



**Going nowhere, slow
scenes of depression in contemporary literature and culture**

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Going nowhere, slow

- scenes of depression in contemporary literature and culture

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Introduction

Welcome to the world's happiest nation

If you traveled to Denmark in the fall of 2015 you were likely greeted by Carlsberg, welcoming you not only to Copenhagen Airport, but to the world's happiest nation. Or so the advert read: Welcome to the world's happiest nation. From the way the message was presented, it was clear that the statement was not supposed to be doubted, or read ironically. From a certain point of view it is simply the plain truth, an objective fact that can be measured and proved: *The World Happiness Report* consistently ranks the Danes as one of the happiest peoples in the world. In the latest report, from April 2015, we find the following statement: "The traditional top country, Denmark, this year ranks third in a cluster of four European countries with statistically similar scores, led by Switzerland and including Iceland and Norway." (Helliwell et al. 34). Yet, as the Danish Mental Health Foundation makes clear, more and more Danes are diagnosed with depression: At any given time, four to five percent of the population is depressed, or, more accurately, diagnosed as such.¹ Indeed, according to the Danish Health Authority more than 450.000 Danes bought anti-depressants in 2011, a figure, the writers state, which has almost doubled over the past decade (Flachs et al. 163ff.).

This tendency can be observed all over the Western World. The U.S. National Institute of Mental Health estimates that nine point five percent of the adult American population – 18.8 million people – suffers from depression.² These numbers have led the World Health Organization to conclude that depression is the most common mental disorder and the prime cause of disability and suicide, affecting around 350 million people worldwide.³ No wonder, then, that the consumption of SSRI-antidepressants has gone through the roof with sales now approaching 6 billion dollars annually (Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* 73).

This is only one side of the economy of depression: The profit potential for the pharmaceutical industry. The other side is the economic burden suffered by nation states and lost earnings caused by the impact of depression on worker productivity and absenteeism. The Danish Health Authority does not attempt to hide the fact that depression is the cause of a massive loss in

¹ Cf. www.psykiatrifonden.dk/viden/diagnoser/depression/depression.aspx.

² Cf. www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression/index.shtml. See also: Brinkmann, "Patologiseringsesen" 39-40.

³ Cf. www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs369/en/

productivity: 3,110 million Danish kroner to be precise.⁴ Similarly, leading scientist Paul E. Greenberg has presented data that shows that depression alone costs the American society \$210 billion per year. (“The Growing Economic Burden of Depression in the U.S.”, unpaginated).

These facts and figures seem to speak for themselves, but it is necessary to remember that the sale of anti-depressants does not correspond exactly to occurrences of depression, as SSRIs are not exclusively used for treating depression, but purchased to treat a range of other mental illnesses as well. Moreover, we must keep in mind that the frequency of diagnoses does not necessarily mirror the frequency of depressions, and thus ask ourselves if the increase in diagnoses testifies to a growing number of depressed people or rather to an escalating tendency to pathologize common, ‘normal’ affects such as sadness, translating them into the diagnostic category of depression.⁵

Regardless, it seems quite clear that depression has developed into a paradigm and remains the prevalent psychopathology of our time with all the moral, economic and political implications that this entails.⁶ Today, Christine Ross writes, depression is “one of the privileged categories through which the contemporary subject is being defined and designated, made and unmade, biologized and psychologized.” (xvii). Allan V. Horwitz and Jerome C. Wakefield even write, in *The Loss of Sadness*, that “depression has gained an iconic status in both the contemporary mental health professions and the culture at large.” (25). We see it in TV-shows such as *Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Happyish* (2015), dramatic plays such as *All my dreams come true* by Christian Lollike (2013/14), the interactive computer game *Depression Quest* (2013), contemporary art exhibitions such as *Depression* (2009, Marres, Maastricht) and *Unendlicher Spass* (2014, Schirn, Frankfurt), the documentary film like *The Dark Gene* (2015) and book publications ranging from nonfiction work *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* by Andrew Solomon (2001), to poetry collections such as Danish writer Sternberg’s *Depressionsdigte* (2014) and *i am a little bit happier than you are* by American poet Tao Lin (2006) or the short novel *Suicide* by the late French author Édouard Levé (2008).

⁴ Cf. www.sundhedsstyrelsen.dk/da/nyheder/2015/~/_media/00C6825B11BD46F9B064536C6E7DFBA0.ashx

⁵ Cf. Horwitz and Wakefield 2007.

⁶ The titles of some influential texts are very telling in this regard: Dan G. Blazer’s book *The Age of Melancholy* (2005); David Healy’s *The Antidepressant Era* (1997); and Alan Horwitz’s article “How an age of anxiety became an age of depression” (2010).

For this reason alone it seems relevant to examine the relation between depression and contemporary literature, arts, movies, and “culture at large”. It seems necessary for a cultural analysis that claims a certain criticality and contemporaneity to dwell on scenes of unhappiness and, more specifically, depression. This is what I intend to do in this dissertation through analysis of books by David Foster Wallace and Michel Houellebecq, the movie *Melancholia* by Lars von Trier, and works by the readymade artist Claire Fontaine. In this way the present study is conceived as a way of contributing to the cultural analysis of the present, a *Zeitdiagnose* as the Germans would say, with the important caveat that it is the works’ own diagnoses of the times that are the focus of attention.

The underlying premise of the dissertation is that there is no better way to understand the psychopathology of depression than to relate it to the problem of time, i.e. to understand depression in temporal terms, more specifically as a problem of futurity. Theoretically informed by the seemingly strange bedfellows of empirical, phenomenological psychiatry – Karl Jaspers, Thomas Fuchs etc. – and so-called radical political theory – Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, Mark Fisher etc. – depression is thus viewed as the pathological feeling that history has come to an end, that the future is closed off, frozen once and for all. Based on a method that I call scenographic symptomatology, which means simply that the dissertation is built around specific scenes with an accompanying set of symptoms, all of the four analytical chapters are variations on this personal, political if not planetary problem of futurity. But before those analyses can be carried out, some theoretical, historical and methodological work must be put in place. The remainder of this rather long introduction will thus consist of a conceptual and theoretical exposition of depression as a disease in and of time⁷, a historical contextualization of the phenomenon of depression, and some methodological remarks with regards to the mode of inquiry, as well as the mode of presentation.

What do we talk about when we talk about depression?

What do we talk about when we talk about depression? How do we define it and capture its specificity? How do we deal with this phenomenon without treating it merely as a conglomerate of other previously known mental illnesses such as anxiety, panic, melancholia, tiredness,

⁷ Cf. Rosa 4.

boredom, sadness and so on? Water consists of hydrogen and oxygen but is in no way exhausted by this definition, which gives us little idea of the nature of water. In the same way depression seems to consist of and include components from some or all of the above-mentioned phenomena. And yet there is something more to depression, something specific that makes it discrete and distinguishable from other related phenomena.⁸ This is why the definition of depression advanced by the influential Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which lists a set of symptoms such as tiredness, insomnia, suicidal impulses etc., is not comprehensive let alone satisfactory, though perhaps understandable from a practical, clinical point of view.⁹

The concept of depression has always been haunted by classificatory problems: From Freud, who in his famous text “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) observed that the empirical foundation for defining melancholia leaves something to be desired and that the definition “fluctuates even in descriptive psychiatry” (203), to Ludwig Binswanger, who in the book *Melancholie und Manie* (1960) expressed similar concerns, prompting him to avoid the concept altogether, since, as he wrote, it had so many disparate and heterogeneous meanings and appeared to be so washed-out that it could no longer form the basis of a real scientific investigation (10). Today this conceptual haziness has still not abated. Depression is, as Christine Ross writes, “the slippery notion par excellence of psychiatry” (xvii). In his seminal work *The Weariness of Self* Alain Ehrenberg even has a section titled “An Impossible Definition” (71) and speaks about depression as the illness of deception (xxix). It would be an exaggeration to speak of a diagnostic chaos, but the only thing people seem to agree is that they cannot agree on a

⁸ These considerations are inspired by a passage of Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet*, in which Pessoa, in the guise of one of his numerous pseudonyms, Bernardo Soares, at one point contemplates the difficulty in describing and defining *disquiet* as a specific phenomenon (133).

⁹ Consequently, the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) – published in 1980 with the psychiatrist Robert Spitzer as its chairman – tried to improve diagnostic reliability by basing the classification system of mental disorders on symptoms rather than context. The following are the criteria for diagnosing major depression disorder, or MDD (at least five symptoms must have been present during a 2-week period and represent a change, and one of the symptoms must be 1 or 2): 1) Depressed mood. 2) Loss of interest. 3) Weight loss. 4) Insomnia or hypersomnia. 5) Psychomotor agitation or retardation. 6) Fatigue or loss of energy. 7) Feelings of worthlessness and/or guilt. 8) Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness. 9) Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide. It should be clear, even to outsiders, that this kind of procedural logic entails a danger of the pathologization of normal sadness and that this, in turn, as Horwitz and Wakefield argue in *The loss of sadness*, may ironically have made the depressive diagnosis less rather than more scientifically valid. (103).

definition of depression. Is depression a chemical imbalance in the brain? Is it biologically or socially determined? Is it caused by genes or the environment, is it a nervous problem affecting the whole body rather than a problem of mood and affect? Is it to be distinguished sharply from normal sadness? Is it somewhat similar to the black bile of melancholy – the ancient concept of *melaina chole* as one of the four humors – or more akin to the medieval notion of spiritual *acedia*? Is it an illness, something abnormal and pathological, or is it a ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ reaction to an abnormal and unhealthy society? What is it? Perhaps, however, these questions are a bit off the mark; maybe the interesting question is not what depression *is* but what depression *does*.¹⁰

Of course, this does not exempt us from conducting the work that needs to be done in order to arrive at a precise conceptualization and contextualization of the phenomenon of depression. As mentioned, this work rests on the supposition that depression is a chronopathology, characterized by the loss of (the ability to imagine) the future. Not the loss of a precise future but precisely the loss of future itself.

This is a controversial or at least unconventional standpoint, viewed in the context of diagnostic manuals like the DSM, in which time or temporal experience does not feature among the otherwise extensive list of depressive symptoms. According to Matthew Ratcliffe, however, there has been some discussion of the relation between time and depression within phenomenological psychiatry and philosophy (5; 176). He mentions the work of Hubertus Tellenbach, Martin Wyllie, Thomas Fuchs, and of course Karl Jaspers.

Depression as a desynchronized and futureless condition

In his *General Psychopathology*, Jaspers, who was not just a philosopher but also a psychiatrist, is interested in the experience of time in mental disorders. According to the anthropology of the phenomenological tradition that has Husserl and Heidegger as its founding fathers, to be a human being is to be a temporal being with a direction, a sense of continuity, and some plan for the future (what Husserl called *protention* and Heidegger conceptualized as the ec-static temporality of being, the anticipation of future possibilities). But this, as Jaspers points out, is precisely what depressed patients lack: After quoting a depressive patient complaining that “it feels as if it is

¹⁰ A methodological guideline echoing Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 109; Deleuze, *Negotiations* 8; and, also, Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* 2.

always the same moment, it is like a timeless void”, Jaspers comments: “A depressed patient feels as if time did not want to go on.” (84). To Jaspers, this experience or awareness of time is intimately connected to an “emotional atmosphere” (86), in that emotional changes make themselves noticeable in the experience of time:

“A depressed patient, suffering from ‘terrible emptiness’ and a feeling of ‘having lost all feeling’ reported – ‘I cannot see the future, just as if there were none. I think everything is going to stop now and tomorrow there will be nothing at all.’ Patients know there is another day tomorrow but this awareness has changed from what it was like before. Even the next five minutes do not lie ahead as they used to do. Such patients have no decisions, no worries, no hopes for the future.” (86)

Jaspers even develops the fruitful idea of what could be called a metafeeling, in particular the idea of the feeling of a non-feeling (*Gefühl der Gefühllosigkeit* or *Fühlen eines Nichtfühlen*), so that in depression one feels nothing but this feeling of nothing is definitely felt. Or to put it another way: the feeling of not feeling anything is itself a feeling. This is not sheer sophistry, but rather the ultimate – affective – horror of depression, which will become clear in the case of David Foster Wallace. In any case, it becomes crucial to explore not just depression as a feeling, but how that feeling feels; what depression feels like.¹¹

¹¹ In fact, the DSM relies on a definition of depression as a mood or affective disorder. I agree with the wording of the definition but not with its content. Perhaps depression is indeed an affective disorder, or a mood disorder, but the question is: how does that affective or mood disorder feel? What is the affect of the affective disorder, so to speak? This is just one of the reasons I do not subscribe to the definition to be found in the DSM. A more fundamental problem is the reductive and rather old-fashioned understanding of mood and affect informing the DSM: The tendency to de-contextualize moods and affects, to rely on the ancient dualism of body and mind/brain, to pathologize certain emotional responses and so on. Theoretically this dissertation is therefore more in line not only with Jaspers, but also recent affect theory too, whose insights and attainments are overall able to nuance, supplement and complicate the definition of depression as a mood or affect disorder presented in the DSM. One of the cornerstones of affect theory, taken somewhat misleadingly as a whole, is firstly that feelings and affects must be taken seriously, and secondly that affects are as much collective, social and political phenomena as they are psychological, private and individual. Crucial reference points in this regard are Ann Cvetkovich’s *Depression: A Public Feeling* and Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*. Furthermore, affect theory often seeks to depathologize negative feelings of sadness and unhappiness, thereby, as Ann Cvetkovich writes, granting questions like “How do I feel?” or “How does capitalism feel?” a real legitimacy (3). As Cvetkovich also writes:

To return to the experience of time in depression as it has been described in the phenomenological tradition, Ludwig Binswanger, in the aforementioned work *Melancholie und Manie*, states that depression is characterized by a protentional disturbance whereby the depressed person experiences a 'futural' vacuum or a vacuum as the future (27). That the future is or has been lost is not a supposition or a conjecture, but documented fact (43-44). The future is, so to speak, always already considered a thing of the past.

Many empirical studies have been conducted in relation to the depressive experience of a slowing or stoppage of time, but the results are mixed and equivocal.¹² Furthermore, such studies tend to "measure the estimation or production of defined time intervals rather than a general subjective experience of the flow of time." (Oberfeld et al. 1). In other words, they do not really capture the phenomenological experience of time in depression, which is the primary concern here. Things appear differently if we turn to American psychiatrist Frederick T. Melges's study of depression, *Time and Inner Future*. Here, Melges offers an account of depression as a spiral of hopelessness, implying first and foremost a block to the future. He writes that hopelessness is like a cloud drawing "a curtain on the future" and even quotes one of his patients who describes how "the future looks cold and bleak, and I seem frozen in time." (178).

Several phenomenological scholars emphasize this particular aspect of depression: the feeling of being stuck, stagnated, that the race is run and that the present – which is hell – becomes all there is and all that can ever be imagined to be.¹³ This is the first aspect of the formal structure of time in depression: A subjective relation to time. This relation is, however, related to what could tentatively be called a social time; the time of the environment and the surrounding world. In the words of German psychiatrist and philosopher, Thomas Fuchs a de-synchronization occurs in depression that is as social as it is subjective; the depressive desynchronization manifests, more precisely, in the very interplay between subjective and social time. In the first instance, the term describes a state of disturbance in the temporal being, within which the flow of lived experience is brought to a halt, transforming temporality from "implicit" to "explicit", in much in the same way as Heidegger – whose thoughts on temporality and subjectivity must not be

"Depression, or alternative accounts of what gets called depression, is thus a way to describe neoliberalism and globalization, or the current state of political economy, in affective terms." (11).

¹² See for instance: Sévigny et al. 2003; Bschor et al. 2004; Gil and Droit-Volet 2009; Ghaemi 2007.

¹³ See: Wyllie, 180; Rønberg, 185; Karp, 23-24.

undervalued here – says that we only notice the given tool – a hammer, for instance – at that moment when it does not work anymore. ‘Normally’, Fuchs says, we do not pay any attention to time, we just live in it. But in depression this is no longer the case. In this type of situation, time is suddenly *noticed*: It becomes perceptively and painfully out of joint, out of synch (“Implicit and Explicit Temporality” 196). The key point about this de-synchronization is that it is not merely biological, but also relational and intersubjective, in the sense that the depressed patient is *out of synch* with the surrounding environment and the social clock as much as she is out synch with herself and her own biological clock: “[T]he depressive suffers the loss of sympathetic resonance; he gets ‘out of synch’. While dialogues are normally accompanied by a continuous synchronization of bodily gestures and gazes, his expression sets and loses its modulation. The affect attunement with others fails.” (“Melancholia as a Desynchronization” 183).

To Fuchs the purpose of the therapeutic process is thus to re-synchronize being, which is to say, “to re-establish [his] protensivity” and “to give rhythm to everyday life.” (“Melancholia as a Desynchronization” 185). The concept of *rhythm* – which in itself contains a temporal dimension – is crucial, insofar as as depression can be regarded as a rhythmic disturbance, or, in the words of Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, as a pathological, obsessive refrain (*Félix Guattari* 130).¹⁴ This also becomes relevant to any analysis of the *style* of depressive works. I will have ample opportunity to return to this pertinent question in the coming analyses, where I argue that it is imperative to take seriously the somewhat suspicious and dated question about the relation between art and therapy. As Berardi argues in *And: Phenomenology of the End*, the spheres of art and therapy belong together because it is here that “sensitivity is shaped” (254).¹⁵ To him the question of therapy is not only an aesthetic question; it has even become, today, an

¹⁴ The concept of rhythm stems from Henri Lefebvre’s *Rhythmanalysis*, wherein rhythm is installed as a central component in the analysis of everyday life: “Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and expenditure of energy, there is rhythm.” (15). Rhythms are thus at work everywhere in life, but sometimes the basic rhythm is disturbed or interrupted, thereby creating a pathological form of rhythm, which Lefebvre dubs *arrhythmia* (*arythmie* in French): “Pathology, in a word illness, is always accompanied by a disruption of rhythms: arrhythmia that goes as far as a morbid and then fatal de-synchronisation.” (68). He also writes: “We are only conscious of most of our rhythms when we begin to suffer from some irregularity.” (77). It is in this sense that Berardi discusses the compulsive rhythm or refrain of depression, although he also finds a great deal of inspiration in the chapter on the ritornello in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A thousand plateaus* (342ff.)

¹⁵ “Aesthetics and politics are not to be linked through an act of decision and will, as proposed by the philosophy of commitment in late modernity. They are linked because the contemporary technocultural mutation is affecting cognition, affection, and sensibility...” (*And* 294).

immanently political one. Is it possible, as he suggests, to understand therapy as singularity rather than conformity (253)? Have we indeed reached a point in time in which “reconciliation, or overcoming alienation” is “indistinguishable from emancipation”?¹⁶

In any case, it is here that the phenomenological tradition reaches its limits for our present purposes. Though it offers a nuanced and empirical understanding of depression as a temporal psychopathology with somewhat of a social dimension as implied by Fuchs, it remains inadequate as a means to address depression as a *political* problem. The phenomenological literature must be supplemented by certain contemporary political theories, which, in turn, can and must be supported by the empirical basis that has just been described in order that this more speculative mode of thought does not melt into air.¹⁷ To provide this kind of ‘synthesis’ is one of the intended contributions of this dissertation.

There is no alternative

In his later works such as *After the Future* (2011) and *The Uprising. On poetry and finance* (2012) Berardi analyzes depression as a symptom of a society that has lost (the ability to imagine) the future. Here he presents the argument that the current crisis is not so much an economic, social or political crisis as a crisis in the imagination of the future. The promise of the future – so present and clear at the beginning of the twentieth century in the work of the avant-garde, the Futurists and so on – has now evaporated: “The future no longer appears as a choice or a collective conscious action, but is a kind of unavoidable catastrophe that we cannot oppose in any way.” (*After the future* 126). For Berardi the decisive year was 1977, a foreboding of what was and perhaps still is to come: “The end of modernity began with the collapse of the future, with Sid Vicious screaming *no future*.” (*The Uprising* 100). This historical situation must therefore, according to Berardi, be related to the emergence and proliferation of a psychopathology such as depression: “The future becomes a threat when the collective imagination becomes incapable of seeing alternatives to trends leading to devastation, increased poverty, and violence. This is

¹⁶ Cf. Galuzzo “A tale of Two Prometheuses” (unpaginated).

¹⁷ To lend empirical support to the political and speculative thinking of Berardi, for instance, is a necessity inasmuch as it is precisely that, which he tends to lose in his otherwise very perceptive critique of the times in which we live. Often he gives in when it comes to diagnostic specificity, rather hastily moving from depression to panic to Alzheimers and dementia: All seem to be symptoms of contemporary misery (see, for instance: Berardi, *And* 319).

precisely our current situation, because capitalism has become a system of techno-economic automatisms that politics cannot evade. The paralysis of the will (the impossibility of politics) is the historical context of today's depression epidemic." (*After the future* 59) As he also writes: "Now that every inch of the planet has been colonized, the colonization of the temporal dimension has begun." (ibid.: 24).

In his latest book *Ghosts of my life. Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2012), Mark Fisher picks up the thread from Berardi in his attempt to apprehend that the future is not what it used to be. When Fisher talks about hauntology, a concept he borrows from Jacques Derrida's writing on Marx's ghosts, he alludes to the idea that the present seems to be haunted by the future – *in its very absence*. This spectre of an absent future constitutes a kind of hauntology in reverse: It is a hauntology *from* the future, not from the past; a hauntology *of* a lost future. *Ghosts of my life* is thus not only natural successor to the work of Berardi, but also to Fisher's own book *Capitalist Realism* (2009), in which Fisher – informed, also, by the work of Fredric Jameson – conceptualizes "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it." (2). He calls this widespread sense *capitalist realism*. As an epitomization of "the spectres of lost futures" (*Ghosts of my life* 27), depression becomes "a paradigm case of how capitalist realism operates." (*Capitalist Realism* 19). It is in this sense that depression can be viewed as the pathological mirror of contemporary capitalism, there is a strange resonance between capitalist realism and the "the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion" (*Capitalist Realism* 5).

One question that does not concern Fisher is where this leaves the hypothesis of depressive realism, which states that depressed persons are not depressed because they have a distorted or delusional view of reality, but because they have a more accurate perception of reality than people who are not depressed. Within psychology the notion of depressive realism emerged from an infamous study conducted in the 1979 by Alloy and Abramson, but Freud had already pointed out that depressed people have "a keener eye for the truth than others who are not melancholic [...] we only wonder why a man has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind." (Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" 206).¹⁸ In the present dissertation, this

¹⁸ For more on *depressive realism*, see: Alloy and Abramson 1979; Alloy and Abramson 1988; Ghaemi, 2013.

particular notion of depressive realism, as it turns up in various guises, shall be complicated throughout. On the one hand it is thus imperative to avoid the *pathologization* of depression found in diagnostic manuals and biomedical psychiatry. On the other, it is essential to sidestep the kind of *romanticizing* that is inherent to the idea of depressive realism.

To get back to the main thread of the argument: It has also become common among sociologists to perceive depression within a temporal framework. In his book *The Weariness of the Self. Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (2010), perhaps the most influential sociological study of depression so far, Alain Ehrenberg argues that depression is indeed a pathology of time (233). To Ehrenberg depression is best understood as a collapse or a decelerated movement in a universe of pure acceleration: “Frozen action sculpts the depressive universe. It is a kind of ‘stoppage of time’, whereas impulsiveness is time accelerated.” (188).

A similar logic and interest is at work in German sociologist Hartmut Rosa’s book *Social Acceleration – a new theory of modernity* (2013), according to which the experience of modernity as such is an experience of acceleration, and it is thus impossible to account for contemporary changes in society without a temporal concept ready at hand. “The present work”, Rosa writes, “is therefore based on the conviction that adequate social-scientific diagnoses of *the times* (*Zeitdiagnose*) should in fact literally be diagnosis of *its time*, i.e., its temporal structures (*Zeit-diagnosen*) [...] The ongoing time of crisis is the result of a crisis of time” (13). Though depression is not his main subject, Rosa still offers valuable insight into the phenomenon of depression in this particular context, insofar as he considers depression to “embody the temporal existence of a *frenetic standstill* in a pathologically pure form.” (248). In that particular sense, the depressed person can be conceived of as the “most sensitive seismograph of current and coming transformations.” (quoted in: van den Bergh 84).

