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The Novel in the Epoch of Social Systems: Or, "Maps of the World in Its Becoming"

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1. The Irony of Systems

> *Der Spiegel*: And what takes the place of philosophy now?
> Heidegger: Cybernetics.
> *Der Spiegel* (May 1976)

1   In these pages I want to pose a general, even rough, question: What is the situation of the artwork, and particularly the novel, in what may be described as the epoch of social systems? I mean to suggest that this question has emerged, often inexplicitly, on a range of fronts, in recent versions of the so-called "method wars" in literary studies and in the humanities more generally. If we demilitarize this rhetoric, and demobilize the nearly one-word arguments that tend to underwrite it, it may be possible to get at the intricated place of the novel among social systems today. It may be possible too to get at—borrowing Alexander Kluge's good way of framing it—the precision of rough ideas.

2   What, then, is the situation of the artwork in what can be called the epoch of social systems?[1] How, that is, can we talk about aesthetic form—its autonomous, and self-insistent or self-organizing character—in the company of the multiverse of complex self-organizing and self-describing systems that make up our modernity, and our continuous redescriptions of it?

3   What happens, that is, when a certain "cybernetic irony" enters into accounts both of the form of the artwork and contemporary forms of life.[2] If the novel, for example, is the prose of the world, what does it mean when self-reflexive form itself becomes at once prosaic and ordinary, formal and world-shaping? When Cormac McCarthy, for example, at the very end of his world-mapping novel *The Road*—a novel that depicts the novel at the

end of its road—presents, in the world, "polished and torsional… maps of the world in its becoming" (287)?

4   Or, consider this cybernetic or systemic irony from the other side—from the side of the subject. What does it mean when subjects come to see themselves as epiphenomena in a systems-complex too complex, unremitting, and all-embracing to be ruled or overruled by a subject? And, moreover, when the pathos of systems-complexity overturns into immersive enchantments. The overturning marks, for one thing, a transitional syndrome in the meaning and implication of systems. Hence the "cybernetic irony" is not merely that the subject is entranced by its (self-)dissolution. The real irony is that the ubiquitization of systems, networks, and dynamic immersion is rendered anodyne by its ubiquity: a syndrome one is tempted to call anodynamics.

5   The real irony consists in the entrancements of a business as usual that has become (as the neo-Situationist cartographer of systems, Tom McCarthy, puts it) more usual than usual. This in effect syncs the humanities to the office climate of what Peter Sloterdijk, with an ironic exactness, describes as a post-humanist conviviality. That is, it will be seen, the hyperbolically-animated control-climate of the spiraling network-designer worlds—the peppy, open-plan office world—of a California Capitalism.[3]

6   Perhaps no novelist more studiously sets out what this convergence—this systems-ironic turn—means for the form of the novel in the epoch of social systems than Cormac McCarthy. One need not point to McCarthy's longstanding affiliation with the Santa Fe Institute—focused on complex systems-theory across disciplines—to see how his "maps of the world in its becoming," and in its undoing, map the place of art in the epoch of social systems, mapping it with the accuracy of a transit.

2. "The Shape of the Road is the Road": California Capitalism

7   How can we talk about forms of art in the company of the multiple and extremely formal microworlds that make up the crystalizing zones of our modernity, our indoor social life (as Erving Goffman put it), the world interiors of capital (in Peter Sloterdijk's way of putting it)?[4] These are the countless staging zones, gated communities, stationary carousels, self-adjusting microclimates, self-persuasive practices and networks—the proliferating reassemblies of forms of life—that make for a general *anthropotechnics*: an art with humans. What is, then, the situation of the art form in the presence of the autonomous (that is, self-legislating) and autotropic (that is, self-turned) forms—cognition, agency, self-assemblage—everywhere erected and reenacted on innumerable stages, and the exercise, work, and play zones of the systems epoch—an official world daily census-taking, counting, and recounting itself?

8   Let's put this already-branching question-set in a somewhat different form. What is the force today of the Situationist "critique of separation"—the imperative of the power of the move beyond binaries, which is, or was, the program of deconstruction? What is the force today of the imperative to critique separation when one is not merely everywhere directed to achieve a condition of dynamic and vibrant immersion, even as that very immersive condition has been declared as already and everywhere universally existing?[5] Actor-network theory, yes, again—but both business and usual, not least in the network

flows, currents, or floods, of data, bodies, communications, and currencies, across the world interiors of capital.

9   This is the immersive adaptation to complex systems: what the cultural critic Diedrich Diederichsen calls "transporting cybernetics from the fields of mathematics and computing into social theory, and—after cybernetics was made credible via psychedelic experience—into the world at large. This leads to such things as the immanent mind and a conception of nature as an animated information system." Animacy, immersion, connections, networks everywhere, entering into a dance of management. The directive of deconstruction (in the hearsay mode of countless, seemingly harmless introductory theory courses) takes this form: Whenever confronted by a difference between, redescribe it as a difference within. In short, the undoing of binaries, and voilà, the open-plan office.

