntary reaction when confronted with the abject: 'The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck' (2).



that accompanies Dennis' disclosed fabrication ripples outwards, forcing the reader to question their assumptions and taboos, retrospectively revising their earlier response. McCarthy, working in the medium of visual art, has a severely flattened temporal moment in which to generate the same effect. Thus, he uses incoherence to create a sense of unease that unfolds slowly as more attention is paid to the piece. As the viewer attempts to become more involved, to press forward into the work, they are held back with increasing force. His 'art of confusion, ideological ambiguity, [and] contradiction,' as Levine classifies it, suspends the viewer and entreats self-reflection, 'shift[ing] attention to the viewer's own culturally constructed values' (11). The reader, in this participatory moment, thus 'completes the work simply by bringing his or her conditioned responses to it [...] but cannot easily be disentangled from its contradictions' (Levine, 16).

Here we begin to see a positive dimension to abjection: not just a back-footed response to a postmodern project that would hold language at arm's length from the capitalist realist curtain it would aim to shred, but an aesthetic that, for all its incorporation, self-reflexivity, and difficulty, depends ultimately on an interpersonal connection with its viewer, a kind of complex affective response that activates its positive political potential. I use 'positive' here in the sense that it is used by Jeffrey Nealon in his recent book *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism*. In *Post-Postmodernism*, Nealon offers a taxonomy of several post-postmodern political-aesthetic projects. For Nealon the 'weak power' of post-postmodern writing functions essentially as an 'interruption', a slowing down or disruption of 'existing truths': a 'negative' response (163). This is essentially a continuation of the postmodern project to problematise the notion of a whole, totalised meaning. In contrast, Nealon offers the notion of a 'strong power' of literature, or a 'positive' literature, which focuses not on the interruption of existing meaning but on the production of new meaning. Nealon gives the admittedly extreme example of the poetry of the Flarf and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movements as an example of the sort of literature that can, by generating 'discourses, acts, and further appropriations' that follow the texts themselves, 'model [...] a mode of engagement, with that text and with the world' (168).

Nealon's thesis is frustratingly vague, his final examples plagued with exceptions and undermined by the critic's hesitancy (ironically) to commit to a truly positive reading of any text or author. I want here to put forward Cooper, Araki, McCarthy, and the abject art of the 1990s as one such 'positive' artistic project: an attempt to generate meaning that,

whilst inescapably at least a partial response to postmodernism, also goes beyond the interruptive project to gesture towards something more productive. I'll return to this idea in the third part of this chapter, but for now I want to consider one more example of the abject in 1990s culture.

### 'It's all a lot of crap': Cindy Sherman's *The Horror and Surrealist Pictures*

Between 1994 and 1996 Cindy Sherman created a series of photographs dubbed *The Horror and Surrealist Pictures*. A grotesque mash-up of Sherman's previous photography sequences *Fairy Tales* (1985) and *Sex Pictures* (1992), these works mark the apotheosis of the abject aesthetic Sherman had slowly been cultivating over the previous ten years. A morbid series of deformed mannequins, cut-up faces, fabricated corpses, amorphous visages, mutilations and mutations, Sherman's chronological works from *Untitled #302* to *Untitled #326* are a veritable primer on abjection. *Untitled #312* (fig. 3) resembles a hellish family portrait, the subjects crude assemblages of mismatched mannequin parts with genitals exposed and teeth and eyes rendered in nauseating detail. *Untitled #314E* (fig. 4) and *#314F* depict sexless, slashed-apart rubber faces strewn under a hyper-saturated light that simultaneously evokes the molten glow of flames and the garish palette of a massage parlour. *Untitled #316* (fig. 5) captures a child-mannequin's face, flayed of skin apart from the mouth and nose, a scarred and crusted plaster-like substance revealed beneath the smooth plastic skin. Finally, *Untitled #324* (fig. 6), another close-up, uses what appears to be a melted or crushed plastic mask to translate the amorphous liquid landscapes of classic surrealist painting into a deformed visage more appropriate to Sherman's oeuvre.



fig. 3. Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled #312*. Print. 1994.



fig. 4. Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled #314E*. Print. 1994.





fig. 5. Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled #316*. Print. 1995.

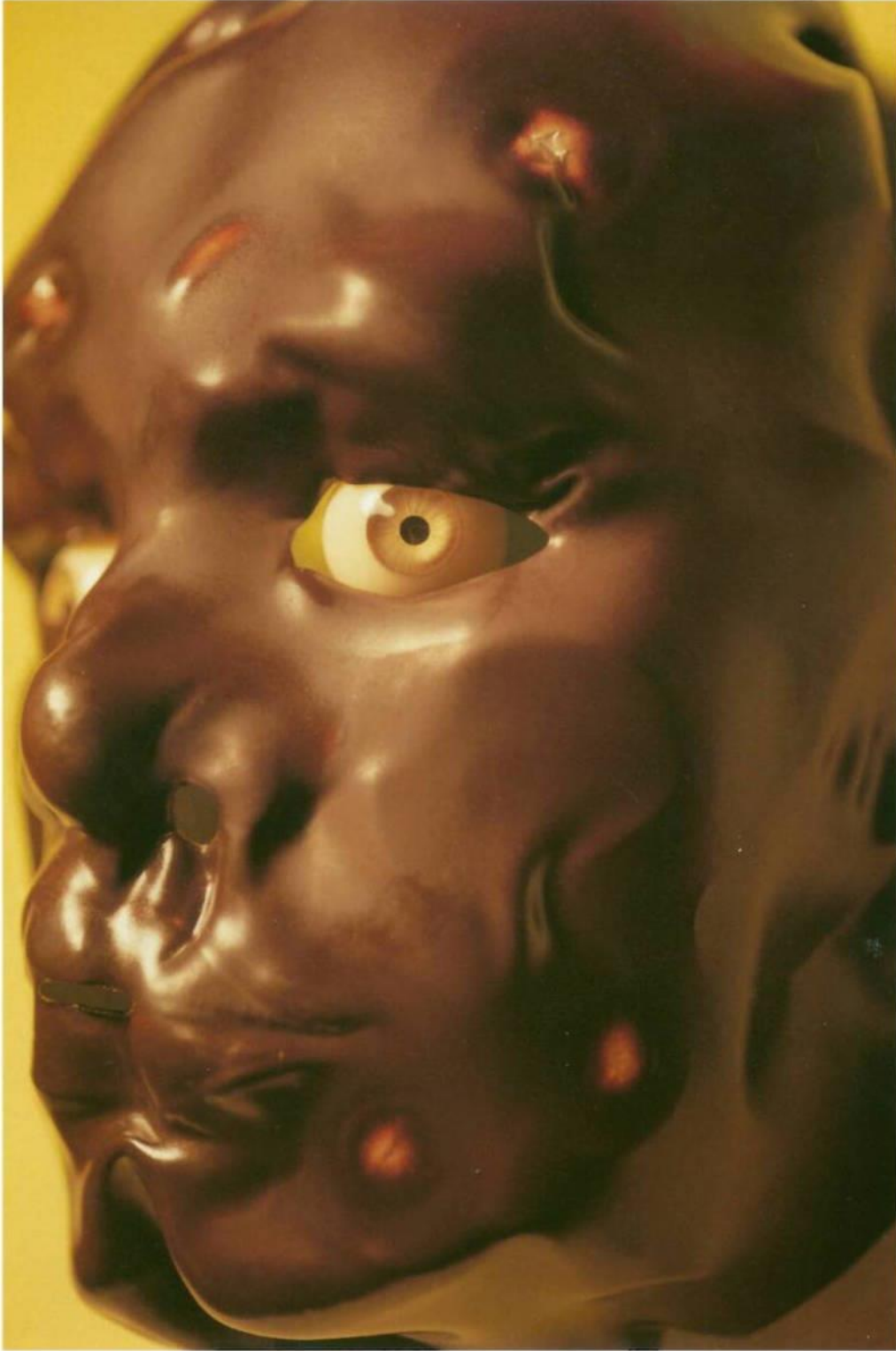


fig. 6. Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled #324*. Print. 1996.

Like the work of McCarthy considered above, Sherman's photographs from this series probe the structures and systems which construct and concretise meaning, simultaneously revealing and subverting them. Sherman's work is unique, however, in that the institution

it takes aim at is the institution of criticism itself—making her work simultaneously compelling and yet extraordinarily difficult to critique. Nevertheless, her work has proven irresistible to commentators. Sherman critic Elizabeth Smith reads Sherman’s abject works as encapsulating a certain subtle but present political aesthetic: an ‘undermining of established genres [that] points to a satirical vein that underpins her work’s late twentieth-century ironic sensibility’ (24). Referring to her career-spanning fascination with masks and disguises, Smith describes how Sherman parodies ‘the construction and presentation of myth and archetype’ (24), specifically those relating to self-construction, performance, and subjectivity, those things which, as Rachel Greenwald Smith has observed, are thrown into sharp relief by neoliberalism’s generation of a ‘new mode of subjection’. As with the previously discussed artists, Sherman’s work makes visible—and thus challenges—the processes of social construction that inform everyday life. In Sherman’s work, much as in Araki’s, it is those processes which contribute to the construction of identity which, at least ostensibly, form the artist’s target for subversion.

This subversion, particularly in Sherman’s earlier work—*Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) and *Rear Screen Projections* (1980-81)—captured the imagination of feminist critics and prompted an often-antagonistic dialogue between the artist and her audience.<sup>7</sup> In one of a number of Sherman retrospectives, Rosalind Krauss provides a relatively *de rigueur* feminist-psychoanalytic reading of Sherman’s body of work, quoting liberally from Laura Mulvey’s earlier treatment. Reading Sherman’s abject images as a critique of the female body-as-fetish, Krauss notes that with

the confrontation of the wound—“the disgust of sexual detritus, decaying food, vomit, slime, menstrual blood, hair”—the fetish fails and with it the very possibility of meaning: “Cindy Sherman traces the abyss or morass that overwhelms the defetishised body, deprived of the fetish’s semiotic, reduced to being ‘unspeakable’ and devoid of significance.” (193)

But in the *Horror and Surrealist Pictures*, gender is almost entirely absent. We might posit that this mid-90s shift marks a deliberate move on Sherman’s part to undo or thwart the feminist-psychoanalytic mode of critique so enamoured by her work. By neutralising sexual identity in her work, Sherman’s shift towards representations of sexually ambiguous subjects represents a conscious rejection of the feminist theories that had previously

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<sup>7</sup> Smith notes how critics including Julia Kristeva, Laura Mulvey, and Mary Russo ‘specifically ground Sherman’s use of [the female grotesque] in relationship to a gendered female subject’ (25).

circled her work. Parsing the arguments around Sherman's real or imagined feminism, Michelle Meagher notes that 'the analyses of Sherman's work are involved in a debate as to whether the images are useful or destructive for feminist politics and theories,' and that a further elision occurs when the question 'is the work feminist?' shifts to 'is the artist feminist?' (19). Some critics, Meagher observes, contend that Sherman's work 'is about women, has always been about women, [is] invested in the construction of a feminist aesthetic' (25). Others, like Smith, however, imply 'that the change in Sherman's protocol was a direct (and negative) response to [...] feminist appropriation of her work' (ibid.). Meanwhile Sherman herself has, in rare moments on record, attempted to disengage her work from the morass of theory surrounding it: 'maybe it's all a lot of crap [...] they're just finding whatever to attach their theories to' (Sherman, qtd. in Meagher, 20).

In Sherman's notebook, the artist laments: 'I can't seem to keep from making everything have a sexual, "political", or "heavy" edge, which I don't exactly want here. If anything, I'd rather make the work seem politically *incorrect*...' (Sherman, qtd. in Krauss, np.). These attempts manifest, in part, in Sherman's idiosyncratic refusal to title her works, and in part in her refusal to give interviews: her refusal, in short, to exert ownership over her work. To eliminate herself entirely from her art is entirely the point. For Meagher, Sherman does not provide an interpretive framework because 'the art's strength, its power and its intrigue, are nested in its ambiguity. A tactic implicit in all of the work is the withholding or refusal of an authentic self' (31). The *Horror and Surrealist Pictures* eschew gender for this reason. They swap the candid realism of Sherman's early work for an impenetrable, alienating surreality. They sit uneasily alongside one another, sharing none of the thematic cohesion that binds Sherman's earlier collections of *Untitled's* together. If the characters that form their subjects had any shared features, it would be the proliferation of mouths and eyes sealed, painted, covered, or wounded. The images refuse to speak. As a body of work, they manifest the same incoherence as McCarthy's individual sculptures, the same elisions as Cooper's novels, the same off-shoring of meaning as Araki's film.

Refusing to attribute these photographs to an authentic artistic presence and refusing to provide indicative interpretative suggestions within or around the works allows Sherman's pictures to aspire to that most emphatic sense of the abject: ambiguity. Like the previous artists discussed, Sherman's challenge to one aspect of culture—this time gender politics—combines with a self-reflexive artistry that undermines the medium in which the



artist chooses to work and an abject aesthetic that invites and frustrates interpretative play. Sherman extends this notion further than the other artists, however, by consciously responding to and challenging interpretation in such a way that the work becomes less about gender politics than about the politics of gender politics. If this sounds tautological—or just plain incoherent—it’s because when read alongside Sherman’s own antipathy to interpretation, her work pushes up against the very boundaries of meaning—something Cooper similarly strains towards in his later novels discussed below. Sherman, then, performs a complex aesthetic-political project: to simultaneously invoke an aporia in capitalist realism, and by extension to draw attention to the mechanisms by which these aporias are expressed and repressed in both art and life. The emphasis Sherman’s work puts on critical play and on a playful refusal of meaning ultimately, I contend, marks an attempt to forge an interpersonal connection between artwork and reader (albeit a fractious one). This project is a defining feature of abject art in the 1990s—indeed, is precisely that which grants abjection its political efficacy and thus its artistic appeal in this decade. So far, we have seen how Cooper mobilises abjection in such a way as to self-reflexively theorise its mode of political engagement, and we have seen how artists like Araki, McCarthy and Sherman have taken up this aesthetic to make visible certain aporias in capitalist realism whilst warily negotiating a postmodern scepticism for any claim to a totalised meaning. In the following section, I want to return to Cooper, to consider how the author’s later works in his cycle—and in the decade—move beyond this scepticism, to take up the ‘positive’ project I have already hinted at in reference to McCarthy and Sherman.

### ‘It’s the trip itself that’s important’: *Guide*

In the chapter bluntly titled ‘Blur’, in which Alex Johns experiences his encounter with Mason, Dennis, narrator of *Guide*, checks in on the novel’s characters: ‘Luke’s asleep in my bedroom [...] Mason’s home making art. So’s Scott. Robert and Tracy are filed away inside freezing cold, human sized drawers. You can basically forget them’ (67). Shortly after, he provides a succinct, elegant analysis of events at this, the mid-point of the novel. His observation returns us to the central conflict which, since *Closer*, has dogged Cooper’s work:

All the beauty in my world is either sleeping, unconscious, or dead. Luke, Goof, Chris, Alex. Life's a scary place without them. All that's left are the artists, the users, the interpreters. Us. Mason, Scott, Pam, Sue, and myself... The balance of power is totally off. (81-2)

To restore this balance is *Guide's* narrative impetus. The novel begins with Dennis 'writing this novel', an immediate metafictional disclosure that colours everything to come. The bulk of the novel follows another milieu of disaffected teens in L.A.: Cooper's usual array of artists, junkies, pornographers, and predators, including another George Miles stand-in in the form of Dennis' muse Luke. Seeking the clarity he once felt during an LSD binge, Dennis drops acid and tries to write his life, and the lives of his friends, into some sort of order. The layered structure of the novel precludes easy analysis. Dennis admits to modifying the story and to constructing 'preposterous' plots, and yet with no grounding reality as our referent, we are forced to follow his lead. Furthermore, his constant struggle to articulate himself clearly leaves the novel punctured by gaps, vagueness, and ever-present ellipses.

The first three novels in Cooper's cycle are sparsely populated with artists and writers: John in *Closer*, Dennis in *Frisk*, and Ziggy in *Try*. In the latter cases, especially, the works of these artists are therapeutic in nature: in *Try*, for example, Ziggy creates the zine *No Apologies* as an artistic response to the sexual abuse he suffers at the hands of his two fathers. These artistic avenues of authentic and meaningful expression are circumscribed as spaces: John's drawings are 'places to put his confusion' (*Closer*, 13), Ziggy's favourite band Husker Du 'knew a spot' (*Try*, 175), and in *Guide*, Dennis describes his artistic pursuit as a project to 'write novels that are essentially long, involved wishes for offbeat utopian worlds' (65). However, these spaces, as we have seen, do not go unproblematised. *Guide* picks up where *Frisk* leaves off: with Cooper's fingerprints and the forced acknowledgement that Dennis cannot 'realistically enter' the utopian worlds of his novels.