The problem of periodization (Old wine in new bottles?)

Rosa’s remarks raise a series of questions regarding periodization – modernity vis-à-vis postmodernity, for one – that must be addressed, however briefly. Although I mainly approach the field of inquiry in a synchronous way by focusing on depression in contemporary culture, I maintain that the question of depression is a historical one and must therefore be subject to

diachronous scrutiny and some kind of historicization. Given the fact that depression has been on the rise for several decades now and, in a way, is our historical present, it becomes a question of periodizing this present. “We cannot not periodize”, as Fredric Jameson famously wrote in *A Singular Modernity* (29).

In general, though, I think we must be wary of broad and generalized claims about the transitions from modernity to postmodernity, from one temporal regime to the next. That said, it seems beyond doubt that the idea of progress so prominent during the better part of the 20th century has more or less faded today, and that a historical transition has taken place that is inextricably bound up with the emergence of depression as the topical psychopathology of our time: A transition from modernity to postmodernity, from Fordism to Post-fordism, from a society of prohibition and discipline to a post-disciplinary society of autonomy and control.¹⁹

The phenomenon of depression can – and indeed ought to – be related to a (western) world which has arrived at the end of history, in the sense that there is no alternative, as Thatcher triumphantly declared. The crisis embodied by depression thus becomes a symptom of a more general crisis of futurity. Following Berardi and Fisher, it seems impossible to separate the history of depression from the societal and historical changes that emerged in the wake of 1968 and accelerated during the economic crisis of the 1970s, leading in the end to a neoliberal²⁰

¹⁹ In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello – whose work remains a source of inspiration to Ehrenberg – note how the creative counter-culture of May 68 spilled over into society as such, and in particular was appropriated or recuperated by capitalism in the sense that the rebellion’s principles of flexibility, creativity and authenticity were transformed into the operational philosophy of the economic procedures that emerged in the wake of this very event. In his book, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary offers an analogous account. The time of post-modernity or late capitalism, Crary writes, “must be distinguished from what Lukacs and others in the early twentieth century identified as the empty, homogenous time of modernity, the metric or calendar time of nations, of finance or industry, from which individual hopes or projects were excluded. What is new is the sweeping abandonment of the pretense that time is coupled to any long-term undertakings, even to fantasies of “progress” or development. An illuminated 24h world without shadows is the final capitalist mirage of post-history, of an exorcism of the otherness that is the motor of historical change.” (9)

²⁰ I use the concept *neoliberalism* as Philip Mirowski defines it in a critical displacement of Michel Foucault’s groundbreaking work (*Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste* 53ff.). Neoliberalism is thus not only understood as an ideological or even idealistic concept, developed by a few visionary thinkers at the Mont Pelerin Society from 1947 onwards and then put to work and realized in the years to come. As the current form of global capitalism, neoliberalism is an economic and political concept and system that has as its primary goal “the restoration of class power” (Harvey 16). At the same, however, neoliberalism also entails a certain production of subjectivity (an insight which admittedly must be attributed to Foucault): A production or modulation of the self as innovative and entrepreneurial, perhaps best captured by the concept of human capital. Mirowski thus speaks of “everyday neoliberalism” (89ff.), which means that

restructuring of the global economy. Historical development since then, with low growth rates, declining or stagnant real wages, structural unemployment, privatization or outsourcing of public services, the steady precarization of labor markets all around the world, a brutal debilitation of unions, explosive financialization and deregulation of the economy, culminated in 2008 with thorough-going crisis. However, the crisis is by no means over and done with, not least due to the fact that austerity measures and a politics of necessity have been considered the sole solutions to the crisis and the only available means of moving forward, which is to say: Going nowhere at all (though it has created an enormous increase in private as well as public debt). There is no point to question whether or not this is a neoliberal development in its most exemplary form. German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck is adamant that it is: "The present financial, fiscal and economic crisis is the end point so far of the long neoliberal transformation of postwar capitalism." (165). In this context I can only hint at some concrete events and decisive dates in this transformation, that include but are not limited to: The abolition of the Bretton Woods system of international financial exchange and the cancellation of the convertibility of the U.S. dollar to gold in 1971; the oil crisis of 1973; Thatcher's nomination as prime minister of England in 1979; the appointment of Paul Volcker as chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank in October of the same year; and the inauguration of Ronald Reagan as U.S. president in 1980. The rest is history, as they say.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 only made manifest what was, in a sense, already an established reality: The end of history. A post-historical, post-modern and post-political situation, in which *time is no more* (as it is proclaimed in the apocalypse). No coincidence, then, that one of the last sentences of Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Possibility of an Island* reads: "The future was empty" (337). In fact, all the works discussed in this dissertation are primarily oriented toward the future, or, more precisely, toward a future that is not there, a future that is already lost.

But is this loss of the future, a loss which is simultaneously a personal and a political problem, not simply the – by now almost ancient – problem of postmodernism? Is it not just, in other words, old wine in new bottles? Yes and no. The new or contemporary feature of the no-future *stimmung* that writers such as Jameson (and Lyotard) addressed quite a long time ago – emphatically encapsulated by Jameson's famous quip that it is easier to imagine the end of the

phenomena such as competition and debt are not just installed at structural level but on a subjective level too.

world than an alternative to capitalism (*The Cultural Turn* 50) – is that, today, this is no longer the shocking realization of a cultural vanguard such as the punk movement. At most it generates a shrug of the shoulders and a concomitant: So what? As Marc Auge points out in *The Future*: “We are becoming used to the idea or image of a world without history or future, a world that has arrived, a finished world whose space is closing in on itself for good.” (42). What *was* originally a diffuse albeit perceptive intuition, has now become a habit; what only existed in an embryonic form, something in the air, has now become a generalized, naturalized and almost common condition. In that respect the future is not what it used to be. This seems to be the backdrop to the phenomenon of depression today.

To be clear: This is not a book about postmodernism, though postmodernism is certainly a part of the problem that many of the aesthetic artifacts that I deal with articulate. The depressive literature of David Foster Wallace, for instance, is therefore not to be comprehended as postmodernist literature but as a literature that originates in, responds to, and tries to distance itself from, a world which has become – and to a wide extent still is – thoroughly postmodern. It is the relation between this historical situation, the phenomenon of depression and contemporary, cultural artifacts that is under scrutiny here.²¹

²¹ What this means is that a lot of interesting histories must go untold here. For example how the psychiatrist Robert Spitzer was appointed head of the DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), which was published in 1980, instantly revolutionizing the psychiatric diagnostic practice by exclusively looking at and listing symptoms of mental illnesses and, in the same breath and by the same logic, disregarding any kind of contextualization. Over the years, this tendency toward the biomedical paradigm has only been reinforced, the latest version of the DSM (DSM-V from 2013) being a case in point, in that grief in the wake of the loss of a loved one – the only contextual circumstance allowed to appear and remain in the manual and thereby being exempted from pathologization (the so-called bereavement exclusion in DSM-IV) – is now no longer considered a ‘healthy’ or ‘normal’ reaction, but a pathological condition, a sign of depression, if the grief lasts more than two weeks, as grief, after all, tends to do. It is also interesting to note how the sheer number of diagnostic categories increases from one version to the next; not so surprising given the fact that Robert Spitzer is rumored to have joked: “I never saw a diagnosis that I didn’t like” (Davies 171). Another line of inquiry that cannot be pursued here is the conjunction of historical circumstances such as the development of a new generation of anti-depressants (the so-called SSRIs, shorthand for Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors) – of which Prozac, launched in 1987, is probably the most famous. The same goes for the election and appointment of Martin Seligman as the president of the American Psychological Association in 1997, paving the way for positive psychology and the science of happiness (the rise of which was inversely proportional to the decline of psychoanalysis), with the result that psychologists and psychiatrists were suddenly caught in a new situation and faced with the necessity to redefine their work and practice, described by Barbara Ehrenreich in the following way: “Effective antidepressants had become available at the end of the 1980s

Each time has its own time – and its own subjects too

To be sure, the loss of the future is not simply an *objective* condition, it has a *subjective* side as well. This is not to suggest that we are dealing with subjective delusions, but rather that a certain ideological modulation or interpellation on affect and imagination is at work here.²² It does not merely involve a subjective experience of the economy – as the phenomenological framework is able to highlight – but also a production of a particular subjectivity within the economy. Marx reminded us that “[e]conomy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself” (*Grundrisse* 173), in the sense that each time has its own time. We must add that each time has its own subjects, its own subjectivity too. It might even be put it this way: The production of temporality is always also, and already, a production of subjectivity. As Lazzarato – who draws on the work of Deleuze and Guattari – writes: “Economics and subjectivity go hand in hand.” (*Signs and Machines* 11). The neoliberal economy, for instance, hinges on the calibration of humans as human capital, as entrepreneurs, as investors in themselves (small businesses) and in their *selves*, in particular their future selves.²³ Happiness as an ideal future whose realization every subject ought to fight for, is one such ideological imperative in which the productions of temporality and subjectivity crystallize and converge. Debt is another. As shall be discussed in the analytical chapters, each of the four problems that emerge in and through the depressive experience expressed and formed in the respective works corresponds to a specific subject formation: The competitive subject, the addictive subject, the indebted subject, the (un)happy subject.

and these could be prescribed by a primary care physician after a ten-minute diagnostic interview, so what was left for a psychologist to do?” (*Smile or die* 149-150). This re-union of economics and psychology in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as the resulting hegemony of the norms of happiness, health and wellness, (Cederström and Spicer 29; Davies 64), will not be pursued any further here, though the concept of happiness will not be bypassed completely, and will appear in the chapter on von Trier’s *Melancholia*. The cemetery of untold stories seems indeed to be infinite.

²² Cf. “What I want to describe is how a failure of consciousness, a false consciousness about the world, is what blocks other possible worlds, as a blockage that makes possibles impossible, such that possibles are lost before they can be lived, experienced, or imagined.” (Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* 165).

²³ In his lecture series *The Birth Of Biopolitics* Foucault offered the elucidating definition: “*Homo economicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. This is true to the extent that, in practice, the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacements every time of *homo economicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo economicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings.” (226)

What, in other words, *also* separates our age from earlier times is that alienation has assumed a different character. The problem nowadays is not a homogenous, mechanical and monotonous time, but a heterogeneous, flexible and momentary time; people are not reduced to objects – dehumanized creatures on assembly line – but rather produced as subjects. Unlike the alienation of yesterday, which always implied *distance*, an abyss between man and machine, between animate subjectivity and sterile temporality, alienation today seems characterized by *proximity* and *immersion*. The problem, it appears, is that one has become so integral a part of the (net)work that – the moment it is no longer possible to keep up – one implodes rather than explodes; not hitting one’s head against a brick wall, but collapsing down into the hole at the very heart of the contemporary capitalist machinery. “We are depressed not because we are so far removed from what we want, but because we are merged with it.” (Solomon 326). In many ways this dissertation is a story about a contemporary form of alienation.²⁴

Why depression, why not melancholia?

We have now come some way towards an appreciation of the specificity of the concept and context of depression, as it will be put to work in this dissertation. But why use the label “depression” at all, one might ask? Is that not already, in itself, a concession to medical discourse, to the constraints of psychiatry and, not least, to the diagnostic manuals that will soon become like Borges’s infinitely expanding map that covers the whole world. Is there not a risk of reinforcing the stigma of mental illness? Perhaps so, but to my mind the importance of confronting the phenomenon in all its problematic aspects and conceptual cul-de-sacs outweighs this risk. And when, I would add, is an investigation ever free of risk? Is there not always a danger of doing violence to that which one is writing about? Is it really always expedient or necessary to shirk away from public discourse, from vernacular language?

What about the concept of melancholia, then, the imagined critic continues? Why scrap that rich tradition of both medical texts and works of art stretching all the way back to Hippocrates and Aristotle? For three reasons that may be intertwined. The first is conceptual and

²⁴ It is, however, not the *only* story about alienation: I am making no universalizing claims. The story I am telling is one about a specific form of alienation in the Western world, in which alienated subjects are not excluded on the basis of their race, gender, class etc., but rather included and inscribed in the web of neoliberal capitalism – until the very moment of pathological collapse.

pertains to a difference in the direction of time, in the temporal orientation: Insofar as melancholia is oriented towards an object that has been lost, the primary temporal modality is *the past*. In melancholia an object has been lost, something or someone is past, though, as Freud pointed out, it is not always clear *what* has been lost (“Mourning and Melancholia” 205). Sometimes it may be the case that it is the loss itself that has been lost: One can lose a person but one can also lose the very loss of that person. In depression there is also a loss, but a loss regarding the future: a future has been lost – or the loss of this future has been lost. This does not mean that depression cannot have death, for example, as a triggering factor, but depression does appear to have, in phenomenological terms, a protentional collapse as the decisive element. This is what empirical phenomenological psychiatry and philosophy have shown, what more political thinkers such as Berardi and Fisher have argued, and – as we will have plenty of occasion to witness – is the case in all the aesthetic works too. As a temporal pathology, depression is oriented towards the (loss of the) future, which is symptomatic of a broader, contemporary crisis of futurity. In itself this constitutes a crucial contrast to the traditional and dominant understanding of melancholia as found in Freud, for instance.

The second reason is historical and pertains to the different contexts in which depression and melancholia appear and assume a paradigmatic position, as intimated already by the periodization above. In Ehrenberg’s sociological and historical account, depression separates itself from melancholia after the Second World War, not least due to the fact that it was at that time that the transition from a disciplinary society to a more post-disciplinary regime. In this latter regime people are not judged in terms of obedience but in terms of autonomy, that is to say, in terms of each individual’s ability to perform, to network, to be entrepreneurial, to demonstrate initiative and to realize themselves. It is a society within which the fantasy of the good, authentic and happy life developed into a normative demand, at once institutionalized at a societal level and internalized at a personal level. It is a society in which the central question is not ‘am I allowed to do it?’, but ‘am I able to do it?’.²⁵

The third is cultural and pertains to a difference in the aesthetic mode of expression. Because melancholia as such tends to be oriented towards the past and a lost object, its artistic form is more often than not allegorical and ironic. Allegory is – as Christine Ross writes, alluding to

²⁵ Cf. Ehrenberg 43

Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* – “the melancholic attitude par excellence, for it signals both the incapacity to mourn and the hope to recover the lost object.” (23). This “melancholic attitude” and the “incapacity to mourn” necessarily imply a ironic attitude towards the past (object), perhaps nowhere more so than in so-called postmodernist art and literature, of which one of the most basic characteristics is an ironic and allegorical approach to representation. The material that I conceptualize as depressive art and literature operates in a completely different register. It has another *modus operandi*, which leaves little or no room for irony, if irony is understood as a potentiation of reflexivity, an infinite spiral, that may – or may not – be regarded as a defense against seriousness. The depressive art that we are dealing with does not have the exuberance and ebullience required for this approach. Besides, we find here a different sensibility and a pronounced ambition to be ‘honest’ and ‘serious’, however impossible. For this reason I prefer to talk of comedy as a puncturing of reflexivity; a laughter based on proximity rather than distance, horizontality rather than verticality. For heuristic purposes I shall proceed, rather crudely, from the assumption that the art under scrutiny here is depressive, comic and literal rather than melancholic, ironic and allegorical (the concept of comedy will be taken up in due time). From the point of view of literary history, the depressive literature in question is therefore not the melancholic memory-work of Sebald with its incessant, nostalgic orientation toward an ever present *Vergangenheit*, Nor is it, for that matter, the novels on existential anxiety (we are, to paraphrase Houellebecq, a long way from Sartre's *Nausea*), or the exhausted, expiring literature of, for example, Marguerite Duras or Samuel Beckett.²⁶ To avoid any misunderstanding, this choice and conceptualization is not based on a clinical argument but rather a cultural one.

An attempt at delineating and exploring these distinctions any further is something for another occasion. The genealogy of the pair depression and melancholia could itself be the subject of several separate, extensive studies from the perspective of sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, history of psychiatry etc. We must limit ourselves here to taking the results of the historical processes just indicated as the point of departure and spelling out some of the assumptions that will be taken for granted in the rest of this dissertation.²⁷

²⁶ See for instance Deleuze's essay on Beckett in *Essays critical and clinical* (152ff.)

²⁷ A lot of the previous issues are, in fact, well described and established within the academic scholarship on depression. For more on melancholia specifically, see: Bale 1997; Kristeva 1989; Jackson 1986; Gudmand-Høyer 2013.

The spirit of depression

The idea to be pursued in the following is that depression constitutes what Raymond Williams, in his influential text “Structures of feeling”, calls “a contemporary structure of feeling” (128) and “an undeniable experience of the present” (134), respectively. In that sense and through the analysis of the critical diagnoses that the aesthetic works unfold themselves this dissertation is intended as a cultural exploration into the so-called *Zeitgeist* – and once more it is presupposed that the phenomenon of depression lies at the core of this *Zeitgeist*. It is my contention, however, that such an analysis cannot be an analysis of the time or of the times only (*die Zeit*); the analysis must be accompanied by an analysis of spirit (*der Geist*). Despite all the previous conceptualizations and contextualizations, in which some lines of demarcation have been drawn, the concept of spirit and spiritual despair must now be confronted.

The thoughts of Søren Kierkegaard are particularly helpful in this regard. In his seminal work *Sickness unto Death* from 1849, originally published under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, which deals with the notion of *despair* (*fortvivelse* in Danish), Kierkegaard defines the human being as spirit. In a playful (anti-)Hegelian manner he goes on to explain what he means by that:

“A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis.” (21).

As spirit the self is a relation that relates itself to itself, and thus despair is a disorder in this very relation, a mis-relation between necessity and possibility, between what the self is (present) and what it wants to be (future). Despair is, in other words, a sickness in spirit, a sickness unto death as it were. The only antidote to this sickness is a leap of faith, which is also a work of love (the title of one of his books, to which I shall return in the chapter on Wallace, is precisely *Works of Love*).

A few thinkers have elaborated on the idea that existential or spiritual despair can be regarded as a central component of depression, a kind of isotope. Karl Jaspers – who found a great source of inspiration in Kierkegaard – is not the only writer to have devoted some attention to the

relation between depression and despair. In his book *On Depression. Drugs, Diagnosis, and Despair in the Modern World*, Nassir Ghaemi places quite an emphasis on this particular relation, and Ann Cvetkovich seeks “a model for thinking about depression as a spiritual problem” in her book *Depression: A Public Feeling* (24). The Kierkegaardian notion of despair is one such model, I would argue. Of course, this does not mean that depression can be reduced to a spiritual problem but that the notion of spiritual despair can expand and supplement existing explications of depression. The goal is thus an attempt to think about depression as a spiritual problem and to that end, numerous congenial and complementary concepts will be presented and defined along the way: Belief, despair, faith, spirit.

My overall intuition is that a rehabilitation of the somewhat antiquated notion of spirit is necessary if the aim is to capture the spiritual depth of depression in its individual pain and horror. But the concept is likewise invaluable for addressing, more generally, the psychological, spiritual and even religious matrix of capitalism today. For that reason the thinking of Bernard Stiegler will supplement that of Søren Kierkegaard²⁸, as – in a sense – the concept of spirit synthesizes phenomenology and political economy. In *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism* and *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals* (both from 2006), Stiegler advances the hypothesis that a spiritual misery penetrates the Western world; indeed he goes so far as to talk about the lost spirit of capitalism. By spirit, Stiegler thus does not intend some abstract factor that determines the course of history, nor a purely individual or mental capacity. In fact *spirit* is not to be understood in any idealistic or transcendental sense. Following the tradition of Max Weber, Stiegler considers spirit a category that belongs to political economy. But he is not so much concerned with the Protestant ethos of capitalism, as the apparatuses of production, the mechanisms of circulation and the patterns of consumption in contemporary capitalism. Phrasing it in a more technical fashion in phenomenological terms, capitalism is as a whole a protentional system, according to Stiegler. At the beginning of the book *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism*, he stresses that spirit is just another name for desire, and that the object of desire is an object of (potential) addiction (3; 12). The spirit of capitalism refers to the currents of desire and affect that keep the market alive from

²⁸ It deserves notice that Kierkegaard did in fact partly develop his typology of despair as a critical diagnosis of the society at that time. The spiritual problem Kierkegaard addressed must thus be understood not only as an individual problem but also as a problem of society, a symptom of the *Zeitgeist*, so to speak.

the *outside*. But capitalism and in particular financial capitalism are spiritual in another sense as well: The financial markets are based on faith, confidence and trust, and this is what keeps the system functioning from the *inside*. In this regard, credit is the ultimate protentional figure.²⁹

What is at stake is thus our very innermost being, our neuronal networks, our beliefs, affects and desires, our brain, our soul.³⁰ Spirit in this context is shorthand for all that, but first and foremost I take spirit – as a protentional figure, a figure of futurity – to denote the exact point of convergence between the self that relates itself to itself as a future self and the capitalist economy. And depression would then come to mean a spiritual, protentional sickness unto death.

In any case, in what follows we will come to see how – in the works analyzed – depression is often anatomized as a crisis of faith³¹ and that the personal spiritual crisis that is part of depression is brought to address a more general and historical spiritual crisis. In an essay on Dostoevsky, David Foster Wallace, for example, writes that we (the contemporaries of Wallace) seem to have lost “motive, feeling, belief” (*Consider the Lobster* 273). And in another essay Wallace even claimed that “philosophy is first and last about spirit” (“The Empty Plenum” 220³²). By implication, the same goes for the aesthetic sphere.

An admission of this sort could have far-reaching consequences for how we regard the critical function of contemporary art and literature. This raises a series of interesting, unavoidable and yet perhaps unanswerable questions about the relation between depression and

²⁹ “The capitalist system for creating protentions is a system of credit which brings about a change in the system of belief – by turning belief into something calculable, and by therefore engendering something better than belief (at least in the eyes of *negotium*): trust [*confiance*]. Credit in general, in all its forms...is the organization of protentions. Credit is the concrete social expression of protentions *which realize themselves, which perform...*” (*For a New Critique of Political Economy* 67).

³⁰ Clearly the concept of spirit is not too dissimilar to Berardi’s concept of soul as presented in *The Soul at Work*.

³¹ A passage from the British author Tim Lott’s memoir *The Scent of Dried Roses* is highly illuminating in this regard: “I have absolutely no faith, in fact, in anything. In a muddy way, I see that *depression manifests itself as a crisis of faith*. Not religious faith, but the almost born instinct that things are fluid, that they unfold and change, that new kinds of moment are eventually possible, that the future will arrive. I am in a time-locked place, where the moment I am in will stretch on, agonizingly for ever. There is no possibility of redemption or hope. It is a final giving up on everything. It is death.” (quoted in: Ratcliffe 68 – my emphasis).

³² This text is actually a review of David Markson’s novel *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*. It first appeared in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1990), from which I quote here. Strangely enough, when the essay was reprinted and included in the collection *Both Flesh and Not*, some changes had been made, including the replacement of the word “spirit” with the word “feeling” in the quoted line (see: *Both Flesh and Not* 78).

despair, spirituality and aesthetics, therapy and art. As summarized rather abstractly by Susan Sontag in “The Aesthetics of Silence” (1967): “Every era has to reinvent the project of ‘spirituality’ for itself.” (3).³³ An ongoing ambition of the rest of this dissertation is to try to flesh out what that might possibly mean and look like.

Methodological remarks (or you’re probably so depressed and exhausted by now that you can’t be bothered to read this)

As I hope is evident by now, my project as a whole draws, theoretically as well as empirically, upon a wide range of sources. Despite this heterogeneous character, the work is nevertheless guided by a single and simple ambition: To study the relation between depression and contemporary culture within a temporal framework.