10   Here we open to view the relation, say, between California capitalism—its vibrant synthetic mix of counterculture spirituality, cybernetics, and venture capital—and the allure of complex systems thinking across the disciplines. The captivation of humanities academics by what the philosopher of science Thomas Nagel calls "the magical flavor of popular presentations of fundamental scientific discoveries" animates the allure of interdisciplinary crossings and networks and intersections (165). That makes for, in turn, what I've elsewhere tried to set out as the scientological turn of a range of contemporary literary-cultural thinking.[6]

11   There is a distinctively scientological cast to California capitalism. Its heady mix of science fiction, psychology fiction, and religion fiction makes for scientology-lite techno-spiritualisms. This becomes perspicuous, not least, in its rechanneling of vertical mobility to upward mobility: its rechanneling of work ethics into a Buddhism for self-boosters, and other inarguably nonmeditative, and undebatably professional, types. The work ethic of a selfless self-devotion. If the understanding of Zen in the uncanny valley—that is, Silicon Valley or now LA's Silicon Beach—at times does not go much beyond the décor of a corporate minimalism or the phrase—"zen is the sound of one hand clapping"—it is, in this case, the sound of one hand clapping for oneself.

12   Yet consider Cormac McCarthy's enactment, or staging, of such zen-like crossings in his novel *The Crossing* (1994)—for example, the koan: "the shape of the road is the road" (230). This is the very idiom of complex systems thinking, the idiom of what the brilliant systems thinker George Spencer Brown calls "laws of form." Yet what are we to make of these fusions of the spiritual ascetic aspirational practices to the ego-technics of sheer professionalism? A fusion that, as we will see in a moment, *The Crossing* at once depicts and installs.

13   This suggests something more than the ways in which the extreme formality, the laws of form, in McCarthy's fiction relays his filiation with a research center for the interdisciplinary study of complex systems, the Santa Fe Institute. How do such fusions contour his analyses of the shape, or end, of the road for the world interior of capital, say, in *The Road* or *No Country for Old Men* (2005)? One might consider, along these lines, the radical entanglements of cybernetic thinking and what R. John Williams has called "Oriental Systems Theory": the perhaps unlooked-for fusions that Williams, in resonant detail, sets out as "a transformation... as Orientalist and literary as it was computationalist and organizational" (474). These strange brews of technics, religion, and psychology are at once countercultural and techno-spiritual. They have, in the epoch of social systems—and its narrative scenarios of world futures and future-casting—crossed

into an intriguing new phase: a crossroads of network-systems, distributed agency, and science, or (with apologies to Latour) scientology in action.

14   Here I'll touch on such questions via what Joseph Vogl has evocatively described as "the specter of capital."[7] My examples are the cartel world of *No Country for Old Men* and the self-determined outcome of the systems-planned world, and its terminal scenarios in *The Road*. These world-descriptions are at the very same time, redescriptions of the situation of the artwork in the epoch of social systems. So it's necessary to say a bit more about that situation, and to set out what these minglings of narrative fiction, psychology fiction, religion fiction, and science fiction look like and make for.

15   I have, over the past several years, traced some relatively recent examples of this autotropic, or self-turning, world and its aesthetic categories and forms. These are forms of a social-systemic organization that metastasized across the five-hundred-year range that has alternatively been called the age of discovery, the age of globalization, and the bourgeois half-millennium: an age coming to realization, or to term, in the epoch of social systems. There is an extended arc to the putting into place of the improbable prospect of an autotropic planet: its imperatives and its repeating exercises; its precincts, circuits, and observation zones; its ways of relating the immanence of the system to its environment. These anthropotechnic exercises—or art with humans—provision the rise of the planet of the professionals.

3. Planet Thinking and Systems Thinking

16   There is not merely a strong analogy between planet thinking and systems thinking—even if the first seems to open the door that the second has closed. But there is an interestingly paradoxical relation between the two—as is often the case with the one-word arguments that proliferate in self-persuasive contexts across academic fields. Planet thinking and systems thinking share a logic and a history.