*Guide* playfully toys with the idea of artistic meaning. A young character offers his dad's opinion: 'my dad says art isn't about anything until someone buys it, then it's about the person who owns it' (100). This notion of inherent meaninglessness—a hangover from the postmodern, poststructuralist days of the 'death of the author'—combines with a general anxiety regarding the insufficiency of language, a pervasive theme of the novel. At the peak of his acid trip, Dennis' friend Scott tries to articulate his feelings: 'it was more like a pkhw... A filament? But weren't words too complex to manipulate properly?' (16). Later, the same

character is described as 'star[ing] into something beyond the constraints of human language' (21). These realisations, fuelled by acid, cause Dennis finally to swear off the drug. Scott finds that acid makes 'art seem pathetic', for Dennis, it's 'more about language' (158). This inadequacy contributes to an unbridgeable divide between 'all the beauty' in Dennis' world, and the 'artists, the users, the interpreters' that make that beauty their subject. As in *Frisk*, art is inherently flawed as a conduit to the Real.

Returning momentarily to that earlier novel, in *Frisk* neither Cooper's text nor Dennis' desires can be entirely cancelled out, despite Burroughs' assertion that 'the dismembered body [can't] function'. But Burroughs modifies this diagnosis with the observation that something—some 'essential piece'—remains. With this essential piece, Cooper demonstrates that *Frisk* is not a *total* failure. This extant something is everywhere and nowhere in the novel. It's in the description of the odours of a body as 'profound' (22). It's in the ellipses that dog Dennis' sentences, that hint at a world beyond language, renderable only in their absence: 'it's incommunicable, obviously...' (78). Mark Storey calls it a 'new world,' one that is 'outside of the capacity of language and [...] requiring other ways of expressing its core truth'. This world is beyond information, inarticulable. At the very beginning of *Frisk*, while describing the snuff photographs, Cooper sites this mystery world in the blank, deformed pit of the victim's ass: 'a small tunnel entrance, too out-of-focus to actually explore with one's eyes, but too mysterious not to want to try' (4).

*Guide* builds on the assertion that opens *Frisk*: that some things, never mind the impossibility of results, are 'too mysterious not to try' to explore. For all of its shortcomings, art is central to *Guide*'s philosophy. When Scott reveals that acid makes 'art seem pathetic,' he follows up by saying he 'can't think [that]' (158). In an early passage, Cooper deftly captures what makes art vital, even in spite of its failings:

Truth is dry. You'll know the truth when everything in your world seems as if it's been cooked until nothing is left but the exact information that separates it from other things in the world. On acid, you look at a thing, anything, with complete understanding. At the same time, everything's more mind-boggling than ever. (22)

This marks the clearest development in Cooper's thought between *Guide* and earlier novels like *Closer* and *Frisk*. Where in *Frisk* information—truth—was valorised in the art of that novel's Dennis, in *Guide*, the more contemporary Dennis fully embraces those moments of ellipses and unknowing that occasionally punctuate both texts. This comparison is clear in

the difference between *Frisk* and *Guide*'s treatments of killing. In *Frisk*, Dennis kills—or imagines killing—as a form of study, as a route to knowledge. Meanwhile in *Guide*, the dwarf that kills Chris similarly 'studie[s]' Chris' body, but his search through Chris' 'purplish-red, pasta-esque insides' is a search not for knowledge but for 'something, anything... some clue, some sign' (93). Killing, like drugs, and crucially like art, takes on a mystical or spiritual significance that is barely present in Cooper's earlier work. In a parallel of Nealon's observation of literary powers, Cooper moves from the pure 'weak' power of interruption in *Frisk*—where meaning is teased at, frustrated and withheld—to, in *Guide*, a strong, productive power which relocates meaning in precisely these spaces of silence, hesitance, and frustration.

The spiritual dimension of *Guide* informs both Dennis' ultimate rationale behind drug-taking and sex, and the development of Cooper's political-aesthetic philosophy. As the novel draws to a close, Dennis reflects on his aborted relationship with Luke:

Here's what I'm thinking: Sex is sort of like being on acid. It's the trip itself that's important. Pills look magical in your hand, but as soon as they're inside your mouth, they dissolve. Then it's up to your mind to make something profound out of their well disguised chemical compounds. I'm thinking the same thing applies to the people you love. A beautiful, interesting boy can be hot, but his body's the exact same body that's slept with a lot of other people. It's only yours in the process of being absorbed. (170)

This might easily be read as a manifesto for Cooper's cycle. Following the publication of *Guide* the author would go on to establish the first iteration of his troubled blog, *The Weaklings*, the object of which is, in Cooper's own words, 'to consciously break down the power structure' between artist and fan (Cooper, 'The Shift', 203). Meanwhile in reference to the cycle, Cooper elaborates on his assertion that 'my politics were involved in the aesthetic of the cycle,' to clarify that '[the cycle] is about faith or something and that's where the politics come in. It's like trying to create a relationship between the work and the reader that's really really democratic' (ibid., 208). When Dennis, in *Guide*, laments the inadequacy of art whilst simultaneously lamenting the dryness of truth, he taps into this idea. It's the same idea that motivates the dwarf to search for 'some sign' in Chris' bloody remains, and the same idea that necessitates Scott believing in art, even if it is 'pathetic.' Finally, it's the same idea that motivates Dennis to keep writing his 'wishes for offbeat,

utopian worlds,' even if he has no hope of entering them: 'it's the trip itself that's important.'

For Cooper, artistic creation is an end in itself. Cooper deliberately contradicts a late capitalist, neoliberal philosophy of art, wherein art is imbued with value derived from its marketability, or from its injunction to self-scrutiny and non-material rewards in line with a neoliberal project of subject formation.<sup>8</sup> Instead, Cooper reimagines art as a space of communal philosophical inquiry: an autonomous space exterior to the neoliberal market. Autonomy, defined in Sarah Brouillette's work on the subject as 'the struggle to develop and secure the means for articulations of creativity that are separable from capital in some authentic measure' (Brouillette 2013), is central to the cycle. Just as the boy's body is 'only yours in the process of being absorbed,' so the participatory act of consuming—of absorbing—a text or a piece of art is what lends it significance beyond its materiality. It's this same interplay that is exploited in McCarthy's sculptural work, or in Sherman's photographs. So when, in *Guide*, Drew mockingly tells Mason, 'art isn't about anything until someone buys it. Then it's about the person who owns it,' he's half right. At the core of Dennis/Cooper's work is a notion of art as therapeutic, but this is only half the story. Once that art is sent out into the world, it becomes transformative.

By positioning his art in this way, Cooper makes an important shift from the personal to the impersonal *a la* Rachel Greenwald Smith: from the generation of affects that are privatised, self-regulated, invested-in, and networkable, to impersonal feelings that are not codifiable or even recognisable and thus resist marketisation. These feelings, furthermore, are not just *impersonal* but *interpersonal*: Cooper's work constantly strives towards the state of conversation. Its obliqueness, its meta-fictionality, and its playful, partial refusal of meaning open Cooper's texts up as spaces of shared meaning-making. The presence of music in *Try* and *Guide* speak directly to this. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva identifies 'rhythm and music as the only way out [of abjection], the ultimate sublimation of the unsignifiable' (23). She privileges music for the same reason she privileges poetry later in the text: because poetic language is most willing to toy with its own arbitrariness and obsolescence, because it is 'not a language of the desiring exchange of messages or objects that are transmitted in a social contract of communication and desire beyond want, but a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges' (38). Kristeva finds the abject at its most

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<sup>8</sup> See my previous discussion of neoliberal art in chapter one.

sublime in the spaces beyond language. These are precisely the spaces Cooper's texts ultimately come to celebrate, and to make available to the reader.

### 'A house painted black inside': *Period*

During the publication of *Guide*, Cooper finally heard of George Miles' suicide a decade earlier. He resolved to finish the cycle, adhering to his original structural plan. Thus, at the beginning of a new millennium, the spare 109-page novel *Period* (2000) ended the George Miles Cycle. *Period* faithfully dons the mantle of the 'backwards reflection' of *Closer*. It's a complex, self-reflexive, puzzling novel, set in a bleak, gothic world populated by disaffected Satanists, tortured artists, schizophrenic teenagers and anonymous web users. It's both an oblique final memorial to George Miles and an act of literary auto-cannibalisation that is at once both confounding and profound, alienating and tender. It is, according to Cooper, a 'failed magic trick', and an un-writing of what came before.

The novel *Period* that sits within the novel *Period* (the former by the character Walker Crane, the latter by Dennis Cooper) refuses to accept its ontological boundaries. Any attempt to summarise the plot will, by necessity, fall woefully short. Nevertheless: Cooper's *Period* begins with the novel *Period*, written by the poet Walker Crane about his lover George. The novel features an artist, Bob, who attempts to memorialise *his* lover, George, through an artwork: a house, painted black inside, housing a giant mirror. Local Satanists sacrifice a deaf-mute teen in the house and in doing so unleash a strange force that reverses everything in their world. The teen, Dagger, survives the attack and emerges as an imperfect copy of George, to be reunited with Bob. Meanwhile, in Crane's world, the 'real' George was once a pornstar named Dagger whom Crane fell in love with. Crane lost touch with Dagger until many years later, when he recognised him in a news report about a boy who had been found raped and tortured in the woods. Crane reconnects with George only to find him bedridden and emotionally needy. He leaves George (again) and writes his novel, *Period*, to assuage his guilt. When George reads the novel he begins to imagine a deaf-mute boy named Dagger resides in a world through his mirror. George kills himself, believing he will be allowed access to Dagger's world. When Crane finds out about George's

suicide, he realises that his efforts have made him a mirror of Bob: vainly trying to resurrect a memory through art.

The above synopsis is cribbed largely from 'Period: The Official Strategy Guide,' a short accompaniment to the novel written by Cooper and published in the magazine *Dazed and Confused*. At the end of the piece, Cooper issues this perplexing explanatory note:

Like Walker Crane's Bob, I have hoped against hope that this work would somehow reconnect me with my late friend, but, on that level, the cycle has been a failure. In the end, all I can do in this final novel is try to make my work disappear, cancel itself out, commit suicide in George's honor [...] Since the novel was published last March in the United States, I've been overwhelmed with requests to explain Period's layered and interconnected mysteries. I can't do that, since this would defeat the purpose of the book. (Cooper, 'Strategy Guide')

Earl Jackson, Jr.'s piece 'Tough Platonic Love' makes an ambitious attempt to make sense of the many layers of *Period*. Jackson, Jr. observes that the official guide describes the narrative without explaining it, that 'to be "satisfied" by the "Official Guide" is not only to misread it, but to allow one's conception of reading to be reduced to the scope of that satisfaction' (90). This resonates with Smith's work on impersonality. To read *Period* for the satisfaction of 'solving' it is to approach the text as a neoliberal reader seeking the fulfilment of a contract between text and consumer. By frustrating meaning, Cooper disrupts this interaction. Cooper's 'Official Guide' is one more layer of narrative added to an already complex game played between the author and his readers. The 'Official Guide' is a text-commentary to a text-commentary, *Period*, which is already 'a novel about the poet Walker Crane and the novel he wrote, also entitled *Period*, [which] also articulates itself as text and commentary' (91). Thus *Period* mirrors the text's (texts') relation to its external commentaries. For Jackson, Jr., Cooper's guide ultimately 'offers a blueprint for the negotiations that go on between reality and representation, original and imitation, text and adaptation' (84). The liberating potential of art gestured at in *Guide* is fully realised in *Period* through these meta-textual games. *Mondo's* blurb of the novel as a 'Chinese puzzle box' is quite accurate in this sense: *Period* offers itself as a puzzle for the reader. But just as Cooper 'can't' explain *Period*, so the reader can't ultimately figure out the truth. As in *Guide*, it's rather 'the trip itself'—engaging in the novel's games and the philosophical self-reflection they encourage—that is important.

A return to the work of Brouillette offers a useful framework for thinking through Cooper's project. 'An insistence on autonomy,' Brouillette writes,

is not about continuing to valorize the self as a site of all meaning and value. The opposite is true. Autonomization is a fundamentally social process. It is a matter of vigorously and loudly arguing for the necessary existence of modes of inquiry, styles of life, and ways of organizing creative and scholarly activity that reveal the limitations of the neoliberal market as an arbiter of what is valuable to know and do. (Brouillette 2013)

What's key in Brouillette's definition is the idea of alternative 'modes of inquiry [...] and ways of organising creative and scholarly activity.' Meaning and value, in the artworks discussed, are not sited in an individual, complete self—not in an authentic author, a perfect text, or a satisfied reader—but at the site of interpersonal connection *between* reader and text. If postmodern poststructuralism insisted that 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination' (Barthes 1997, 148), then the post-postmodern work of abjection shifts meaning to somewhere between these poles, so that the text's unity is suspended *between* the origin and the destination, claiming neither a totality of meaning nor its arbitrariness.

I have tracked Cooper's use of the body through his cycle, and following this trope to its conclusion elucidates this unique aesthetic. The idea of the body (and always, by extension, the novel) as a form of information, relied upon in *Frisk* and exceeded in *Guide*, is finally foreclosed in *Period*. The Satanic-rock band The Omen, deep into a hitchhiker killing spree, describe a recently deceased corpse to one of the novel's principle characters: 'it's a crude piece of something that we can't understand. It only strikes us as a guy because that's our best point of reference' (27). The body passes from understandable to incomprehensible, followed by the novel. This shift marks Cooper's disillusionment with a cycle that set out to do the impossible: reconnect the author with an acquaintance who had died before the first novel was published. Nate, the character to whom The Omen explain the meaning of the hitchhiker's corpse, picks up on the notion of form first sparked in *Closer* to further elucidate this failure. Momentarily dreaming of a world in which everything would understand everything else, Nate's vision quickly collapses with the realisation that 'there's no way the world's ever gonna be totally perfect, unless nothing and no one had minds,' and ends with a longing for the day that 'everyone [loses] sight of each other's existence' (17).



Despite this ostensible failure, the novel continues to pose questions. After reading Walker Crane's *Period*, a character in Cooper's novel wonders 'whether the artist's success is an example of love co-opting form, as some would have it, or the complete opposite' (50). The question remains unanswered. *Period* offers no resolutions, only the endless oscillation of the dialectic of unruly, libidinal, ugly Real, and constructed, perfect, seamless Symbolic Order. Is the work of Bob 'George's house,' or is it just 'art... just a house painted black inside'? In the end, it doesn't matter. The uncertainty is the point. The novel makes itself available as a space in which reader and text meet in a process of interpretive work, a 'trip' or an 'analytic adventure.' The primary register of abjection is ambiguity, and by harnessing this ambiguity Cooper and the other artists discussed invite entry into a reciprocal relationship with their reader. Abject art engages in what Nealon calls the 'weak' or interruptive attempt to disrupt the seamlessness of capitalist realism and to expose the aporias it conceals—for example the way patriarchal authority is disseminated through ritual or the way identity politics ironically push towards a homogeneity of culture-as-marketplace. But abject art also self-reflexively acknowledges the limitations of its project, and by absorbing these limitations it generates a strong, productive effect, whereby a new mode of post-postmodern engagement with art is modelled and performed.

### 'The answer must be in the attempt': Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise*

It's hard to imagine how Richard Linklater's philosophical romance *Before Sunrise* (1995) could be further removed from the artworks discussed above. It is a slow, whimsical study of two people falling in love, a serendipitous meeting of minds and sensibilities that transpires into something profound. It exists in a world apart from the visceral and hellish scenes portrayed by the likes of Cooper and Araki, or the stomach-churning works of McCarthy and Sherman. And yet, a moment of Celine's dialogue in the film unwittingly taps into the heart of a project like Cooper's, and hints at the resonances between the project of abject aesthetics and broader aesthetic movements in the decade:

I believe if there's any kind of God it wouldn't be in any of us, not you or me but just this little space in between. If there's any kind of magic in this world it must be

in the attempt of understanding someone, sharing something. I know, it's almost impossible to succeed but who cares really? The answer must be in the attempt. Just as, for Dennis, 'it's the trip itself that's important', so, for Celine, 'the answer must be in the attempt.' Here the counterculturally inflected project of the slacker, discussed in chapter one in relation to the ideas of the new sincerity, meets the traumatic nihilism of Cooper's youths in a celebration of inquiry and liminality.

