

10:04: Everyday Life and the Novel as Late Capitalist Limit-Form

Fredric Jameson has described the condition of late capitalism or postmodernity, in an article written several years before the financial crisis, as an approaching 'end of temporality'. He draws particular attention to the temporality of a mode of production based on globally networked finance, ushering in what Paul Virilio has elsewhere called an 'era of instantaneity'. As Jameson notes, the most significant territory of change 'is the impact of the new value abstractions on everyday life and lived experience, and this is a modification best articulated in terms of temporality'. A sequential and differentiated regime of time is radically flattened, reduced to 'a succession of explosive and self-sufficient present moments', a development that in the realm of culture 'gradually crowds out the development of narrative time' itself.¹

In *Against The Event* (2013), Michael Sayeau remarks that the novel-form in its movement from the period of realism to modernism, is formally shaped by 'vicissitudes [...] as it negotiates with the everyday and the event.' The emergence under industrial-capitalist modernity of what Henri Lefebvre termed 'everyday life', as a residuum of space-time apart from the explicit time-discipline and rationality of social production, entered the novel in the form of what Franco Moretti has called 'fillers'.² The everyday was the realm of a false concreteness to be lived against the abstract temporality of production. The textual longeurs of 'filler' insert themselves in the novel as this differentiated time of repetition, stasis and accumulation. As such forms of diachronic but unpunctuating time begin to disappear, the temporal dialectic of realism stalls.

1 Fredric Jameson, 'The End of Temporality', *Critical Inquiry* 29:4 (2003), pp. 695-718 (p. 695); qtd. in Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 10; Jameson, p. 703; *ibid.*, p. 714.

2 Michael Sayeau, *Against the Event* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 2; Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: The One-Volume Edition*, trans. by John Moore (London: Verso, 2014); Franco Moretti, 'Serious Century', in *The Novel Vol. 1: History, Geography, Culture*, ed. by Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 364-400 (p. 367).

It is as a telling moment in the advance of this 'end of temporality' that I turn to Ben Lerner's *10:04*, published at the end of 2014 and set over roughly one year, from 2011 to 2012. The novel combines elements of autobiography and semi-autobiography or *roman à clef*, photographic collage and theory. As this paper will argue, *10:04*, through several of its devices—most notably its handling of narrative time—responds to this shift in a manner that both continues and radicalises the postmodernist paradigm in fiction that Jameson was so influential in theorising more than 30 years ago. The new temporal pressure, I argue, on 'everyday life' as a disappearing alternative or refuge from the temporality of production (albeit an already reified one) forces the novel-form, struggling with the existing techniques and forms at its disposal, into a sort of inversion of its structures of narrativity that at once pushes the notion of novelistic significance—of what the novel can make meaningful as the cultural form of a disenchanted lifeworld—to its limit. Finally, I will conclude with a few remarks regarding the possibilities *10:04* suggests in its repurposing of different genres, of how the novel, as a form of and in temporal crisis, might in a sense step beyond itself, even as it cannot abandon its formal history.

The narrator is a poet who published his first novel with a small press a few years before. He lives in Brooklyn and teaches at a local university. Having recently published a short story in *The New Yorker*, his agent, as the novel opens, has secured 'a "strong six-figure" advance [...] all I had to do was promise to turn it into a novel.' The novel form, then—its length and substance, its structure, its integrity—is from the beginning intertwined with commerce. In a later repetition of the opening scene, in which he celebrated his new book deal, he ventriloquises his agent, who thinks 'the larger houses were optimistic that their superior distribution could help a second book do much better than the first', as saying: "Develop a clear, geometrical plot; describe faces, even those at the next table; make sure that the protagonist undergoes a dramatic transformation."³

3 Ben Lerner, *10:04: A Novel* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 4; *ibid.*, p. 154, 156.

As becomes clear towards the end of the fourth section (there are five sections), there is a complication here. The narrator informs us he has replaced the novel ‘with the book you’re reading now, a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction [...] I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past, but into an actual present alive with multiple futures.’⁴ At one level, we can see this return to a focus on the present of writing, of *writing as a present*, as analogous to the postmodern emphasis on *l’écriture*, on the writtenness of writing. But it is important to note that the material that the book thus structures centres quite explicitly on the value of individual biography or existential time—that is, not on the process that overwrites the subject but the subject itself. (The reinforcing correspondences between the narrator’s own biographical coordinates and those of Ben Lerner himself are, I think, well enough known not to require rehearsing here.) It is necessary though to note something about the counterintuitive manner in which this material is structured and how this structure acts, in relation to two structuring oppositions: between the disintegrated, arbitrary and unique lived time of life under modernity and the structured, coherent time of the novel (in the account of Georg Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel*); and between ‘everyday life’ and the real abstractions of financial production and a historical time after the end of history.