Contrary to what one would expect, given that depression figures so large in discourses surrounding mental illness in the western world, aesthetic studies of depression are still scarce. Christine Ross, who makes an excellent examination of depression and contemporary art in *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, is an exception, while Ann Cvetkovic has written about depression as a cultural and political phenomenon in *Depression: A Public Feeling*, but that is about the extent of such work. And as far as literary studies go, to the best of my knowledge there has been no proper exploration into depressive literature, besides the brief but brilliant book *Anti-Matter: Michel Houellebecq and Depressive Realism* by Ben Jeffery. In all modesty I shall try to compensate for that here. But what I offer is not to be taken as a systematic, exhaustive study, or a general theory of depression. This dissertation should perhaps better be described and read as an assembled and trans-aesthetic study of depression in contemporary culture³⁴, a study that has what could be called a scenographic symptomatology as its methodological principle, not only in terms of the mode of presentation but also in terms of its mode of inquiry. In plain words this means that each chapter of this dissertation is built around specific scenes of literature, art and film. But there is a little more to it than that.

³³ She continues: “In the modern era, one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project is “art.”” (3)

³⁴ A trans-aesthetic and trans-disciplinary approach and a mosaic constellation of primary and secondary sources have been necessary in order to find a possible entrance to a field of research which remains, at least as far as aesthetic studies go, in a relatively virginal state.

Scenography

How can one write about depression without falling into depressed speech, and without standing outside and remaining unaffected by what one is writing about? As Bernard Stiegler writes: “Speaking about misery always entails exposing oneself to the risk of becoming miserable [...] it is only possible to speak of *that which affects the miserable* to the extent that one finds *oneself affected* in one way or the other” (*Uncontrollable societies* 12). Placing oneself outside of the subject is not a viable solution, as Stiegler also points out. Becoming affected by and entangled in the empirical material is not merely an option but a condition. There is no way out, no other way about it. Yet, the task is – at the same time – one of finding a position in relation to depression or developing a discourse on depression that is not in itself depressing.³⁵

By the same token, Lauren Berlant has pointed out that at one point she began to write from “the position of depressive realism in which the world’s hard scenes ride the wave of the optimism inscribed in ambivalence, but without taking on optimism’s conventional tones. I do not have the aim of moving beyond x but the aim of sitting there awhile, dedramatizing the performance of critical and political judgment so as to slow down the encounter with the objects of knowledge that are really scenes we can barely get our eyes around.” (“Starved” 434). Notwithstanding the fact that I, as stated previously, do not subscribe to the theory of depressive realism, the challenge that Berlant puts on the table is readily accepted. Slowing down “the encounter with the objects of knowledge”, is thus elevated to a methodological principle precisely because it allows for surprise encounters and for following the unexpected twists and turns in any given scene.

Etymologically the word *scenography*, comprising the words *skēnē* and *grapho*, entails describing a scene, setting a scene, or writing a scene. Aristotle wrote about this in his *Poetics*, but Erich Auerbach was the one to cultivate a proper scenographic method in his seminal work *Mimesis* (1946), where he initiated each chapter with a long passage – a scene – for a particular work of literature. Recently, however, Jacques Rancière has worked in an analogous manner. In the book *Aisthesis* he describes his method as follows:

³⁵ In his book *The Soul at Work* Berardi writes: “This is just what we need today: An awareness of depression that would not be depressing” (134), and along the same lines Ann Cvetkovich states: “The concept of political depression is not, it should be emphasized, meant to be wholly depressing.” (2)

Each one of these scenes thus presents a singular event, and explores the interpretive network that gives it meaning around an emblematic text [...] The scene is not the illustration of an idea. It is a little optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names and ideas, constituting the sensible community that these links create, and the intellectual community that makes such weaving thinkable. The scene captures concepts at work, in their relation to new objects they seek to appropriate, old objects that they try to reconsider, and the patterns they build or transform to this end. For thinking is always first thinking the thinkable – a thinking that modifies what was thinkable by welcoming what was unthinkable. (xi)

What Rancière emphasizes is that the scenes are events, small optical machines, “microcosms” (XII), which individually and together reveal how “perceptions, affects, names and ideas” are woven together and made visible. The scene forces an analytical approach which in this context can be translated into a principle of pausing and lingering at the individual scenes of depression, which are admittedly circular, but also open, not least to each other: They circle around themselves, around each other and around their already ever-empty centers. There is not, then, one coherent, linear argument, but rather a series of scenes, a series of arguments. The dramaturgy of the dissertation thus seeks to avoid a narrative of progress(ion) in favor of a more paratactic technique, which involves hesitant, lateral and crab-like movements. Only in this way, as far as I can see, is it possible to capture the *differentia specifica* of the depressive experience as it unfolds in the various scenes; only then does it become possible to render explicit *the singularity of the symptom* (the symptoms may be more or less the same across the scenes but that does not mean that the experiences or the aesthetic expressions are identical...).

Symptomatology

As for the word symptom or symptomatology, I use the words consciously and carefully, not in a Freudian sense according to which symptoms are derivatives of repressed conflicts³⁶ but in a Deleuzian sense. Firstly, this has the advantage of avoiding the logic of causality and etiology. In the book *Two Regimes of Madness* Deleuze thus writes that if we wish to analyze “the sickness of

³⁶ See for instance Freud’s *The Question of Lay Analysis* (203).

today's society, we should not look to generalizations about our way of life, but to very precise mechanisms of a social, political, and economic nature." (28). Instead of extrapolating causal connections and "generalizations", it is much more fruitful to look for and write about "very precise mechanisms of a social, political, and economic nature" that this or that mental illness relates to. It is these precise mechanisms that appear in the scenes, not as *causes*, but as *symptoms*. While Deleuze (and Guattari) is preoccupied with the phenomenon of schizophrenia, and my concern here is depression, the consequences remain the same: It is not possible to claim that any one formation of society is the *cause* of depression. Secondly, the question of symptomatology is an entirely aesthetic or artistic question for Deleuze. This has to be understood in a very specific sense, however: In the same way that an author, for instance, does not write with his or her individual feelings, (s)he does not write with his or her mental illnesses either. On the whole, the artist is not the patient but the physician; not the one who is being cured, but the one who cures.³⁷ It is in this sense that the symptomatology he proposes becomes critical and clinical, to refer to the title of one Deleuze's books. The artwork is consequently to be seen, as Jens Lohfert Jørgensen points out in the book *Sygdomstegn* in which he makes use of Deleuze's method, as a *constellation* of symptoms and an *articulation* of cultural – and, I would add, political – conflicts (59-63). A constellation and an articulation; a problem, or a set of problems, and a response³⁸; a diagnosis and a prognosis. It cannot be emphasized too strongly: There is no causality, nor etiology, which means that one is forced to look at – or rather listen to – the *Klagen* and *Anklagen* that arise as an echo out of the abyss of depression in the individual scenes.

It was Freud who, in "Mourning and Melancholia", engaged in a speculation on the complaints (*Klagen*) and accusations (*Anklagen*) of the melancholic patient. But in this dissertation

³⁷ In *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze writes: "Clinicians who are able to renew a symptomatological picture produce a work of art; conversely, artists are clinicians, not with respect to their own case, nor even with respect to a case in general; rather, they are clinicians of civilization." (237), and in the essay "Literature and Life", he states: "the writer as such is not a patient but a physician, the physician of himself and of the world. The world is a set of symptoms whose illness merges with man. Literature then appears as the enterprise of health" (*Essays critical and clinical* 3).

³⁸ In his exhaustive doctoral dissertation with the awe-inspiring and untranslatable title "Stemningssindssygdommenes historie i det 19. århundrede: Omtydningen af melankolien og manien som bipolarere stemningsslidelser i dansk sammenhæng under hensyn til dannelsen af det moderne følelseslivs relative autonomi. En problematiserings- og erfaringsanalytisk undersøgelse", Marius Gudmand-Høyer points out that experience enters into an exchange between problem and response ("udveksling imellem problem og respons." (33)). His reference point, however, is not Deleuze but Foucault.

Freud's argument is turned upside down. To Freud the *Klagen* and *Anklagen* are always directed inwards, toward the melancholic self, as part of the endless production of narcissistic guilt and excessive self-hatred of melancholy, meaning that everything evolves around what the melancholic subject *in reality* says about his or her self. Here, in contrast, it is more a question of mapping out and trying to understand what this same self has to say *about reality*. How the world appears from the position and perspective of depression and what the depressive subject is really talking about when she is talking about herself – those are the questions. In relation to literary texts, for example, one important implication is that the attention must not only be directed toward any given text's view of depression, but also toward the view of the world that the depressive experience occasions in the work in question. Accordingly, the analytical task requires at least two more or less explicit steps: As a first step, it is a matter of localizing and specifying the depressive experience³⁹ (a constellation of symptoms), and, as a second step, of perceiving this experience as a response to a problem, or, as may well be the case, the actual production of a given problem (an articulation of conflict, a process of problematization). Crucially, the problem is not necessarily given beforehand; thus the depressive work of art is not just an illustration of a problem and cannot be thought of simply as a reaction to, or a product of, a set of problems. The questions then become: What kinds of – contemporary and social – problems do the works of art, not merely respond to but also, to a certain extent, produce? How do they respond? Can the response be said to be some sort of therapeutic cure, to perform a certain pharmacological function? How critical and how clinical can depressive art claim to be, in other words? How do they avoid being purely pessimistic pieces of art, seduced by the cynicism that seems to be an almost inevitable affective attendant to the pathology of depression?

Three paradoxes

As the remainder of this dissertation will disclose, there is a certain dialectics at play in the works that needs to be reckoned with. The hypothesis can be risked that this 'dialectics' takes the form of three paradoxes.

³⁹ "A depressed person does not have an experience *of* something called 'depression'. Rather, those with diagnoses of depression have certain kinds of experience." (Ratcliffe 3).

The first paradox is that such a thing as depressive art even exists. In itself it approaches a contradiction in terms. The depressed person experiences a complete lack of creativity and imagination, denying an artist the very tools of his or her trade. This could be called the constitutive aporia of depressive literature and art: Strictly speaking, the depressive person does not write (or paint, or compose, or...). Thus, the question is not only how depression becomes a problem *of* literature and art in general, but also how depression at the same time becomes a problem *for* literature and art.⁴⁰

The second paradox has to do with a dark variety of comedy that arises in depressive art. Kierkegaard has written that “the melancholy have the best sense of the comic” (*Either/Or Vol 1* 20-21). In fact, Kierkegaard repeatedly states, in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, that a mis-relation or contradiction lies at the root of the comic, and therefore the comic is everywhere in so far as life is essentially characterized by contradiction. Thus, Kierkegaard arrives at a strikingly simple law of the comic and the law is: “Where there is life, there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comic is present.” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 513-514). As a consequence, comedy, for Kierkegaard, is irreducible to a “style of speaking” (“Tale-Form”), and it is not a matter of genre alone (the genre of comedy or tragicomedy, for instance). Rather, comedy is what he calls an “existence-qualification” (“Existents-Bestemmelse”) (ibid. 503). In other words: A mis-relation in the self not only forms the basis of deep despair; it is also the stuff that comedy is made of. The structure is, in a way, the same. We can even translate it into the vocabulary relied on so far and say that the temporal desynchronization of depression – between a present self and a future, ideal self or between a self and the world around it – potentially entails a comic quality. That there seems to be a somewhat structural similarity between despair or depression and comedy is something that Simon Critchley has also observed in *On Humour*: “Humour has the same formal structure as depression, but it is an anti-depressant that works by the ego finding itself ridiculous.” (101). The question is: What kind of function does the depressive humor serve?

⁴⁰ At the outset of her book *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, Christine Ross writes: “The focus there is on how contemporary art inscribes itself in the discursive debate on depression.” (xxvii), and at the very end: “It is precisely here, in this interstice between psychodynamics and diagnostic psychiatry, that art enters the depression debate” (181). Her main question is thus “how is art relevant to the question of depression, how does art contribute to scientific debates on depression” and not the opposite and perhaps more interesting one: How is depression relevant to art?

Does this dark comedy, as Critchley suggests, function as an anti-depressant, as a cathartic redemption?⁴¹

The third paradox relates to the fact that the depressive scenes sometimes evidence, however briefly, a paradoxical impulse of optimism and hope. In the words of Lauren Berlant, they can be said to unfold an “interregnum of hesitation when the relation of living to a fantasy of life has to be reinvented.” (“Austerity” 4). It is imperative to look at depression as an experience in itself, in its own right, with all the pain and misery that that it entails, but at the same time we cannot neglect those quasi-dialectical reversals where a scene goes in the direction of a relation – to oneself, to the other, to the world – that has to be and maybe even is reinvented, repaired or rebuilt (ibid.). Following Berlant we can say that an “[a]esthetic projection” (4) in the form of a fantasy is central, maybe even integral, to some of the scenes.⁴² The scenographic method requires attentiveness toward – a hesitation before – those very rare moments when an act of reparation or fabulation produces a more hopeful rhythm, when another relation to the future is formed. When the tyrant Bane, in the third part of the Batman-trilogy, states that there can be no despair without hope, we might conversely and cautiously add that perhaps there can be no hope without despair either. But we are getting ahead of ourselves here. Now it is time to listen to the concrete *Klagen* and *Anklagen* the aesthetic works themselves. Before that, though, a chapter-by-chapter rundown.

Itinerary

Chapter 1 carries out an analysis of several novels by Michel Houellebecq. Descending into a scene from his debut novel *Whatever*, I begin by analyzing the constellation of depressive symptoms expressed in the book. Moving then to the process of problematization initiated by the depressive experience itself, the chapter hones in on the relation between depression and the generalized state of *competition* that has materialized in the neoliberal economy, ambiguously assisted by the events of May ‘68. On the basis of that groundwork, the remainder of the chapter will take as its center of rotation three distinct models of response to the problem that has been articulated:

⁴¹ That this question of humor was not only a structural question, but also a historical and cultural one was something Wallace was very aware of, not least in his struggle with overcoming what he perceived to be a postmodern culture of irony (and cynicism) (see in particular his essay *E Unibus Pluram* from 1993).

⁴² In this dissertation I prefer to speak about fabulation or fiction, but the idea remains the same.

Science or technology in *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island*, religion or spirituality in *Submission*, and last but not least, art. The reading concludes that the ‘solutions’ suggested or at least experimentally put forth in Houellebecq’s novels are, in fact, no solutions at all. There is no light at the end of the tunnel, only yet another tunnel.

Chapter 2, an analysis of David Foster Wallace’s magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996) and a couple of stories from the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), starts from the premise that to Wallace a critical diagnosis is never enough in itself: Literature must take the form of some kind of cure. What follows from the analysis of the first two scenes is that depression, for Wallace, is a condition in which the capacity for empathy has vaporized; the Other – whose temporal order is, as Levinas points out, the future – is lost. To Wallace this is not purely a personal problem, but a cultural and perhaps very American one of addiction. The so-called double demon of depression (as total withdrawal from the other/object) and addiction (as total immersion in the other/object) makes it almost impossible to imagine a way out: How does one safely cross these narrow waters between Scylla and Charybdis? Taking my cue from Søren Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love* and his radical reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan, I suggest that Wallace’s writing is not about empathizing *with* the other but rather presupposing the capacity for love and empathy *in* the other. The question is, though, whether this translates into a political project at all.

Chapter 3, which performs an exploration into the readymade works of the artist duo Claire Fontaine, moves in a more explicitly political, even anti-phenomenological direction. The theoretical and historical entry point will be the concept of *debt*. As thinkers from Nietzsche to Lazzarato have shown, debt has profound effects on both subjectivity and temporality. This is the reason, in works such as the video *P.I.G.S*, ready-made sculpture *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)*, and neon works *Past Present Future, Please God Make Tomorrow better* and *Untitled (Sell your debt)*, a global and contemporary situation is addressed in which debt (and its twin: financial speculation) seems to make the future a calculable and profitable domain for a small elite, and a source of endless desperation and depression for the rest. For Claire Fontaine, however, what is lost is less the future than the present. Moreover, in the works of the artist duo depression is not exactly to be seen as a sickness or a symptom. It is rather a strike, a human strike. Thus, the chapter finally

discusses how and if depression, as a paradigmatic expression of pure inactivity, can bring about a rhythmic suspension of the teleological order of the world that is not pathological but political.

Chapter 4 concentrates exclusively on Lars von Trier's movie *Melancholia* (2011). The first scene in this chapter deals with the protagonist Justine's depression as a defective futurology, a protentional collapse, which is to say, an inability to project and form plans; a pathology highlighted to the extreme when confronted with an external environment of plans constantly being made. The chapter goes on to show that what animates all of the other character's plans is an ideological imperative of *happiness*. From here the chapter turns to the relation of disaster and depression, whose cosmological framework seems to render the notion of happiness totally irrelevant. Here, the crucial questions become: How do you face the end of the world? What do you do when the future literally has no future? The perhaps surprising argument of the chapter is that neither Justine, nor the movie as a whole, ends in a position of cynicism, nihilism or pessimism. At the brink of total annihilation, *Melancholia* provides an impetus for what I would call a paradoxical, eschatological hope.

Four chapters, four variations on the problem of futurity, four sets of symptoms or constellation of symptoms, and four specific problems, or articulations of cultural and political conflicts: Competition in Houellebecq, addiction in Wallace, debt in Claire Fontaine, happiness/the end of the world in von Trier. And also, four responses, four pharmacological models, which can tentatively and rather roughly be schematized as follows: If Houellebecq's response is techno-scientific and pertains to a transgression of being human, Wallace's is ethico-spiritual and pertains to a recovery of the other, Claire Fontaine's is radical-political and pertains to a transformation of depression into a strike, and von Trier's is cosmic-eschatological and pertains to the erection of an architecture of hope against all evidence to the contrary.

Chapter 1

Michel Houellebecq

Intro

There is not a single protagonist in the novels of Houellebecq who is not depressed. From his debut novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (mysteriously translated as *Whatever*) to his latest *Soumission* (*Submission*), from the nameless narrator in the former to Francois in the latter, a depressive experience seems to saturate every fiber, every word. Descending into a specific scene from *Whatever*, I begin this chapter by analyzing the constellation of depressive symptoms, primarily expressed in the book as a problem of futurity.

If this first scene involves an investigation into the articulation of depression in *Whatever* as a problem – an investigation of the experience of depression in its own right – the subsequent scenes gradually shift focus toward how the experience of depression in turn articulates – or is symptomatic of – some pertinent problems in the historical context within which this experience arises and unfolds. Bearing in mind the previous modification of Freud's conception of and distinction between the melancholic *Klagen* and *Anklagen*, we can stipulate that the *Anklagen* voiced in the works of Houellebecq are aimed at the twin trajectories of neoliberalism and the events and aftermath of May 1968, whose two ideologies of (economic) competition and (erotic) liberation have converged in the figure of the entrepreneur, and resulted in an expanded field of battle within which it has become impossible to distinguish between money and sex. For Houellebecq, this seems to equate a deep crisis, which I – relying on Stiegler's conceptualization of spirit – do not hesitate to call a spiritual crisis. In this chapter I am, in other words, tracing the movement from a phenomenological experience of depression to depression's problematization of the political economy. Or perhaps, rather than a movement from the former to the latter, we should describe it as an oscillation between the two, insofar as it is more an analytical distinction than an actual relation. In practice – i.e. in Houellebecq's *oeuvre* as whole – the two levels are inseparable. Perhaps one could even speak of his depressive literature as a phenomenology of the political economy?

Venturing into an analysis of *Les Particules élémentaires* (*Atomised*), scene two will look at Houellebecq's critique of the political economy, his diagnosis of the times as formulated from and through the depressive experience laid bare in scene one. After that, in scene three and four, I shall attend to two possible models of cure to be found in Houellebecq's body of work.

Dealing with *La Possibilité d'une île* (*The Possibility of an Island*) – a novel which in a sense is a sequel to *Atomised* – scene three is concerned with the question of science and technology, whereas scene four, which offers a reading of *Submission*, takes up the question of religion and spirituality.⁴³ But what about art and literature in Houellebecq's pharmacological *experimentarium*? The quite extensive outro (or threshold as I have chosen to call it) will serve as an opportunity to ponder this question. It may well be that literature – like philosophy according to Simon Critchley – begins with a disappointment, but who is to say whether it might not also be interested in ending in one?

⁴³ As Angela C. Holzer points out, though, "the scientific solution" is in itself not without a certain "a spiritual quality" (6).

Scene 1: *Whatever*

“From time to time, he [the psychiatrist] glances at his wristwatch (fawn leather strap, rectangular gold-plated face); I get the feeling of not overly interesting him. I ask myself if he keeps a revolver in his drawer, for patients in a state of violent crisis. At the end of half an hour he pronounces a few phrases of general import on periods of blankness, extends my leave of absence and increases my dosage of medication. He also reveals that my condition has a name: it’s a depression. Officially, then, I’m in a depression. The formula seems a happy one to me. It’s not that I feel tremendously low; it’s rather that the world around me appears high.” (*Whatever* 134-135)⁴⁴

Here he is, the protagonist and narrator of Michel Houellebecq’s debut novel *Whatever* (1994). The man without a name is a computer programmer, he is 30 years old but feels much older, and his life consists of nothing but pizza, porn and pills. He is clearly unhappy, but why does the formula – that he is in a depression – seem a happy one to him? What does it mean that rather than feeling low, he feels that the world around him is high? What kind of topography is that? And what sort of realism is at work here and in the novel as a whole? As we will see below, Houellebecq’s depressive literature is not a matter of content alone; it pertains to form and style as well. Not only is a certain depressive discourse made manifest in the novel, the grammatical tenses used help to establish the future as a thing of the past. For that reason the concept of symptomatology introduced earlier is going to be helpful in the course of this scene, not only in order to read Houellebecq’s novel symptomatologically but also in order to substantiate the claim that its realism is based on a certain symptomatology (thus the symptomatology in question pertains as much to Houellebecq’s method as a writer as to my method as a reader). One of the implications of this first scene is, in other words, that I shall extract and develop a concept of symptomatological realism rather than rely on and apply the hypothesis of depressive realism.

“Failure, everywhere failure”

It is not until the very expiration of *Whatever* that the narrator receives the diagnosis of depression, but from beginning to end he exhibits a variety of depressive symptoms. He is inactive, immobilized, utterly exhausted and without any interest whatsoever in material things,

⁴⁴ The novel is henceforth abbreviated to *W*. All page references will be to the English translation, unless I have estimated that something important is lost or left out, in which case the French original is going to be included (the same goes for the other scenes and novels in this chapter).

social interaction, erotic adventures, or life in general. He is incapable of investing his desire in “the possibility of establishing various interconnections between individuals, projects, organizations, service.” (38).⁴⁵ He is totally disinvested, completely disconnected.

At one point he is on a business trip somewhere in France: He wants to go to Paris, he buys a ticket, he waits for the train, he does not go. This is, in so many words, a perfect example of the pathology of action integral to depression.⁴⁶ The protagonist in *Whatever* can go back to Paris or he can stay where he is: It does not make any difference. But if one is unable to act oneself, one can certainly attempt to get others to act on one’s behalf. In the depressive state of affairs that makes up his life, every action is outsourced. He is, however, not alone on this business trip but accompanied by a man called Raphael Tisserand, a sad little frog-like virgin in his late twenties. At Christmas time the two of them decide to celebrate by going to a disco. Raphael tries to pick up one woman after the other but to no avail. One woman in particular, or more precisely a young girl, catches his attention and when she leaves with – in the deliberately inappropriate jargon of the novel – a ‘mulatto’, the narrator and Raphael follow them down to a beach. The secret plan of the former is to persuade the latter to kill the mulatto and, afterwards, the girl (a scene obviously alluding to Albert Camus’ *The stranger*). The point is that the depressed protagonist outsources the main and central Act, except that it never takes place: Raphael does in fact go down to the beach, but instead of using his knife to kill the couple who are now having sex, he jerks off. He then drags himself back to the car, says goodbye to the narrator, gets in, drives off towards Paris and is killed in an accident on the way home. The chain of events has something overtly ridiculous and comical about it. To quote Beckett: “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness”.⁴⁷ It would, however, be a mistake to claim that the laughter in Houellebecq has a redemptive function. In the end every comedian – and Houellebecq is a comedian, no doubt about it, even if – or rather because – his literature is so depressive – must come to realize that life, as a line goes in *Possibility of an Island*, “fundamentally is not comical.” (32).