Finally, then, we may say that abject art carves out a liminal space for philosophical meditation in spite of the aesthetic constraints of postmodernism and the political constraints of neoliberalism. The problems Cooper, Araki, McCarthy, and Sherman work through are deeply politicised, even when apparently confined to aesthetics. Each pursue their own agenda, using the abject to transgress a mainstream culture of suburban conformity, homo-normativity, liberal identity politics and patriarchal indoctrination. In this sense, abjection works to disrupt the seamlessness of capitalist realism by making visible the aporias it conceals. By marrying the constraints of language and form (postmodern concerns) to the constraints of social construction (symptomatic of neoliberalism), abject artists manage to absorb the legacy of postmodernism and re-energise, and re-politicise, aesthetics. But perhaps more importantly than this, abject artists working in the 1990s also gesture towards new, positive powers for art. By harnessing the inherent, pre-rational responses incurred by the abject, these artists embark upon an attempt to connect meaningfully in dialogue with their audience. Theirs is a never-ending attempt to express themselves in the face of the absolute impossibility of authentic expression post-postmodernism. Nevertheless, they invite their audience to join them in this attempt through the staging of self-reflexive games and an obliqueness that necessitates interpersonal participation and a work of interpretation that ultimately engenders self-reflection. Kristeva describes the abject as an 'analytic adventure'. Cooper, Araki, McCarthy and Sherman offer to take their audience on that adventure. They promise no resolution, nor even a destination; only the reassurance that the answer must be in the attempt: that it's the trip itself that's important.

## Chapter 5: Dialectical Writing

### Introduction

In a letter written to fellow author Jonathan Franzen, Don DeLillo addresses the former's inquiry into the structure of his eleventh novel, *Underworld*. DeLillo writes,

There's a term in mathematics, convergence to a limit, and I don't recall the precise meaning, or even the vague meaning, but maybe this is what I do when building the side-by-side structures you mention in your letter. Getting closer to an "answer" by listing the steps that lead to the answer. I think I tried to do less of this, one or two books ago, but with this book a number of things opened or reopened and possibly I began doing it again. (95.4)<sup>1</sup>

The concept of convergence to a limit is an effective metaphor for the unmistakable structure of Don DeLillo's novels—helpfully summarised with one of Peter Boxall's favourite terms for the author's method: 'bi-directional' (Boxall, 94, 133, 184). For the purposes of this chapter, I wish to propose an alternative term for DeLillo's distinctive style: dialectical. Understood in both the traditional, Hegelian sense as a mode of inquiry which arrays opposing theses against one another in search of a synthesis or resolution, and in Jameson's sense as 'thought to the second power' (Jameson 1971, 45), reading DeLillo's writing as dialectical recognises both the author's intention to resolve problems with his texts and indexes the particular formal strategies DeLillo employs to this end. If each of DeLillo's novels can be understood as an attempt to converge at a synthesis moment, or an 'answer,' then the first step to successfully reading DeLillo's work is to understand the question. For Boxall, DeLillo's work is oriented around an attempt to maintain 'the possibility of fiction' in the face of the 'exhaustion of possibility' (8); or, in a reading that resonates with the dual preoccupations of this thesis, an attempt to develop a 'form of

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<sup>1</sup> These letters belong to the Don DeLillo archive held at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, along with all of DeLillo's drafts, manuscripts, research materials and career-related ephemera. All of the unpublished work referred to in this chapter is drawn from research I carried out at the Ransom Center as an AHRC visiting fellow in Spring 2017. References to this material will list container and folder numbers in parentheses following quotes.

critical possibility that might take us past the theoretical impasse marked out by postmodernism, as it might take us beyond the end of history' (16). Boxall observes that 'the millenium has formed DeLillo's far horizon, and his organising principle' (4). As the millennium-point bears down on the author in the 1990s, his attempts to argue for the 'possibility of fiction' intensify, and DeLillo brings the theme of artistic production to the foreground of his work in this period. To this extent, one may read all three of DeLillo's novels produced in the period of the long nineties—*Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* (1997), and *The Body Artist* (2001)—as one attempt to converge at the answer to the same problem that has preoccupied, in one guise or another, all of the works discussed in this thesis: what, at the moment the twentieth century becomes the twenty-first, is the purpose, power, and *possibility* of art?

In DeLillo's specific case, delineating the role of artistic production means drawing together two equally contested projects in 1990s America: postmodernism and Marxism. In the sphere of literary production, the waning of postmodern irony as the literary style *du jour* provided a space for a nascent and hotly contested post-postmodernism. Once comfortably classified as a postmodernist, the critical dissensus<sup>2</sup> surrounding the categorisation of DeLillo's 1990s writing testifies to his status as a paradigmatic writer of and for this unstable decade. Meanwhile, the Marxist project exhibited equal instability in 1990s America. The post-political, 'end of history' narrative promulgated by capitalist realism, or in Will Davies' terminology, 'normative neoliberalism,' heralded a crisis of imagination for the left. Responses exacerbated the already splintered schools whose works of political, sociological, and cultural analysis could be said to owe elements of their methodology to classical Marxist theory. It is by engaging with these splintered factions of post-Marxism and relevant debates around autonomy, materialist critique, and the linguistic turn that DeLillo, in his 1990s texts, attempts to draw his own vision of the future of art.

DeLillo's first 1990s novel, *Mao II*, introduces these questions. The role of art and the relevance of the artist are quandaries that haunt the text and its protagonist, author Bill Gray. True to the metaphor of convergence, *Mao II* arrays concepts in dialectical pairs diametrically opposed to one another: art and terror, the individual and the crowd, autonomy and heteronomy. From this rigid schema, the novel pushes towards a sense of synthesis and an artistic ideal oriented around an idea of the social and the ameliorative

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of this critical dissensus, see my summary on page 169.

potential of art. Ultimately, though, the questions the text raises remain open. While DeLillo's ideas converge, synthesis eludes him.

1997's *Underworld* picks up where *Mao II* leaves off. As well as a summation of the novelist's achievements, this vast novel represents a widely acknowledged 'pivot' in the author's oeuvre—a figurative break between the paranoid style and 'relentless fixation on the political' (Pakenham) that came before, and the oblique style and elliptical expression that comes after.<sup>3</sup> This pivot, I want to suggest, is not as wholesale as some critics have argued. While *Underworld* certainly represents the end of a specific incarnation of DeLilloian style, in terms of DeLillo's intellectual concerns the novel represents less a pivot than a bridge. Facing the questions left unanswered by *Mao II*, *Underworld* may best be read as a grand playground of ideas—an experimental investigation into modern art's potentialities and limitations, this time stressing greater ambitions in line with the novel's expansive scope. It is in *Underworld* that DeLillo most explicitly draws his experiments with post-postmodernism into conjunction with his interest in post-Marxism. Of particular interest in light of this reading are the archived early drafts of the novel, which hint at DeLillo's unease and uncertainty in writing *Underworld*, and which reveal some of the possibilities the author failed to realise in his epic novel.

If *Underworld* represents a grand debate played out over a half-century-sized stage, then *The Body Artist* embodies the outcomes of that debate distilled and manifested into DeLillo's distinctive 'late' aesthetic project. Despite its oblique style, *The Body Artist* exhibits a certainty of purpose and a surety of agenda absent from the earlier work that is achieved partly by jettisoning the aforementioned 'bi-directional' rhythm in favour of a distinctly linear narrative trajectory. In its linearity it represents, I will argue, the limit point of DeLillo's investigation into the role of the artist, and sets the stage for his following twenty-first century works. Ultimately, DeLillo's output over the *fin de siècle* period encapsulates the narrative of this thesis, in which the long nineties is understood both as a space of instability and conflict, but also of radical experimentation and creativity.<sup>4</sup> Tracing

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<sup>3</sup> In his article 'The Genius of Don DeLillo's post-*Underworld* work', Christian Lorentzen presents a reading of the 'four phases' of DeLillo's oeuvre, the last of which is constituted by 'the major minor works that followed [*Underworld*], five novels that constitute a beguiling late phase [...] and each in its way a reckoning with encroaching silence.' For further reference to a 'late phase' DeLillo, see also Anderson, 'White Noise'; and Jordison, 'Zero K and Making Sense of 'Late Period' Don DeLillo.'

<sup>4</sup> In an excised passage from *Underworld*, DeLillo describes precisely this vision of the nineties. In an early draft of Marvin's speech to Brian Glassic, the former observes:

DeLillo's experiment, with all its conflict and creativity, from its origins as a disparate scattering of ideas to its convergence at an 'answer' to the question of the power and possibility of art will be this chapter's task.

## *Mao II*

The oft-quoted origins of *Mao II* point to the novel's humble beginnings as a folder of research. In a rare interview with DeLillo, conducted by Vince Passaro in 1991, Passaro quotes Nan Graham, DeLillo's then editor at Viking: "'Long before he had written anything,'" says Nan Graham [...] "Don told me he had two folders -- one marked 'art' and the other marked 'terror.'" Eventually the two folders became one.' Eventually this folder became a novel, but the folder itself still exists in DeLillo's archive. Among the various newspaper clippings, magazine articles, and photographs that it contains, one article stands out as being subject to a particularly heavy spate of underlining and annotation. It is a piece from the *New York Times* entitled 'Writers and Dictators,' written by Mitchell Levitas and published in August 1988. The article explores the publishing world of Chile under the repressive regime of Augusto Pinochet. Beginning as a catalog of horrors visited upon prominent figures in Chile's publishing industry—the death of editor Jose Carasco, the jailing of editor Sergio Marris—the piece soon evolves into a debate over the role of literature.<sup>5</sup> Referencing Jorge Luis Borges, Levitas writes that 'Borges [...] wrote an article in 1948, during the Peron era, arguing that literature must avoid a confrontation with politics, a submissive idea to which he gave example.' Following this example, Levitas suggests, has 'led to a defense mechanism in which many writers took shelter in pure literature, a literature without historical reference that remains to this day.' Several of Levitas' subjects voice their displeasure at this state of events. One interviewee observes that "the only machine that functions well is the complicity machine, and until the writer's responsibilities are openly debated, it will not be a healthy society"' (Levitas).

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People think the Cold War is history. It's actually the repression of history. It's the one thing that keeps the lid on society going nuts. It's the what-do-you-call-it, the stifling, the smothering of a thousand desires. What things will break loose when this period ends? Ask yourself. The knots are already loosening. Ask what it means to you personally. (63.4)

<sup>5</sup> DeLillo includes Marris' story in *Mao II*. While photographing Bill, Brita remarks that she 'was in Chile last year and [...] met an editor who'd been sent to prison after his magazine did caricatures of General Pinochet. The charge was assassinating the image of the general' (44).

It is the idea that the writer's responsibilities must be 'debated' that DeLillo addresses in *Mao II*. The novel follows the author Bill Gray and a loose cluster of figures that surround him: Scott, a drifter-cum-Bill's housekeeper; Karen, an ex-Moonie and Scott and Bill's sometime partner; and Brita, a photographer tasked with taking Bill's picture. The first half of the novel documents these characters as they congregate at Bill's house, drawn in by the gravitational pull of the reclusive author. Bill himself is a once-successful novelist who now maintains a near-hermetic existence and wrestles with a vast and unpublishable novel. In the second half of *Mao II*, Bill is invited to speak at an event on behalf of a kidnapped writer, believed to be held by a Maoist terrorist group in Beirut. Bill becomes embroiled in a plot to free the writer, and travels to Beirut by way of London, Athens, and Cyprus, in an attempt to sacrifice himself on behalf of the young Swiss poet. Bill dies on the ferry to Beirut from injuries sustained in a hit-and-run, and at the end of the novel DeLillo leaves the reader with an account of Brita's successful meeting with the same Maoist group's leader, whereupon she photographs him, having replaced her obsession with photographing writers with a desire to photograph terrorists.

Anxiety over the roles of the terrorist and the novelist permeates *Mao II*, and leads to some of the novel's most memorable passages. Early on, while Brita is photographing him, Bill volunteers his theory on the limitations of the novel:

There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence. [...] Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated (41).

For Bill, whatever perceived power the novel once had has been superseded by the more immediate psychic impact of the terrorist event. It is clear from a cursory exploration of the 'Art and Terror' folder that the inspiration for these anxieties extends far beyond Chilean politics. DeLillo's reading prior to writing the novel encompasses a global ferment of creative production and artistic repression. But drawing from this collection of research materials, a kind of paradox manifests itself in the novel: on the one hand, Bill Gray's position argues for the impotence of art; yet, at the same time, compelling evidence refutes that notion: from Augustus Pinochet's execution of uncompliant journalists to the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa issued against an English author whose work of fiction sparked

a global hysteria, it is apparent that, for the Pinochet's and Khomeini's of the world, words have lost none of their power or potency.<sup>6</sup>

George Haddad accurately identifies Bill's problem when he observes—in a draft of their final conversation—that, “in the world of glut and bloat, terror is the only meaningful act. The artist can be a hero only in repressive societies” (39.3). For Bill, the artist is defined by his other, the state against which he is perpetually opposed. The problem out of which the novelist's impotence arises is the nature of the state against which Bill writes: the Western neoliberal state, the late-capitalist ouroboros of globalization and monoculture, consumerism and incorporation. The fluctuating nature of this state, its ideological malleability and infinite capacity to absorb and disarm that which threatens its hegemony, makes neoliberal capitalism the most dangerous opponent for the author attempting, as Bill attempts, to ‘raid [...] human consciousness.’

DeLillo addresses this problem with dialectical inquiry. *Mao II* arrays a series of loosely interrelated terms in binary pairs such that the resonance of each individual term is developed through association. On the one hand, the character Bill, the solipsist *par excellence*, is associated with the individual artist and by extension, through his near-hermetic existence, with the concept of absolute autonomy. Against Bill's autonomous existence is arrayed the threat of absolute heteronomy, represented by DeLillo through the repeated images of crowds that punctuate the novel and that come, increasingly, to be synonymous with terror. From the ‘crushed and buckled’ (33) bodies of the Hillsborough disaster to the ‘living wave’ (189) of the Ayatollah Khomeini's mourners, crowds in the novel are depicted in a perpetual ‘rush to death’ (34). Meanwhile, Bill's own fate is similarly bleak. Death comes to the author in a small room, and with the symbolically on-the-nose theft of his identity papers, that death is freighted with the same significance as the deaths

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<sup>6</sup> A curious absence from *Mao II*, given the topic of the novel and the plethora of real-life references, is the figure of Salman Rushdie—but this was not always the case. In a scene from the novel that is cut from the final draft, Karen views a protest on TV. In later iterations, this scene would recount footage of the Hillsborough disaster, but in an early draft it describes a quite different vision:

She sees a flag with a crescent moon, a man standing on a car; then a crowd, people cover the screen, chanting: then suddenly prayer, [...] prayer rugs, running shoes, those knitted caps she doesn't know what they're called; then the canopy, Sunshine Deli, police in riot gear, then signs in English and she begins to understand this is not Tehran or the West Bank, signs saying Long Live Khomeini, Rushdie is a Friend of Satan; then the crowd standing and shouting. (39.2)



of hundreds at a football match or a funeral: both autonomy and heteronomy—the individual and the crowd—lead inevitably to the wholesale obliteration of one’s identity.

DeLillo’s dialectic describes the same problem that Nicholas Brown, in his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption under Capital,’ considers in terms of the art object: ‘pure autonomy would have no relation to the world; pure heteronomy would be indistinguishable from it’ (Brown). This is essentially Bill’s bind: in Western society, the novelist can be absorbed by the culture or can withdraw from the culture, but Bill’s pessimism allows him no vision of how the novelist might be able to stand apart from, and yet meaningfully impact, that culture. But by arranging these concepts dialectically, DeLillo does what Bill cannot: he gestures towards the possibility of a synthesis of the poles of heteronomy and autonomy, and in doing so *Mao II* begins to posit an ideal form or role for art under the hegemony of neoliberalism: one that would neither be alienated from, nor absorbed by, the state against which it is opposed. In Brown’s schema, he associates autonomy—or at least an aesthetics of autonomy—with the modernist project, and heteronomy with the collapse of this project and the subsequent turn to postmodern pastiche. Here we approach familiar ground in the territories of DeLillo criticism: the debate regarding the degree to which DeLillo might be considered postmodern. This question arises in almost all significant work on DeLillo. David Cowart places DeLillo among ‘the postmodern masters’ (2) but qualifies that his relationship to postmodernism is broadly antagonistic. Paul Giaimo builds on Cowart’s assertion and also rejects claims that DeLillo might more properly be considered a modernist or neo-modernist, to instead argue that the author’s emphasis on social engagement reflects a mimetic realist aesthetics (18). Meanwhile Tom LeClair places DeLillo in his own subcategory of postmodern or ‘re-modern’ literature: the ‘systems novel’ (9). Peter Boxall, lastly, prefers to ‘move beyond the assumptions that are at work in the theorisation and the deployment of the terminology of postmodernism’ altogether (15).