The novel is structured by repetitions: not only of the opening scene, which inaugurates this text biographically and materially, but of the storm that follows it several pages later. ‘An unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core’ hits New York and the narrator waits it out with Alex, the friend he has agreed to artificially inseminate, watching *Back to the Future*. When, in the final section, a similar disaster occurs, the narrator treats it as a by-now routine occurrence: ‘Again we did the things one does: filled every suitable container we could find with water, unplugged various appliances’ and so on; ‘we got into bed and projected *Back to the Future* onto the wall; it could be our tradition for once-in-a-generation weather’. The

4 Ibid, p. 194.

exception, what should function as the turning-point of a classical realist plot, has already assumed the narrative form and language of routine, drudgery, the blank and cumulative texture of the everyday. And indeed, in plot terms the storms have no impact: although, whilst confined to the apartment, the narrator becomes more intimate with Alex, it doesn't inaugurate their agreement, which they made beforehand; when, after the second storm, they walk back from Lower Manhattan to Brooklyn, she is already pregnant. All of the plot-determining material happens, as it were, in the segments between what would normally be the 'turning points' of plot, in flat, low-keyed scenes, texturally undifferentiated from historical disasters that the narrator notes are 'man-made'.⁵ This recalls the contradictory social rhythm of late capitalism described by Jameson: 'the equivalence between an unparalleled rate of change on all the levels of social life and an unparalleled standardization of everything—feelings along with consumer goods, language along with built space—that would seem incompatible with just such mutability'.⁶ The specific tempo of late capitalism turns the eruption of qualitative difference into just another quantitative social fact, temporal change into the stasis of space. The rhythm of the classic realist narrative transfers, in inverted form, from 'everyday life' to historical time: everything happens to such an extent that nothing happens.

Such repetitions inscribe the formal linearity of narrative with its dedifferentiated material as a secretly cyclical time. Just after the opening scene of the narrator and agent, the narration immediately flashes back to the narrator being diagnosed with an abnormal heart condition 'the previous September'.⁷ That phrase, in the first sentence in the fourth paragraph on page 4, is the only reference in the entire text to where the present of the syuzhet is positioned in the calendar year; each scene in this first section is effectively self-contained, so that any concrete, impinging sense of the syuzhet's relation to the contingency

5 Ibid, p. 16; *ibid*, p. 230; *ibid*, p. 220.

6 Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 57-58.

7 Lerner, p. 4.

of the fabula is absent up until the end of the third section, in which the narrator again describes the dinner and looking out from the viewing platform of the High Line over Tenth Avenue, 155 pages later. There is no sense, in other words, of the flashback structure's usual function as a form of temporal organisation that necessarily produces significance: the initial flashback adds no information that could not have been gleaned from later scenes and the relative self-containment of separate scenes negates causality as an effect of the structure. The flashback structure here is, indeed, almost ornamental, and has paradoxical effect of depressurising the narrative whilst maintaining what seems to be a sequential flow in the mould of classic realist narratives. In the flatline of plot, such overdetermination is what substitutes for meaning.

The present evoked in the opening scene, which is narrated in the past continuous, is thus itself contained in a flashback structure, with the actual present being, effectively, the present of narration beginning after this section, itself superseded in the final two paragraphs of the text as the narrator moves into the future tense, a structure prefigured in the opening pages with the insertion of a copy of Klee's *Angelus Novus*, captioned with Walter Benjamin's gloss that '[t]he storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned.' The text's self-declared political-aesthetic project then, of reclaiming narrative form as situated in and productive of a contingent present, is itself the effect of multiple, nested embedded instances of the past tense of the novel form. The text produces its own metonymic instances of this structure, as when the narrator, in the novel's third section, retells a story to a friend told by his father about attending a funeral in winter and returning via Penn Station: 'They had even added extra cars—I could see them and they looked archaic, like decommissioned cars from nineteenth century', to which he adds a mental detail borrowed from Christian Marclay's video *The Clock*.⁸