⁴⁵ Our civilization suffers from “vital exhaustion” a character says at one point in *Whatever* (29). This character considers the main character as a “fitting symbol of this vital exhaustion. No sex drive, no ambition; no real interests, either.” (30)

⁴⁶ Cf. Ehrenberg 144.

⁴⁷ In its totality the quote, from *Endgame*, reads: “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that... Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more.” (*The Complete Dramatic Works* 101).

Back in *Whatever*, New Year's Eve is coming up: "I walk from place to place in the grip of a fury, needing to act, yet can do nothing about it because any attempt seems doomed in advance. Failure, everywhere failure. Only suicide hovers above me, gleaming and inaccessible", the narrator states (*W* 131). Suicide is not an option either: Michel is too depressed and impotent for that too. And then he is hospitalized.

What is up and what is down? The topography of depression

The scene at the psychiatric clinic where Michel receives his diagnosis is strangely reminiscent of Kierkegaard's description of despair in *Sickness unto Death*. In this book Kierkegaard develops a regular typology of despair, the conceptual pair most relevant for our purposes being his description of a despair of possibility and a despair of necessity. In a situation of excess possibility the self "flounders around in possibility until it is exhausted" (36), whereas in a situation of too little possibility "a person seems unable to breathe" (39).⁴⁸ Despite the very self-conscious mockery of Hegelian dialectics throughout – nowhere more clear than in the opening lines where the self, as already mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, is defined as a relation that relates itself to itself – there *is* a dialectical tinge to the concept of despair. According to Kierkegaard, there can in some case, even be something diabolical or demonic to the state of despair. The self in demonic despair is a self who clings to his or her despair. It is a self who is not, on any account, willing to let go of the despair; a self who would rather be *right* than be *redeemed*; a self who does not want to seek help even if that means living through "all the agonies of hell." (71). Suffice to say that this demonic logic is certainly not entirely alien to Houellebecq's protagonists.

In the beginning of *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard writes that, normally, *to be able to be* this or that does not have the same status as *to be* this or that. Reality or actuality (*Virkelighed*) is on a higher level than possibility (*Mulighed*). For this reason he writes that "being is related to the ability to be as an ascent" (15). With despair the situation is completely different: "With respect to despair, however, to be is like a descent when compared with being able to be;

⁴⁸ Two attitudes to be derived from the despair of necessity are determinism and fatalism: "The determinist, the fatalist is in despair and as one in despair has lost his self, because for him everything has become necessity. He is like that king who starved to death because all his food was changed to gold." (*Sickness unto Death* 40).

the descent is infinitely low as the excellence of possibility is high.” (15). To be is thus related to the ability to be as *a fall*. “Infinite as is the advantage of the possibility”, Kierkegaard notes with stunning clarity, “just so great is the measure of the fall.” (ibid.). This means that in the case of despair possibility stands above actuality. The self in despair experiences a *fall* from the self that could be to the self that is or, alternatively, a fall from the future to the present. If anxiety, as Kierkegaard defines it, is to be compared with the feeling of vertigo or dizziness one experiences when staring *down* into the abyss of existence, into the void of freedom, the nothingness of being (*The Concept of Anxiety* 61), then despair may be imagined as the feeling of standing or lying down in that abysmal hole while looking *up*.

This peculiar relationship between up and down, between what is possible and what is necessary, between present and future, is in any case what defines despair according to Kierkegaard, and it is also what defines the paradigmatic scene in *Whatever*. “It’s not that I feel tremendously low, it’s rather that world around me appears high”, Michel explains (“*Non que je me sente très bas; c’est plutôt le monde autour de moi qui me paraît haut.*” (135)). But rather than emphasizing the mis-relation between a present/actual and future/possible self – that is, a mis-relation within the self – as Kierkegaard tends to do, Houellebecq is much more interested in the misrelation – or de-synchronization to use Thomas Fuchs’ concept – between self and world. Another obvious difference: Michel in *Whatever* is not (just) in despair, he is depressed.⁴⁹ Though Michel mocks the psychiatrist and the whole realm of psychiatry, not to mention psychology – for example, taking great pains to describe the fancy watch (“fawn leather strap, rectangular gold-plated face”) that the psychiatrist wears and repeatedly glances at before delivering his diagnosis in the most routine like manner – and though the narrator, as well as the novel as a whole, is clearly not interested in the *diagnosis* or the *name* of depression⁵⁰, the *reality* of depression is examined to the point of exhaustion.

⁴⁹ As already established, existential or spiritual despair – as defined by Kierkegaard, or Karl Jaspers for that matter – can be and often is a central component of depression. Carole Sweeney, in her book *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, in fact applies the concept of despair. Strangely enough, though, Sweeney never quite makes explicit what she means by despair, but what is even stranger is that she, in her otherwise perceptive analysis of the works of Houellebecq, does not relate the phenomenon of despair to that of depression.

⁵⁰ In *Atomised*, we thus find the following line: “Was he depressed, and did such a question have any meaning?” (270)

Depressive realism?

Does this warrant or justify a reading of Houellebecq as a depressive realist, not only in the sense that he captures the reality of depressive suffering, but also that that he captures the reality from a depressive perspective?

In itself, the depression to be found in Houellebecq seems to constitute a negative optical system, a bleak and pessimistic world-view. In the book *Ghosts of My Life*, to which I referred in the introduction, Mark Fisher writes that “[d]epression is, after all and above all, a theory about the world, about life...Depression is not sadness, not even a state of mind, it is a (neuro)philosophical (dis)position.” (59). A certain pessimism, perhaps even cynicism or nihilism, appears to be at work here. It is no coincidence that the first book Houellebecq ever wrote and published was a monograph on the American horror fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft, *H.P. Lovecraft. Against the World, Against Life* (1991). The title of the book says it all, but in case that is not enough, one could content oneself with consulting the following emphatic line from Lovecraft’s story “Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family”, also quoted by Houellebecq): “Life is a hideous thing, and from the background behind what we know of it peer daemoniacal hints of truth which make it sometimes a thousandfold more hideous.” (59).

Of course, Houellebecq has also read Pascal and Schopenhauer, compulsory reading for any proper pessimist. But Lovecraft was the true love: Here Houellebecq has found and still finds an endless source of inspiration with regards to the pessimistic view of the world, the deep disgust with society and the endless rants against what Lovecraft called *smirking optimism* in the essay “Supernatural horror in literature” (*At the Mountains of Madness* 105). As the narrator of *Whatever* broadcasts:

“I don't like this world. I definitely do not like it. The society in which I live disgusts me; advertising sickens me; computers make me puke. My entire work as a computer expert consists of adding to the data, the cross-referencing, the criteria of rational decision-making. It has no meaning. To tell the truth, it is even negative up to a point; a useless encumbering of the neurons. This world has need of many things, bar more information.” (W 82).

There is, however, something suspicious – treacherous even – about these prototypical Houellebecqian statements. They testify to the danger of the depressive position, the risk of being seduced by the wisdom and clarity that seem to emanate from it: A seduction that goes not only in the direction of the one who listens to or reads the depressive’s tirades, but also concerns the depressed person himself. Again, Mark Fisher describes this very well: “The depressive is always confident of one thing: that he is without illusion [...] Depressive ontology is dangerously seductive because, as the zombie twin of a certain philosophical wisdom, it is half true.” (*Ghosts of my Life* 60-61). In that sense, what presents itself as a total lack of illusions may in fact be the ultimate illusion; what appears as a certain realism about the world, an objective assessment, can very well be a psychological defense mechanism as well, a routine to fall back on, a mask to hide behind. As Jonathan Franzen – who has also written perceptively about his colleague and friend David Foster Wallace – writes in the essay “Why Bother?”:

“Depression presents itself as a realism regarding the rottenness of the world in general and the rottenness of your life in particular. But the realism is merely a mask for depression's actual essence, which is an overwhelming estrangement from humanity. The more persuaded you are of your unique access to the rottenness, the more afraid you become of engaging with the world; and the less you engage with the world, the more perfidiously happy-faced the rest of humanity seems for continuing to engage with it.” (87).

Such accusations would not be totally unwarranted in the case of Houellebecq, though I would question the assumption that Houellebecq is such a primitive writer – or so caught up in demonic despair – that he identifies his personal collapse with the collapse of the world.⁵¹ There are, in other words, enough reasons to be wary of the hypothesis of depressive realism, which – as mentioned earlier – holds that that depressed people have a more accurate and realistic assessment of the world than non-depressed people do; that they have, in the words of Freud, “a keener eye for the truth than others who are not melancholic.” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 206). In the scholarship on Houellebecq, though, this kind of thinking has remained quite

⁵¹ At the end of his review of Houellebecq’s latest novel *Submission*, Karl Ove Knausgård seems to suggest something like this. I shall return to that novel and Knausgård’s review in part 4.

influential, leading to the widespread perception that his depressed protagonists – or Houellebecq as the depressed author – are in possession of a special knowledge about the society and world they live in.⁵² Thus, Houellebecqean sentences about the horror of the modern world – society is disgusting, work is meaningless, life is useless – are taken at face-value, as plain truths about the world, and insights that even sociology must envy. My point here is not just that depression, in the words of Franzen, “has become fashionable to the point of banality” (72); but that there is no guarantee that the statements which issue from the depressive position rise above the level of banality. In fact, a lot of the sentences do not transgress standard pessimist phrases or clichés. In addition to this problem of *banality*, there is a problem of *inconsistency*. At one moment, the individual is taken to be a pure expression of social and historical processes, only to be regarded within the framework of a stern biological determinism or a Lovecraftian cosmology the next. This is made even clearer if we turn to Houellebecq’s other novels: Suddenly the traumatic childhood of Bruno in *Atomised* is, for example, presented as the cause of his adult misery, while psychology is denounced in other places as the most ridiculous science of all.

Symptomatological realism take one

There is a general consideration I would like to interpolate here, namely that it is important not to surrender too quickly to the captivating concept of depressive realism: One might end up in the cul-de-sac of causality, in the labyrinth of etiological explanations. It should be remembered that that Houellebecq is not a psychologist, but he is not a sociologist either, nor an economist for that matter.⁵³ Despite what most people seem to believe Houellebecq is, first and last, a writer (who is surely allowed his fair share of (self-)contradictions)). More explicitly, he is a writer who deals with depression, but only in the sense that his literature is a construction and exploration of depressive

⁵² See for instance Ben Jeffery’s book *Anti-Matter*, which explicitly draws upon the notion of depressive realism, or Paul Berman’s review of *Atomised* in *New Republic*, which bears the simple title “Depressive Lucidity”, a phrase that turns up in the novel (270). Implicitly, the same idea flourishes in a sociological reading like Anders Petersen and Michael Hviid Jacobsen’s “Houellebecq’s Dystopia – A Case of the Elective Affinity between Sociology and Literature”. What must to be stressed is that the hypothesis of depressive realism or any other kind of romantic notion of depression must be abandoned, even if the artists or artworks themselves seem to subscribe to such ideas, as *Whatever* does at a glance. Indeed, at one point the narrator implies a connection between his wretched life and his unbending clarity of perception; he is miserable because he can see what misery life in reality consists of (146).

⁵³ As for the latter view see Bernard Maris’ *Houellebecq. Economiste* (2014).

symptoms. It is more a symptomatology than an etiology. Or to put it another way: What is noteworthy about Houellebecq's account of the political anatomy of depression is not so much the criticism of society that he consistently performs and advances, as the depressive position *from which* this criticism is raised. At times the statements appear banal but the toneless voice *with which* these statements is delivered is itself far from banal.

This does not mean that realism cannot be found in the works of Houellebecq, but that the realism is located elsewhere, in what I would call *a symptomatological realism* rather than a depressive realism. Nor does it mean that the criticism which emerges from the depressive position is not worth paying attention to, only that it is necessary to take into account its banalities and inconsistencies, not to mention the fictional setting and situation in which a given statement is put forth. Above all, it means that an analysis of Houellebecq's novels cannot remain at the level of content when looking into the depressive symptoms but must consider the formal aspects as well. His symptomatology is operative on various levels, which I shall now go through in the order given: On a *stylistic* level, on a *compositional and characterological* level, and on a *grammatical* level.

A truly very self-aware debut novel, *Whatever* is unafraid of laying bare its own endeavor. No more psychological realism, the novel declares at the very beginning, though this is not to be taken as a rejection of realism *per se*: "All that accumulation of realistic detail, with clearly differentiated characters hogging the limelight has always seemed pure bullshit to me [...] Might as well watch lobsters marching up the side of an aquarium." (13-14). In direct continuity with this preliminary design of a new poetics, a later passage reads:

"This progressive effacement of human relationships is not without certain problems for the novel. How, in point of fact, would one handle the narration of those unbridled passions, stretching over many years, and at times making their effect felt on several generations? We're a long way from *Wuthering Heights*, to say the least. The novel form is not conceived for depicting indifference or nothingness; a flatter, more terse, and dreary discourse would need to be invented." (40).

This is, in fact, what Houellebecq preaches and practices, not only in *Whatever*, but in his whole *oeuvre*, and the reason he is often accused of being a fundamentally bad writer. His syntax is too simple, his style too uninspired, people claim. Just look, for example, at the beginning of *Whatever*: “Friday evening I was invited to a party at a colleague from work’s house. There were thirty-odd of us, all middle management aged between twenty-five and forty.” (3) (“Vendredi soir, j’étais invité à une soirée chez un collègue de travail. On était une bonne trentaine, rien que des cadres moyens ages de vingt-cinq à quarante ans.” (5)). Sure enough, a chain of main clauses seems to drag themselves – and the reader – along. There is complete lack of affective vibration in the narrator’s voice. The tonal register is flat, the intonation without any ring, the language as a whole appears empty and inanimate. These are indeed typical traits of any Houellebecq novel, but that is exactly the point: The invention of “a flatter, more terse and dreary discourse”. What we have here is “a kind of limp *déjà dit*”, as Victoria Best and Martin Crowley correctly point out: “we all know everything already (including, of course, the fact that we all know everything already...)” (185). The stylistic effect – or rather affect – is the feeling of exhaustion at having said it all before, of having to repeat oneself over and over again. It is, I would claim, a symptomatic discourse, a discourse symptomatic of depression. But Houellebecq’s symptomatology goes deeper than that.

On one level, some of Houellebecq’s sci-fi scenarios of the future in his other books can be read as being so rudimentary that it is hard not to view them as signs of a collapsed imagination. The very construction of works like *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island* seems to be a symptom of an artistic or aesthetic imagination that cannot escape the depressive condition of pure uncreativity (I will expand on this later, picking up Ben Jeffery’s original idea that “Houellebecq’s books are works of the imagination against the imagination. They hate themselves.” (53)). On another level the symptomatology pertains to the scope of the characters’ imagination – or lack of it. When, for example, Daniel – the main character in *The Possibility of an Island* – finds a young girlfriend and one of the primary differences between the two characters manifests in their different conceptions of capitalism: “Capitalism was for her [Esther] a natural habitat, in which she moved with the grace that characterized all the actions in her life; to strike in protest of planned redundancies would have seemed to her as absurd as striking against the weather getting colder, or the invasion of North Africa by crickets” (133). Capitalism is Esther’s natural habitat, which

makes it difficult for her to imagine the end of capitalism, let alone an alternative to it. In a talk given at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in February 2014 under the title “On some of the affects of capitalism”, Bruno Latour addressed this relationship between nature and society, between earth and the capitalist economy, between first nature and second nature, between “binding necessities” and “boundless possibilities.” (3). Latour’s point was that this relationship has been turned upside down so that today it is nature and the natural laws that appear as a field of contingency and subject to change, whereas capitalism has been transformed into a first nature that is as unalterable as the laws of nature used to be: “[I]t is the Earth that is undergoing subversion at a dizzying pace and the Economy – that is, second nature – that still runs like clockwork.” (7). As for Esther, this constitutes no problem at all, causing no despairing or depressive feelings, since all she has ever known is the capitalist clockwork. It is totally different for Daniel and all the other (male) narrators and protagonists of Houellebecq’s books; every single one *has* known some moment of happiness uncorrupted by capitalism, a brief period of pure love, or something like that.⁵⁴ This explains the occasionally nostalgic or even sentimental tone of the narrators: An awareness of things that have been, or could have been, or could be different. Against such awareness, the present state of things, including the capitalist clockwork, stands out like an abysmal and claustrophobic dungeon. This contrast – foreign to Esther and the people of her generation – is similar to a Kierkegaardian dialectic between necessity and possibility: If you have not had an experience of being *up there*, or of aspiring to some possible other state floating above your head, it is difficult to feel *down*. Which brings us back to *Whatever* and the question of a grammatical symptomatology.

It is two in the afternoon⁵⁵

As already mentioned, at the end of the novel the narrator and main protagonist is diagnosed with depression and hospitalized. After being discharged, he travels to Saint-Cirgues-en-Montagne, specifically the Forest of Mazan. At this point in time he realizes that his horizon of action has been severely limited: “My margin of manoeuvre in life has become singularly restricted. I still

⁵⁴ Cf. *Atomised* 295; *Platform* 163.

⁵⁵ The foundation of this section is the result of a course I taught at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, Copenhagen University, during the spring of 2015: Teaching, supervising, and, above all, reading excellent exam papers and BA-theses have informed a great deal of what follows.

envisage a number of possibilities, but they only vary in points of detail." (W 153). Here the possible has finally given way to the impossible. In a rather crude sense: Necessity wins. The problem is not that he cannot choose between this or that possibility, but that he cannot choose choice itself. Choice as such has disappeared; the possibility of possibility has evaporated from the horizon. As Kierkegaard writes in part II of *Either/Or*, "action is essentially future tense" (105), adding a few pages later: "As truly, then, as there is a time to come, so truly there is an Either/Or" (107). But to the depressive narrator there is precisely no "time to come" and *eo ipso* no Either/Or. There is no longer any future *whatsoever*.

And so, as the novel closes, he goes deeper into the woods: "I am at the heart of the abyss. I feel my skin again as a frontier, and the external world as a crushing weight. The impression of separation is total; from now on I am imprisoned within myself. It will not take place, the sublime fusion; the goal of life is missed. It is two in the afternoon." (155). Here we must pay attention to indications of time, mention of specific dates, and, not least, use of grammatical tenses. It is evident that the novel has a partiality for bringing the reader's attention to seemingly insignificant times of day, such as the description of a peculiar incident when the protagonist witnesses another man's sudden death that ends with the words: "All in a day's work. It was six-twenty" (66). It is six-twenty, it is two in the afternoon. These temporal designations can be understood as expressions of what Thomas Fuchs calls the explicit temporality of depression: A de-synchronization, a loss of the individual's familiarity with his surroundings and the world. Unquestionably, this is where Michel finds himself at the end of *Whatever*: In a situation within which time has become explicit. No longer does time simply pass by unproblematically and unnoticed. As Fuchs writes in the article "Implicit and Explicit Temporality", "explicit time establishes a merciless rule; its passing by is noticed painfully, and the future of lived time seems closed forever." (196). In this kind of depressive experience lived time has become "static", has come "to a standstill." (197).

The final sequence of *Whatever* performs this gradual explicitation of time, as attention is increasingly turned toward the passing of time *itself*, culminating, as previously noted, in the final phrase. But time does not simply become explicit; it acquires, concurrently, a certain diabolical quality. The diabolical horror is not that things end, but that they do not and can not

end. Time has become not dead, but undead.⁵⁶ This may explain and account for the present tense of the ultimate statement: “Il est deux heures de l’après-midi” (156 – my emphasis). Up to this point, the novel has mainly operated in the past tense, though occasionally and sporadically it has shifted to the present tense (*le présent*). However, towards the end, particularly in the final section “Saint-Cirgues-en-Montagne”, the use of the present tense is intensified, bearing witness, perhaps, to an endless now, or what Martin Wyllie – whom Fuchs also quotes – calls “a negative eternity” or “perpetual suffering” in his article “Lived time and Psychopathology”: “Perpetual suffering is suffering with a beginning but no end. Suffering is perpetual if it began, and in so beginning stops temporal movement. Suffering without temporality is suffering that will not end” (182). In this sense, the final designation of time may be a form of period, but the very present tense of the sentence seems to hold the situation open, extending the depressive’s suffering *ad infinitum*.

But what is the cure to this endless suffering, if there is any? The next scene will look into the (potential) cure of science and technology as proposed and practiced in *Atomised*. However, understanding the novel’s contextualization of the suffering is a precondition for considering this pharmacological question.

⁵⁶ As Kierkegaard wrote in *Sickness unto Death*: “[t]he torment of despair is precisely this inability to die. [...] Thus to be sick *unto* death is to be unable to die, yet not as if there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness is that there is not even the ultimate hope, death.” (18). Or as Fisher writes: “The Beckettian ‘I must go on’ is not experienced by the depressive as some redemptive positivity, but as the ultimate horror.” (*Ghosts of my Life* 60).

Scene 2: *Atomised*

“December 31st 1999 fell on a Friday. In the clinic at Verrières-le-Buisson, where Bruno would spend the rest of his life, there was a small party for the patients and the care staff. They drank champagne and ate paprika-flavoured crisps. Later that evening Bruno danced with one of the nurses. He wasn't unhappy; the medication was working, he no longer had any feelings of desire. He enjoyed the afternoon snack, and watching game shows on television with the others before the evening meal. He expected nothing, now, of the progression of days, and the last night of the second millennium was a pleasant one for him.

In cemeteries all across the world, the recently deceased continued to rot in their graves, slowly becoming skeletons.

Michel spent the evening at home. He was too isolated to hear the noise of the party in the village. Many times, warm and peaceful images of Annabelle flitted across his memory, and images too of his grandmother.

He remembered that when he was 13 or 14 he used to buy flashlights, and small mechanical objects which he liked to take apart and put together again endlessly. And he remembered an aeroplane with a motor which his grandmother had given him, which he had never succeeded in flying. It was a beautiful plane, painted in camouflage; in the end, it stayed in its box. Through the slow drift of his consciousness, certain things seemed to characterize his life. There were people and thoughts. Thoughts occupy no space; people occupy a portion of space; they can be seen. Their images form on the lens, pass through the choroid and strike the retina. Alone in the empty house, Michel watched his modest parade of memories. Throughout the evening, a single conviction slowly filled his mind: soon he would be able to get back to work.

All across the surface of the globe, a weary, exhausted humanity, filled with self-doubt and uncertain of its history, prepared itself as best as it could to enter a new millennium.” (*Atomised* 353-4⁵⁷).

What do depressives dream of? And what kind of dream – or nightmare – is the so-called Y2K?

What kind of historical time is revealed through this New Year's Eve of 1999 in Michel

Houellebecq's novel *Atomised* 1998? Is it History – with a capital H – that comes to an end here? Is what we are dealing with, in that case, nothing but a confirmation of the depressive's premonition and longing: That *it* – life, history, the world – is finally over? Or is it, rather, a question of the verification of the depressive's ultimate fear: That things in fact do *not* come to an end? Does the millennial change bear witness to a crisis in time, an un-ecstatic and end-less time: an end without end? Is this what the countdown is all about? A countdown to zero and then what? Death? Or

⁵⁷ The novel is henceforth abbreviated to *A*.

infinity? Immortality? These are the questions, and hidden behind them is a question of the political economy, more specifically: May 1968 and neoliberal competition.

Bruno and Michel

What a lovely pair they make, Michel and Bruno, the two half-brothers and protagonists of *Atomised*, celebrating New Year separately in the scene above. On the whole, the story is narrated in the third-person from somewhere in the future; it is set in the year 2029 at least, probably further ahead in time, since in the narrator's present almost every living creature is a clone and the last representatives of humanity are dying (379). *Atomised* is, in a certain sense, designed as an obituary to "a weary exhausted" humankind. A poem included in the prologue to the book thus ends: "Now/For the first time,/We can retrace the end of the old order." (8). And the epilogue finishes with the sentence: "This book is dedicated to mankind." (379). The mankind which – thank God? – no longer is. From the futural perspective of the book, the human is already *a thing of the past*. This is the temporal frame of the story: We are in the future looking back to the past, which is our present.