Boxall declares his position following a long excursus into the ‘fork’ in twentieth century theory, on one side of which sits postmodernism and whose chief proponents are Freud and Lacan, and then Derrida, Kristeva, and DeMan; while on the other side lies the Frankfurt School Marxism of Adorno and Horkheimer. Boxall convincingly argues that this is a false distinction, that ‘the story that pits French and German thought against one another has become somewhat less plausible’ (15). DeLillo grapples with the same complex knot

Boxall describes in *Mao II*, and as we shall see, even more directly in *Underworld*. By attempting to write a way between the poles of modernist autonomy and postmodern heteronomy, DeLillo's work in *Mao II* and in the broader period of the long nineties attempts to move beyond the author's own (debatably) postmodern aesthetics and politics, towards what we might call post-postmodernism. Just what this post-postmodernism looks like, for DeLillo, becomes clearer as each novel progresses.

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In preparation for his piece 'Perchance to Dream,' published in *Harpers* in 1996,<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Franzen tapped DeLillo for a quote in an attempt to clear up a question he was grappling with: namely, what relevance and what purpose the novelist could enjoy in the coming century. In a letter to DeLillo, Franzen reveals one answer sourced from the novelist Donald Antrim:

the question I still don't have an answer to is: how do I square the idea of the writer-alone-in-the-shadows with the imperative that so many of us feel nonetheless to address matters of central importance to the culture? Donald Antrim [...] offered the idea that to write a novel is to create an (imagined) community that makes sense and feels home-like to the socially-isolate writer. (95.4).

History—or at least the Ransom Center archives—does not record DeLillo's response to Antrim's idea. But in reading *Mao II*, one finds something akin to Antrim's position developed in the novel.

Before leaving Bill's house to return to New York, Brita is invited to share a dinner with the house's three residents. This dinner party forms something of an understated apex to the text, being the only time the four characters in the novel share a single scene. During the party, Bill observes that, "'it's interesting how 'guest' and 'host' are words that intertwine [...] converging, mixing, reciprocating'" (67). This notion of 'converging, mixing, and reciprocating' is key to DeLillo's synthesizing act. Bill's observation anticipates the concept Scott Lash has termed 'sociality,' as he describes it in his 1996 essay 'Difference or Sociality.' In this short text, Lash sets out his vision of 'a radical politics of signification'

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<sup>7</sup> Originally Franzen composed the piece for the *New York Times*, but, as he reports with horror to DeLillo, the *Times* ended up requesting half the text be cut and the rest be turned 'into bullet-points' (95.4).

(115) in opposition to an early-nineties intellectual climate that, in its privileging of identity and the ‘signifying lifestyle,’ Lash perceives to dangerously valorize the attributes of the ‘self-enclosed’ and ‘monologic.’ Lash’s work provides an ideal critical companion to DeLillo’s fiction. Operating at the interstices of what Boxall identified as the ‘false binary’ of postmodernism and Frankfurt School Marxism, Lash—like Boxall—braids together the writings of Marshall McLuhan, Baudrillard, Eco and Derrida with a Benjamin-inspired critique of late-industrial society. Lash finds in the aforementioned postmodernists a disregard for intersubjectivity in favor of what he calls inter-objectivity, or the foregrounding of the interaction between the subject and the object. Lash terms this approach a ‘semiotics of difference,’ against which he posits his idea for ‘a semiotics of sociality’—a semiotics that would stress the qualities of ‘receptionism and presentation’ (122). For Lash, the ideal subject is

not self-enclosed, but open, open and [...] vulnerable; not involved in monologic “representation” but dialogical “presentation”, and whose aesthetic sensibility is not primarily productionist but receptionist.’ (114)

This semiotics of sociality can be distilled into an aesthetic agenda that emphasizes dialogism, presentation, and reception, which is to say: it engages in a dialogue that functions at both an intertextual and interpersonal level; it rejects the easily consumable, marketable ‘fixity of the signifier’ in favor of an emphasis on irreducible aesthetic experience; and it eschews staid, alienating meta-referentiality for new forms of communication and connectivity.

In Lash’s model art facilitates interpersonal connection by generating an aesthetic experience of ephemerality, impersonal feeling, and participatory production—all ideas I have discussed elsewhere in this thesis.<sup>8</sup> Lash himself gives the example of free-form jazz, with its real-time responsiveness and improvisational quality, as an art form that might embody these features and thus demonstrate a semiotics of sociality. In a response to Lash’s essay, Harold Lemke provides an array of further examples. For Lemke, the key to the idea of sociality is ‘the drawing together of life and art through cultural activities which have only a marginal function under capitalism’ (Lemke, 134), for which he gives the example of ‘the art of cooking and feasting... [and] the related arts of friendship and socializing’ (ibid.). With Lemke’s response to Lash we come full circle to arrive back at Bill’s

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of ephemeral production as means of resistance in the film *Slacker*, see chapter 1; for an explanation of ‘impersonal feelings,’ see chapter 3; and for further development of the idea of democratic production in the literature, art, and film of the 1990s, see chapter 4.

dinner party, and the 'converging, mixing, reciprocating' relationship that it facilitates between the guests.

Not content with the ephemeral pleasures of a good party, however, DeLillo extends the idea of sociality to more conventional art in *Mao II*, namely the photograph and the novel. In relation to Bill's novels, the idea of the work of a fiction as a mediator for interpersonal connection is explicitly developed in a passage cut from the final manuscript, in which DeLillo reveals Bill's profound effect on Karen's relationship with Scott:

She didn't sleep with Scott for three months. First because she was married. Not only that but a willing celibate.

She didn't sleep with Scott until she'd read Bill's novels.

Bill's novels allow Karen to connect intimately with Scott. Meanwhile, talking to Brita, Scott describes *his* first experience reading Bill: 'I saw myself. It was my book. Something about the way I think and feel. He caught the back-and-forthness. The way things fit almost anywhere and nothing gets completely forgotten' (51). Scott clarifies his ambiguous description by referring to a 'great Winogrand photo,' which for him conjures an 'incidental menace', a sensation which Brita affirms (51).<sup>9</sup> Later, again talking to Brita, Scott recalls his first meeting with Karen, in White Cloud, Kansas. In response, Brita tells Scott she has 'an Eve Arnold photograph of White Cloud,' in which 'everything so lonely and eloquent and commonplace at the same time [...] all flows into the strange word on that [shop] sign'. 'Ha-Hush-Kah', Scott recalls, 'a Bill Gray touch. It's a Bill Gray place, it really is' (83). These conversations manifest a sense of intertextuality derived from Scott and Brita's shared cultural experiences, despite the two characters being relative strangers. Brita and Scott use the references to Garry Winogrand, Eve Arnold, and Bill Gray as a form of extra-linguistic communication, as a way of communicating complex sensations—'the back-and-forthness,' 'incidental menace,' 'everything [...] lonely and eloquent and commonplace'—through an aesthetic experience that can be shared interpersonally between the two characters, rather than confined to self-reflection and what Scott Lash might term 'the self-enclosed monad'.

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<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Frank Lentricchia, DeLillo calls Winogrand's *New Mexico, 1957* 'the great American novel without words' (97.8). He doesn't elaborate, but I would speculate that DeLillo found the photograph's marriage of the quotidian suburban dwelling with the vastness of the New Mexico desert particularly evocative. The encroaching storm clouds cast a pall over the innocent domestic scene Winogrand captures, and one can't help but read in the photograph an anxiety in the child's uncertain pose that echoes a generational anxiety regarding expansion, technology, and the looming threat of the nuclear.

The medium of photography is particularly significant here. In a commentary on *Mao II*'s closing chapter, Mark Osteen—drawing on the works of John Berger and Walter Benn Michaels—observes the ‘weak intentionality’ of the photograph, a condition of the instantaneousness of the photograph’s taking, and the disconnect between the photographer and the developed photo. This weak intentionality dilutes the authority of the photographer and leads to the photograph expressing ‘the subjectivity of the photographer,’ while simultaneously ‘demand[ing] the superimposition of the viewer’s.’ Osteen summarises: ‘[the photograph] is both social and personal, at once a document and an interpretation’ (Osteen 1999, 667)—in other words, it is, perhaps more than any other medium, a liminal space in which collaborative meaning-making is foregrounded. As an artist, Brita expresses an awareness of her contingent manipulation of her photographs when she explains to Scott, ‘secretly I know I’m doing certain things to get certain effects. But we ignore this, you and I’ (26). Osteen notes how *Mao II* ‘embodies this paradox of photography: its mimetic quality is always accompanied by a realization of its artificiality’ (645).<sup>10</sup> But, like in Brita’s conception of her work, the overriding sense in *Mao II* is of a move beyond the meta-referential displays of self-awareness typical of postmodernism. The fact that Brita chooses to ‘ignore’ her role as mediator, however weak or strong her intentionality might be, speaks to what Nicoline Timmer has observed obliquely in post-postmodern literature as the practice of ‘suspending’ the ‘suspicion of the suspension of disbelief’ (256), the latter of which guides reading in postmodern cultural and literary practices. Elsewhere Timmer refers to this move as ‘bracketing [...] lack of faith’ (239). This ‘bracketing’—or attempting to maintain faith—in turn recalls the openness of Lash’s ideal social subject, and circumscribes the aesthetic agenda of DeLillo’s novel.<sup>11</sup>

The artworks in *Mao II*, then, demonstrate how the semiotics of sociality might be mobilized in aesthetic experiences to generate something like Donald Antrim’s idea of the

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<sup>10</sup> Most obviously, this sense of materiality is evoked in the inclusion of reproductions of photographs in the novel, with which DeLillo draws attention to the text as a material object and a work of printed fiction. This sense of materiality recalls the techniques of several other artists discussed in this thesis, from the retained pilcrow of Coupland’s *Generation X* to the attention Gregg Araki draws to the constraints of the frame in *Totally Fucked Up* (see chapters 1 and 4 respectively).

<sup>11</sup> This idea of ‘bracketing [...] lack of faith’ also of course recalls the ‘blind faith’ which Adam Kelly argues is instrumental to the aesthetics of new sincerity, which Kelly draws from the Derridean idea of the gift. Just as one must bracket the fear of manipulation when one accepts a gift, so the reader of new sincerity fiction is invited to bracket their postmodern ‘suspicion’ in order to engage with the work (see chapter 1).

‘(imaginary) community.’ The photographs discussed by Scott and Brita and the novels written by Bill function to facilitate interpersonal exchanges, both as shared cultural objects capable of expressing common but hard-to-articulate feelings, and as invitations from artist to viewer to share in a faithful interpretation of the object itself. In this way, DeLillo posits a vision of art that aspires neither to heteronomy nor autonomy, but to sociality, and to the affective sensation of communality that this semiotic register can develop when deployed in an artwork.

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But if *Mao II* argues for art’s capability to facilitate and forge affective bonds between artists and audiences, these bonds remain at the scale of Bill’s four-person dinner party. Consulting DeLillo’s notes and drafts reveals the author’s belief in the mechanics and scale of art consumption. At the end of the novel’s prologue, DeLillo observes how people ‘bind themselves into numbered seats and fly across time-zones and high cirrus and deep night, knowing there is something they have forgotten to do’ (16). In an earlier draft, this image forms the opening scene of the novel:

A journey by air is a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. It has a narrative pull, the arching trajectory of classic plot design. But it's a story you forget as soon as it's over. [...] The aircraft encloses you all in a time sense unconnected to the burdened pace set by earth-clocks and sunsets and seasons. You are part of a complex trick, sealed from the world, enclosed in private time, a drift barely felt, like time passing in a book, years passing in a page. (39.1)

DeLillo’s conflation of the separate images of a plane journey and a literary narrative are telling. They suggest, in their shared sense of ‘enclosed [...] private time,’ the way in which, during the act of reading a novel, the novel exerts its own reciprocal effect back onto the reader, withdrawing them from the ordinary, ‘burdened’ flow of time.<sup>12</sup>

This spatialized idea of reading evokes Salman Rushdie’s sense of the ‘little room of literature,’ which DeLillo refers to in a pamphlet written a few years after the release of *Mao II* in support of the then-exiled author. In the pamphlet, DeLillo observes that,

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<sup>12</sup> This passage also echoes the moment in DeLillo’s earlier work, *The Names*, when protagonist Axton observes how flight is a form of ‘dead time’ (*The Names*, 7).

[the] spirit of Rushdie lives [...] in the narrow passage between the writer who works in solitude and the reader whose own living space or park bench or plane seat is "the little room of literature"—in Rushdie's own phrase—the place that will not be completely open until all marked writers are free people again. (91.6).

This 'narrow passage' suggests a restricted relationship between reader and novel. In these instances, DeLillo's vision for the novel resonates more with his own recorded thoughts on his ideal readership, as shared with Alan Begley in his *Paris Review* interview:

I like to imagine [my novel] being read by some stranger somewhere who doesn't have anyone around him to talk to about books and writing--maybe a would-be writer, maybe a little lonely, who depends on a certain kind of writing to make him feel more comfortable in the world.

For Jeffrey T. Nealon, DeLillo's primary aesthetic goal with *Mao II* is to achieve a sense of 'interruption' to the 'too fast world of capital', thus proving the novel 'semi-autonomous from the world of getting and spending' (155). DeLillo's celebration of the plane seats and 'little rooms' of literature is certainly indicative of DeLillo's interruptive aspirations, but, contrary to Nealon, I want to stress that *Mao II*—and the photographs and novels that circulate within the text—also embraces a sense of sociality and a sense of the possibility—to return to Boxall's term—of art's generative power. DeLillo cedes the power to 'influence mass consciousness' to the terrorist, but he nevertheless claims for the novel an alternate form of power no less important, but also not yet fully realised. The ideas of the novel as interruption and the novel as a means of instigating a form of sociality co-exist and commingle uneasily within the pages of *Mao II*. Ultimately, while the points DeLillo plots undoubtedly converge on a sense of something capable of mediating between the absolute poles of autonomy and heteronomy, the novel does not reach a 'limit' point of convergence: the dialectic does not result in a synthesis. What the novel *does* do, is raise and keep open the question of art's place and power in the new millennium, opening a space for DeLillo's subsequent work.

### *Underworld*

In his review of *Mao II* for *The Irish Times*, John Banville writes, '*Mao II*, with its rages and disgusts, strikes me as a transitional work, a sort of pivot between sure-footed novels such as *The Names* and *Libra*, and something wholly new, the birth of which we must await.' No doubt Banville felt his anticipation justified when DeLillo followed *Mao II* with 1997's vast epic *Underworld*. But I would argue that it is *Underworld*, not *Mao II*, that can most comfortably be read as a 'pivot' between the DeLillo of old—the DeLillo of postmodernism, of paranoia, and of an abiding interest in the grand sweep of American history—and a DeLillo that is 'wholly new'; and that perhaps even then the novel is not so much a pivot as it is a bridge between the questions raised in *Mao II* and the answers potentially arrived at in *The Body Artist*. Indeed, regarding the question of the role of the artist, *Underworld's* primary mode is of experimentation, in which a dizzying array of ideas are played out—some successfully, others not—as DeLillo attempts once again to converge on an 'answer.' If *Mao II*, in Nealon's terms, represents a 'nostalgia' for interruption, and as I have suggested balances ideas of art as an articulation of sociality formative of new communities and art as an amelioration of the existential loneliness of the alienated reader, then *Underworld* may be read as DeLillo's rejoinder to the small-scale and the interruptive: an attempt to write a novel capable of generating tangible social change and the 'widespread cognitive dissonance' that Nealon argues should be the ultimate goal of any literature with aspirations *beyond* interruption. But, as I shall eventually demonstrate, DeLillo's attempt culminates in exhaustion.

*Underworld* begins similarly to *Mao II*: in an American baseball stadium. The set-piece this time, though, is not a Moonie mass wedding but the historical event of the 'shot heard 'round the world'—Bobby Thompson's 1951, pennant-winning home run against the Dodgers—and its curious historical concurrence with the test-explosion of a Soviet nuclear missile. These twin shots reverberate through the novel, sending out shockwaves that disturb fifty years of American history. DeLillo's whistle-stop tour of the late-twentieth century takes in his home territory of the Bronx in the 1950s, the New York art scene in the 1970s, the nascent cyberspace of the 1990s, and many more destinations besides. Structuring—or rather de-structuring—the novel is the omnipresent threat of the Cold War. Everything in the text is irradiated by the perennial threat of the nuclear, from Lenny Bruce's Cuban Missile Crisis-inflected stand-up routine in the 1960s to Nick Shay's business trip to a Kazakhstan desert that closes out the story. Throughout this, *Underworld* further picks at the threads teased at in *Mao II*. A plethora of artists and artworks circulate in the



novel, and DeLillo uses these figures as a means to further develop his response to the question of art's possibility in the coming millennium.