"The flow of energy through a system acts to organize that system."
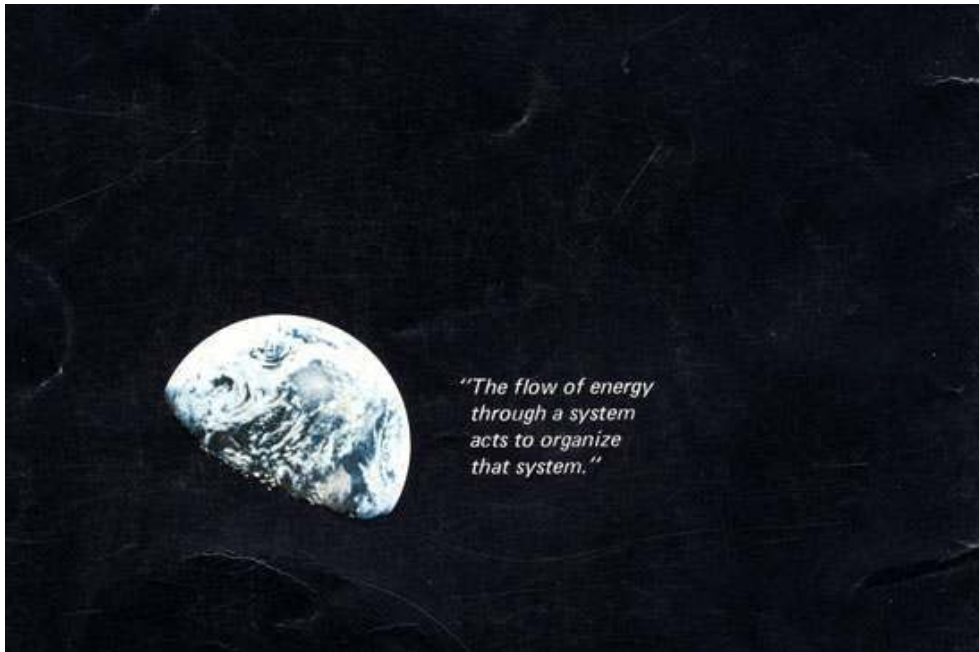
17   Seen from space, from the outside, "the image of earth tells us that there is no more outside"—our view and our viewing platform are one and the same (Diederichsen). The

paradox is that we view from space the world interior we inhabit, one that coheres as a whole in that viewing. The earth refers at once to the ground beneath our feet and the blue sphere out there, that is, here—spaceship earth.[8]

18   The crux of the matter is that the theoretical object, the globe, includes but goes beyond the aesthetic geometry of round things. It includes—as Peter Sloterdijk has traced in rich detail—its shape, its history, and its turning: the provisions of a world of compulsive, repeatable, and reversible movements; interiors and projections; ventures and returns—that is, revenues.[9] We are familiar too by now with the passages from the age of globalization to the global age. To the present that now seems to run, as the sports idiom has it, in the added or "injury time" of the modern epoch: the repeated repeating of a social world-system.

19   This is the crystallization of a synchronizing world, and its depictive media. It is now alternatively depicted, for example, as the "pristine culture of capitalism" or as the "Anthropocene."[10] These may be seen as alternating descriptions of a real subsumption, either a synched or a trumped world, and hence a periodization in the idiom of the capitalist sublime. That begins to indicate the reincarnative character of a self-organized world and its serial forms of life and death and life.

20   These too are depictions of a self-turned earth. Here is Cormac McCarthy on it in *The Crossing*: "Across the pieced land they watched a man turning the earth with an ox yoked by its horns to a singlehanded plow. The plow was of a type that was old in Egypt and was little more than a treeroot. They mounted up and rode on" (203). An extraordinary condensation of history and natural history marks this piece and its contracted lines. The passage, or crossing, looks at the species that singlehandedly, and repeatedly, even violently, tears and uproots the earth (turning the tree root itself into the instrument of overturning). Such that history and natural history are "yoked" together—and, crucially, the species that enacts it at the same time watches the act from across the now "pieced land," and reports it.

21   This is a small diorama of the so-called Anthropocene, one serving to indicate that this charismatic, if misdirecting, term less tells a new story than correlates an old one (already "old in Egypt"), to the observation and depiction that enter into it. That crossing of history and natural history has now arrived as its own theme—in this case, as the prerequisite of the form and lines of the novel itself.

22   The correlation of world and worldview has now, across a range of fields—disciplines apparently are still seen as pieced plots of earth (breaking new ground)—come into view and so into question. Here it *shows* a reality and *watches* it being made. It is a picture of motion, that (like a motion picture) *realizes* what it stages, via a look included in the world it creates. Or, as McCarthy puts it in the final lines of *The Road*, it presents "maps of the world in its becoming": self-mapping worlds that include, then, lines drawn on the ground. In this way, the flow of energy through a system acts to organize the system, and so on.

23   Such a coming into view, for now, appears as a turn taken in the history of a self-turned and self-observed planet—coupling its turning to its observation. In short, in McCarthy's fiction of such a network "crossing," this is an *overturned* and so *uprooted* world: one on the move and made for people with plans—watchful, incipient, upwardly mobile, on the move *up* and *on.* There is encrypted here the great shift in forms of life from vertical

mobility to upward mobility, the defining practice of modernity. It is as if one can daily turn the earth beneath one's own feet.