And the loss of that present is not exactly something to mourn. Michel Djerzinski – a world-renowned molecular biologist – and Bruno Clément – a provincial high school teacher – are totally different but equally depressed. Leading a life governed by sexual impulses, Bruno feels, from a very early age the competition that pervades not only the sphere of economy, but the sphere of sexuality as well: the expanded field of battle as it were (63). Pain, suffering and premature ejaculation characterize his life, with the exception of the occasional stay at the 1968 hippy-ish place "Lieu du Changement" – holiday resort and swinger club in one – where Bruno meets Christiane and experiences brief moments of intense happiness, as the novel is fond of formulating it. But Christiane suffers an injury that leaves her disabled and subsequently commits suicide.⁵⁸ As a result Bruno turns to drinking, becomes increasingly aggressive and depressive, until he finally breaking down after trying to seduce an Arab girl from the high school class that he teaches. He is then put in a psychiatric clinic; a "depressed teacher, possibly suicidal" (238), in the laconic words of the novel. It is here that we meet Bruno in the scene above, in a psychiatric

⁵⁸ This is the fate that most of the women in Houellebecq meet: They die (and a lot of them by their own hand).

hospital on New Year's Eve: "He wasn't unhappy; the medication was working, he no longer had any feelings of desire." This state of medicalized numbness – no feelings of desire, no expectations – is the closest Bruno comes to happiness. Or, to be more precise, the questions of happiness and unhappiness no longer make any sense: He is beyond both. Here, a lack of expectations, hopes, and dreams are presented not as a cause or even as a symptom of depression, but rather as a solution to the state of depression (I shall return to this issue later). The problem with Bruno is not that he does not expect anything, but that he was previously expecting too much. This is what has induced so much misery. That problem has now been solved and the new millennium can come as it may. If there is no hope, there can be no despair either.

On various occasions, Bruno is described as a thoroughly typical individual, which conversely makes it hard to conceive of him as an individual (212). He is typical because he continues to play a game that he cannot win; because the sexual economy of the West is not meant for people like him; because he, as he himself sadly declares, "is completely dependent" on a society in which he plays "no useful role" (242); because he is ultimately too human. Michel on the other hand, is the atypical individual; highly, almost frighteningly intelligent, and not really a human being at all. Never exhibiting any real emotions – "the world of human emotions was not his field" – he leads "a purely intellectual existence." (139). No events or incidents are able to move or touch him (91), which is why Bruno tells him: "You're not human." (216). As described in the scene under scrutiny here: "[C]ertain things seemed to characterize his life. There were people and thoughts." What a life: People and thoughts! Even his high school sweetheart Annabel – who is otherwise capable of making any boy or man swoon – does not rouse his desire, as is elucidated in another scene that clearly resonates with the ending of *Whatever*:

"Lying in his tent, Michel waited for daybreak. In the early hours a fierce storm broke and he was surprised to discover that he was a little afraid. When at last the sky cleared, a steady rain began to fall. Raindrops fell with a dull sound on the canvas; though they were inches from his face, they could not touch him here. He had a sudden premonition that all his life he would feel at this moment. Emotion would pass him by, sometimes tantalizingly close; others would experience happiness and despair, but such things would be

unknown to him, they would not touch him. Several times that evening Annabel had looked over at him while she danced. Though he wanted to, he simply could not move; he felt as though his body were slipping into icy water. Still, everything seemed strangely calm. He felt separated from the world by a vacuum moulded to his body like a shell, a protective armour." (99-100).

A more epitomized scene of depression would be hard to find. The symptoms seem simply to be piling up: The physical retardation ("Though he wanted to, he simply could not move"), the desynchronized feeling of being sheathed and totally cut off from the outside world ("by a vacuum moulded to his body like a shell, a protective armour"), the typical imagery of depression ("icy water") and the temporal experience that this particular moment in time will stretch into eternity ("He had a sudden premonition that all his life he would feel at this moment"). Is it the case that Michel does not feel anything, or would it be more accurate to say – to repeat a point about the metafeeling of depression from the introduction to this dissertation – that what he is experiencing is the feeling of not feeling anything?

In any case, at the end of the novel Michel travels to Ireland, tellingly described as "the westernmost point of Europe, the very edge of the Western world." (352). In the epilogue we are told – from a future point of view and thus in the past tense – of Michel's last days in the ancient year of 2009, before he left, disappeared, or committed suicide, as is believed: One day, he apparently walked out into the ocean and disappeared (365).

To recapitulate: Michel is everything that Bruno is not, and vice versa. They are, in the most classical manner, each other's mirror images. Bruno is utterly at the mercy of his feelings, Michel is perfectly numb and inclined to cool abstraction. Bruno is almost addicted to sex; Michel seems completely uninterested in erotic adventures. Bruno is suffering from a kind of hedonia, Michel from anhedonia.⁵⁹ But both become depressed. Both become inhuman, but from opposite directions.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Cf. Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* where hedonia is defined as "an inability to anything else *except* pursue pleasure." (22)

⁶⁰ Cf. Josie Appleton's "The prophets of pessimism", a text which is on the whole very critical of Houellebecq's work (www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/1323#.VqtbZ_F5ISE).

May '68 (the horror, the horror)

In *Atomised*, the primary problem articulated and criticized *through* the experience of depression is the event and aftermath of May '68. Bruno and Michel's mother, Janine, is the paradigmatic embodiment of everything that this event stood and continues to stand for: A general progressiveness, a fundamental emancipation of desire, and a stubborn quest for an autonomous life, not to mention mind-expanding drugs.⁶¹ According to the novel, '68 may very well have been perceived as "a communist utopia", a collective project, but in reality it was just "another stage in the rise of the individual." (135-6). In fact, Bruno thinks that there is an intimate connection between this individualism, the narcissistic pursuit of pleasure, and physical violence:

"In a sense, the serial killers of the 1990s were the spiritual children of the hippies of the Sixties; their common ancestor would be the Viennese Actionists [...] Actionists, beatniks, hippies and serial killers were all pure libertarians who advanced the rights of the individual against social norms and against what they believed to be the hypocrisy of morality, sentiment, justice and pity. From this point of view, Charles Manson was not some monstrous aberration in the hippie movement, but its logical conclusion." (252-3).

There is no doubt that every statement that Bruno tosses off must be interpreted with certain reservations considering his consumption of alcohol, his psychic condition and his general outlook described by the narrator as "a cynical, hard-bitten, typically masculine view of life" (246), which says quite a lot. While many of Bruno's tirades are tiresome to listen to, the same can be said of many of the novel's misogynistic comments, the bashing of feminism, the Islamophobic remarks⁶² and so on. That said, the critique of '68 must be taken seriously, because it is a – if not *the* – constant in Houellebecq's body of work. Three common and consistent characteristics are worth mentioning here: 1) The way in which '68 has ushered in a new, radical and permanent youth culture (more will be made of this later). 2) The way in which porn and sex tourism, not least in the

⁶¹ Which in the end amounts to horrific child-abuse (29ff. in *Atomised*). I am not going to go into the so-called *Affaire Houellebecq*, which among other things revolved around the relation between Houellebecq and his mother. For more on this issue, see Ruth Cruickshank's "L'Affaire Houellebecq: Ideological crime and fin de millénaire literary scandal".

⁶² Cf. the infamous line in *Atomised*: "Islam – by far the most stupid, false and obscure of all religions..." (323).

eyes of the books *Platform* and *Lanzerote*, are natural consequences of the sexual liberation of '68. As a slogan in *Platform* goes: "Eldorado Aphrodite: Because pleasure is right", to which can be added that pleasure is not only right, it is also almost *a* right.⁶³ 3) The way in which the Lieu du Changement in *Atomised* and the sect of the Elohimites in *The Possibility of an Island* are regarded as phenomena established in the spirit of 68 with a myopic focus on new age-techniques, orgone energy and chakra meditation.

In *Atomised* the harsh view of May 68 culminates in a scene during the summer of 1974 – recounted by Bruno to his psychiatrist – when a young Bruno walks into his mother's bedroom, where she is asleep beside one of her countless lovers, pulls off the sheet, kneels down and looks directly up into her vagina. This is not just a childish fantasy, this is indeed the night of the world, May '68 (81-82).

"A permanent state of war": Neoliberal competition

The fundamental principle, or ideological imperative, that is at work and subject to criticism in *Atomised* – as in all of Houellebecq's other novels for that matter – is *competition* (part two of *Platform* is, for example, called simply "Competitive Advantage"). This is integral to the analysis of '68 as the background for the "general mood of depression" in "the last years of Western civilization" (A 81). Here, the history of '68 and the history of neoliberalism become one in the world and work of Houellebecq.⁶⁴

⁶³ Cf. *Atomised*, 293.

⁶⁴ It is by now conventional analysis that the critical ideas of autonomy and emancipation instanced by the event of 68 were quickly appropriated by capitalism and transformed into a guiding principle for the neoliberal restructuring of the economy from the late '60s/early '70s onward. See, for instance, Chiapello and Boltanski's influential book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. An important question, which lies beyond the framework of this dissertation, is how the causal chain is to be construed. In *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism*, Bernard Stiegler initiates a polemic against the hypothesis of Chiapello and Boltanski, stating that May 1968 "did not *cause* capitalism to change. It was rather the pre-maturation of changes that already lay in embryonic form of capitalist and industrial becoming." (30). The premise of *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, that "the ideas of 1968 lie at the *origin* of the transformations of capitalism" is thus according to Stiegler "absolutely false." (31). In other words, for him the event of '68 was not the cause of the capitalist changes of the economy, but rather a symptom of a process already underway. For more on Houellebecq and neoliberalism, see the sections "The Extension of the Domain of Struggle" and "(Bad) Subjects of Neoliberalism" in Carole Sweeney's *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (despite its conceptual flaws).

As Michel Foucault detailed in the series of lectures published as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, in neoliberalism "Homo Economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself." (226). Within the neoliberal theory of *human capital*⁶⁵, the human is quite simply viewed as capital, or as an investor whose primary (re)source of investment, whose fundamental form of capital, is him or herself. Here, competition is not just something that is nourished and thrives in the market economy, or within the institutional framework of the so-called competition state. Rather it is as if competition has become an ontological or anthropological reality.⁶⁶ As Margaret Thatcher once said: "Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul".

If we infer from Foucault's analysis that this is indeed the principal characteristic of neoliberalism, we can more or less understand why all the people in the books of Houellebecq are portrayed as (exhausted) entrepreneurs, even – or perhaps especially – artists. As stated in *Platform*: "Most of the artists I knew behaved exactly like entrepreneurs." (183).⁶⁷ This book contains several interesting reflections as far as the issue of work goes. At one point, a man named Robert, who is the protagonist's travel companion on a trip to Thailand, says that "[w]hen he can, a Westerner *works*; he often finds his work frustrating or boring, but he pretends to find it interesting: this much is obvious." (112). It is, however, not only at work that the 'Westerner' seeks to realize him or herself. In the universe of Houellebecq a total dissolution of the borders between state and market, production and consumption, work and life or leisure, has occurred, making vacations and holidays a question of self-realization as well. This is what the travel companies in *Platform* have come to realize also: That it is crucial to sell experiences and vital to put emphasis on the feelings of the vacationer who is also always at work: Working on his self, realizing himself (167ff.; 202-203).

⁶⁵ Gary Becker's book *Human Capital* was published in 1964 and the concept quickly became a standard reference within neoliberalism, although the concept had existed and flourished for some years before that.

⁶⁶ Foucault also confronted the question of competition – inherent in the concept of human capital – in a neoliberal society: "For what is competition? It is absolutely not a given of nature [...] Competition is an *eidōs*. Competition is a principle of formalization [...] Competition is therefore an historical objective of governmental art and not a natural given that must be respected." (120). He also stated that "[i]f you multiply enterprises, you multiply frictions" (175); i.e. the more businesses the more competition.

⁶⁷ Every Houellebecq-novel can thus be seen as a schematization of various aspects of modern work life, and in *The Map and the Territory* it is precisely artistic work, which is under scrutiny, including the relation between art and capital, since the main character Jed is a rich and famous artist.

For Houellebecq, the primary consequence of the neoliberal economy that has emerged and developed in the wake of May '68 is thus the creation of a world in which competition makes itself felt at any time or in any location. According to his books neoliberalism is all about extending or expanding the zone of struggle. It goes without saying that, if vacations and leisure time have also become a question of self-realization, there will be an element of competition there too. This is what his books show: That the tentacles of competition do not only reach into in the working sphere but into life as such, into the very being and soul of each individual, just as Thatcher understood and recommended. Of special relevance is the way in which Houellebecq's continuous and concentrated thematization of work is less about a change in *the work* than about a change of *the worker* and his or her personality. It is in this sense that one must read the statement in *Platform*, that capitalism is a permanent state of war (284).⁶⁸

Y2K: A millenarianism with no tomorrow

In principle, there are only two responses to this situation, to this permanent state of war with no external limits and no outside. As Carole Sweeney observes: "If there is no outside, no space of opposition, then our only options, Houellebecq suggests, are either hedonistic participation or an ascetic retreat." (12). Bruno and Michel are the very obvious incarnations of 'hedonistic participation' and 'ascetic retreat', respectively. The truly devastating insight is that it does not really matter which you chose, both paths lead to the same door of depression as the New Year's Eve of 1999 testifies to. An evening traditionally constituting an occasion for anticipation, expectation, hope, a new beginning, a rite of passage into the future, has here degenerated into a passage to nothing.

Of course the Millennium Bug, as it was known, now appears deeply dated and rather ridiculous, and yet something significant takes place in *Atomised*. Or rather, something significant does *not* take place. In the novel, in this particular scene, is that it is as if the year 2000 does not really happen. How are we to understand this? I think that Jean Baudrillard's *The Vital Illusion* can be of some help here. In the book he advances precisely the idea that the year 2000 would not take place: "[B]ecause the history of this century had already come to an end, because

⁶⁸ Cf. "Competition is the concealment of a war machine in every niche of daily life: the kingdom of competition is fascism perfected." (Berardi, *The Uprising* 95). I do not know if Houellebecq would go this far, though he is certainly no stranger to the art of aggravation and exaggeration.

we are remaking it interminably and because, therefore, metaphorically speaking, we shall never pass on, into the future.” (34). Baudrillard calls this phenomenon:

“a reversal of our modern relation to time” in the sense that “time is no longer counted progressively, by addition, starting from an origin — but by subtraction, starting from the end. This is what happens with rocket launches and time bombs. And that end is no longer the symbolic endpoint of a history but the mark of a zero sum, of a potential exhaustion. Time is viewed from a perspective of entropy — the exhausting of all possibilities — the perspective of a counting down...to infinity.” (ibid. 35).

This historical relation to history, this specific temporal experience, is emphasized by Houellebecq in the New Year’s Eve scene in *Atomised*: The sense that there is no future and nothing to look forward to, since all possibilities have been exhausted in advance; the sense that history is already over and humanity no longer exists. When the end — the year 2000 — finally arrives a strange sensation of *déjà vu* surfaces. The brothers may be as different as night and day but in the end their problem is the same: A problem of the end. As Baudrillard writes: “Our millenarianism — for we have reached, all the same, a millenarian deadline — is *a millenarianism with no tomorrow.*” (34 — my emphasis).

Science: Our last, great adventure

It is here that the dreams of cloning and of immortality come into play. It may seem paradoxical, for who in his or her right mind would want to extend a miserable life into the infinite? (One of the first phrases of *The Possibility of an Island* reads: Who, among you, deserves eternal life? The question is, rather: Who among you wants eternal life?) But the point is, as Baudrillard is once again able to clarify, that “[i]n cloning — this collective fantasy of a return to a nonindividuated existence and a destiny of undifferentiated life, this temptation to return to an indifferent immortality — we see the very form of a repentance of the living toward the unliving.” (*The Vital Illusion* 14). This fantasy or temptation betrays a certain Freudian death-drive, which is precisely not a desire to die, but a desire to keep on living in a kind of undead or zombie-like state, where every possible form of individuation, sexualization and differentiation has been eliminated, not to

mention desire itself. "This may well be the story of a deliberate project to put an end to the genetic game of difference, to stop the divagations of the living", Baudrillard writes in *The Vital Illusion*, before posing the somewhat rhetorical question: "Aren't we actually sick of sex, of difference, of emancipation, of culture?" (15).

Houellebecq's answer is an affirmative and resounding yes. This is indeed what his novels and characters are sick of and why the event of 1968, and everything it stands for and has led to, is portrayed as the paramount culprit. This is also the reason that the character of Michel is a scientist in molecular biology in *Atomised*. His research focuses on developing the scientific preconditions for *perfect reproduction*. His epoch-making scientific discovery, when he returns to work after the New Year's Eve of 1999, is that every cell can be copied, infinitely and perfectly. Forget about the genetic cloning of sheep and cows; what must be cloned are human beings themselves. This is Michel's radical proposal: "[t]hat humanity must disappear, that humanity would give way to a new species which was asexual and immortal, a species which had outgrown individuality, individuation, and progress." (371). The goal is to eliminate the differentiation and individuation that underlie the principle of competition. The goal is to achieve a world without desire, without feelings, without happiness and thus also without unhappiness: a blissful numbness, or, in the words of Baudrillard, "an indifferent immortality". The goal is to arrive at a stage, where beings are no longer "sexed, differentiated, and mortal." (*The Vital Illusion* 7). It is to accomplish an exit from history, which is an exit from humanity, an exit from being human.⁶⁹ This is the revenge, the only solution to the problem of a depressed and exhausted humanity.

It is clear within the imaginary of *Atomised* that science and technology are the only means through which this fantasy can be realized. Science is indeed "our last adventure, our last great narrative, the bearer of dreams as well as nightmares, and it alone is capable of combining poetry, action and utopia." (Bruckner 219).⁷⁰ Or as Bruno Latour asserts in his *We Have Never Been Modern*: "Yes, science is indeed politics pursued by other means." (111). Interestingly, this notion of genetic manipulation, of a 'revolutionary' transformation of the self, is a direct continuation of the neoliberal idea of the self as human capital which, as Philip Mirowski has

⁶⁹ In an interview Houellebecq states: "deep down, I am with the utopians, people who think that the movement of *History* must conclude in an absence of movement. An end to History seems desirable to me." (Bourriaud et al., "An Interview with Michel Houellebecq" 244).

⁷⁰ Incidentally Bruckner – whose thoughts on happiness will re-appear in the chapter on Trier's *Melancholia* – is quoted in *Submission* (168).

convincingly argued, is not unrelated to the experiments with the self that took place in the drug culture of the 1960s and the events preceding, constituting and following May '68.⁷¹ Foucault made this connection explicitly, albeit from a slightly different perspective: "The malleability of the self presumed by the theory of human capital investment will extend down to the most basic corporal level, which will eventually mean investment in genetic manipulation." (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 228). Technological alteration, customization and optimization of the self are absolutely integral to the neoliberal mindset. As the aforementioned Mirowski writes: "The ultimate goal of genetics is therefore a DNA upgrade: the ability to freely alter yourself at will at the ribonucleic level [...] *This is the true terminus of the neoliberal self.*" (154 – my emphasis).

In a sense Houellebecq takes this at face value, and even takes it one step further: Within the horizon of his novel, the ambition is not to improve the self but to leave the self – as we know it – behind. The "first or final point of resistance" does not consist in "the relation of self to self" as it does for Foucault (quoted in Mirowski 105). Nor is a pharmacological neuroenhancement anywhere near radical enough, though Bruno is temporarily relieved of his misery in the scene above: "He wasn't unhappy; the medication was working, he no longer had any feelings of desire". The solution in the works of Houellebecq – if there is such a thing as a solution; not at all a rhetorical question – is neither ethical nor chemical, but ontological or technological.⁷² It is the very biological and ontological reality of the human that must be manipulated. In Houellebecq, being human is not impossible; it is simply unbearable...

But is a technological posthumanity or an artificial neohumanity a real solution? This is the question that will inform and form the basis for the analysis of the next scene. Is it really the case that "the solution to every problem– whether psychological, sociological or more broadly human – could only be a technical solution" as it is stated toward the end of *Atomised* (377). Must we need accept the slogan that is launched in connection with this idea: "THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE MENTAL, BUT GENETIC" (377)? Is that the true terminus of the twin trajectories of neoliberalism

⁷¹ Mirowski writes that "many of the earliest experiments in neoliberal self-alteration came out of the drug culture of the 1960s." (150).

⁷² Cf. the discussion on Aldous Huxley in *Atomised* where Bruno says that Huxley was a terrible writer but had an intuition that techno-scientific operations would assume an ever more important role (whilst keeping in mind that Bruno is very drunk at this point) (186ff.).

and May '68? Is this the only way to enter the new millennium, or is the dream of cloning and immortality actually more like a depressive dream, a symptom of a depressive imagination?

Scene 3: *The Possibility of an Island*

“The sight before me was almost the same in all directions; but I knew that to the southwest, once the fault had been crossed, from the heights of Leganes or maybe Fuenlabrada, I was going to have to make my way across the Great Gray Space. Estremadura and Portugal had disappeared as differentiated places. The succession of nuclear explosions, of tidal waves, of cyclones that had battered this geographical zone for several centuries had ended up completely flattening its surface and transforming it into one vast sloping place, of weak declivity, which appeared in satellite photos as uniformly composed of pulverulent ashes of a very light gray color. This sloping place continued for about two and a half thousand kilometers before opening out upon a little-known region of the world, whose sky was almost continually saturated with light clouds and vapors, situated on the site of the former Canary Islands.” (*The Possibility of an Island* 328⁷³).

The “I” of this passage is Daniel25: A clone, replicant, and so-called *neohuman*. He is a descendent of Daniel1, whom we meet and follow in the first two-thirds of the novel *The Possibility of an Island*. Daniel1 is another prototypical Houellebecqian protagonist, thoroughly depressive in the world of today. A comedian, he has staged controversial shows such as *We Prefer the Palestinian Orgy Sluts* and the film *Munch of My Gaza Strip (My Huge Jewish Settler)*, which has earned him all the fame and money in the world, but no happiness. He has a wife but after she leaves him he finds himself on the verge of joining a sect called The Elohimites (modulated on the Raëlian movement). It is a big joke – the prophet and leader of the sect wears a t-shirt with the text “lick my balls” (89) – and yet the religion of the Elohimites achieves world hegemony, because the sect manages to develop the technology of cloning, making the dream of becoming immortal a reality. In the words of one critic, nicely summarizing the rest of Daniel1’s life, Daniel ends up “leaving DNA in deep freeze before writing his life story and committing suicide. He rematerializes eons later as Daniel2, then 3 through 25.” (Gary Indiana, “Francobile” unpaginated). In *The Possibility of an Island*, we thus find a fictional realization of the technical solution to the problem of a depressed and weary humanity proposed at the end of *Atomised* (for me these two books thus form a kind of duology). To a great extent, the future world presented in the former begins where the latter breaks off. In order to grasp whether a technological posthumanity or an artificial neohumanity is a real solution or not, let us therefore concentrate on the strange world and life of Daniel25.

⁷³ Henceforth abbreviated to *PI*.

Daniel25, the neohuman beyond and the Lovecraftian landscape of clinical depression

Daniel25 lives – or rather subsists – in a world a couple of thousand years into the distant future; a postapocalyptic world transformed and destroyed by climate change, nuclear bombs, tidal waves, cyclones and other catastrophes. It is a world no longer dependent upon sexual and biological reproduction because it is possible to “bypass the embryogenesis stage and directly manufacture adult individuals.” (PI 170). This only requires the transfer of DNA, as well as memory and personality through some so-called life stories, from one generation to the next. This is what Daniel1 has done whilst with The Elohimites and thus achieved eternal life. In this world all needs are reduced to an absolute minimum: Interpersonal relations, including masturbation, take place via the internet, and food is ingested by means of a photosynthetic system, which makes neohumans capable of surviving on small amounts of water and a few minerals (257). The result is, in the words of the novel, “nothing less than a new species and even, strictly speaking, a new kingdom.” (258). The kingdom of no desire, as it were.