In this respect also, *Underworld* initially picks up where *Mao II* leaves off—with the idea of sociality and of Donald Antrim's 'imagined communities'. One of the over-arching conceits of *Underworld* is the novel's excavation and exposure of the literal 'underworld' that DeLillo demonstrates to be subsumed under or repressed by contemporary society. The novel demonstrates by example the way in which a work of art can reverse this repression and bring to light secret or buried histories and communities. Boxall suggests that the novel, in a sort-of ironic resistance to its own opening half-line, is fundamentally about 'all those forms of cultural experience and memory that cannot be articulated by an American voice' (187).

The idea of art as an articulation of a repressed underworld is raised almost immediately and in literal terms in the novel's prologue, when J. Edgar Hoover, while attending the Giants' game, encounters Pieter Bruegel's painting *The Triumph of Death* on a torn-out page from *Life* magazine.<sup>13</sup> The painting's subject, an untamed underworld rising up to shatter the respectable veneer of bourgeois society, becomes a recurring motif in *Underworld* and guides DeLillo's clinical, unblinking vision of American society. During the course of the novel DeLillo describes horrors as varied as the man 'who'd cut his eyeball out of its socket because it contained a satanic symbol' (247) in Brooklyn, to the woman 'with features intact but only half a face, somehow' (800) in Tchaika, which leads Woody Lewis to remark that the novel views its subject through a 'Bruegel filter' (Lewis). More than just an aesthetic coda, though, *Triumph's* depiction of the denizens of the underworld puncturing a surface of decorum and sensibility sets the ideological agenda of the novel, and leads Sister Edgar to reminisce, only a page after the story of the satanic eyeball, of her days in Rome and her own vision of 'death, yes, triumphant' (249). Art, for DeLillo, is the ideal medium through which to breathe life into those skeleton denizens of society who lay hidden.

This motif is clearly present in the various art projects featured in *Underworld*, from the guerrilla-style throw-ups of graffiti artist Moonman 157 to the vast, participatory projects

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<sup>13</sup> Over five hundred pages later, this moment will find its parallel when the Factoids infiltrate and intimidate Hoover at his own bacchanalia, the Black and White Ball.

of visual artist Klara Sax, to the avant-garde filmmaking of real-life Soviet auteur Sergei Eisenstein. Repeatedly, these projects are framed as expressions of uprising thematically akin to the skeletal bacchanalia of the Bruegel painting. While riding one of his painted subway cars, graffiti artist Moonman 157 addresses himself to the public of New York:

you can't *not* see us anymore [...] you have to see our tags and cartoon figures and bright and rhyming poems, this is the art that can't stand still, it climbs across your eyeballs night and day, the flickery jumping art of the slums and dumpsters, flashing those colors in your face--like I'm your movie, motherfucker (440-441)

Moonman's graffiti is cast in the novel as an expression of the underclass with which he identifies, the class that occupy the literal underworld of the subway tunnels and 'slums and dumpsters' and 'the people who lived in the cable rooms and up on the catwalks [...] and in the unused freight tunnel under the West Side' (435). 'The whole point of Moonman's tag,' DeLillo writes, 'was how the letters and numbers told a story of backstreet life' (434), while the form and violence of the tag lends it its forceful impression. As Jean Baudrillard writes in *America*: '[Graffiti] simply say: I'm so-and-so and I exist! They are free publicity for existence.'

*Long Tall Sally*, the work of visual artist Klara Sax and an army of volunteers working in the New Mexico desert, is a similar project of making visible. The vast installation consists of over two hundred decommissioned and abandoned B-52 bombers, systematically painted by Klara and her volunteers living in the makeshift camp she has organised for this purpose. When asked to explain the rationale behind the piece in an interview with a French television crew, Klara haltingly explains that, in the face of the spectacle of mass production the Boneyard represents, 'we're trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life, and maybe there's a sort of survival instinct here, a graffiti instinct—to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are' (77). As with Moonman's tags, Klara's brightly daubed canopies declare 'I'm so-and-so and I exist!'

Finally, and arguably the most iconic of *Underworld's* many artworks, is the fictional 'lost' Sergei Eisenstein film *Unterwelt*. In a pivotal scene in the novel, the film is watched by Klara Sax and a carefully curated audience of New York artists and intellectuals at the same moment that Moonman is riding his subway train below—the passing vibrations of which are felt by the Eisenstein crowd in the basement theatre of the Radio City Music Hall. Eisenstein's film is a long, ill-defined narrative documenting an oppressed and deformed

peoples' overthrowing of their captors and their subsequent ascent to the surface of their world. The film is reportedly shot in the director's distinctive style but inflected with a schlocky science-fiction edge, and with a tempered and distilled 'politics of montage' that is a subtle yet pointed departure from the rest of Eisenstein's (real) oeuvre. Klara notes the way Eisenstein shifts in this film from 'typage' to 'typology'—from a focus on characters defined by their class and persecuted accordingly, to characters defined only by the fact that they are persecuted: 'this was their typology,' she remarks. 'They were an inconvenient secret of the society around them' (443). Based on this egalitarian representation, she concludes:

This is a film about Us and Them, isn't it?

They can say who they are, you have to lie. They control the language, you have to improvise and dissemble. They establish the limits of your existence. (444)

Like Klara and Moonman's artworks, Eisenstein's film symbolizes art's potential to express that which has been repressed and driven—literally—to the underworld.<sup>14</sup>

These projects—variously, an avant-garde film from the 1930s, graffiti produced in the 1970s, and a kind of social or participatory art project typical of the 1990s<sup>15</sup>— all seek to express the existence of an 'underworld' to an American society ignorant of its presence. And yet, of course, they vary immensely in both their process and execution. As this chapter develops, I will argue that *Underworld* is, above everything else, a novel of experimentation. The novel's five-year gestation period is reflected in a finished project full of internal dichotomies and contradictions, not least relating to the role of art as a mode of societal critique. Spanning a fifty-year period, DeLillo's exploration necessarily considers

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<sup>14</sup> In an interview conducted in the wake of *Underworld's* publication, DeLillo confirms both this reading and the film's centrality to the novel:

the film supplies a Russian presence right in the middle of the book, almost the literal middle of the book, and it also explores a kind of gradation from the political repression of the Stalin era to something that in a way is deeper and more personal. (Howard)

<sup>15</sup> Here, it may be worth very briefly considering the issue of medium specificity, which is raised when considering these examples and which surfaces regularly when dealing with DeLillo's novels, which typically feature a myriad of art forms including film, photography, painting, theatre, and performance. Despite this plethora of forms, I am inclined to agree with David Cowart's response to the widely held notion that DeLillo privileges the visual image in his novels. Cowart, discussing DeLillo's use and belief in the power of language, suggests that in DeLillo's fiction the visual image *is not* privileged, rather, 'language subsumes image,' and that 'images themselves constitute a semiotic' (4). In other words, DeLillo uses different mediums as different semiotic codes that nevertheless express essentially the same thing. Attending to medium specificity may nuance our understanding of DeLillo's project, and his use of various mediums may allow him access to different techniques and strategies, but these mediums are at a very fundamental level interchangeable with regard to the author's key ideas.

several shifts in contemporary art, covering periods of both modernism and postmodernism, and both 'high' and 'low' cultural forms.

Were we to attempt to place Moonman 157's graffiti into an existing taxonomy of art movements, we might take its playfully disruptive nature, its occupation of public space, and its dubious legality, and conclude that it belongs alongside its contemporaries in the neo-avant-garde, as another stunt or 'happening' akin to those staged by groups like the Situationist International and Fluxus.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, Moonman's artistic ethos, the transient nature of his work, and the joy he takes in witnessing its reception, mirrors the Situationist emphasis on 'complete communication' of 'the lived moment.' ('Situationist Manifesto'). Meanwhile, as Moonman rides his bombed car below, the coterie of intellectuals assembling for the display of Eisenstein's film *Unterwelt* represents a starkly contrasting model of artistic circulation. Whether in keeping with the auteur's wishes or not, the limited showing of *Unterwelt* manifests as a sort of Bourdieusian field of restricted production, a hallmark of a typically modernist circulation of art.<sup>17</sup> At the moment Moonman's train passes beneath the Radio City Music Hall, then, DeLillo juxtaposes an avant-garde vision of art-in-life with a modernist model of restricted artistic circulation.<sup>18</sup>

In his 1985 study *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen contrives a similar juxtaposition in his attempt to 'map the postmodern'. Huyssen tells a narrative of the development of postmodernism that begins with the challenge mounted by the historical avant-garde against the bourgeois high art of the nineteenth century. These attempts by expressionists and Dadaists to bring 'art into life,' Huyssen argues, ultimately result in failure, and modernism's emergence represents a redressing of the balance in favour of 'high' culture: a move away from art and life, to *l'art pour l'art*, or art for art's sake (192). In telling this story, one of Huyssen's most interesting interventions is to recast poststructuralism as a theory of modernism and an 'archaeology of modernity,' which he situates against a

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<sup>16</sup> Graffiti's status as avant-garde has been argued by, for example, Connell Vaughan in 'Institutional Change: The Concept of the Avant-Garde and the Example of Graffiti', as well as in many popular publications such as the special issue of *IdN: Street Art: from Vandalism to Avant-Garde*.

<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu compares the 'field of restricted production' to the 'field of large scale cultural production.' For Bourdieu, the former is defined as 'a system objectively producing for producers,' which is to say, a collective of artists creating art for a highly specialised coterie of fellow artists and intellectuals actively distinguishing themselves from a broader public of consumers, of which modernism is the archetypal example (Bourdieu, 4).

<sup>18</sup> See also Peter Bürger, who argues in his classic work *Theory of the Avant-Garde* for the way in which the avant-garde seeks to 'reintegrate art into the praxis of life' (22).

prevailing reading that parallels poststructuralism and postmodernism. Huyssen finds a congruence between modernist art's restriction to the aesthetic realm and poststructuralism's abandonment of 'the pretense to a critique that would go beyond language games, beyond epistemology and the aesthetic,' leading him to conclude that French theory is a theory of 'modernism at the stage of exhaustion' (209). This is a complicated account of postmodernism, and these complications might be accounted for by Huyssen's position as a frontrunner in the rush to attempt to 'map the postmodern.'<sup>19</sup> To an extent, we might read DeLillo's work in the 1990s as a similar attempt to map the postmodern. The interplay of modes and styles of art he describes betray an interest in working out where contemporary art—including his own—sits in relation to their modernist and avant-garde antecedents. In this sense, the web of influence Huyssen traces back from the postmodern moment, while provisional and imperfect, is nevertheless invaluable for interpreting how artists like DeLillo were attempting to draw their own 'maps of the postmodern' at the end of the twentieth century.

Without wishing to suggest too schematic a reading of DeLillo's configuration of artists, we might read Klara Sax as DeLillo's avatar for the postmodern tradition. Having explicitly acknowledged the significance of the formal placement of the *Unterwelt* episode at the center of *Underworld*, it is reasonable to read Klara Sax's placement at the centre of this event as another formal tip-off to the artist's situation at the centre of the modernism/avant-garde divide with which the novel is at least partially preoccupied. Placed somewhere between Eisenstein's film and Moonman's graffiti, Klara's art—particularly *Long Tall Sally*—occupies a liminal no-man's land between modernist autonomy and avant-garde art-in-life, and DeLillo's depiction of Klara's art is representative of his dialectical style. Klara's work marries a desire to 'find an element of felt life' with the semblance of autonomy she implicitly indicates when she quotes Matisse in her French television interview: 'painters must begin by cutting out their tongues' (77); or when she insists on the necessity of the desert which renders her installation all but unreachable. In this sense quintessentially postmodern, her work is simultaneously withdrawn and open,

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<sup>19</sup> Huyssen's *Great Divide* is contemporaneous with Fredric Jameson's account of postmodernism but precedes the later and widely accepted narratives posited by, among others, Linda Hutcheon or Brian McHale. Whether postmodernism is primarily a return to avant-garde practice, a pastiche of consumer culture, historiographic metafiction, or an experiment in ontological instability, the debates surrounding the definition of postmodernism speak to its slipperiness as a category and thus a frame of understanding. Huyssen contributes to the attempt to define the term, but his conclusions are far from final.

restricted and egalitarian. This balance is significant for DeLillo's broader project because it suggests that far from a coherently linear interpretation of the last half-century, *Underworld* is bound up in the contradictions and oppositions of this period.

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By raising the question of language—by observing that ‘they control the language’—Klara gestures towards a broader issue raised by Eisenstein's film and the other artworks in the text: the idea of history as a narrative or discourse. When Klara or Moonman or Eisenstein narrate the existence of their own suppressed community, they not only make visible that community but also the ideologies which enacted that suppression in the first place. In other words, they make visible the dominant narratives that organize and describe their society. *Underworld* returns frequently to this idea of narrative as an organizing principle and to these narratives' effects on the culture. Likewise, critics of DeLillo have frequently noted the way in which his work aspires to the condition of counternarrative or disruption-of-narrative.<sup>20</sup> To return to the earlier question of DeLillo's postmodernity, we might initially recognize this idea of narrative and counternarrative as an essentially postmodern one. Here, DeLillo begins to grapple more explicitly with some of the defining theoretical debates of the 1990s. Earlier, drawing on Lash and Boxall, I referred to the tensions between postmodernism and Marxism. While a commonly accepted narrative tells of the publication of Hardt and Negri's influential text *Empire* in 2000 as instrumental to the ‘resurrection’ of Marxist debates following their decline in the 1990s,<sup>21</sup> in fact such debates continued throughout the decade, albeit partially occluded by the critical dissensus concerning the nature and legacy of postmodernism. Indeed, these two debates are inextricably intertwined, as postmodernism often found itself situated—as Lash and Boxall demonstrated—as the bogeyman of classical Marxist analysis. As I wish to demonstrate, *Underworld* represents DeLillo's attempt to engage with, and work through, precisely this complex knot of political and aesthetic theory.

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<sup>20</sup> See Boxall (5) as well as John Leonard, who in his review of *Underworld* notes wryly that ‘cyberpunk professors are entitled to conclude that DeLillo has problematised the very idea of a master narrative.’

<sup>21</sup> Michael Hardt, in ‘Postface: Deciphering the Meaning of the Attacks on *Empire*’, notes that in the wake of *Empire*, ‘traditional anti-imperialist authors’ have tended to ‘resurrect the “Marxism versus postmodernism” debates that raged among Left academics.’

In his 1991 article 'Remaking American Marxism', Manning Marable laments that in the 'post-modern period' it is no longer accepted as given that capitalism is class struggle.<sup>22</sup> This shift away from the tenets of classical Marxism gave rise in this period to a number of debates over the applicability of key Marxist concepts—concepts like the labor theory of value and the configuration of base and superstructure—to late capitalism's *fin de siècle* form. A paradigmatic example of such a debate can be found in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000), a three-way exchange between Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek which culminates with the latter two theorists disavowing one another's positions entirely.<sup>23</sup> Over the successive essays laid out in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Slavoj Žižek puts forth an argument for, among other things, a re-essentialising of class struggle in the face of its 'ideological displacement' and sublimation under the 'discourse of postmodern identity politics' (Žižek, 97). Žižek situates himself against what he perceives as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's renunciation of 'the objective grounding of the "superstructural" hegemonic struggle in the economic "infrastructure,"' which he regards as an attempt to repoliticise the economic realm and democratise struggle (98). Against this shift, Žižek argues for a structural, materialist analysis that reinstates a classical appreciation of the hegemonic relationship between base and superstructure and the privileged position of class struggle as the terrain of revolutionary politics based on the worker's proximity to the heart—or base—of the system. In return, Laclau argues that a renewed emphasis on the privileging of class struggle ignores the fact that capitalism is a complex world system structured as an 'imperialist chain,' not a hierarchy, and thus 'crises at one point in the system create dislocations at many other points' (Laclau, 203). Reading the capitalist system as an unstable system of constantly displacing component elements, rather than as the classical arrangement of base and superstructure, allows Laclau to reframe class struggle as 'just one species of identity politics, and one which is becoming less and less important in the world in which we live' (ibid.). Furthermore, Laclau probes the metaphor of base/superstructure itself, positing that the systemacity it implies is itself a hegemonic construction, and that this brand of Marxist discourse might be considered complicit with the neoliberal metanarrative of economic fundamentalism.