8 Ibid, p. 25; *ibid*, p. 141.

We might well wish to ask how this problematic differs from that of high postmodernist fiction. We can think, for example, of similar treatments of some of these questions in the banal disasters of DeLillo's *White Noise* or the narrative conspiracy of meaninglessness in Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* or *Gravity's Rainbow*. In such cases, the novel performed a perverse reenactment of the modernist attempt to make time, distorted by space-time compression, meaningful, 'to defeat transience, by bending it into pattern' as Steven Connor puts it, compressing or twisting it into arbitrary or delirious shapes.⁹

The narrator himself wonders about this. 'This'—he's referring to his book deal—'would have made sense to me in the eighties or nineties, when the novel was more or less still a viable commodity form, but why would publishers, all of whom seemed to be perpetually reorganizing, downsizing, scrambling to survive in the postcodex world, be willing to convert real capital into the merely symbolic?' The very market temporality that expressed itself as the repetition and rearticulation of the novel form in the moment of postmodernism has in theory negated it. The 'merely symbolic' capital of the novel is tethered to speculation on the form's own future: his agent tells him "your book proposal might generate more excitement among the houses than the book itself." [...] my virtual novel was worth more than my actual novel.' The generic specificity of the novel form, the novel as temporal model in its 'clear, geometric' structure and material boundedness, embodies and imparts the abstract futurity of finance capital. Instead the narrator offers the raw material of biographical time that the novel form processes into a meaningful unity. But, as we have seen, given the dependence of this present of narration on a whole temporal structure related to that of the novel, we cannot take this claim at face value. During his residency, the narrator reads Whitman's *Specimen Days*—the only piece of biographical writing mentioned in the text—a memoir that, the narrator notes, presents the biographical material of someone who 'wants to be less a historical person than a marker for democratic personhood' and so 'can't really write a memoir full of life's

9 Steven Connor, *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 117.

particularities.’ Whitman’s evocations of moments of everyday life ‘are general enough to be anyone’s memory: how he took his ease under a flowering tree or whatever.’ The very acme then of biographical time is the vacating of the biographical subject-position, that, in the quotation that forms the last line of the text, is ‘with you, and I know how it is’ before and after the present of narration.¹⁰

Where Jameson characterised the time-sense of postmodernism as a schizophrenic series of presents, we might see this state of narration, disarticulated but porous, as a series of layers.¹¹ The narrator describes the text as ‘flickering between’ modes of fiction and nonfiction: in the apparently stalled text of the end of temporality, genre *is* temporal progression. We can see this ongoing dependence on the (ideological) model of a certain novelistic temporality, then, not as a covert *return* to the novel but as the temporal aggregate or accumulation, the total shape, of a different sort of patterning. Historical and generic layers from 19th and 21st century Brooklyn, Occupy Wall Street, the history of poetry, minimalist sculpture, the *Challenger* disaster and the institutional history of fiction overlap, like the borrowings the narrator points to in Joseph Gillespie Magee’s “High Flight”.¹² While traces of the basic shape of the realist novel remain, the alternation of event and ‘filler’ is replaced by the readymades of genre, whose market divisions crack and fissure the surface of the text.

Another of the text’s allegories is pertinent here. The narrator’s current girlfriend runs a conceptual art project, ‘The Institute For Totaled Art’, which exhibits damaged artworks sequestered away by insurers. Her own figurative paintings depend on just such a breaking of the surface: in one, the figure ‘stares at the viewer as if from another century, the craquelure confusing genres’. In the ‘totaled’ artworks of the Institute, time—the before and after of slashing or water damage—is clearly visible, inscribed in the cracks of content’s surface. What interests the narrator, though, is an apparently undamaged but now worthless Cartier-Bresson

10 Lerner, p. 154; *ibid.*, p. 155; *ibid.*, p. 168; *ibid.*; *ibid.*, p. 240.

11 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 25-28.

12 Lerner, p. 194.

print: 'it was the same, only totally different. [...] a utopian readymade—an object for or from a future where there was some other regime of value than the tyranny of price.'¹³ This suggests something about how the novel form must end up disposing itself in *10:04*. Even as, in the collapse of its material's inner substance, it dwindles into stasis and is reconstructed on the new basis of generic collage, the novel form becomes a different sort of readymade: a form that suggests, immanent to itself, the possibility of a different, transformative and qualitative time, the before and after of a time different from the static time of disaster, where life will no longer be corralled as 'everyday life'.

13 Ibid, p. 27; *ibid*, p. 134.