24 These configurations of an autogenous world—the geological epoch of the human—approach what Hans Blumenberg would call an *absolute metaphor*, a universal that, in this case, emerges from, and is premised on, a shared sense of self-determined disaster, doom, or catastrophe. Here one sees again an ironic form of self-realization via self-extinction: a new anthropocentrism, self-confirmed in its self-cancellation—that is, the anthropocene). Hence the possibility that, as Niklas Luhmann dispassionately puts it, "humanity will disappear in the course of competing with its own products" (*Introduction* 152).

25 The point not to be missed is that these are anecdotes of enclaved life—that is, a self-enclaved one—shaping and meeting its own ends: intramural life and death, on the planned, zoned, and overdeveloped, planet. They are anecdotes too of its expert-professional asceticisms, its self-exposition and self-exposure. The curriculum vitae of techno-spiritual exercise and aspirational programs and ego-technics—no pain, no gain regimens, at their outer limits.

4. Breathing Exercises

26 Take, for another and iconic example of these practice regimens, this remarkable episode in expert-professional self-exposure recounted in Paul Auster's inside-out murder mystery novel *The New York Trilogy*:

> 'In a book I once read by Peter Freuchen,' Fanshawe writes, 'the famous Arctic explorer describes being trapped by a blizzard in northern Greenland. Alone, his supplies dwindling, he decided to build an igloo and wait out the storm. Many days passed. Afraid, above all, that he would be attacked by wolves—for he heard them prowling hungrily on the roof of his igloo—he would periodically step outside and sing at the top of his lungs in order to frighten them away. But the wind was blowing fiercely, and no matter how hard he sang, the only thing he could hear was the wind. If this was a serious problem, however, the problem of the igloo itself was much greater. For Freuchen began to notice that the walls of his little shelter were gradually closing in on him. Because of the particular weather conditions outside, his breath was literally freezing to the walls, and with each breath the walls became that much thicker, the igloo became that much smaller, until eventually there was almost no room left for his body. It is surely a frightening thing, to imagine breathing yourself into a coffin of ice, and to my mind considerably more compelling than, say, *The Pit and the Pendulum* by Poe. For in this case it is the man himself who is the agent of his own destruction, and further, the instrument of that destruction is the very thing he needs to keep himself alive.' (256)

27 Here we encounter the paradoxes of the drive "to endow the outside world as a whole with a magical immanence," and the "tendency to make both nature and culture indoor affairs"—the limit-case of the climate-controlled world interior of capital (Sloterdijk, *World Interior* 170).

28 In Auster's retelling of the professional arctic explorer's strange drive to self-exposure, auto-conditioning overturns into self-interment. It overturns into, with homage to Poe, premature self-burial. Hetero-constriction becomes self-constriction, self-determination self-termination. And it is coupled to the acquired instinct for self-reporting, to the very end: as Tom McCarthy puts it, in his novel *Remainder* (2005), "if I didn't keep up the commentary, I'd die."[11]

29   Spirit or anima (breath) becomes counter-spirit: a snow-domed version of what Erving Goffman calls "our indoor social life"—a self-conditioned, an air-conditioned, and an intramural world. Death from the air—air wars, are, of course, a refrain of our indoor social life—from the poison gas attacks in the trenched earth of WWI to the gas chambers of WWII; to the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo Metro in 1995—in which the systemic running of the trains during the attack spread the gas throughout transit system—in effect, literalizing the network-state that Teju Cole, calls, in his network-form novel *Open City* (2011), the "movable catacombs" of the New York subway system (7). The encapsulated air of deep-sea divers, mountain-climbers, and space-explorers are, of course, as a range of commentators have pointed out, variants of such life-support, or life-suspension, systems. These aspirational practices are extreme forms of recreational, or reincarnative practices, self-stressing aerobic exercises at the limit.

30   The coffin of ice is one of a multiverse of enclaves that include the crystal palaces and ferro-vitreous stations and mirror-walled skyscrapers and silicon valleys of modernizing processes bound to hyperproductive and autotropic modes of life—the autogenous atmosphere of the systems epoch and what Tom McCarthy, in his novel *Men in Space* (2007)—about proliferating self-enclosed spaces—calls a "cradle to grave relationship to institutions" (218).

31   Hence the epoch of social systems is bound up through and through with the bipolar organization of the long modernity and its stockpile, or arsenal, of image-funds. "When it comes to man-made catastrophes," Sloterdijk observes in his eclectic history of anthropotechnic practices *You Must Change Your Life* (2009), "the twentieth century was the most instructive period in world history. It demonstrated: the greatest disaster complexes came about in the form of projects that were meant to gain control of the course of history from a single center of action... the final battle for world domination" (445).