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<sup>22</sup> Marable's own position is that 'it always has been, and so long as corporate capitalism dominates our economic and social system, it always must be' (45).

<sup>23</sup> Alongside Derrida's 1993 text *Specters of Marx* and the responses captured in the 1999 volume *Ghostly Demarcations*, the dialogue between Žižek and Laclau indicate the heatedness with which theories of post-Marxism were debated in the 1990s. Certainly, these debates were in no need of 'resurrection' come the publication of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*.

This back-and-forth exchange is paradigmatic of the antagonism that Goran Therborn, in his 2007 article 'After Dialectics,' observes between post-Marxist and neo-Marxist thought. For Therborn, the most compelling and prolific strains of late-Marxist thought at the turn of the century are those of the post- and neo- schools. While Therborn admits that the boundaries between the two 'have become blurred in recent times,' he still distinguishes between a post-Marxism that, in Laclau and Mouffe's words, represents 'the reappropriation of an intellectual tradition, as well as the process of going beyond it,' (Laclau and Mouffe, qtd. In Therborn, 104) and a neo-Marxism that is contrarily composed of projects that 'signal a significant departure from classical Marxism and retain an explicit commitment to it,' of which Therborn considers Žižek's Lacanian-inflected politics emblematic (Therborn, 106). Following Therborn's taxonomy, we might place Žižek's passionate confirmation of the enduring relevance of the base/superstructure configuration and of class struggle as the primary force motivating anti-capitalist reform as a neo-Marxist position. In turn, Laclau's dismissal of Žižek's defence as an outdated reading of a complex and multivalent system mired in an archaic terminology represents what Therborn would classify as a post-Marxist stance. A key distinction between the two positions is the neo-Marxist insistence on the continued relevance of materialist claims arrayed against the post-Marxist turn to linguistics and a focus on discourse and the insufficiencies and elisions present in the language of classical Marxism. This difference is emblematised by Laclau's claim in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, that the main task of political theory in the 1990s is 'to develop [...] language games and thus to promote the expansion of political imagination' (213). Here, it is clear to see how post-Marxism can be yoked to postmodernism through a chain of false equivalences. Huysen's branding of post-structuralist 'language games' as a clear indication of the discipline's retreat from the political shares Laclau's terminology, but Laclau's 'language games' represent an expansion of, not a retreat from, the realm of politics.

To return to *Underworld*, essential to understanding DeLillo's politics is understanding whether the language games the novel employs represent post-Marxist expansion or postmodern retreat. Swathes of the novel take place in the post-Cold War 1990s, and in these scenes DeLillo's diagnosis of modernity—delivered primarily through the character of baseball memorabilia collector Marvin Lundy—playfully invokes a Lyotardian account of the structuring force of metanarratives. In a key scene in the novel, Brian Glassic visits



Marvin on a whim after seeing an article on him in an in-flight magazine. Unprompted by Brian, Marvin pontificates at length on the meaning behind the obsessive pursuits of collectors like himself. He eventually locates this meaning in the end of the Cold War—an event that he describes as one of the twentieth century’s most powerful narratives and most enduring organizing principles. The Cold War, Marvin observes, is

the one constant thing. It's honest, it's dependable. Because when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that's when your worst nightmares begin. All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream. You will no longer be the main [...] point of reference. (170)

In his suggestion that ‘the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream,’ Marvin appears to predict the hegemony of Cold War realism giving way to something emergent and as yet undefined. This position is clarified further in a passage DeLillo eventually cuts from the novel, in which Marvin remarks that ‘people think the Cold War is history. It's actually the repression of history. [...] It's the what-do-you-call-it, the stifling, the smothering of a thousand desires’ (63.4). For Marvin, the Cold War represents a systemic narrative capable of inhibiting or suppressing ‘history,’ and perhaps also politics, understood as the flux of everyday life.

For DeLillo, when the Cold War comes to an end, capitalism assumes its position as organising metanarrative. The epilogue to *Underworld*, titled ‘Das Kapital’, begins with a typically DeLillo-esque provocation: ‘capital burns off the nuance of the culture’ (785). The passage goes on to lament the development of the nuance-less monoculture of globalisation, referring as it does to the same suppression of desires for which Marvin blames the Cold War:

The system pretends to go along, to become more supple and resourceful, less dependent on rigid categories. But even as desire tends to specialize, going silky and intimate, the force of converging markets produces an instantaneous capital that shoots across horizons at the speed of light, making for a certain furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars that affects everything from architecture to leisure time to the way people eat and sleep and dream. (786)

DeLillo’s vision of instantaneous, speed-of-light capital complements Laclau’s nuanced appreciation of the complexity of the late capitalist world system. In each of DeLillo’s accounts of the Cold War and capitalism, global conflict and globalisation are framed as the dominant narratives of a system capable of assimilating the nuances of individual

expression and desire. Drawing equivalence between capitalism and the Cold War in this respect, DeLillo presents both as ideological fronts, picking at the same loose thread Laclau draws from Žižek's reliance on the base/superstructure configuration: the idea that systemic narratives are self-confirming. This reading has interesting repercussions for the art projects the novel features, and by extension, the novel itself: if the capitalist system relies on a 'planing away of particulars,' then to emphasise the difference and the radical non-conformity simmering beneath the monocultural veneer positions *Underworld*, as well as the artworks it contains, as a direct antagonist to globalized capitalism. Here, DeLillo's commitment to everyday life is imbued with a newfound political valence that freights the art projects of Klara and Moonman with an urgency tied directly to their attempts to make visible the 'felt life' of their suppressed subjects as discrete counternarratives.

Against these forces which control the discourse, DeLillo arrays art as resistance. Beginning with Klara Sax, DeLillo tells us: 'she tried to scale her work to the human figure even though it wasn't figural. She was wary of ego, hero, heights and size' (375). Meanwhile, in reference to her piece *Long Tall Sally*, Klara remarks: 'what I really want to get at is the ordinary life behind the thing. [...] That's the heart and soul of what we're doing here [...] to find an element of felt life' (77).<sup>24</sup> In the context of a novel hyperaware of modernity's tendency towards monoculture—the aforementioned 'stifling' of the Cold War, the 'furtive sameness [and] planing away of particulars' engendered by globalized capitalism—the impulse towards egalitarianism and suspicion of ego, combined with the celebration of the everyday and the quotidian, positions Klara as a champion of those desires suppressed by the structuring dominant narratives. Her 'looking [...] carefully' allows her to expose counter-narratives and micro-narratives of the ordinary arrayed against the grand narratives of global conflict and global expansion that threaten to flatten out the particularities of human existence. Klara's explanations weaponize her art in this war of discourse. Frequently, the novel renders this conflict in terms of a struggle to control vision: whether through advertiser Charlie Wainright's observation that 'whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world. [...] Once we get the consumer by the eyeballs, we have complete mastery of the marketing process' (530-31), or Moonman 157's declaration that 'you hit a

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<sup>24</sup> Once again, early drafts cast this project in slightly different, expanded terms:

We salvaged junk and reclaimed it, I guess, gave it a refuge in art. Which sounds nobler than it was. It was mainly a democratic thing. We were all-consuming on the one hand, junk-merchants ready to steal and beg, but also sort of populist, I think. [...] eager to see what's worthwhile in the ordinary object, to see it again. (65.5)

train and it's yours [...] seen everywhere in the system, and you get inside people's heads and vandalize their eyeballs' (435), DeLillo's novel equates visibility with agency and power. From Nick's interpretation of *Long Tall Sally* as an expression of 'who we are' to Moonman's eyeball-vandalizing graffiti to Eisenstein's 'secret rebellion,' the artworks in *Underworld* function as a creative-critical challenge to the narrative forces of consumer culture and global conflict for control of the discourse of history.

Laclau concludes his first contribution to *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* with the proposition that democratic politics needs to balance the universal and the particular in the way that, for example, a general strike encompasses both the concrete specificity of actual demands and the symbolic desire for a fully ethical society. As the link *Underworld* makes between art as an expression of felt life and art as counternarrative suggests, for DeLillo the novel is capable of performing precisely this marriage of the particular and the universal. DeLillo's position, however, is far from stable. Just as debate raged between the factions of post- and neo-Marxism in the 1990s in the pages of volumes like *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, so, to an extent, do these debates manifest in literary works from the period, including *Underworld*. While DeLillo's work has always been characterized by the dialectical approach he employs in *Underworld*, one of the most compelling revelations DeLillo's archive discloses is the extent to which such attempts to stage and resolve complex problems are enacted during the drafting phase of the author's writing process. Consulting the early drafts of *Underworld*, for example, one is met with DeLillo's wavering attempts to solidify his position within the Marxist debates I have glossed above. Emblematic of his uncertainty in these debates is a fascinating speech DeLillo eventually cuts from the epilogue of *Underworld*. In this speech, Viktor Maltsev delivers a strikingly traditional Marxist sermon in which he argues that Marx's vision of capitalist collapse may have been somehow suspended by the Cold War, much as Marvin reads the suspension of history as a product of this same conflict. As we move into the twenty-first century, Maltsev speculates, capitalist collapse may again become possible:

Marx believed capitalism would crumble because the vast standardised system, the interdependent and uniform means of production, would fall into conflict with independent thinking, private property, free enterprise, free expression. [...] The bomb makes us all docile. Malleable. Faithless. Conformist. Ready to be massed and processed. Not just the danger of the bomb but the knowledge, the

technology, the vastness of nature completely falsified, you know. Now that the immediate threat is gone, what will happen? I don't know. Chaos, maybe. (68.6).

This passage returns to Marvin's belief that the threat of nuclear conflict somehow stifled or repressed the possibility of 'chaos.' But Maltsev's account is more stridently neo-Marxist than Marvin's, in its insistence on a superstructure of legal and ideological values constructed on a base system of production, and on its prediction that the contradictions internal to this configuration will inevitably result in revolutionary change. It is perhaps Maltsev's conviction of this inevitability that leads DeLillo to excise this passage. While postmodern metanarratives and post-Marxist unstable systems grant superstructural actants—including artists—agency to effect political change, Maltsev's position appears to leave little room for the possibility of critique to play a meaningful role in the challenging of capitalist realism or the neoliberal hegemony it represents. The speech, coming in an epilogue already explicitly signaling Marx through its title, is imbued with a conclusiveness that disturbs DeLillo's carefully balanced oppositions. Structurally paralleling Marvin's argument in the novel, the position of Maltsev's speech as well as its content appears to close the loop of the text, trapping the tensions it explores within, rather than leaving the question of the possibility of critique open. Removing Maltsev's speech preserves this question, and it is to this notion of possibility that I will turn in the following, concluding section.

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Laclau and Butler represent, to perhaps a greater extent than Žižek, the legacy of the 'linguistic turn' of the twentieth century. Butler effectively summarises both the openness and the instability of language in her final contribution to *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, when she concludes that 'language will not only build the truth that it conveys, but it will also convey a different truth from the one that was intended, and this will be a truth about language, its unsurpassability in politics' (Butler, 279). For Butler especially, but Laclau also, there persists a gulf between the symbolic order in which the political must be conducted and the Real to which it gestures. This isn't to say that politics is therefore futile, rather both Butler's multiple truths and Laclau's 'language games' represent an 'expansion of the political imagination' and the 'going beyond' of traditional Marxism that post-Marxism represents. The antagonist to this view is, again, Žižek, who

commits himself to the distinction Laclau had previously critiqued—that of the difference between effecting change within the system, at the superstructural level, or against the system, by reconfiguring the base—and argues that in fact it is possible for a subject to achieve the latter by means of the Lacanian ‘act,’ a gesture which, ‘by definition, touches the dimension of some impossible Real’ (122). In a further demonstration of the malleability of the superstructure/base metaphor, Žižek here equates superstructure and base with the dichotomy of symbolic and Real, respectively.

In successive drafts of the final pages of *Underworld*, DeLillo wrestles with this same question regarding whether an ‘act’ might approach the Real, or whether it will always be blocked by the ‘unsurpassability’ of language. In the published text of the novel, the very final lines of *Underworld* read:

'[...] But it's only a sequence of pulses on a dullish screen and all it can do is make you pensive—a word that spreads a longing through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the dreaming bourns and orchards to the solitary hills. Peace.' (827)

However, in the earliest draft of the novel, the lines are quite different. The first iteration of these lines reads: 'Listen and smell, live in the world, follow the word off the screen and into the street and across the landscape that rolls to the solitary mountains. Peace' (68.6). In this draft, ‘peace,’ as a word and a concept, is transported off the computer screen and out into the street. The linguistic expression penetrates the barrier of the screen and appears to inhabit the Žižekian dimension of the ‘impossible Real,’ transcending mere expression to operate as an ‘act.’ But as DeLillo redrafts this conclusion, the ‘unsurpassability’ of language increasingly drives a wedge between ‘peace’ as a word and ‘peace’ as a real-world manifestation. In their second iteration, the lines read: 'and you try a little unreachably to imagine the word on the screen taking its serenities and contentments out into the street,' and in their third, 'and you try to understand the limits of the word on your screen, how it can never become a thing in the world.' This slow gradation from the word in ‘the street’ to the word as ‘a sequence of pulses’ appears to suggest the same poststructuralist abandonment of ‘the pretense to a critique that would go beyond language games, beyond epistemology and the aesthetic’ that Huyssen locates in the exhaustion of the modernist project.

Returning to the question of art, this reading can be bolstered by DeLillo’s own ‘language games’ relating to the varying modes of address in the novel. In the passage I quoted in the

first part of this paper, Moonman directs his graffiti at a 'you' that refuses to acknowledge him. Meanwhile, in his analysis of *Long Tall Sally*, Nick Shay perceives 'you' as a malign force when he remarks in another excised draft that Klara's piece is '[about] who we are when you are not directing your menace into our lives' (62.6). Finally, Klara associates 'you' with 'us' against 'them' in her response to Eisenstein's film (444). So, for Nick 'you' are a malign presence; for Moonman, 'you' are an apathetic public; and for Klara, 'you' are a sympathetic community. 'You,' of course, are also the owner of the voice in which Cotter Martin speaks at the very beginning of the novel: 'He speaks in *your* voice, American.' The 'underworld' of *Underworld*—the slums of Manhattan, Klara's boneyard, Cotter Martin's Bronx, Moonman's subways—are evoked by the novel and the artists within firstly as a means of asserting their existence *a la* Baudrillard's graffiti. But the shifting signifiers—'you,' 'us,' 'them'—point also to the way in which these artworks are multivalent in meaning and open to interpretation. The shifting signifiers of *Underworld's* art projects and the fact that 'you' can be menace to one character and ally to another suggests a continually fluctuating and malleable system of repression and subversion that exceeds and transgresses traditional, fixed class divides. This system operates on an individual, subjective level, much like the complex 'imperialist chain' which Laclau posits as the ideal means of understanding global capitalism, full of pressure points and thus full of opportunity for specific struggles to be translated into a universal challenge to hegemony.

What is at question in both the exchanges in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* and in DeLillo's 1990s fiction concerns the extent to which classic Marxist tenets still hold, and consequently, to what extent the concrete changes these tenets predict can still be anticipated; or, whether post-Marxist discourse has shifted the work of progressive politics entirely into the realm of the symbolic. In the iterations *Underworld* goes through, one can clearly see DeLillo vacillate between these conflicting positions. A temptation to articulate a more traditionally Marxist, or neo-Marxist, position jars with DeLillo's postmodern skepticism of metanarratives and linguistic instability. This first results in the jettisoning of the Maltsev speech, which appears to deny the possibility of art's role in effecting social change. At the end of the novel, DeLillo finds himself tending too far in the opposite direction, endorsing a Žižekian view of art as an 'act' capable of effecting exactly this concrete change. Characteristically of his 'bi-directional' or dialectical approach, DeLillo ultimately also excises these moments in which the text endorses the possibility of a reconfiguration of the economic base through critique.

Despite these insecurities, DeLillo doesn't give up entirely on the Marxist critique the text contains. Rather, he draws towards a post-Marxist position in which the hegemony of a complex world system rests on its articulation through symbolic discourse and the interplay between metanarratives and subversive counternarratives—counternarratives which, as an expression of felt life, relinquish the goal of autonomy in favour of universality. In this sense, the novel appears to argue for the possibility of critique and for its own value as a critical tool. But the language games DeLillo deploys remain frozen between poststructuralist retreat and post-Marxist expansion. The structure of *Underworld* is cyclical, its chapters arrayed in a mirror-like arrangement. Like the narrative itself, DeLillo's position in relation to the question of art as a mode of Marxist critique collapses and folds back on itself, and at the end of the novel, while the shadow of a decision is visible, this question is ultimately left unresolved.