In *The Possibility of an Island*, this new kingdom is intended as a kind of utopia; the suffering of being and the competition between beings have been eliminated, in the sense that money and sex have been done away with. What exists is a “freedom of indifference” (260), an “obvious neutrality of the real.” (312). There are no plans, no becoming, no difference, no change. As Daniel25 writes: “I had attained innocence, in an absolute and nonconflictual state, I no longer had any plan, nor any objective, and my individuality dissolved into an indefinite series of days; I was happy.” (312). A blissful state of sterile and hermit-like happiness. But, of course, this is not entirely true. As Daniel25 also admits: “Happiness should have come [...] but happiness had not come.” (305).

An increasing and thoroughly human dissatisfaction with life in the new kingdom finds its way into the novel and the mind of Daniel25, up to the point where, in the last part of the book, he embarks upon a journey in order to experience something new: “[I]t seemed to me now that, under these conditions, I could not go on living.” (306). In an act combining hope and despair, he leaves his isolated and excluded reservation – outside which the last remains of the old humanity rummages around – and heads for what were formerly known as the Canary Islands.

What Daniel25 confronts and experiences here is a deeply Lovecraftian world, reminiscent of the “glacial void of 700 miles” chillingly described in Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* (15). As Charles Baxter has argued in an article in *The New York Review of Books*, what Lovecraft was truly writing about was the horror of clinical depression: “In some sense Lovecraft does not write about ‘horrors’ at all but about the worst kinds of clinical depression, the feeling that one is dead but not dead enough to achieve real rest. Nothing gives pleasure, nor can any form of pleasure be imagined.” (“The Hideous Unknown of H.P. Lovecraft”, unpaginated).

Indeed, it is the mountains of madness or the glacial void of depression that meet Daniel25 at the end of his journey. In the quoted passage from *The Possibility of an Island*, the glacial void is a sloping plane of ash and salt, continuing for about “two and a half thousand kilometers before opening out upon a little-known region of the world.” (328). Is it possible to conceive of this landscape as anything other than a landscape of clinical depression? As is well known, depression is not merely an economic or a psychiatric/psychological category; it is also a geological appellation for a land-form sunk below the level of the surrounding area. This seems to be what Houellebecq is depicting in the scene in question. In a sense it is no longer possible to distinguish the mental and material catastrophe, as if the internal and external landscapes melt into each other, in so far as the external is more an extension than an expression of the internal. It is not a metaphor; the landscape functions more as a literalization of metaphors usually employed to describe a pathological state of depression.⁷⁴ Depression is often described as a feeling of gliding or sinking, of losing your footing and of the ground disappearing from under you, or, alternatively, as a sensation that everything is frozen, dried up. Here, this feeling is concretized, literal. Once again the real horror is that of not even being able to die; of experiencing “that one is dead but not dead enough to achieve real rest.”

“The future was empty”

The purpose of this analysis is not to demonstrate Houellebecq’s inspiration from Lovecraft, or Pascal – who haunts the phrase “the pure terror of space” (*PI* 296) – for that matter. Rather, the

⁷⁴ For the metaphors of depression, see David A. Karp’s *Speaking of Sadness* (29ff.) where, for instance, he quotes a patient saying: “I’ve referred to it as a dark storm at sea...I mean it’s doom.” (29). Another patient or informant, comparing depression to despair rather than to sadness in a very vivid way, speaks about “a constant ocean of it [despair].” (32).

purpose is to establish that the potentially pharmacological models of technology and science in the novels of *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island* do not lead anywhere but to an affirmation of the *status quo*; to an infinitization of the depressive condition. This is made clear through a paradoxical twofold relation between present and future that is operative in the novels.

For one thing: The future is already present, it is already here. In *Atomised*, an “unlimited, indefinite stasis” (PI 295) is not something awaiting us, but something happening right now, or that has even already happened. The annihilation of humanity *is* a reality; the dream – or the nightmare – *has* already manifested itself, not least as far as Michel– whose life can be perceived as a paradigmatic example of the “obvious neutrality of the real” that the future was supposed to bring about in *The Possibility of an Island* (PI 312) – is concerned. To Michel, sex and money do not matter and common human emotions are not available to him. He is already living as a cyborg or a clone.⁷⁵ This is what the very first scene of *Atomised* shows: Human communication and interaction is impossible. After his own farewell reception at work, which opens the novel, Michel finds himself standing in the parking lot with a female colleague: They try to politely and appropriately take leave of one another, but the exchange is excruciatingly awkward. In a sense, this small scene summons the end of the human civilization as we know it. When Michel is driving home, he feels as though he is in sci-fi-movie, as if he is “the last man on earth after every other living thing had been wiped out. A post-apocalyptic wasteland.” (A 13).

The future, then, is already present, or the human present is already inhuman. And the future world presented in *The Possibility of an Island*, beginning where *Atomised* ends, is only an extension and continuation of the present. What *could be* is reduced to what *is*. The techno-scientific solution to the problems of the western world and the therapeutic overcoming of depression solve nothing. There is no qualitative difference. The posthuman or neohuman is still all-too-human. Daniel²⁵ cannot help but hope or despair, which in the end almost amounts to one and the same thing. His only source of dialogue, Marie²³ – who incites his journey of ‘rebellion’ –

⁷⁵ This was also Baudrillard’s claim in *The Vital Illusion*: That in our culture we human beings are already clones, if not biologically then mentally. As he writes: “Through school systems, media, culture, and mass information,” Baudrillard writes, “singular beings become identical copies of one another.” (25). It is this kind of cloning that anticipates and makes possible the biological cloning adventure.

is described precisely as being “still human, so human.” (PI 333).⁷⁶ In that sense, the future is just like the present, or the inhuman future is always too human.

There is, in other words, no rupture or discontinuity between the present and the future in the universe of Houellebecq. This is what leads up to and explains the ending of *The Possibility of an Island*:

“I had perhaps sixty years left to live; more than twenty thousand days that would be identical [...] Happiness was not a possible horizon. The world had betrayed. My body belonged to me for only a brief lapse of time; I would never reach the goal I had been set. The future was empty; it was the mountain. My dreams were populated with emotional presences. I was, I was no longer. Life was real.” (337).

Moments before he ostensibly dies, Daniel25 is faced with an endless horizon, a flat world in every respect, or rather a slightly sloping surface, a small yet steady inclination, and a minimal but inevitable fall into nothing. But also: a mountain. Again, the topography is striking, exhibiting a down and an up. Equally, if we pay close attention to the grammatical tense, we cannot help but notice the use of the past tense in this final section – the epilogue – of the novel, whereas the tense has shifted back and forth between past and present until that point. It is not the case that the future *is* empty: From the final displaced and advanced point of narration the future *was* empty (“Le future *était* vide”). From this point and perspective the future is something that *was*; a thing of the past. To paraphrase the writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, who plays a central part in *Submission*: *L’avenir a fait son temps*. The future has had its time.

This is the consequence of the depressive’s way of looking at the world: The future is considered a *fait accompli*.⁷⁷ By conceiving of the future as something past, the future is attributed a certain determinism. It is not a questing of looking into the future, ascertaining that it *cannot* be any other way, that it *cannot* be any different to what it already is. Rather, what is established is that it *could not* have been any other way. The imagination is caught in a total collapse (bringing to mind Esther to whom capitalism was as given and as natural as the weather itself): “The idea that

⁷⁶ “I need to live more”, Marie thus tells Daniel25 before she leaves the ruins of New York City where she lives.

⁷⁷ Cf. Binswanger 43-44.

things could have been different did not cross my mind, *no more than a mountain range, present before my eyes, could vanish to be replaced by a plain*. Consciousness of a total determinism was without a doubt what differentiated us most clearly from our human predecessors. Like them, we were only conscious machines; but, unlike them, we were aware of only being machines.” (PI 325-6 – my emphasis). However, there is further cruelty to the ending: In contrast to the compound past (*passé composé*), which indicates a completed action, the French imperfect (*imparfait*) is a descriptive past tense, which, in its lexical definition, indicates an ongoing state of being or a repeated or incomplete action. In *The Possibility of an Island*, this specific grammatical tense can thus be perceived as highlighting how the emptiness or past-ness of the future is not something over and done with. In its very past-ness the future is precisely not past⁷⁸; the effect is rather one of a spectral presence. The lost future is there: it is a mountain, it is real, or rather, it *was* real. This is what is meant by the ultimate words: *La vie était réelle*.

⁷⁸ It is of course William Faulkner (“The past is never dead. It’s not even past”) who lurks behind this formulation.

Scene 4: *Submission*

"...the day before I left, as I made my usual visit to the Chapel of Our Lady, I happened on a reading of Péguy [...] I was in a strange state. It seemed the Virgin was rising from her pedestal and growing in the air. The baby Jesus seemed ready to detach himself from her, and it seemed to me that all he had to do was raise his right hand and the pagans and idolators would be destroyed, and the keys to the world restored to him, 'as its lord, its possessor, and its master' [...] Or maybe I was just hungry. I'd forgotten to eat the day before, and possibly what I should do was go back to my hotel and sit down to a few ducks' legs instead of falling down between the pews in an attack of mystical hypoglycaemia. I thought again of Huysmans, of the sufferings and doubts of his conversion, and of his desperate desire to be part of a religion." (*Submission* 137-9⁷⁹)

The year is 2022, a groundbreaking election is taking place in France, the Muslim Brotherhood come to power, endorsed by the socialists and almost everyone else except the Front National, and their candidate Ben Abbas is elected the new president of the French Republic. However, the protagonist of Michel Houellebecq's novel *Submission* of 2015, François – a depressed 44 year old, specialist in the decadent Catholic writer Joris-Karl Huysmans – decides to leave Paris for the time being. The capital is in tumult and his only real love, a Jewish woman named Myriam, has gone to Israel due to the escalation of the situation. François heads for the pilgrimage city of Rocamadour, where he makes a daily habit of visiting the Notre Dame church with its carved wood icon of the Black Madonna. It is here, during one of his daily visits, that François happens upon a reading of Péguy, the French Catholic poet. Sitting in front of the Virgin while the poems are being read and performed, he experiences a gleam of spirituality to the point of witnessing the Black Madonna "rising from her pedestal and growing in the air". One would almost think that, as readers, what we are confronted with here is a religious experience equivalent to that of Huysmans. But as always the situation is punctured by Houellebecq: Perhaps François is just hungry and should just go back to his hotel "and sit down to a few ducks' legs." Spirituality and a low blood sugar level are all much of a muchness.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the scene remains significant; in fact, Houellebecq has called it a key scene⁸¹ in as much as it really brings a persistent – albeit somewhat suspect –

⁷⁹ Henceforth abbreviated to *S*. As is well known *Soumission* was published in French on the same day as the Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris, 7 January 2015.

⁸⁰ Again, I have to give due credit to my students, especially Eva Magelund Krarup and her article "Fremtiden som umulig mulighed. En læsning af Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*".

⁸¹ Cf. Bourmeau, "Scare Tactics" unpaginated.

Houellebecqian subject to the fore: The issue of religion, spirituality, belief and faith. As Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård accentuates in his review of the novel in *The New York Times*, its central question is: “What does it mean to be a human being without faith?” (“Michel Houellebecq’s ‘Submission’” – unpaginated). However, in Houellebecq this question is inseparable from a depressive perspective, position and problem. For example, the way in which a sudden need for religion or spirituality arises and makes itself felt within the precarious, painful state that depression is, even in a person who had no faith to begin with. This is the first question: How can depression be understood as a spiritual crisis, a crisis of faith for the future? The second question is how this crisis manifests itself at a personal and political level simultaneously and how these two levels are interrelated. The third and final question is whether religion or spirituality can really be said to constitute a cure in the world of Houellebecq? We have already seen how technology and science in the novels *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island* did not solve anything; are religion and spirituality, in contrast, able to indicate – as the subtitle on François’ dissertation on Huysmans reads – a road *out of the tunnel*?

Out of the tunnel: Huysmans and Houellebecq

But why, after all, does François have any interest in a writer as religious as Huysmans? At one point in *Submission* François states: “I was almost completely lacking in spiritual fibre” (77). A theme elaborated elsewhere as well: “Obviously, it’s not easy for an atheist to talk about a series of books whose main subject is religious conversion [...] In the absence of any real emotional identification, what an atheist slowly comes to feel when confronted with Durtal’s spiritual adventures – with the series of spiritual retreats, followed by eruptions of divine grace, that make up Huysman’s last three books – is, unfortunately, boredom.” (39). Yet the study of Huysmans is what François has dedicated his (academic) life to. It may well be that he occasionally suffers from boredom when reading about “Durtal’s spiritual adventures”, though at the same time there is, on Houellebecq’s part as an author, a profound preoccupation with, if not respect for, such adventures, not only in *Submission* but in his other works as well. In *The Possibility of an Island*, for instance, the comedian Daniel¹, explaining the reason he has never introduced sects such as the Elohimites into one of his sketches, declares: “[I]t is easy to make jokes about human beings [...] but when they give the impression of being animated by deep faith, by something that goes

beyond the survival instinct, the mechanism breaks down, and laughter in principle is stopped.” (165). Numerous scenes like this can be found throughout Houellebecq’s body of work. As Douglas Morrey writes in the book *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath*: “There is clearly some residual respect, or even awe, for genuine faith in Houellebecq.” (143).

That must be why Houellebecq, in *Submission*, lets François read and write about Huysmans, but also follow in his footsteps. Not only does François pay a visit to the Chapel of Our Lady in Rocamadour, but later spends time in Ligugé Abbey, to which Huysmans had also withdrawn a century or so before, though this is no success for François either. Both François and all of Huysmans’ alter egos feel utterly repelled by that which their respective worlds have to offer them. Towards the end of Huysmans’ so-called decadence bible, *Against Nature* (*À rebours* (1888)), the main character and nobleman Jean Floressas des Esseintes, he of a “libidinous past” – having expressed his dismay with the “the caliphate of the counter, the rule of the Rue du Sentier [...] the ungodly tabernacle of the Bank!” (179-180) – cries out: “May you crumble into dust, Society; old world, may expire!” (180). Significantly, des Esseintes is not so much hero as anti-hero, a man on the verge of perishing in his own aestheticism and whom therefore tries to retire from the world in order to find some spiritual comfort in the Catholic faith, which is not too easy. “It was obvious,” the narrator of *Against Nature* declares, “there remained no haven, no shore where he might shelter.” (178). Just like Huysmans himself, des Esseintes is a skeptic – he has a strong “distrust of any kind of faith” (64) – who wants to believe. On the very last page of the novel, Des Esseintes, in a state of utter desperation and misery, turns “for help and comfort to Schopenhauer’s consoling precepts; he repeated to himself the painful axiom of Pascal” (180), and it is then that he realizes that it is no good. “He finally realized that the arguments of pessimism were incapable of giving him comfort, that only the impossible belief in a future life would give him peace.” (180). *Against Nature* thus ends with a desperate plea: “Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the unbeliever who longs to believe, on the galley-slave of life who is setting sail alone, at night, under a sky no longer lit, now, by the consoling beacons of the ancient hope!” (181). This plea became the point of departure of Huysmans’ ensuing works – *Là-bas* (1891), *En route* (1895), *La Cathédrale* (1898) and *L’Oblat* (1903) – all of which feature and follow the character Durtal, his spiritual journey and conversion to Catholicism. This is indeed the way out of the tunnel, no longer lit “by the consoling beacons of the ancient hope.”

Overall, *des Esseintes* is described as a sick spirit, a man whose illness is – in keeping with the times – construed as a nervous exhaustion: In other words, a somewhat typical case of fin-de-siècle neurasthenia. Huysman was deeply engrossed in the new psychiatric concepts and diagnoses of the time as put forth by scientists such as Alexandre Axenfelt and Eugène Bouchut,⁸² and convinced that the remedy to these illnesses was of a religious or spiritual nature, specifically the Catholic faith. In this context, the fundamental point is that an intimate relation between despair and belief, between pathology and religion or spirituality, is at work in the work of Huysmans.⁸³ This is the case in Houellebecq too. But whereas Huysmans' novel *Against Nature* features the pathology of neurasthenia, Houellebecq stages the pathology of depression.

Sick spirits and the suicide of Europe

There is a long and great tradition of studying the relation between depression and religion, even if, as Stanley W. Jackson shows in *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times*, religious melancholy lost its validity as a clinical category around 1900 (341). Robert Burton devoted the final chapter of his monumental *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) to the subject. Though he was mainly concerned with instances of enthusiastic, superstitious, delirious religiosity (311ff.), he did reflect at some length on what he called *religious melancholy in defect*: "that other extreme, or defect of this love of God," (379), an entirely "monstrous" or "poisoned" melancholy (ibid.). For Burton, religious despair is simply the most terrible sickness; "it is more than melancholy in the highest degree." (405).

What is even more interesting and relevant is that William James and Karl Jaspers – two more or less contemporaries of Huysmans – were preoccupied with the rise of secularism (or what in France is called *laïcité*) and the relation between depression and spiritual despair within

⁸² Cf. Buvik 94. Adam Leith Gollner provides another excellent overview of the relation between Huysmans and Houellebecq in the article "What Houellebecq Learned From Huysmans".

⁸³ In a preface to *Against Nature*, written twenty years after the publication of the novel but included in my edition of it, Huysmans writes: "Indeed it does seem to be the case that nervous disorders and neuroses create fissures in the soul through which Evil may penetrate. That is an enigma which remains unexplained: the word hysteria solves nothing; it may suffice to define a physical condition, to denote an uncontrollable turmoil of the senses, it does not account for the spiritual consequences associated with it, particularly the sins of dissimulation and falsehood which almost invariably implant themselves therein." (189), adding, that as far as this relation between pathology and spirituality is concerned "medicine talks nonsense and theology remains silent" (189).

that emerging historical formation. For Jaspers, in his *General Psychopathology*, spiritual despair and loss of faith inhere in the experience of depression.⁸⁴ In James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), there is a chapter named "The Sick Souls" (127ff.), in which at one point he describes, translates and quotes a French example of religious melancholy, reportedly an autobiographical experience from 1872 that James disguised "as that of a French correspondent" (*Writings 1902-1910* 1329). The account begins: "Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went out one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence" (160). James ends with the words: "I have always thought that this experience of melancholia of mine had a religious bearing." (161). This is why James talks about *the sick soul*, summarizing the whole problematic in his usual emphatic and elegant manner: "Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! Help!" (162) (James will return in the chapter on David Foster Wallace, who had, as we shall see, read this particular passage extensively and used it directly for his own purposes in *Infinite Jest*).

Neither James nor Jaspers were particularly interested in the spiritual crisis of depression as a purely individual phenomenon. They both developed their respective analysis as a critical diagnosis of the society at that time. As such the pathological problem they anatomized must be understood as a symptom of the *Zeitgeist*, of an age "poor in faith" as Jaspers puts it (*General Psychopathology* 811). And just as the neurasthenia of des Esseintes in *Against Nature* is of course also a neuro-pathological symptom of the society of his day⁸⁵, the personal spiritual crisis that is part of François' depression is brought to address a more general and historical spiritual crisis in *Submission*. "Without Christianity, the European nations had become bodies without souls – zombies" (S 213), the character Rediger explains to François at one point, before adding: "Europe had already committed suicide" (213). An idea expressed repeatedly in the book is that atheism is doomed (56; 209). Though Houellebecq is well known for his ridicule of spiritual movements such as the Elohimites in *The Possibility of an Island* – in the conversational book with Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Public Enemies*, he talks derogatorily about "ecological fundamentalism", "left-wing alter-globalization" and "half-witted New Age cults" (165) – these movements only

⁸⁴ Cf. the section "The spirit of depression" in the introduction.

⁸⁵ Cf. Goulet 78-83; Buvik 94.

testify to the fact that the Western world faces a fundamental problem according to Houellebecq: The problem of religion. In the interview "Scare Tactics" made in connection with the publication of *Submission* Houellebecq stated: "I think there is a real need for God and that the return of religion is not a slogan, but a reality, and that it is very much on the rise." (unpaginated). In *Submission*, this is what the Muslim Brotherhood's presidential candidate Ben Abbes has understood better than anyone among the political elite: "Ben Abbes had kept his distance from the anti-capitalist left. He understood that the pro-growth right had won the 'war of ideas', that young people today had become *entrepreneurs*, and that no one saw any alternative to the free market." (125). Thus, Ben Abbes is the only one who sizes up the contemporary crisis of faith, offering people something to believe in; something, indeed, to submit themselves to. It is in this sense that Islam or the so-called and apparently imminent Islamization of France is, as Knausgård notes in his review, "merely a consequence".⁸⁶ However, the problem with Knausgård's otherwise perceptive review is not only that he fails to note the relation between depression and religion; he also subscribes to a fairly conventional and conservative analysis of the novel, or at least subscribes to what could be perceived as the novel's own conservative diagnosis of the contemporary situation: "This is what the novel is about, an entire culture's enormous loss of meaning, its lack of, or highly depleted, faith, a culture in which the ties of community are dissolving..." (Knausgård, unpaginated). Knausgård thus reduces the spiritual question at work in *Submission* to a question of culture; to an existential loss of meaning or a cultural loss of values. What Knausgård fails to consider, in other words, is the role of the political economy.

⁸⁶ Knausgård writes that "[t]he main reason François's ennui never really seems significant, at least not compared with the status ennui is accorded in Huysmans's "Against the Grain," even if it is consistently present in nearly all the novel's scenes, is, however, neither abhorrence of emotional closeness nor the remoteness with which its comic passages are infused, but rather the fact that it coincides with the massive political upheaval France is undergoing in front of his very eyes." (unpaginated). But this distinction and distance between the personal ennui of François and the political events unfolding in France in 2022 is precisely what is thoroughly undermined in and by the novel. It is simply two sides of the same coin. Knausgård must be credited for paying attention to the spiritual issue brought to the fore in *Submission*, but he fails to connect the two levels in question. It is the same in the article "Michel Houellebecq and the Theological Virtues", otherwise one of the few studies that take the theological or spiritual matter seriously: Here, the relation between the personal and the political is not taken into consideration either; nor are the dots between religion and depression connected. Other texts that touch upon this particular topic include the article "Science, Sexuality, and the Novels of Huxley and Houellebecq" (6) and the book *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath* (141ff.) Again, both texts leave the phenomenon of depression out of the question.

It's the spirit, stupid

Bernard Stiegler is the thinker that has perhaps gone furthest in thinking the spiritual matrix of capitalism today. As already emphasized in the introduction to this dissertation, for Stiegler, spirit does not mean some free-floating substance that determines the course of world history, nor does he have a purely individual and interior phenomenon in mind. Rather, the concept of spirit pertains, at one and the same time, to individual, collective and technological processes in the capitalist world (*Uncontrollable Societies 2*). "What we are trying to say is that to think spirit is to think industry", as he has put it in an interview ("Interview" 6). To think spirit is thus to think industry, to think how we fantasize about objects, to think affects, desires, beliefs, our attachments and addictions and attentions, to think the way we relate to objects, to other human beings and to ourselves. It is, in short, to think the capitalist libidinal infrastructure.

In this sense capitalism is an economy evolving around and resting upon protentions, that is to say, projections, expectations and anticipations in regard to the future.⁸⁷ Any investment – and we must remember that in this day and age we all seem to investors, human capital, small-scale entrepreneurs – is an anticipation of the future, an expectancy of a future profit. Thus, according to Stiegler the capitalist economy quite simply depends on actions that have a spiritual basis. However, what the present crisis has revealed is the fact that the protentional system of capitalism has collapsed. Belief has disappeared, desire has been liquidated, the expectation of a better future has evaporated, hope is gone. People are, Stiegler writes in *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals*, becoming "disbelievers, that is, cynics" (27), with no "belief in the future of the entire process" (29). In the eyes of Stiegler, this creates a situation that is not only discouraging, but downright dangerous. A society without hope, expectations and protentions is an uncontrollable, irrational society, which is one of the reasons that Stiegler does not talk about the new spirit of capitalism but only the lost spirit of capitalism. The power that emerges from this loss is an irrational power, defined by Stiegler in the same book as "a power that destroys all reasons for hope, a power that is therefore *irrational*" (*Uncontrollable Societies 17*) – and as a power engendering "*regressive, drive-based and suicidal acts.*" (ibid. 9). The empirical examples Stiegler provides are the riots in the Parisian and other French suburbs in 2005, and various

⁸⁷ Cf. Lazzarato's *The Making of the Indebted Man* and Joseph Vogl's *Das Gespenst des Kapitals*. The relation between debt and depression, credit and futurity will recur in the chapter on Claire Fontaine.

instances of suicide bombing and terrorism (these are also Houellebecq's examples in *Platform*). The conclusion that Stiegler draws from his analysis is that we have arrived at an epoch that does not love itself (ibid. 82). As he also puts it: "No society is possible without belief" (ibid. 67) – which is exactly the point that Houellebecq never tires of repeating: No society can survive without religion.