32   Rilke's injunction "You must change your life" is "turned" and monetized as the pure idiom of self-actualization programs such as Scientology: for example, the idiom of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard's bestseller sci-fi novel, *Battlefield Earth* (1982). It thus participates in the drive to *storify*, as we now say, the sciences, via the narratological conflation of psychology fiction, science fiction, and religion fiction: the coalescence of planetary and systems thinking that interanimates self-actualization industries and world-futures scenarios.[12]

33   This situation makes for a world perpetually lifting itself into a state of suspense. At the extreme, this is the perpetual cold war state of a violence suspended in its premonition and induced in its preemption. This cold war form of suspended violence has scarcely disappeared with the disappearing of walls or their coming down (in Berlin, or elsewhere). It has been generalized as an intramural—enwalled—planetary situation: globalization into what has been described as "the one-world state," and its world interior.

5. The Art System and Social Systems

34   These institutional formations are bound up through and through with "the specter of capital" today. That makes for a mutual heightening of security and insecurity: stabilization is attained through the spread and transfer of instabilities (Vogl 122).

Outsourcing the strategies of the globalizing financial system across social fields, systemic risk is at once fostered and recycled. This is a situation that resembles then one of the icons of suspense and one of its working models of projective insecurity: the suspension bridge, a complex infrastructure stabilized by its own tensions, and nothing more.

35   This is (to borrow the *anime* way of putting it) the "stand-alone complex" and its mode of operation on global scale: systems-internal form, autonomization practices—and an art with humans at the limits. That is to say, this is no country for old men.

36   I mean the country of reincarnative-aesthetic form in the late Yeats poem from which Cormac McCarthy takes the title of his suspenseful, violent, and extremely formal novel. I mean too the cybernetic irony of the world interior of capital: a cartel world, in which the laws of form, circular causal actions, repeating action zones, and game-like and choreographed spaces proliferate. These scenarios are at once radically contingent and auto-hypnotically concerted. On the one side, there is a condition of dynamic immersion. On the other, the specter of capital, incarnated in "some kind of ghost," the spectral figure with a coin, an actor-network system, a capsule of compressed air—the ascetic professional who, as he puts it, "live[s] a simple life"—Anton Chigurh (*No Country* 177). At once alien and catechistic: the Coen brothers remarked that they wanted the actor who played Chigurh to look like someone who could have come from Mars.[13]

37   A good deal of *No Country for Old Men* takes place in alien space: in "this outland country dead even of static from one end of the band to the other" (25). That is to say, it is outland and dead to the extent that the communicative bandwidth of ego-technic media is taken as the boundary of life itself. The novel engages in an ongoing comparison of the outland and the human measure, territory and map. It is full of studiously reflexive moments like this one: "He pulled in at the filling station under the lights and shut off the motor and got the survey map from the glovebox and unfolded across the seat and sat there studying it…. He sat looking at the line he'd drawn. Then he bent and studied the terrain and drew another one. Then he just sat there looking at the map" (25). The novel, in short, is replete with measures of space and time, maps, clocks, calendars, schedules, records, numbers. It sets out an official world in terms of an order of things that includes "in what order to abandon" them (177).That order is a systems-recursive one of retroactive causality: it foregrounds a continuous bending back of reference to self-reference: feedback-realization. It foregrounds too continuous reassemblages (from the dominance of characters welding and repurposing things to the disjoining and rejoining of sequences of action, plot, and cause and effect at the level of its narrative). Hence, for example, the prevision of the effect shapes the act: "Chigurh stepped back to avoid the spray of ceramic chips off the tub and shot him in the face" (104). Hence again and again, it's said, "I knowed what you'd say fore you said it," that "you know how this is going to turn out, don't you" (184), or that, simply, "he'd seen it all before" (174). The real point is that this is not merely the foreknowledge, and so foreclosure, of the world. It is the continuous outlining and framing and forming of a world principle of an unremitting recoil: it is populated by figures "who must think that he thought that they thought that he thought they were very dumb. He thought about that" (171). Reflexivity without reserve—reenactor-network theory—here is not an epistemological virtue, and it is not a form of sociological distinction. It looks, instead, like some thing held to light as if it were a curious pathogen.

38   Now this retroactive turn means not merely that one has seen it all before, but also that this is a world with its own laws of form. It is logically and temporally afterward such that "now everything can be seen at once" (*No Country* 178)—hence that things take form. It is along these lines that this spare and measured novel, which again draws its title from the poem on the turning of life to art, stages the precipitation and emergence, before our very eyes, if not quite to them—of laws of form. Consider, one simple example, this taut line, one among many others: "When you've said that it's real and not just in your head I'm not all that sure what it is you have said" (299). This is to pose the question of the correlation, or conformation, of the world and the human measure in the starkest terms: to pose the question of what's outside the official world—and whether that's outside of everything. But these lines do something more: they do, or stage, what they say. The official world, and its laws of form, include self-assembly—self-mapping, lines that outline themselves. In that autonomy is self-legislation, the novel too, reenacts this exact sense: these bare hard words self-align the way iron filings align in a force field, assembling bits into an incipient quatrain, one that scans and rhymes:

> When you've said that it's real
> And not just in your head
> I'm not all that sure
> What it is you have said.