### *The Body Artist*

DeLillo's drafts of his 2001 novel *The Body Artist* are haunted by a phrase the author couldn't seem to escape. DeLillo scribbles it in notepads and in the margins of manuscript pages, and writes it into—and back out of—almost a dozen different scenes in the novel. A hangover, perhaps, from the final failure of language that marks the end of *Underworld*, the repeated phrase reads: 'otherwise it's just words' (6.5, 6.6, 7.1, 7.2). This fragment expresses a frustration on the author's part to successfully manifest something beyond the written page—to, for example, drag 'peace' out into the streets. With *The Body Artist* DeLillo resets his ambitions to a more minor key. The compressed, almost claustrophobic narrative he produces, however, succeeds in doing that which it seems *Underworld* ultimately could not: to create something 'more than words.'

*The Body Artist* begins where *Underworld* ends: with a T. S. Eliot reference and a collapse of linguistic meaning. In the first scene of the novel an unnamed couple, 'still a little puddled in dream melt' (3), enjoy a lazy, somewhat disjointed breakfast. The pair communicate ineffectually to one another and at one point, watching the feeder outside the window, DeLillo tells us, 'the birds broke off the feeder in a wing-whir that was all b's and r's, the

letter b followed by a series of vibrato r's. But that wasn't it at all. That wasn't anything like it' (14). Recalling Eliot's Prufrock—'turning toward the window, should say: / "That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all."'—the scene hesitates and stumbles over sensations that struggle to be rendered linguistically: 'the sense somewhere of the color blue, runny and wan' (5); the smell of soya, the way 'nothing described it. It was pure smell' (13); and 'a hundred other things, nameable or not' (17). Out of this insufficiency of language and DeLillo's desire to write something that is more than 'just words' arises the novel proper. Following their breakfast, Rey Robles shoots himself and leaves his third wife Lauren Hartke, the eponymous body artist, to grieve his absence. She discovers a strange man, whom she names Mr. Tuttle, living in her house. Tuttle, an apparent manifestation of her grief, offers Lauren temporary, imperfect access to a trace of Rey, but disappears towards the end of the novel as abruptly as he had arrived. Alone again, Lauren develops the experiences the novel has described into a piece of 'body art', a performance work that enacts her process of grieving and ultimately enables Lauren to re-enter the society from which she had temporarily withdrawn.

Thematically, *The Body Artist* represents the convergence point for the question first raised in *Mao II*: what are the possibilities for art in contemporary Western society? Throughout *Mao II* and *Underworld*, DeLillo flirts with a number of responses to this question: art as an expression of repressed communities and ideas; art as an articulation of a sociality formative of new communities; art as an amelioration of the existential loneliness of the alienated reader; art as an enunciation of impersonal feelings facilitating an interpersonal connection; art as a force of social change. Returning to Jeffrey Nealon, we might group these functions into two groups: the 'strong power' of the artwork as operating on a large scale to express, develop, and generate social formations and social change; and the 'weak power' whereby the artwork operates on a muted level, at the 'retail consciousness' of the individual consumer to provide a sealed space extant to neoliberal flow and to soothe that consumer's sense of alienation. *The Body Artist* converges at a synthesis of several of these ideas, marrying a possibility of temporal interruption to a nuanced version of the notions of interpersonal exchange and post-Marxist language play expressed in the earlier novels.

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Following Rey's death, Lauren enters a state of 'still time,' or timelessness, embodied by the atemporal figure of Mr. Tuttle. This strange, childlike man exists somehow outside of conventional human experience of time. From Lauren's perspective, DeLillo attempts to describe Mr. Tuttle's existence:

Time is the only narrative that matters. It stretches events and makes it possible for us to suffer and come out of it and see death happen and come out of it. But not for him. He is in another structure, another culture, where time is something like itself, sheer and bare, empty of shelter. (98)

With Mr. Tuttle alongside her, Lauren enters this 'other structure' that exists outside of time. Her plan, we are told, 'was to organise time until she could live again' (36). Removed from the ordinary flow of time, Lauren can exert a degree of influence over her experience or perception of everyday life as a means of separating out a parcel of timelessness in which she can grieve for her lost husband. While Lauren's escape from time is motivated by this grieving, the novel's expression of her escape—especially through its own formal qualities—implies a broader sense by which art can be understood to function as an antidote to time. This notion is described explicitly in DeLillo's notes for the novel when he writes, in a spiral notebook containing early ideas for the piece, 'Art is the cure for time. Art stops time' (6.5). This is the clearest expression of the interruptive potential of art that Nealon finds expressed in DeLillo's work, and that I identified previously in the moments in *Mao II* in which the novel is evoked as a figurative manifestation of a little room or plane seat.

The idea of consciously manipulating or temporarily halting time as a form of resistance or an attempt to exert a sense of personal autonomy has gained increasing prominence in the twenty-first century as a response to the temporal intensification of daily life under late capitalism.<sup>25</sup> David Harvey identifies the basic importance of fast time to capitalism when he observes that 'capital must circulate continuously or die. The speed of its circulation is also important. If I can circulate my capital faster than you, then I have a certain competitive advantage' (Harvey 2014, 73). Following this idea, Jonathan Martineau, in his 2016 book *Time, Capitalism and Alienation: A Socio-Historical Inquiry into the Making of Modern Time*, distinguishes between the concrete time of lived experience—of seasons, day and night—and clock time, a 'worldwide time regime' (111) of social relations that

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<sup>25</sup> These ideas are treated explicitly by DeLillo in the novel following *The Body Artist*, 2003's *Cosmopolis*.

demarcates and arbitrarily constrains the ‘natural rhythms’ of life, broadly for the benefit of early systems of commerce, and later, for industrial capitalism. In the twenty-first century, this system has evolved in the ways in which it structures daily life, mutating from a system of rigidly defined boundaries to a more fluid temporality in line with capitalism’s colonization of leisure time and even sleep. In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary critiques the ‘normative trajectories and conditions’ of twenty-first century capitalism, one of which is ‘the generalised inscription of human life into duration without breaks, defined by a principle of continuous functioning. [...] A time that no longer passes, beyond clock time’ (8).<sup>26</sup> A trajectory from lived time, to clock time, to a kind of post-clock temporality parallels the trajectory from pre- to post-industrial life.

With increased attention being paid to the intensification and indeterminacy of late-capitalist temporality, there has also come, since around the beginning of the twenty-first century, a renewed interest in how the flow of time might be reclaimed for the individual as a subversive response to the hegemony of capitalist fast time. Michelle Boulous Walker’s *Slow Philosophy: Reading Against the Institution* champions ‘slowness’ as a response to temporal intensification. The ‘slow movement’ that she describes in the book is

not a counter-cultural retreat from everyday life, not a return to the past, the good old days [...] neither is it a form of laziness, nor a slow-motion version of life [...] Rather it is [...] a process whereby everyday life—in all its pace and complexity, frisson and routine—is approached with care and attention (Boulous Walker, qtd. In Lloyd).

Primarily focusing on the practice of philosophy, Walker’s idea nevertheless taps into a broader cultural zeitgeist oriented around the idea of ‘slowness’.<sup>27</sup>

In a review of Boulous Walker’s book for *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, Henry Martyn Lloyd notes that ‘slow reading is often characterized by its intensity: it involves a fine-tuned attention to detail and nuance,’ and that this reading practice can be generative of a sense of openness: ‘Boulous Walker,’ Lloyd suggests, ‘is advocating reading as an act of

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<sup>26</sup> As we saw in chapter 1, this ‘duration without breaks’ is a hallmark of the neoliberal work environment, and a catalyst for the slacker’s impulse to withdraw.

<sup>27</sup> In recent years, the epithet ‘slow’ has been appended to a vast array of cultural practices, beginning with the ‘slow food’ movement in 1986, and spreading to everything from fashion to travel. Many of these movements are discussed in Carl Honore’s 2004 book *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed*, which the *Financial Times* famously described as being ‘to the Slow movement what *Das Kapital* is to communism’ (van der Post).

meditative contemplation that has transformative potential, which opens the self to the possibility of a reorientation *vis-à-vis* knowledge and the other' (Lloyd). This sense by which the reader, engaged in a process of slow reading, may become 'open' to reorientation recalls the 'openness' of Scott Lash's ideal social subject and of the intimate relationship DeLillo posits between author and reader in his discussion of Salman Rushdie: '[the] spirit of Rushdie lives [...] in the narrow passage between the writer who works in solitude and the reader whose own living space or park bench or plane seat is "the little room of literature."' In this instance, Rushdie's 'spirit' is the embodiment of his work's transformative potential, contingent on the reader occupying the 'little room of literature,' itself a spatial expression of slow reading.

With *The Body Artist* DeLillo makes a distinct stylistic choice that seems calculated to encourage slow reading. Time is a thematic focus of the novel from the very first sentences—'Time seems to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments' (7)—but DeLillo also generates a sense of time from his sentences themselves, which are often paragraph-long and punctuated with commas, mimicking the same sense of 'unrolling' that DeLillo evokes on the opening page. Vague referents, a focus on the quotidian minutiae of daily life—one page-long scene describes a paperclip falling, its echoes rippling through 'teeming space' and 'an immense web of distances'—and Lauren's halting struggle with language all further contribute to the novel's achingly slow pace. Several reviewers pick up on this sensation when reporting on their experiences reading the novel. Alan Begley notes how DeLillo 'slows the reader down' (Begley, 'Ghostbuster') for example, while Donna Seaman observes that 'there is a curious physics at work in this intense narrative, which takes much longer to read than its size would suggest.' And in a letter to DeLillo, David Foster Wallace notes that the novel 'took a long time to read. I read it very slowly' (101.10). These remarks affirm the way the novel operates to generate its own ideal reader: the 'slow reader' championed in Bouldous Walker's book. With its reader suitably removed from the capitalist flow of fast time, the novel exhibits its own potential to interrupt, *a la* Nealon, and draws us also back to the ideas of everyday life and to the reinvigoration of leisure time I discussed in relation to the slacker fiction of the early-1990s (see chapter 1).

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In an article on Lauren's eventual performance piece, *Body Time*, the artist tries to explain the rationale behind her work. The idea, she muses, is to

"Stop time, or stretch it out, or open it up. Make a still life that's living, not painted. When time stops, so do we. We don't stop, we become stripped down, less self-assured. I don't know. In dreams or high fevers or doped up or depressed. Doesn't time slow down or seem to stop? What's left? Who's left?" (113).

Doubling-back and self-cancelling, Lauren's stilted explanation posits, and then rejects, the idea of 'stopped time' in favour of 'stretched' or 'opened' time; 'living' time. What is advocated, in Lauren's work, is not a rejection of—or interruption of—time but a reorientation of temporal experience towards a slowness that nevertheless still flows. Simultaneously, her open, inquiring manner—her repeated entreaties for reviewer Mariella to share her sensations of the piece: 'doesn't time slow down or seem to stop?'—suggests that Lauren's real goal for *Body Time* is to generate a feeling, a 'seeming' that is at once tangible and yet vague, ephemeral—what, referring to Rachel Greenwald Smith, we might call an 'impersonal feeling.'

In both Crary and Boulous-Walker, and in the broader slow life movement, time is similarly *celebrated* rather than denigrated. For Crary, the problem with late-capitalism is its effacement of clock time in favour of a time 'that no longer passes.' Meanwhile for Boulous-Walker, the point of the slow movement is to pay renewed attention to the 'pace and complexity' of everyday life. In each of these examples, a different flow of time is advocated for, rather than a time that is simply halted. As Lauren develops her art and her grief simultaneously, she likewise moves from advocating a sense of being outside of time to a recognition of the necessity of re-entering time. Occupying a 'still life' allows Lauren to work through the repercussions of Rey's death, but as she develops her art performance she recognizes the necessity of transforming that still life into something 'living.' This 'still life that's living' becomes *Body Time*.<sup>28</sup> Like DeLillo's novel, Lauren's art succeeds in disrupting the flow of time, slowing it down until it becomes almost unbearable. But also like DeLillo's novel, this temporal experience is not bound to the individual artist. Rather, both Hartke and DeLillo use their artworks to disseminate slowness, to—in the words of

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<sup>28</sup> Mariella describes this piece in terms curiously similar to those eventually used by the reviewers of *The Body Artist*. 'Hartke clearly wanted her audience to feel time go by,' Mariella writes, 'viscerally, even painfully. This is what happened, causing walkouts among the less committed' (110).

Mariella—make the observer or reader ‘feel time go by.’ As Mariella observes, Lauren’s art is

obscure, slow, difficult, and sometimes agonizing. But it is never the grand agony of stately images and sets. It is about you and me. What begins in solitary otherness becomes familiar and even personal. It is about who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are. (116).

With this passage, DeLillo could be describing his own novel. Lauren’s journey in the piece likewise represents a movement from ‘solitary otherness’ to something ‘familiar and [...] personal.’ As her grieving progresses, Lauren re-enters time through art, and as she does the novel begins to integrate outside characters—Mariella, the landlord—to demonstrate the way in which Lauren’s performance grants her readmission into society. At the same time, the participatory experience of viewing her work places her artwork at the center of this process of community-formation. As Mark Osteen observes,

*Body Time* embodies second chances not only for Lauren, who revives and undertakes Mr. Tuttle and Rey, but also for audience members, who cannot watch passively but must engage in a spirited give-and-take with Lauren’s impersonations and subversions. Lauren’s echoes thus reverberate against the audience’s experiences to enable the formation—even if briefly—of a genuine community (Osteen 2008).

In the second part of this chapter, I suggested that *Underworld* could be read as a pre-emptive rejoinder to the criticism Nealon would level at *Mao II* by aspiring to exactly the effect of ‘widespread cognitive dissonance’ he criticises the former novel for abandoning. Ultimately, though, I observed that *Underworld* concluded on a note of exhaustion and the expression of its own limitations. With this pattern, DeLillo follows many artists so far discussed in this thesis: upon arriving at the sense that their art cannot effect real change, the artist begins to create art that posits the possibility for this change in a form separate from that in which they are working—they make imperfect art about ideal art. In the case of Linklater, for example, the filmmaker creates a film that, by its nature, is inescapably bound to the mechanics of capitalism, but which features examples of artworks extant to these mechanics. DeLillo, however, pursues a different approach. Markedly separate from the ‘bi-directional’ structures of his previous novels, Lauren’s linear trajectory in *The Body Artist* suggests a commitment to a compromised but nevertheless generative, rather than self-referential, possibility for art. Likewise, the shift DeLillo signals in his use of language—

from language as description or narration, which is undermined by the moments of failure present in the opening scene, to language as a means of generating a 'slowness' that registers on an affective, rather than intellectual, plane—suggests that the author's belief in the possibility of fiction is not exhausted contiguously with his belief in the possibility of language. To return, again, to David Cowart's analysis, DeLillo's fiction compellingly argues that 'if there is a site of resistance, it is language.'

In the novel's final scene, Lauren evocatively throws open a window in her house. DeLillo writes, 'she wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was' (132). The flow of time is recognized as key to personal knowledge, and expression of this knowledge—say, in the form of performance art—helps generate a sense of affective connection between the artist and her audience. Mariella reads Lauren's piece as 'about who we are when we aren't pretending who we are,' recalling Bill's novels, Klara's art, and Eisenstein's film, each of which contains the idea that art can express something essential about ourselves that even we cannot put into words. Lauren's art imposes her feeling onto others as a means of sharing and ameliorating those feelings,<sup>29</sup> and allows the artist to re-enter 'felt life'. And, as critics like Rachel Greenwald Smith have rightly observed, encountering this art makes possible the opportunity to share those feelings, thus facilitating a form of social exchange based on the openness, dialogism, and reception that Scott Lash celebrates as the integral facets of sociality.

In another note taken in preparation for writing *The Body Artist*, DeLillo finally, directly, answers the question around which this chapter has been circling:

Role of artist in 21st century--directly influence people's lives; to infiltrate people's lives; to make art seamless with living.

[...]

To change the way people think, eat, sleep, shit.