Surprisingly, however, Stiegler does not talk about depression at all. He thus fails to consider that which within the framework of the universe of Houellebecq is another, and perhaps the most obvious symptom of this spiritual misery. A possible outcome of the progressive collapse of protentional temporality, the disinvestment of desire, and the increasingly disaffected and demotivated individual is – of course – terrorism in all its forms, carried out by people who have no expectations, nothing to lose and have become totally and intrinsically 'uncontrollable', in the words of Stiegler. However, another outcome – just as 'logical' – is depression. In a sense, the depressed person is just as disillusioned, demotivated and disaffected as is the terrorist. These two emblematic phenomena of our times could thus be regarded as two sides of the same coin. This is made very clear by Houellebecq, and though Stiegler does not make it explicit, it certainly lurks beneath his analysis. There only ever seem to be two actions possible in the world of Houellebecq, as embodied in *Atomised* by the half-brothers Bruno and Michel: hedonism or asceticism, explosion or implosion, terrorism or depression.⁸⁸

A shelter for bodies without souls?

To return to *Submission*: There is another obvious but nonetheless important difference between Huysmans' *des Esseintes* and Houellebecq's François: Whereas the former is an aristocrat, the latter is a more ordinary man, despite being an academic. It might be said that depression in Houellebecq is a democratic illness in a twofold sense.⁸⁹ Firstly, it is a suffering that is not reserved

⁸⁸ Berardi suggests something similar: "Religious fundamentalism and the cult of purity are mixed with ignorance and depression, and feed ethnocentrism and nationalism. The global panorama islamizes [*s'islamise*] in different forms: submission becomes the dominant form of relation between individual and group. Whereas the collective dimension abandons all forms of desiring energy, and is reduced to a skeleton of fear and necessity, adhesion to the group becomes compulsive and obligatory. And conformism is the last shelter for souls without desire or autonomy." ("Repression" 220).

⁸⁹ According to Ehrenberg melancholia has traditionally been associated with aristocracy and the idea of the exceptional man, disposed to both madness and creativity, which is not only observed by Michelangelo, but also and above all by Aristotle some two millennia earlier. Depression, on the other hand, is for

for an exclusive group of people. Secondly, it is a pathology which in the eyes of the novel has favorable conditions under the current neoliberal organization of a society that has both become totally secularized and seems to have arrived at the end of history: It is impossible to believe in or imagine anything other than what already is. Within this kind of spiritual misery, all that remains in which to invest energy is the given, pre-established competitive field, a theme that Houellebecq, as we have seen, strikes time and again and also introduces at very beginning of *Submission* (5-6).

However, the most crucial difference between *des Esseintes* and perhaps especially Durtal *and* François is that François evidently never arrives at the point at which it becomes possible to believe. In the aforementioned – rather unbearable – book by Houellebecq and Lévy, the conversation eventually turns towards Victor Hugo, whom reportedly once suffered a terrible period of depression. Here Houellebecq ponders the question: “[W]hat if it was spiritualism that brought him through it?” (253). The same question seems to guide *Submission*, even if nothing more comes of it than a skewed attempt to get out of the depressive condition – to get out of the tunnel so to speak – by way of religion and spirituality. The realization that spirituality and religion are necessary is certainly present, but the necessity does not carry a possibility within it, at least not on an individual level. It remains unavailable to François, as the scene in the Chapel of Our Lady in Rocamadour shows. At a collective, societal level the religious solution leads, at best, to an Islamic state with polygamy and a religious education system. This is not a pure and unequivocal dystopia. In the interview mentioned above Houellebecq even ‘admitted’ that “France is not committing suicide at all. What’s more, for people to convert is a sign of hope, not a threat. It means they aspire to a new kind of society.” (Bourmeau, unpaginated).

That this issue is not decidable is not a cliché but a concrete consequence of the temporal perspective and the grammatical tense that increasingly mark the final part of the novel, where the tense changes from past to future conditional tense (*Le conditionnelle*), designating a situation’s occurrence as uncertain or conditioned. “A few more weeks *would* go by...”, the last chapter thus begins (247 – my emphasis (“Quelques semaines allaient encore s’écouler”)), and continues in this tense for the few remaining pages of the novel, which ends with a slightly

everybody and not the ‘prerogative’ of men, aristocrats and artists: “[C]ontemporary depression is the marriage between the traditional melancholia of the exceptional person and the modern egalitarian idea that anyone can be exceptional.” (Ehrenberg xxx). See also: Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* 2.

modulated version of Edith Piaf's famous line "Je ne regrette rien": "Rather like my father a few years before, I'd be given another chance; and it would be the chance at a second life, with very little connection to the old one. I would have nothing to mourn." (250 ("Je n'aurais rien à regretter.")). For the first time in Houellebecq's *oeuvre*, the time and point of narration does not transcend or overhaul the end of the action, which creates a final ambiguity different from his other books. There is no saying what is actually going to happen and how this is to be viewed and judged. But what remains unambiguously clear is that François, whether in the Chapel of Our Lady or elsewhere, is incapable of undertaking the absurd leap of faith required of him. Rather, he trudges along into a more or less unknown future. And though there is no discernible difference between a critical blood sugar level and a spiritual experience, this is perhaps less to be read as a satirical rejection of the depressive problematic – the depressed person's crisis of faith – than as a cementation of the problem. Rather than emphasizing the problem's *irrelevance*, the scene may be interpreted as highlighting its *importance* and *insistence*. For there is only one thing more disheartening than bodies without souls who seek shelter in an act of spiritual submission: Depressed people who are unable – or unwilling? – to find shelter anywhere at all.

A reviewer wrote of *Against Nature* that "[a]fter such a book, the only thing left for the author is to choose between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the cross. The choice is made." (Huysmans 197). In *Submission* that choice has not yet been made: François is still standing there, between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the cross.

Old age and the art of depression (threshold)

In the works of Houellebecq, depression crystallizes as a time in itself, or rather an age in itself. The problem that is present(ed) in all of his books is that of old age. The world in Houellebecq is always an old and weary world and, accordingly, all of his characters are always already too old, even in *Whatever* where the protagonist is 'only' 30. *The Possibility of an Island*, for instance, is a novel concerned with "the unbearable nature of the mental suffering caused by old age." (PI 62). As mentioned, between the divorce with his first and only wife and his entrance into the sect of the Elohimites, Daniel¹ has a brief relationship with the very young and attractive Esther, which of course does not last long. In a particularly devastating scene, Esther is throwing a party for all her young friends, with copious amounts of cocaine, and the depressed Daniel is feeling helplessly old; Esther as good as disowns him and at the end of the party, nearing dawn, Daniel finds himself outside next to a swimming pool:

"A few meters away from me there was a girl dressed in black, with a vacant look in her eyes; I thought she wouldn't even notice my presence, but she spat to one side when I ejaculated. I ended up falling asleep, and I probably slept for a long time, because when I woke up there was nobody left; even Pablo had gone. There was dried sperm on my trousers, and I must have spilled whiskey on my shirt, it was reeking. I got up with difficulty, and crossed the terrace amid piles of food and empty bottles. I leaned against the balcony, and observed the street below. The sun had already begun its descent in the sky, night would not take long to fall, and I knew more or less what awaited me. I was evidently on the home stretch." (PI 237).

Later on, he writes a poem with the lines "We enter an old age/Where nothing awaits us", after which he realizes that "this poem corresponded not simply to my state of mind, but to a starkly observable reality [...] The thought was depressing at first, and it remained, on further examination, just as depressing." (275).

This temporal depressing experience is inextricably linked to the contemporary consumer capitalism, that, according to the narrator of *The Possibility of an Island*, was "turning

youth into the supremely desirable commodity” and thereby, little by little, destroying “respect for tradition and the cult of the ancestors – inasmuch as it promised the indefinite preservation of this same youth, and the pleasures associated with it” (246). As the French writes collective Tiqqun suggest in their book *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, the young girl is the ultimate model or figure for capitalism today (15). Consumers are also producers, they invest in themselves, realize themselves, and no one more perfectly than the young girl. In this game, which makes up a generalized state of competition, old men are the emphatic losers. In the end, being old and being depressed amounts to the same thing, unless you are both old *and* depressed; then you are really on the home stretch. Houellebecq and every one of his male characters are all too painfully and pathetically aware of this, and so in *The Possibility of an Island* alone we find such claims that “life begins at fifty, that’s true; inasmuch as it ends at forty” (17); that society is characterized and haunted by a “pure fascination with limitless youth” (29); that “after a certain age, life becomes administrative – more than anything” (106); and that “in the modern world you could be a swinger, bi, trans, zoo, into S&M, but it was forbidden to be *old*.” (148). Perhaps one could even say that in the world of today it is not only forbidden but immoral to be old. It is, indeed, no country for old men.

An artist who no longer has anything to say?

Alain Ehrenberg has drawn attention to the fact that the depressive is in a sense always prematurely old, but it is Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi whose reflections provide the possibility for getting to the bottom of this. In several works, Berardi has tried to arrive at an understanding of depression that takes as its point of departure the work of Deleuze and, in particular, Guattari. As Berardi himself points out, there is something paradoxical about this endeavor, since the framework of Deleuze and Guattari leaves almost no room for a consideration of depression.⁹⁰ This is because their work is based on the presupposition that desire is a production, and the psychopathology that they are mainly interested in – schizophrenia – is thus never understood as a lack of desire or even as a drying up of desire. In his book on Guattari, Berardi stresses that

⁹⁰ Cf. “The methodology [*démarche*] of the *Anti-Oedipus* is not easy to reconcile with the possibility of delving into depression. Depression is not just a condition among others, in which a machinic unconscious is assembled, made of existential and chaotomic fragments proceeding from anywhere to everywhere else. The *Anti-Oedipus* does not know depression; it continuously overcomes, leaping with psychedelic energy over any slowing down and any darkness.” (Berardi, *Félix Guattari* 11).

depression is essentially “a disinvestment of libidinal energies in facing the future, in facing the world” (Félix Guattari 158); depression occurs the moment “you realize that your desire no longer has any place in the real.” (160). According to Bifo, then, depression is the unthought or unthinkable of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*. It is the dark side of desire; what awaits when the desiring machine runs out of fuel, collapses into a dark hole, and dries up. Surely Houellebecq would lose no time in pointing out that the publication of *Anti-Oedipus* was closely related to the events of ‘May 68, not to mention the fact that it was very quickly appropriated by capitalism and incorporated into its very machinery in subsequent years. Regardless of the possible complicity of Deleuze and Guattari in the historical disaster that, in the eyes of Houellebecq, followed from ‘68, what Berardi tries to show is that Deleuze and Guattari, did in fact deal with depression at one particular place in their joint work, albeit somewhat unknowingly or implicitly. As he writes in *The Soul at Work* (and never mind the overfamiliar use of first names): “If we pay careful attention to the last chapter of their last collective book, Gilles and Félix are in fact analyzing depression, confusion and dark horizons: the emergence of chaos” (128). The place Berardi has in mind is the beginning of the last chapter of Deleuze and Guattari’s last work, *What is Philosophy*: “Old age is this very weariness: then, there is either a fall into mental chaos outside of the plane of composition or a falling-back on ready-made opinions, on clichés that reveal that an artist, no longer able to create new sensations, no longer knowing how to preserve, contemplate, and contract, no longer has anything to say.” (*What is Philosophy* 214).

Berardi re-frames and re-contextualizes this description of old age as a description of depression, which I fully agree with. But whereas Berardi mentions Jonathan Franzen’s novel *The Corrections*⁹¹ as a paradigmatic example of the old age of depression, I want to consider whether it might not serve as a fitting account of the world of Houellebecq as well? In his novels, it does seem to be the case that “old age is becoming the average social condition of the majority, while at the same time it also becomes the condition that best expresses the metaphor of the energy loss affecting the human race.” (*The Soul at Work* 132).

The essential difference, however, is that for Berardi the task – simultaneously therapeutic, aesthetic and political – is definitely not to “bring the depressed person back to normality, to reintegrate behavior in the universal standards of normal social language” but rather

⁹¹ This is one of the places where the specificity of Berardi’s critique and diagnostic hits the rocks.

to give the depressed person “the possibility of seeing other landscapes, to change focus, to open new paths of imagination”, thus leading the person in question out of the “labyrinth” instead of back in (*The Soul at Work* 216). What everything comes down to, for Bifo, is desire. The collapse or disinvestment of desire is the problem of depression, but the solution to this problem is not an abandonment of desire; rather, it is its reinvestment, a new trajectory of desire, or – in the Deleuzian/Guattarian vocabulary – a deterritorialization of desire. Desire is the pharmakon: Poison and cure. The problem here then is not desire per se, as it is in Houellebecq: In his novels *everything begins with the end of desire*.

Significantly, the remarks made by Deleuze and Guattari on old age relate specifically to one of the pillars of *What is Philosophy*; namely art. The question they raise is: What does the artist do with old age? How does he or she handle it? Here Berardi, usually a pure pessimist, is quite optimistic on behalf of art. Particularly inspired by Guattari’s idea of an ‘aesthetic paradigm’, he often ends up emphasizing art’s potential to compose the chaos of old age, to show a way out of the labyrinth, to offer new ways for the imagination to go. It is not only in *The Soul at Work* that Berardi ascribes a simultaneously diagnostic and therapeutic quality to art. Art, he writes in “Repression, Expression, Depression”, “registers and signals” the trouble of the modern world, while at the same time “goes looking for possible new modalities of becoming.” (198), and in *The Uprising* he argues that poetry in particular has the capacity to function as a source of salvation (40). The times are dark and there is danger everywhere, but – as Hölderlin wrote in some oft quoted lines – “where danger is, grows/The saving power also.”

But what if depressive literature does not function as the opening of an imaginary field, but rather as evidence of the immediate and total collapse of the very faculty of imagination? What if the goal of the writing and language in question is not to reinvest desire but to remove it? What if literature as a potential remedy is not only part of the disease but one of its symptoms? What are we left with then? The answer seems simple: Michel Houellebecq and his depressive and radically symptomatological literature. Indeed, his novels seem – not least stylistically – to sink into the old age of depression; they appear to accept – or cannot but accept – “a falling-back on ready-made opinions, on clichés that reveal that an artist, no longer able to create new sensations, no longer knowing how to preserve, contemplate, and contract, no longer

has anything to say.” Here, the question is, again, not so much how art presents the problem of depression but how depression presents a problem for art.

Symptomatological realism take two

A symptomatological project is something that Houellebecq’s works themselves explicitly raise. At one point in *Atomised*, for example, during an account of Michel’s ancestors, the narrator states the following: “[i]n the case of Martin Ceccaldi, it seems appropriate to set his life in a socioeconomic context; to say less about the individual than about the society of which he is symptomatic.” (26). Again, the important point here is that the symptomatological gaze or the symptomatological method is not merely something that is spoken of and *preached*; it is put to work, and something that is *practiced*. In Houellebecq the symptomatology covers everything from the innermost to the outermost. We have already seen how the very style and syntax of his novels must be perceived as symptoms of depression, but the construction and composition of each book can be interpreted in the same way. As Ben Jeffery remarks in his perceptive analysis, the fictional frameworks of Houellebecq’s novels have a slightly rudimentary character: “The science-fiction in *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island*”, he writes, “is interesting mainly for its poverty.” (67). In this way, the novels seem to function as paradigmatic examples of what might be called the anti-imaginative modality of depressive literature. The novels – particularly the two that Jeffery mentions – only erect and assemble imaginary sci-fi universes in order to have them punctured in the very same moment; a demonstrative procedure of undermining the purpose of which is to indicate and intensify the depressive feeling that there is no tomorrow and no alternative to what already is, no alternative to the world as it exists *right now*. This is what Houellebecq would seek to show then: The flatness and poverty of the imaginary constructions, the impotence of the work(s) of the imagination. Thus, Jeffery concludes: “The imagination is the enemy, a liar – the ultimate faker. There’s a saying that misanthropy is a disguised form of self-contempt, which, in this case, is perfectly true. Houellebecq’s books are works of the imagination against the imagination. They hate themselves.” (53). In a certain sense it is almost necessary for the books to hate themselves, because how would they otherwise express hatred towards a world that they themselves are nothing but a symptom of?

This is what is meant by Houellebecq's depressive symptomatology, whose fundamental symptom – or decisive problematic – concerns, as I have argued, a question of time, more specifically futurity. I have thus read the designation of time and the use of grammatical tenses in *Whatever* as symptoms of what Thomas Fuchs calls desynchronization, or the explicit temporality of depression. I have read the future scenarios in *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island* as symptoms of an imagination that does not so much regard the future as a possibility or an alternative to the present as a time already past; “The future was empty” as the line goes towards the end of *The Possibility of an Island*. Finally, I have read the depressive condition of François, the protagonist and narrator of *Submission*, as a symptom of a spiritual crisis; an individual crisis in itself symptomatic of a broader and more fundamental crisis of a society “poor in faith,” to quote Jaspers once again.

As intimated, I do believe a certain symptomatological realism is at work here, but the reason I have avoided and refrained from speaking about depressive realism – as opposed to Jeffery (and quite a few others) – is that this concept presupposes a distanced and somewhat romantic clear-sightedness, i.e. a position on the *outside* from which it is supposedly possible to see through and elucidate the society to which one does not really belong. In the case of Houellebecq, this hypothesis is simply unjustified. Of course, the issue is not only one of epistemology, but also and perhaps above all one of criticality. It is a question of the critical potential of depressive literature. To approach this final question and relate it to that of the depressive symptomatology just indicated, it is necessary to pause for a moment to reflect upon the distance or lack of distance in Houellebecq's body of work, i.e. the position and point of view of narration. The scholarship on Houellebecq often emphasizes the distanced voice of the narrators, or the ways in which they – allegedly – observe society from the outside. Thus, in a recent book *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its aftermath*, it is stated that “[t]he point of view appears, on numerous occasions, almost anthropological, or ethnological – our society is observed *as though from the outside* precisely because Houellebecq's narrators do not feel themselves to be fully a part of it.” (41 – emphasis in original). However, my point is exactly the opposite: The distance to which all the works of Houellebecq evidently testify is *not* a distance from without but a distance from *within*: a distance created and constituted by depressive collapse, and no less great than a distance from the outside. To repeat the cogent lines from Andrew Solomon's

Noonday Demon: “We are depressed not because we are so far removed from what we want, but because we are merged with it.” (326).

Does the angle between two walls have a happy ending?

This of course has consequences for what form of resistance it is possible – and meaningful – to envisage. This is why it is difficult, especially for left-leaning critics, to read Houellebecq. Due to the lack of distance from without, the lack of autonomy, or of of an outside, one is easily led to believe that he is a reactionary.⁹² There is no asymmetrical perspective with regards to the object observed and written about, only a total and absolutely symmetrical symptomatology. As Victoria Best and Martin Crowley write on Houellebecq: “His work is, unavoidably, *both* the ultimate symptom *and* the critical diagnosis of the mediated, self-conscious, lost world it describes.” (185). It could perhaps be expressed even more strongly: That his diagnosis *is* his symptomatology and *vice versa*. That it is only to the extent that his literature is formed symptomatologically that it constitutes a ‘realistic’ diagnosis of the times. This means that the responses expressed in his books – as reactions to the problems articulated within them – must also be read as symptoms themselves. I would thus tend to agree with Frederik Tygstrup when he says that Houellebecq not only shows us the pathologies of neoliberal capitalism but also formulates the “Utopias appearing on the totalizing market’s line of horizon”, so that it is only logical to “consider the Utopian as a part of the diagnostic.” (282 – my translation). Tygstrup continues: “[t]he novels are not merely overflowing with one bittersweet utopia after another, which they are, but also demonstrate how these utopias sprout and grow.” (ibid.). Houellebecq's utopian scenes are thus evidence of a depressive imagination and the utopian models proposed – technology, religion etc. – are not *solutions to depression*, but *symptoms of depression*.

Before leaving the subject for good, one might make a Jamesonian objection. In *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Fredric Jameson writes that science fiction is not at all about the capacity to “keep the future alive, even in imagination. On the contrary, its deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future.” (288-9). In that sense, Houellebecq’s work could be viewed as

⁹² Cf. “All the great writers were reactionaries” (*Atomised* 179).

the perfect example of a truly utopian work. But whereas Jameson regards utopia as “a necessary failure of imagination” (178) and this failure as a kind of reversed Pyrrhic victory – reminiscent of Beckett’s “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.” – Houellebecq goes in the opposite and more literal direction: For him a failure is a failure is a failure. There is no utopian imperative or impulse left. All that remains is a depressed and depressing work of fiction that bears witness to the collapsed space of an impotent imagination: The future has contracted to a zero point, and this is precisely where everything in the fiction of Houellebecq begins and ends. However, the counter to the potential Jamesonian objection might be even more radically formulated: Perhaps we should rather say that for Houellebecq it does not really make sense to engage in the discussion – dystopian or utopian, failure or success? – using a human scale. This is what such discussions, quite understandably, tend to be characterized by: Is this or that future a good or bad thing *for us*, as human beings? But this is precisely not the central question in Houellebecq, insofar as the very point from which such an evaluation could be conducted is dislocated and displaced beyond any human point of view. Strictly speaking the ending of *The Possibility of an Island* is not aimed or addressed at us, the contemporary human readers, or if it is, its purpose is only to underline our inevitable and essential irrelevance for the future.⁹³ The reader of Houellebecq is confronted solely by dry ascertainment, a matter-of-fact extrapolation of contemporary conditions, and the depressive recognition that life ends and the human as we know it will disappear; the future of humanity is a future without humanity. As J. G. Ballard once wrote in his manifesto *Notes From Nowhere*: “Does the angle between two walls have a happy ending?” (149).

What seems certain is that art is no more able to offer a way out of – or a therapeutic cure for – depression than technology and science or religion and spirituality. Indeed, this should not be in the least surprising given that the protagonist of *Platform* had already declared:

”Questions of aesthetics and politics are not my thing; it’s not up to me to invent or adopt new affinities with the world – I gave up all that at the same time I developed a stoop and my face started to tend towards melancholy. I’ve attended many exhibitions, private

⁹³ In *Public Enemies* Houellebecq says: “I think, in dealing with humanity, it’s important from time to time to take a *bacterial point of view*” (172 – italics in original), which is indeed what he does at the end of *The Map and the Territory*.

views, many performances that remain unforgettable. My conclusion, henceforth, is that art cannot change lives. At least not mine.” (16).

Perhaps art is not able to change life. Perhaps art is actually complicit in the contemporary misery in a variety of ways – and the novels of Houellebecq certainly are that, not least due to the method of symptomatology and the imitation from the inside, whereby, for example, a tired world equals a tired syntax. However, Houellebecq’s novels avoid partaking in what Lovecraft calls bland or smirk optimism. That much is clear. The depressive position and perspective prompt Houellebecq to make life – again in the words of Lovecraft – a “thousandfold more hideous”, a thousandfold more depressing than it already is. The goal is not relief or reparation, but intensification and multiplication. The only medicine he offers is the assurance that there is no medicine.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Here I am paraphrasing some lines from an interview with Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai (Szirtes, unpaginated).

Chapter 2

David Foster Wallace

Intro

In some oft quoted lines from his famous 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, David Foster Wallace declared:

“Look man, we’d probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite the times’ darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it’d find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it.” (*Conversations* 26).