39   The work of art in the epoch of systems not merely achieves a form that can, or may, be seen afterward, and all at once. Scenarios that crystalize the singular and transient, are in the process of taking on, as W. G. Sebald expresses it in *Austerlitz* (2001), "the shape and the self-contained nature of discrete things" (76–77).

6. "The Growth of Systems"

40   Yet, see this another way, and on another scale: from the standpoint of what the Situationists called the overdeveloped world. Or, let's say, the expert-professional planned and zoned one, and, collaterally, the rise of the planet of the professionals. The larger question, for the systems epoch and for the novels that reenact or realize it, is how we live in and with these circular networks—as aesthetic categories and as world interior. Here the very sense of *planning* shifts. Planning inside and out—self-realization, personal training, self-boosterism; zoning, reassembling, repurposing; road systems, networks, and crossroads. In Patricia Highsmith's 1965 suspense novel about autotropic violence, *A Suspension of Mercy*, the main character is writing a novel called "The Planners"—a work in which the main characters are seeking to script and then to live out self-determined destinies as a game for the living. If the shape of the road is the road, this transitions into a matter of planning, networking, a transitional flow system. It becomes, for example, a matter of the shock-waves of linear planning in the postwar years: the drawing and inscribing on the ground of lines—lines that resemble circuit-boards that resemble neural pathways that resemble circulatory systems—cut across the national landscape in the U.S. Interstate Highway System. Roads and power grids "important to the nation's economy, defense, and mobility" continued military style planning projects into the cold war years ("National Highway System"). That involved 20,000 miles, 32,000 kilometers, of interconnected primary highways, and infrastructural architectures, to begin with.

National Highway System (NHS)

41   "The shape of the road is the road."

42   Hence its counterpart—the counterpart to systems-planning on the ground—was, in the coming decades, the emergence and spreading across world landscapes of life-planning zones and self-actualization industries. That included the self-promotional programming of the life-plans in the human potential and self-determination movements (the actualization-for-everyone programs) and the scientology-lite movements that have continued to proliferate, boosted as corporate self-culture.[14]

43   Stated simply, in the period of the emergence of cybernetic programs, "[f]or technicians and theorists of planning, complexity was the decisive problem back then" (Luhmann, *Introduction* 171). That is, complexity-reduction was the decisive problem and the technical solution.

44   Consider, for instance, J. G. Ballard's short story "The Largest Theme Park in the World" (1989). This is a story of zoning, planning, and recreational psychopathy, in this case the zoning of the Eurozone, recast as a transcontinental theme park. The world theme park enacts a direct fusion of bodies, technics, and scientologically-contoured spiritualisms:

> The cult of physical perfection had gripped everyone's imagination. Bodies deformed by years bent over the word-processor and fast-food counter were now slim and upright, as ideally proportioned as the figures on the Parthenon frieze. The new evangelism concealed behind the exercise and fitness fads of the 1980s now reappeared. A devotion to physical perfection ruled their lives more strictly than any industrial taskmaster. (Ballard 1141)

45   The self-actualization industry couples the devotion to physical perfection to what may be called self-less self-devotion, often fused to group movements, and to what Siegfried Kracauer called "The Group as Bearer of Ideas" in his essay of that title.

46   It's necessary to bear in mind the remarkable transformation this planning principle involved—in small, how, for example, a 1960s novel called "The Planners" could seem at all novel or experimental or violence-inducing. It's necessary, that is, to recall the shock doctrine of social planning, the surges of postwar modernization, a total mobilization of civilian populations and general reassembly of the social, on countless stages and arenas. Here is the Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard on it, speaking of his father's dislocated and systems-transformed generation:

> the first post-war generation, which in many ways represented something new, not least by dint of their being the first people in this country [Norway] to live in a society that was, to a major degree, planned. The 1950s were the time for the growth of systems—the school system, the health system, the social system, the transport system—the public departments and services too, in a large scale

centralization that in the course of a surprisingly short period would transform the way lives were led. (*My Struggle: Boyhood* 9)

47   The "growth of systems." Here large abstractions of family and career emerge: as Knausgaard describes his father's self-compelled and ultimately self-destructive state:

> The meaning of his days was not concentrated in individual events but spread over such large areas that it was not possible to comprehend them in anything other than abstract terms. 'Family' was one such term, 'career' another. Few or no unforeseen opportunities at all can have presented themselves in the course of his days, he must always have known in broad outline what they would bring and how he would react. (*My Struggle* 14)

48   The point not to be missed is that this is not merely a generation occupying a new system but a systems-generated generation. And, for Knausgaard, this growth of systems and its systemic abstractions couple together the figure of the father, whose life and death centers the first volume of *My Struggle* [*Min Kamp]*, and the figure of the Führer (the author of *Mein Kampf*)—while "the catastrophes and incomparable horror of the group spirit" center its final volume (Kracauer 169).