The ambition to 'make art seamless with living' surfaces in all of DeLillo's work in this decade. From the sociality expressed in *Mao II*, which draws 'together [...] life and art through cultural activities which have only a marginal function under capitalism'; to Klara's stated belief in *Underworld* that art and life are 'all the same thing'; to Lauren's literal 'body art', wherein her art and herself are physically indistinguishable: each novel demonstrates

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<sup>29</sup> In response to Franzen's request for a quote for his Harper's article, DeLillo told Franzen, 'writers write to survive.'

the way in which art can enter and reorganize the inner life not of the culture on a large scale but of the individual and their interpersonal relationships and affective sensations on a small scale. Matching the trajectory of so many artists in the 1990s, DeLillo's ambitions ultimately—necessarily—diminish, but the author does not abandon his art entirely to self-reflexivity. Rather, DeLillo pushes forward, for a way out of the bind that *Mao II* first introduces: embracing neither the autonomy of modernism nor the heteronomy of postmodernism, neither pure hermetic interruption nor grand social disruption, and neither the power of language nor the failure of fiction; DeLillo instead converges on an idea of post-postmodernism that emphasises partial autonomy, small-scale sociality, and complex feeling. In doing so his work operates subtly but effectively, ceding the territory of grand spectacle to terror but claiming as it does the spaces of everyday life as its own to reorganize and rejuvenate.

# Conclusion

## Rupturing Events

The long nineties ended in 2001, with the fall of the Twin Towers on September 11. In the decades following 9/11, the event has come to represent a major rupturing force with significant repercussions not just for American politics, but for American society and culture, too. This viewpoint is echoed repeatedly in literary criticism focused on the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> However, the tendency to describe 9/11 as a ‘break’ or ‘rupture’ in these texts does not extend to the field of literary production itself, unlike, for example, the way in which the rupturing events of the First World War are often considered to mark the transition from realism to modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, despite a series of further ‘ruptures’ in early twenty-first century American history, most notably the financial crisis of 2008 and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in November 2016, there has been little critical consensus as to the impact of these events on American art. Arguably, it is simply too soon to periodise in the way that I have throughout this thesis.

The events of 2001, of 2008, and of 2016 no doubt represent violent, polarising forces. Americans’ sense of both liberty and security has been pressurised by terrorist threats and the surveillance-based response of western governments, economic precarity has intensified following the global crash, and the rise of populism has heralded the increasing vocalisation of new extremes of political opinion. Indeed, so radically has the political landscape altered since the 1990s that critics are increasingly questioning whether the neoliberal project—which seemed so hegemonically entrenched only a decade earlier—has come to its end. Will Davies’ taxonomy of neoliberalisms, referred to earlier in this thesis,

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<sup>1</sup> For more on ‘post-9/11’ fiction, see: *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001*, in which Philip E. Wegner argues that 9/11 heralded ‘a true new world order’ (24); *9/11 and the Literature of Terror*, in which Martin Randall suggests that 9/11 ‘fundamentally and irrevocably ruptured reality’ (35); and Arin Keeble’s *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics, and Identity*, in which 9/11 is repeatedly referred to as an event of ‘trauma and rupture’ (90).



concludes with the post-2008 formation of 'punitive neoliberalism,' characterised by its propagation of cruel austerity politics ostensibly to safeguard economic stability. Davies' description of punitive neoliberalism evokes an 'undead' state. Today, Davies writes,

sovereignty is found in technical and technocratic spheres: policies, punishments, cuts, calculations are simply being repeated, as that is the sole condition of their reality. The coercions of post-2008 policymaking are those of a system in retreat from both the ideology and the reality of rational public dialogue, and the epistemological constraints which that involves. (134)

In the years after the 2008 crash, neoliberalism could be observed in a state of living death. By the mid-2010s its fragility had only increased. In 2016, the IMF took the unprecedented step of not only directly recognising the label 'neoliberalism,' but also of recognising that aspects of the neoliberal project had failed. Writing for the Finance & Development branch of the IMF, Ostry, Loungani and Furceri suggested that 'instead of delivering growth, some neoliberal policies have increased inequality, in turn jeopardizing durable expansion.' For the IMF itself to address the failures of neoliberalism marks a significant moment in the late history of this economic project. And by November 2016, Donald Trump had been elected to the highest office of the United States on a campaign waged on the populist rejection of wealthy elites and globalised trade. Days after this result, *The Guardian* gleefully declared 'Goodbye, American Neoliberalism,' observing that a 'lethal fusion of economic insecurity and cultural scapegoating [had] brought neoliberalism to its knees.' Closer to home, I have been involved in the running of the research project 'Freedom After Neoliberalism' at the University of York. In the 2018 edited collection of *Open Library of Humanities* on this topic, editors Adam Kelly and Alex Beaumont, the founders of the project, offer a reading of the contemporary situation that draws short of declaring the death of neoliberalism, but that nevertheless recognises the moment of crisis in which this ideology finds itself:

Quite suddenly, ground has opened up on either side of the 'centrist' neoliberal doxa that previously dominated the political arena. On the right, new forms of cultural revanchism are propelling political parties into power whose presence in national assemblies would have been unthinkable during the 1990s. And [...] it is also the case that opportunities have opened up for the reinvigoration of leftist politics.

Neoliberalism, then, is perhaps not dead yet. But after the dual blows of an economic crisis and a political crisis, the once seemingly impenetrable ideology finds itself only just clinging to life. These events, however, are too contemporary to confidently periodise. Perhaps

future scholars will be able to say with confidence that the long nineties was followed by a 'short noughties,' ending with the crash of 2008. Or perhaps the relative stability of 'the Obama years' will be followed by the apocalyptic epoch of the 'Trump years.' However, it is my contention that at the moment of writing the long nineties represents the most recent period that we can, with some certainty, identify as having both a beginning, an ending, and a characteristic set of aesthetic forms, as I have set out in the preceding chapters.

## Taipei *Ennui*

What, then, *can* we say about the cultural products of the twenty-first century from the vantage point of this thesis' findings? Rather than attempting to make broader, definitive claims about this period, I want in these final pages to look closely at a single contemporary text, to consider how the readings I have conducted in this thesis might help readers understand the texts that have followed. Writers, filmmakers and artists who are in their mid-thirties now lived their formative years in the 1990s, and it follows that to an extent they have inherited both the neoliberal economy of that decade, and the aesthetic forms developed as a response. One such writer is Tao Lin, whose most recent novel, *Taipei* (2013), explicitly draws upon some of the literary techniques I have discussed in this thesis, even as it presents its own distinct picture of American life under late capitalism.

Lin initially rose to fame as a central figure among the loosely affiliated group of artists comprising the Alt Lit movement.<sup>2</sup> *Taipei*, his third novel and the first from a major publisher, follows Paul, an American author of Taiwanese descent, on a book tour and trip to Taipei to visit his parents. Much of the narrative action is spent with Paul either taking drugs or 'doing things' on his Macbook, or frequently both together. The narrative is listless, Paul's interior monologue oscillating between apathy and anxiety and delivered in long, run-on sentences:

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<sup>2</sup> Writing in *The New Yorker*, Kenneth Goldsmith describes Alt Lit as an online writing community that emerged in 2011 and harnesses the casual affect and jagged stylistics of social media as the basis of their works—poems, stories, novels, tweets, and status updates. Its members have produced a body of distinctive literature marked by direct speech, expressions of aching desire, and wide-eyed sincerity.

He vaguely traced back the night and concluded he should've left when, on his way to the venue, he had been "completely lost." He allowed himself to consider earlier opportunities, mostly for something to do, and discerned after a brief sensation of helplessness—like if he'd divided 900 by itself and wanted the calculator to answer 494/494 or 63/63—that, in terms of leaving this social situation, he shouldn't have been born. (21)

As a Brooklyn-based, Florida-born author with Taiwanese parents, Paul is a clear analogue for Lin himself. Much like the third-person fiction of Kathy Acker, then, Lin's novel is a work of autofiction. Furthermore, Paul's unconventional work ethic—towards the beginning of the novel he refers to several months of his life as 'an interim period' between stretches of creative work—and his penchant for introspective philosophising and periods of prolonged doing nothing mark him as an inheritor of the slacker mindset. Indeed, Lin's work is representative of a trend in twenty-first century fiction, particularly noticeable in the Alt Lit genre, towards producing autofictional narratives of slacker lifestyles.

In an interview with *Vol.1 Brooklyn*, Noah Cicero, one of Alt Lit's most prominent authors alongside Lin, offered the following when asked to define Alt Lit:

Currently I am sitting in Seongnam, South Korea [...] I wouldn't be here unless I met Brittany Wallace through the alt lit connection. To reduce alt lit, online literature or whatever, to merely literature is not the truth. It is a way of life, a new type of view that doesn't correspond with the views of societies that want us to be good little college kids that get jobs and pay off our student loans, then buy televisions and cable, and spend our lives watching "Two and Half Men", Fox News, CNN and Shia Lebeouf movies in some dumbass suburb going deeper and deeper into debt.

Unpacking Cicero's comments raises a number of notable points: not only that Alt Lit represents a new mode of withdrawal modelled after the slacker archetype and intensified by the addition of student debt, but also that Cicero and fellow Alt Lit authors mobilise the internet to generate real-life networks of connections, in much the same way that slacker narratives attempted to instantiate communities through formal techniques decades earlier. The same impulse is notable in *Taipei*. Lin's novel ends with Paul in his characteristic state, 'lying on his back, on his mattress.' In these final passages, Paul muses on the purpose of his writing: 'he uncertainly thought he'd written books to tell people how to reach him, to describe the particular geography of the area of otherworld in which he'd been secluded' (247). Echoing, with its spatial metaphor, the moment in Coupland's

*Generation X* in which Andy allegorises his fiction writing as akin to the distribution of maps, Lin's vision of his work evokes the techniques of the new sincerity: the notion that fiction can be mobilised as a conduit for connection between reader and writer.

Lin's use of the autofiction form further compounds this notion, but the stilted language, narcotic haze and frequently uncomfortable moments of misinterpretation are most reminiscent not of the texts I focused on in Chapter Two, so much as of the autofictional experiments of Dennis Cooper. Paul's candid descriptions of his mental and physical states recall the obsession with the bodily as it is represented in Cooper and McCarthy when, for example, in a train station in Taipei Paul reports that he 'tried masturbating and couldn't and [...] was worried he vomited some of his MDMA earlier, because he didn't feel much' (188). Less grotesque, but no less discomfiting, is Paul's apathetic, almost nihilistic attitude. Paul describes himself as feeling 'like a digression that had forgotten from what it digressed and was continuing ahead in a confused, choiceless searching' (67), and the reader's experience mirrors this confusion: like Cooper's flagrantly manipulative or delusional narrators, Paul's candour is marred by moments of contradiction and a carefully maintained position of detachment. Moments of affective vulnerability, as in the novel's final line: '[he] was surprised when he heard himself, looking at his feet stepping into black sandals, say that he felt "grateful to be alive"' (250), are framed by Paul's habit of ironic quotation,<sup>3</sup> as well as by qualifying statements drawing attention to the moment's remarkability. This draws into greater prominence the dialectic of sincerity and irony that for critics like Adam Kelly resides at the heart of new sincerity: the notion that a reader can never be sure of the intention of the author, and that to take the author at face value thus always constitutes a leap of faith and a shared willingness to circumvent what Coupland calls 'the carapace of coolness.'

Paul is at his most ironic when in Taipei, in the later chapters of the novel, and also at his most political. But, as Audrea Lim has observed, Paul is 'embarrassingly inarticulate' when it comes to observing something as complex as the intersection of class and race in Taipei. A conversation shared with Erin reveals this:

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<sup>3</sup> This is a frequent hallmark of Lin's style, see for example this representative passage:

Paul began, at some point, during the ninety-minute discussion, to feel a mocking, sitcom-like conviction that, for him, "too many years had passed" since college—that without education's season-backed, elaborately subdivided, continuous structure, traceable numerically backward almost to birth, connecting a life in that direction, he was becoming isolated and unexplainable. (19)

“I don’t like places... where everyone working is a minority... because I feel like there’s, um, too many different... I don’t know,” said Paul with a feeling like he unequivocally did not want to be talking about what he was talking about, but had accidentally focused on it, like a telescope a child had turned [...] toward a wall. [...]

“Minorities,” said Erin at a normal volume. “What were you saying?”

“Just that... here, when you see someone, you don’t know... that... they live like two hours away and are um... poor, or whatever,” said Paul very slowly, like he was improvising an erasure poem from a mental image of a page of text.

Indeed, for a novel set mostly in the financial heart of the Western world, New York, and named after the capital city of one of the four ‘Asian tigers’<sup>4</sup>—countries that have experienced rapid economic growth in the last half-century—overt references to financialisation are largely absent from Lin’s writing. Instead, like Franzen’s *The Corrections*, the effects of late capitalism are filtered largely through Paul’s subjective experience, and, also comparably to Franzen’s work, this experience is overwhelmingly characterised by depression. Sophie Atkinson has labelled Paul as a contemporary example of what she terms the ‘Sad Flâneur,’ a character archetype that ‘appears in literature in times in which capitalism is at its most ruthless: [and] lays bare the relationship between capitalism and depression.’ Like Franzen’s Gary, Paul’s mental state reflects the neoliberal economy, and as, post-crash, neoliberalism limps on in a state of undeath, so too does Paul continue to digress without purpose or pleasure. What is particularly significant, in light of the proliferation of suburban financial fictions in the 1990s, is that the ‘Sad Flâneur’ is an urban phenomenon. As Atkinson observes, Paul takes no pleasure in wandering New York or Taiwan because ‘these same cities are effectively the visual form of the same system that’s crushing them.’ Where, in the 1990s, suburbia could be effectively mobilised to critique a financial system based on deferral, in the 2010s the precarity experienced by Lin’s generation appears to preclude any faith in future returns—most characters in the novel work temporary, shift-based or freelance work—such that the suburban environment no longer becomes a viable or relevant setting. Instead, Paul’s restless, digressive journey through an urban city centre of shared apartments and hot desks emblematises an uncertain future, both for Paul and for the economy to which he belongs.

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<sup>4</sup> South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. For more see Gulati, ‘The Foundations of Rapid Economic Growth: The Case of the Four Tigers.’

Ultimately, perhaps, in its affectless tone and meandering plot, Lin's novel best represents the continuation and extension of Don DeLillo's dialectical tradition. Where, as I demonstrated in my final chapter, DeLillo's work in the mid-90s mobilises a dialectical structure in order to stage conflicts between grand ideas, in the 2000s he turns towards linearity in order to generate an aesthetic of slowness that allows for a confrontation with the personal: with grief, mourning, and existential uncertainty. Lin's novel similarly 'stretches' time, moving hesitatingly from passages that gloss over months (Paul's first five-week visit to Taipei is covered in a matter of pages) to achingly slow passages cataloguing a minutiae of movement and thought:

Fran said to put on Rilo Kiley. Paul said it was Rilo Kiley and, after a few motionless seconds, Fran slowly turned her head away to rotate her face, like a moon orbiting behind its planet, interestingly out of view. (62)

This pared back style, twinned with Paul's restless forward momentum, echoes DeLillo's late phase work like *The Body Artist*, and even more so *Cosmopolis* (2003), which also sites a narrative exploration of late capitalism in the centre of a major urban city. Paul's aforementioned apoliticism precludes the staging of grand, dialectical debates—a symptom, perhaps, of the novel's historical emergence during a period of prolonged centrism and relative stability in the US.

In his *Vulture* article 'Considering the Novel in the Age of Obama,' Christian Lorentzen identifies four genres representative of American literature 2009-2017, all of which are arranged around what Lorentzen identifies as the crucial problem of this era: 'problems of authenticity.' It is my contention that it is sincerity, not authenticity, which is the defining problem of the twenty-first century, emerging out of the aesthetic experiments of the 1990s. Lorentzen includes autofiction as one of his representative genres, and observes in conclusion that the inward-focused nature of narratives such as Lin's may lead 'literary historians [to] look back at the Obama years as a time of tranquility—when American writers had the luxury of looking inward, investigating the systems that formed them...' (Lorentzen). Lin's *Taipei* is but one of a number of texts that take this interiority to its glacially-paced, anxiety-ridden conclusion. Perhaps the ending of the Obama years will see also the end of such narratives. Looking forwards, the age of Trump heralds anything but tranquillity. New, radical extremes of discourse suggest a re-emergence of dialectical thought after a long period of centrism that has seemingly turned the gaze of authors like DeLillo and Lin inwards, while the imminent threats of environmental disaster and global

turmoil may well inject new urgency into political fiction, and a new, outwards-looking perspective. Writing in early 2019, it is difficult to periodise and difficult to predict what new genres and aesthetic forms the twenty-first century will see. What I consider certain, however, is that the legacy of the long nineties—of innovative formal experimentation, of art mobilised to generate new affective relationships between artist and audience, of compromise and contradiction and movement beyond failure, and of the importance of the attempt—will be apparent for many years to come.

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