7. Eastern Promises in the Western: Or, On the Other Side of the Other Side

> "Form, in the narrow sense, is nothing more than the boundary against another form."
> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular* (qtd. in Luhmann, *Art* 27)

> "Maybe the art's just one out of all kinds of different ways."
> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (177)
> "The function of art, one could argue, is to make the world appear within the world… The art system realizes society in its own realm as an exemplary case…. But this situation only raises the question: What difference does it make?"
> Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (149, 309–310)

49   Reconsider on this view, and via this long detour, McCarthy's horror-catastrophe novel *The Road*. Let's say, the Interstate, the planned systems-state, in its aftermath. The derelict and suspended world in *The Road* has contracted to the world interior of a father and son—"each the other's world entire" (6)—who push down the road a battered shopping cart, containing their bare provisions, on a thoroughly consumed earth: as if going down the same road that led to the disaster in the first place. A receding world and a squandered world (to take two of the many world-descriptive terms McCarthy uses). It is—and here I am paraphrasing Alexander Kluge's account of the devastation produced by the air war on Germany—as if the reflexes of a form of life that not merely preceded the disaster but led to it continue on in the absence of the obliterated world that was the prerequisite for them—and prerequisite for the form of the novel itself.

50   We know that the novel as genre, from the start, is concerned with showing readers how they might lead their lives by showing how a life is something that can be led. The novel in the epoch of social systems depicts a life led in the world interior of capital, one in which systems-thinking and planet thinking meet and fuse. Take, then, this exchange, Beckett-like in cadence, life-planning and work-ethical in format—or take it to mark (to adapt Weber's terms) the extinction of the spirit of rationalization in life-planning systems: "He looked at his father. *What* are our long term goals? he said. *What*? Our long

term goals. *Where* did you hear that? I don't know. No, *where* did you? You said it. *When*? A long time ago. *What* was the answer? I don't know. Well. I don't either. Come on. It's getting dark" (160–1; my italics). This is, in effect, a catechism of the "what," "where," "when," and so the "why" of this new world goal-directed order, one now shorn of its referents.

51   The world of *The Road* is one virtually stripped of secondary qualities: "some cold glaucoma dimming the world" (3). It is also a world stripped of self-observation and so of news of itself: the self-reporting world at an end. There remain only the remnant small technologies—binoculars, lamp, sextant, folded and torn "oilcompany map" (42)—that not merely locate a way of seeing but ways of seeing: the world as it looks to us. The sudden, quenching return of color and life, in the last lines of the novel—the beauty of the brook trout "standing in the amber"; in the "deep glens where they lived all things were older than man" (287)—these appear strictly in terms of the world as it looks before, or after, us.

52   *The Road* is thus located at the crossroads of a speculative realism and a social realism. It is located, that is, at the crossroads of two worldviews, or, more exactly, a worldview and a world without a view. First, the nature of things apart from us—and apart from how we see them (cold, autistic, alien, uncoupled, implacable, a world unheard of—these are some of McCarthy's terms for this). Second, the vagrant flashes of a social realism and its prerequisite idiom of a mutually observed and reported world—that is, the world of the novel, at its eclipse or blood meridian. Or, in the terms I have set out here, at once self-reported and self-eclipsed.

53   Let me turn again, however, to the brook trout "standing in the amber current... polished and muscular and torsional... on their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming... maps and mazes" (287). "Standing in the amber current": standing in amber is encased life, the amber substance of a suspended animation. And yet this is a form of life that is at once suspended and live: standing in the live current—the currents and flows of a liquid, immersive or liquidated, modernity. The creature suspended in amber, "polished and muscular and torsional," is a living statue, a "monument of its own magnificence" (in the terms of Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium"). "On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming." "Maps and mazes." That is, this is a form of life that incorporates a living diagram of its own conditions: a complex, self-mapping system of dynamic immersion and patterned emergence, one then that fuses systems life to the self-depictive technologies and reenactments of vibrant aesthetic form.

54   There are today countless scaffolds on which these scenarios are reenacted—from dystopian futurism to the exuberant world-epochal and world-annihilative violence of Japanese anime to the zombie apocalypse genre *The Road* notes in passing ("we're the walking dead in a horror film" [55]). In walking dead stories, even in *The Road*, it may by now not be hard to see that *cannibalism* realizes systems *feedback* in the most literal form. This is the open secret of cannibal/living dead stories in the epoch of social systems— from Dracula's discourse networks to the enclaved and gated communities of *The Walking Dead* (2010-) to the obsessive tableaux vivants—life standing-in-amber—of Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) (a story of Wall Street, and the world interior of capital, too). This is to see our extinction—what McCarthy calls "a creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end" (59)—in the extreme forms and image-funds of a self-turned and self-overturned world and the crossings between them. That's a spectacle now that is, as

Knausgaard simply puts it, "something we are drawn to and will happily pay to see" (*My Struggle* 5).

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NOTES

1. On the redescription of our situation as the epoch of social systems, see my *The Official World* (2016).

2. I here draw on a collateral account of what this "cybernetic irony" involves, Peter Sloterdijk's sly but pertinent treatment of Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory as

devil's advocacy, "Luhmann, Devil's Advocate"—in Sloterdijk, *Not Saved: Essays after Heidegger* (2017).

3. This syncing is perhaps clearest in the critical—or post-critical—turn to an animated idiom of resilience, affordances, and reassemblages; to the pleasures of merely circulating, in systems and networks: what Tom McCarthy has simply called, instancing ocean-spanning jellyfish invasions—"the coming goo." The systems-irony here (the irony of what Donna Haraway calls "tentacular thinking") could not be clearer. The common goo is, McCarthy goes on to say, the situation of his own criticism: "a critical mass of goo circulation" (*Typewriters* 1). The common goo then elides the common good, and suspends both aesthetic and political intentions, strategies, and politics: "Does this mass have intention? Is it governed by some sort of plan? A systematic, or least (revolutionary? or reactionary?) program" (McCarthy, *Typewriters* 1-2). Here, put simply, the pathos of systems overturns to bathos. Along the same lines, Latourian actor-network theory may resemble Luhmannian systems theory, in an optative, or Gallic mood—a posthuman conviviality again—at least in its academic-conference alamodality. The criticism-by-hearsay mode of the "method wars"—which consists in part of professional branding and rebranding contests—restages the same situation that McCarthy's neo-Situationism (in, for instance, his novel *Satin Island*) at once occupies and upstages. "Critique" may then become a euphemism for accusation, and post-critique a synonym for what is deemed a vibrant—and decidedly professional—networking. Delimiting or abjuring critique, the branders—or, as it were, the deemers—become (as McKenzie Wark has suggested) spokesmodels for objects, convivial stuff, and endless reassemblies of the social. That is, again, the open-plan office climate of the official world. As Wark observes, with a certain deadpan, "the revival in the twenty-first century of philosophies of speculative objects or vitalist matter is not a particularly progressive moment" (Wark 554).

4. See Goffman (1959) and Sloterdijk (2013).

5. See Diederichsen (2013).

6. I take up these matters in greater detail in *The Official World*.

7. See Vogl (2014).

8. Here I draw on Diedrich Diederichsen's comments on the "Whole Earth" exhibition that took place in Berlin several years ago.

9. See Sloterdijk (2013).

10. See Wood (1991).

11. On McCarthy, and commentary as now our most ordinary exercise of language, see my *The Official World.*

12. I take this up in *The Official World*. My sense of world-futures, and the fusion of corporate scenarios and narrative thinking, is directly indebted to R. John Williams' "World Futures." In this light, the current rebranding of humanities fields in terms of "narrative" and "story" is not merely a symptom of professional branding and rebranding but a long-standing corporatist and R & D turn—one diagnosed in, for example, Tom McCarthy's recent *Satin Island*, in which an academic anthropologist is recruited by a mega-corporation to write the "Great Report" on the contemporary.

13. My discussion of the novel here in part reprises, in order to reframe or, as we say, repurpose, my brief account of the novel in *The Official World*.

14. The spreading of self-actualization planning was not merely because "psychological help was defined so broadly that everyone needed it" (Herman 311). It may include the perverse self-persuasion of what Lauren Berlant traces as a "cruel optimism." Or, it may take the form of a self-boosterism without reserve. Or, too, it may take on a scientological

shape in which self-choreography combines the two: exteriorization via self-stressing and monitored "exercise machines." Here again one discovers the irony of a systems epoch—compulsory autonomization and programmatic disinhibition training. One of the most captivating recent novelistic accounts of these dispositions is, again, China Miéville's *This Census-Taker*.

ABSTRACTS

These pages pose a general, even rough, question: What is the situation of the artwork, and particularly the novel, in what may be described as the epoch of social systems? I mean to suggest that this question has emerged, if often inexplicitly, on a range of fronts, in recent versions of the so-called "method wars" in literary studies, and in the humanities more generally. If we demilitarize this rhetoric, and demobilize the nearly one-word arguments that tend to underwrite it, it may be possible to get at the intricated place of the novel among social systems today. It may be possible too to get at (borrowing Alexander Kluge's good way of framing such matters) something of the precision of rough ideas. Perhaps no American novelist more incisively stages what this convergence looks like—what this systems-ironic turn in the form of the novel means—than Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy's fiction serves as the throughput of the analysis of the shape and distinction of the art system among a manifold of comparable, and rival, social systems. It provides a view of the pathos, and enchantments, of networks and systems of systems, across the practices and disciplines, the tableaux and forms, the proliferating self-descriptions and roadmaps of contemporary life.

INDEX

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