The writer from whom Wallace is explicitly distancing himself in this passage is Bret Easton Ellis who, according to Wallace, has chosen the easy – and in every respect cynical – solution: “If readers simply believe the world is stupid and shallow and mean, then Ellis can write a mean shallow stupid novel that becomes a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything.” (ibid.). Wallace might as well have been talking about Michel Houellebecq. In clear contrast to Houellebecq, who seems to be content with merely giving an account of the depressive experience as a way of unveiling the world as it is – thereby letting his literature be almost absolutely symmetrical with and symptomatic of this very world – Wallace is convinced that literature has to be an “illumination”, a cure, a therapy, a kind of CPR as it were; the critical diagnosis is not enough in itself.

This is the general framework for the following chapter on David Foster Wallace. Scene one and scene two will focus rather exclusively on the experience of depression as it is made manifest and expressed in the “The Depressed Person” and *Infinite Jest* respectively, through the nameless protagonist of the former and the character of Kate Gompert in the latter. It is not surprising that depression was a major concern of Wallace’s literary work – from his first published story “The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands In Relation To The Bad Thing” which appeared in the college journal *Amherst Review* in 1984 to *The Pale King*, published posthumously in 2011 –

given that Wallace suffered from episodes of deep depression for most of his adult life, which ended when he committed suicide in 2008. However, my concerns in this chapter are strictly textual, and what follows from the analysis of the two scenes is that, for Wallace, the capacity for *empathy* is evaporated in the depressive condition. In *Infinite Jest*, for instance, we hear about the "anhedonic Inability To Identify" (695-6), where, in the context of the novel, to identify is to empathize. As shall be shown, depression in Wallace is characterized by a loss of empathy, by a loss of the Other. There is temporal aspect to this loss, insofar as the Other, as we learn from Emmanuel Levinas, is a category of futurity. In *Time and the Other* he writes: "[t]he other is the future. The very relation to the other is the relation to the future. It seems to me impossible to speak of time in a subject alone." (77). In other words: The relation to the other is a protentional relation. The loss of the future is the loss of the other and vice versa.

For Wallace, however, this problem is related to a cultural and perhaps also very American problem of *addiction*. All of the characters in *Infinite Jest* are addicts in one way or another, and a central part of the novel takes place at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, wittily footnoted "Redundancy sic". The relation between depression and addiction is well established within psychiatric research: Substance abuse is common among depressive patients, and depressive incidents are, in turn, frequently reported among substance abusers, which is why depression and addiction are sometimes referred to as a double demon.⁹⁵ Ehrenberg even suggests that "[d]epression and addiction are what trace the outline of the individual at the end of the twentieth century" (12). Whether this is indeed the case or not, it is clear that in Wallace's writing we find a rather classical problem that rotates around the axis of self and other, subject and object. However, what is singular to his works is the way in which they exhibit a sort of cruel double bind. On the one hand, if the relation to the other or the object becomes too strong, the risk is an addictive relation, total immersion (a favored word by Wallace), a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, or a never-ending quest for recognition from others, whom, for their part, also hope desperately to be perceived and recognized by other others, who in turn seek recognition and so on. It is, indeed, "an endless funhouse hall of mirrors" (*The Pale King* 96). On the other hand, if the relation to the other or the object becomes too weak, the risk is depression,

⁹⁵ See for instance Regier et al. 2511ff. See also www.dualdiagnosis.org/resource/depression/.

anhedonia, total withdrawal, an enclosed and enfolded self, a world with no mirrors at all. Pick your poison. This is the subject of scene three.

What is the cure, if indeed there is one? That is the question that guides the fourth and final scene, making the structure of the chapter somewhat similar to that on Houellebecq. However, whereas the problem articulated in Houellebecq's work was one of *competition*, here it is *addiction*, and whereas the response in Houellebecq was ontological, concerning the very being of human beings – or alternatively, a post-human form of being – the response in Wallace has a more ethico-spiritual character, pertaining to the being of the Other. It raises issues of love, belief, and infinity. Thus, in this scene I shall turn to “B.I. #20 12-96. New Haven CT,” the brutal, yet somehow rather beautiful, penultimate story in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, in which a woman saves her life by way of a radical act of empathy. As I shall aim to demonstrate, the empathy evinced in this story goes beyond any conventional understanding. Though some readers of Wallace – and even Wallace himself – at times seem satisfied with viewing empathy, quite trivially, as the affective and imaginative operation of putting oneself in the proverbial other's shoes, it is much more complicated than that. My goal is to challenge the pervasive yet problematic assumption that empathy is simply an operation through which you feel, or try to feel or imagine, what another person feels. In that way, my reading has little to do with Martha Nussbaum's conceptualizations of the relation between literature and empathy.⁹⁶ This argument will draw not so much on Levinas, as Kierkegaard and his highly original reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan in *Works of Love*. As my analysis of “B.I. #20” will hopefully show, the rehabilitation of the Other – or the Neighbor – is a work of love that renders impossible the maintenance of both a rosy feel-good version of the empathetic powers of fiction, and of a more pessimistic and cynical view that every possible attachment in Wallace – to people, partners, AA, tennis, etc. – is simply another addiction, or another act of selfish narcissism. Instead, as the final argument goes, the result is a radical and stern version of love as the only kind of therapeutic cure or CPR for the pathology of depression and for these dark times as a whole. The question that remains is whether this translates into any kind of political project.

⁹⁶ See for instance Nussbaum 1997. For an example of a reading of Wallace that moves in that direction, see Robert K. Bolger's text “A Less “Bullshitty” Way To Live: The Pragmatic Spirituality of David Foster Wallace.” Though I appreciate the confrontation of the issue of spirituality in Wallace, Bolger is, when all is said and done, orientated towards “the reality of the moral virtue of empathy” (48).

Scene 1: The obsessive refrain of depression (“The Depressed Person”)

“The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror [...]

The friends whom the depressed person reached out to for support and tried to open up to and share at least the contextual shape of her unceasing psychic agony and feelings of isolation with numbered around half a dozen and underwent a certain amount of rotation. The depressed person’s therapist – who had earned both a terminal graduate degree and a medical degree, and who was the self-professed exponent of a school of therapy which stressed the cultivation and regular use of a supportive peer-community in any endogenously depressed adult’s journey toward healing – referred to these female friends as the depressed person’s Support System. The approximately half-dozen rotating members of this Support System tended to be either former acquaintances from the depressed person’s childhood or else girls she had roomed with at various stages of her school career, nurturing and comparatively undamaged women who now lived in all manner of different cities and whom the depressed person often had not seen in person for years and years, and whom she often called late in the evening, long-distance, for sharing and support and just a few well-chosen words to help get her some realistic perspective on the day’s despair and get centered and gather together the strength to fight through the emotional agony of the next day, and to whom, when she telephoned, the depressed person always began by saying that she apologized if she was dragging them down or coming off as boring or self-pitying or repellent or taken them away from their, active, vibrant, largely pain-free long-distance lives.” (“The Depressed Person” 37-39⁹⁷).

Within these endless and interlaced spirals, the depressed person of David Foster Wallace’s “The Depressed Person” from the short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* from 1999⁹⁸, appears before the reader in all her emotional agony and spiritual despair, her inability to communicate the pain of her depression, and her unbearable self-consciousness and narcissistic self-centeredness. In any exploration of Wallace’s problematization of the phenomenon of depression the story is impossible to ignore, and the scene above displays almost all of the crucial components of the experience of depression in Wallace’s work. The female protagonist is so caught up in what Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi calls the obsessive rhythm of depression (*Félix* 130) that she has lost any sense of the Other. Yet, as we shall come to see, “The Depressed Person” is in fact

⁹⁷ The story is henceforth abbreviated to “TDP”. All page references to this story are in fact references to the page numbers in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* in which it appears.

⁹⁸ The story was first published in Harper’s Magazine in 1998. According to the biography *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, the female character is based on the author of *Prozac Nation*, Elizabeth Wurtzel, and is ostensibly some kind of revenge that Wallace took after having been turned down by her.

an atypical text from Wallace's hand in that it does not seek to offer any cure or CPR; it provides no resynchronized rhythm, nor recovery of the Other.

The depressed person's zero sense of empathy

The story "The Depressed Person" is essentially a loop. There is neither a beginning nor end to the story, nor to the depressed woman's depression. It goes on and on, though she tries everything she can to get help. She is on a vast range of medications: Paxil, Zoloft, Prozac, Tofranil, Welbutrin, Elavil. She has a therapist. She reaches out to her friends, to her so-called Support System. In this story Wallace shows his utmost familiarity with the language of cognitive therapy, endogenous depression, etiological models and the names of anti-depressants. He also shows that nothing really works.

The depressed person calls her friends but is painfully aware of "what a joyless burden" she must be (42), as she cannot help but point out, and makes sure to say to her friends that they absolutely must tell her "the very *second* she (i. e. the friend) was getting bored or frustrated or repelled or felt she had other more urgent or interesting things to do." (44). However, she is also very well aware of "how pathetic such a need for reassurance might come off to someone, how it could all too possibly be heard not as an open invitation to get off the telephone but actually as a needy, self-pitying, contemptibly manipulative plea for the friend *not* to get off the telephone, *never* to get off the telephone" (44). It does not take the reader long to realize how the depressed person not only draws on her friends, but exploits their empathy and emotional support, an exploitation which is not mitigated but maximized by her self-conscious effort to be open about it. From her helpless and powerless position, she attempts to control the situation and leaves little or no breathing space for her listeners – nor for the readers of the story.

At the same time, the depressed person is so thoroughly self-centered in her pain that she has no understanding nor empathy for any other than herself. When her therapist dies, she thinks only about how that affects her therapeutic process, how inconvenient it is from her perspective. She is utterly unable to "feel or identify any real feelings within herself for the therapist." (67). Earlier, she confesses to her Support System that, though they have spent hours and hours talking to each other, she has not once "asked for the therapist's loved ones' names." (65). As for her Support System, one of them, "a surpassingly generous and nurturing mother of

two in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan” (66), is actually terminally ill and undergoing chemotherapy for “a virulent blastoma” (ibid.), but the depressed person does not care. Or rather, she does not know (which is of course even worse), as she has been too preoccupied with herself to even consider the simple question of how the others in her network are doing. It stands to reason though that even if she had known about her friend’s terrible condition, she would probably not have felt anything in this case either, except perhaps a slight annoyance. What is valued about this particular terminally ill friend is that she is “not only almost always at home but also enjoyed nearly unlimited conflict-free availability and time to share on the telephone, for which the depressed person was always careful to enter a daily prayer of gratitude in her Feelings Journal.” (66). Later the depressed person does admit to this friend that she is “frightened for herself, for as it were '[her] *self*' – i.e. for her own so-called 'character' or 'spirit' or as it were 'soul', i.e. for her own capacity for basic human empathy and compassion and caring”, before continuing with the question: “What kind of person could seem to feel nothing – '*Nothing*', she emphasized – for anyone but herself? Maybe not *ever*?”⁹⁹

A desynchronized rhythm of recursion

Reading “The Depressed Person” is an absolutely claustrophobic experience. At no time is it possible to step outside the stream of self-consciousness with its recursive sentences and dizzying syntax, the effect of which has been described by Zadie Smith as follows: “[T]o read those spiral sentences is to experience that dread of circularity embedded in the old joke about recursion (*to understand recursion you must first understand recursion*), as well as the existential vertigo we feel when we stand before two mirrors.” (276 – emphasis in original).¹⁰⁰ What Smith misses in her otherwise perceptive observations is the fact that the formal features are a symptom of the depression at work in the story. The speech of the depressed person as a character and the style of “The Depressed Person” as a story betray a thoroughly depressed rhythm. There is reason to pick up, elaborate on and apply the concept of *rhythm* – introduced at the beginning of this dissertation – in this context. As we saw, it is not uncommon to describe mental illnesses in terms

⁹⁹ A person feeling nothing for others is, as Marshall Boswell observes, a nothing, a void (207).

¹⁰⁰ As a whole the story is constructed as layers upon layers: We have an implicit narrator, who tells what the depressed protagonist has told her therapist, what she has told her friends on the phone and so on. In addition, we have the seemingly unending footnotes.

of a rhythmic disturbance or dissonance within the psychiatric literature, in particular phenomenological psychiatry: Thomas Fuchs, for one, spoke about the desynchronized rhythm of depression. Rhythm is of course also a musical term, apotheosized in pop music as the *refrain*. Inspired by Henri Lefebvre but even more so by Felix Guattari, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi has ventured into the relation between rhythm/refrain and a psychopathology such as depression. "The refrain", he writes in the book that bears the simple and telling title *Félix Guattari*,

"is above all a musical phrase that returns in the course of a song: a phrase that, in returning, constructs and brings forth the complex rhythm. It is a factor of assemblage: by constructing rhythm and bringing forth the song's complex rhythm, the refrain functions as the structuring element in language, in existential behavior, and in history."¹⁰¹

The refrain is thus more than a designation of a musical phenomenon; according to Berardi it pertains to the very rhythmic relation between *Organismus* and *Umwelt*. The refrain is what holds together a world or a life; it sustains relations to other people and to one's self. What happens in the depressive state is that this rhythm hardens and becomes compulsive, like having a particular piece of music on the brain: It sticks in your head, in your body and you cannot get it out. On and on it goes, round and round.

This is literally how "The Depressed Person" operates as a text: It consists of a series of suffocating repetitions, in which the narrator merely mimes the thoughts and speech acts of the depressed protagonist. Formally and stylistically "The Depressed Person" thus bears the stamp of the compulsive and obsessive refrain of depression, from which there is no escape. There is no outside, and despite all the communicative efforts, no you.

"Our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms"

In his *General Psychopathology*, Karl Jaspers called attention to the *pathological and clinical* problem of "a failure of empathy" (64). Furthermore, he regarded the problem of empathy as an integral part of the therapeutic practice, insofar as there can be no direct access to the psychic experiences of others, which implies that there must be "an act of empathy" on part of the

¹⁰¹ See also the chapter on the refrain/ritornello in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (342ff.)

clinician or psychiatrist (55). Empathy is thus simultaneously a diagnostic and a therapeutic category, an epistemological and an ethical problem.¹⁰² For Wallace it is, however, a *contemporary and cultural* problem as well. After all, all of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* are explorations of people – mostly men – who have zero sense of empathy. There is a man who leaves his girlfriend because she has been too explicit about her fear that he might leave her, which then ends up as a self-fulfilling prophesy and a very neat excuse for the man in question (20-22). There is a man who takes advantage of a girl when she is not picked up at the airport by the love of her life (22ff.). There is a man who uses his crippled arm as an ‘asset’ to get more “pussy than a toilet seat.” (86). In short, it is a book about people who cannot love or empathize and who, as the book itself formulates it somewhere, have severe problems with “other-directedness” (138) – of which the depressed person is the radicalized and pathological instance.

In the article “The Science of Evil” Simon Baron-Cohen argues that a contemporary erosion of empathy has taken place, which has as its primary consequence “people turning people into objects [...] in such a state we relate only to things, or to people *as if they were just things*” (unpaginated – emphasis in original).¹⁰³ In *Brief interviews with Hideous Men* this erosion of empathy seems to be the very condition for the violence, sexual abuse, and misogyny permeating every fiber of the book. What is lost is precisely the Other, or the Other is turned into an object, which amounts to one and the same thing.

Is the loss of the other or the transformation of the other into an object a consequence of a culture of narcissism? According to several critics, what Wallace tries to capture is a specifically American problem of generalized narcissism.¹⁰⁴ Examples of narcissistic behavior in Wallace are legion, and not only in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. In *Infinite Jest* the whole Incandenza-family, the focal point of the novel, is haunted by it. One of the sons, Orin, is sexually aroused by watching himself play American Football on TV (298) and the mother Avril has to be at

¹⁰² Cf. Rosfort & Stanghellini 166.

¹⁰³ See also Berardi's *And* (16ff.).

¹⁰⁴ Mary K. Holland's article "The Art's Heart's Purpose": Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* is perhaps the most obvious example. The reference point for nearly all of these readings is, of course, Christopher Lasch's seminal *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979). Lasch's book featured in Wallace's private library, which was made public a couple of years ago, so the comparison is surely not unwarranted, even if some decisive differences are evident too. The focus on narcissism was, for Lasch, part of a fairly conservative cultural criticism, which among others things implied a critique of feminized society and a nostalgic longing for (lost) paternal authorities. For more on the problems with Lasch's book, see: Holland 223; Lunbeck 115.

the exact center of every room that she finds herself in (521).¹⁰⁵ In the famous commencement speech “This is water”, given at Kenyon College in May 2005, Wallace seemed to pick on precisely this image in a passage that discussed “the worship of self”: “Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation” (117). However, it is vital not to regard these “tiny skull-sized kingdoms”, this pronounced narcissism, as a simple love of the self. The egoist subject continuously undertakes a demarcation in relation to other subjects, whereas the narcissistic subject cannot clearly define his or her boundaries. According to German philosopher Byung-Chul Han this is precisely a symptom of a society in which all forms of negativity and alterity have disappeared (*Agonie des Eros* 9ff.; *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft* 15ff.). In a society of pure positivity, the Other no longer exists, or if it does, merely as a reflection, a mirror image of the self. For Han, this means that today, love is in straitened circumstances, while, conversely, favorable conditions for depression abound.

With regards to “The Depressed Person”, Marshall Boswell has made the case, in his highly influential book *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, that the story “ultimately makes the point, repeatedly, that the true source of the woman’s depression is not the various wounds she might have suffered at the hands of her parents or friends but rather her own voracious narcissism.” (205). In general, I think “The Depressed Person” seeks to avoid advancing a causal line of etiology, which is mocked severely and repeatedly in the story. Another thing worth considering in this regard is the question of whether there is anything or anyone that is *not* narcissistic?¹⁰⁶ It is, in a sense, possible to read narcissism into everything, for who can say that a seemingly unselfish, altruistic deed is not ultimately fueled by a selfish wish to appear as an even better, more sympathetic and altruistic human being than before?¹⁰⁷ In any case, what remains

¹⁰⁵ For more on this particular topic, see Hirt 33.

¹⁰⁶ This particular question is inspired by a passage in *The Writing of the Disaster*, where Maurice Blanchot writes: “What is there that isn't narcissistic? All the positions of being are narcissistic, and of not-being. Even when being is totally renounced – denied to the point of becoming not-being – it does not cease (with the element of ambiguity which then obscures it) to be passively active.” (125).

¹⁰⁷ In *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* we encounter many men who think that they are the world’s greatest lovers and who are obsessed with sexually satisfying their female partners, bringing them one orgasm after the other: “They think they’re generous in bed. No, but the catch is they’re *selfish* about being generous.” (31). This is a typical catch in the work of Wallace but also, as argued, a kind of dead end.

clear is that narcissism is often a crucial factor in the depressive condition, which Wallace was very well aware of:

“This story [“The depressed person”] was the most painful thing I ever wrote. It’s about narcissism, which is a part of depression. The character has traits of myself. I really lost friends while writing on that story, I became ugly and unhappy and just yelled at people. The cruel thing with depression is that it’s such a self-centered illness – Dostoevsky shows that pretty good in his “Notes from Underground”. The depression is painful, you’re sapped/consumed by yourself; the worse the depression, the more you just think about yourself and the stranger and repellent you appear to others.”¹⁰⁸

Vicious infinite regress (your best thinking got you here)

This phenomenon is paradigmatic of what Wallace calls *vicious infinite regress*. The concept features in several of Wallace’s stories, such as “Good old neon” from *Oblivion* of 2004 (147; 181), but it is developed more theoretically in *Everything and More*, his book on the mathematical concept of infinity, where vicious infinite regress is defined as the moment “that it becomes logically impossible to do something we’re logically required to do.” (278). Wallace provides the following example:

“You’re standing at a corner and the light changes and you try to cross the street. Note the operative ‘try to’. Because before you can get all the way across the street, you obviously have to get halfway across. And before you can get halfway across, you have to get halfway to that halfway point. This is just common sense [...] the sequence has no finite end. Goes on forever. This is the dreaded *regressus in infinitum*, a.k.a. the Vicious Infinite Regress or VIR. What makes it vicious here is that you’re required to complete an infinite number of actions before attaining your goal, which – since the whole point of

¹⁰⁸ These lines that have been translated by The Howling Fantods, an online site for Wallace enthusiasts, stem from an interview Wallace did with *Die Zeit* in 2007 (www.zeit.de/2007/05/L-Interview). For the transcription and translation, see www.thehowlingfantods.com/dfw/interviews/translation-of-the-zeit-online-interview.html

'infinite' is that there is no end to the number of these actions – renders the goal logically impossible. Meaning you can't cross the street." (*Everything and More* 49).

As with everything else, Wallace's interest in this kind of phenomenon or concept was not purely mathematical; he was particularly preoccupied with the existential implications. Much of his interest in Wittgenstein followed the same pattern. The fundamental question for Wallace became: What would it be like to *live* in the Wittgensteinian world of the *Tractatus*?¹⁰⁹ An inability to cross the street thus translates into an inability to accessing the help that is needed. One cannot get out of depression. This is the depressed person's painful problem and is one of (self)consciousness, reflection and thinking in general. In *Infinite Jest* it is called "Analysis-Paralysis" (203), or as a slogan of the AA goes in the novel: "My Best Thinking Got Me Here." (1026). Thus consciousness of, and thinking about, a given problem is often part of that very problem. Knowledge does not lead to action; the diagnosis does not entail the cure.¹¹⁰

What Wallace is primarily absorbed by in "The Depressed Person" is anatomizing – and ridiculing – the workings of the depressed person's mind, or what some have called the nightmare of consciousness. The story is an introspection on the depressive process's introspective character. That said, we must remember that for Wallace, abstract thinking and existential feeling, rationality and affect, and mind and body are two sides of the same coin. The distinction between 'I think' and 'I feel' is immediately and irreversibly undermined. Any feeling is not only concerned with itself, but also inextricably bound up with the (self)consciousness of this feeling. The (self)consciousness of a feeling thus produces a 'new' or intensified feeling. This is the case with the character Cusk from *The Pale King*; a man who sweats an awful lot, which makes him very self-conscious, and in turn makes him sweat even more, making him even more self-

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Wallace's review "The empty plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*" (*Both Flesh and Not* 73-120).

¹¹⁰ This is stated explicitly in *The Pale King* (486), which is, in fact, only repeating a point already advanced in the essay "E unibus pluram", where Wallace mentions the "idealistic" belief that "etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure" (*A Supposedly Fun Thing* 66). The contrast to Freud could not be starker. In *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926) he writes that a "correct reconstruction" of "forgotten experiences of childhood", almost always "has a great therapeutic effect" (216) and in the postscript he added "there has existed from the very first [within psychoanalysis] an inseparable bond between cure and research. Knowledge brought therapeutic success." (256)

conscious and so on and on. He fears the sweating, but he also fears the fear, and the fear of the fear, resulting in “an endless funhouse hall of mirrors of fear.” (96).

The fact that there is always the consciousness of the consciousness, and the consciousness of the consciousness of the consciousness, obviously relates to the multi- and metalayers of Wallace’s fiction. Whereas this is a question of an *external* relation in much so-called metafiction, such as John Barth's work for example, in Wallace – in particular *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* – it is a question of an *inner* relationship. As Norwegian writer John Erik Riley points out in an essay on Wallace, the meta-thinking has been *internalized* by the various characters, as is shown in the question and answer form of a lot of the stories, where questions – always left blank – originate less in an interviewer than in the interviewee themselves (Riley, “Ikke et ord til” unpaginated).¹¹¹ The interviewee internalizes and anticipates every possible form of question or criticism, which is also why we are never allowed know the questions: The interviews are almost exclusively articulated in the consciousness and heads of the hideous men themselves.

Specifically, for the female protagonist of “The Depressed Person”, we witness a gradual intensification and infinitization of her depressed condition in line with the cruel logic indicated above: The more she reaches out to her friends, the more she becomes self-conscious, ashamed and disgusted with herself, prompting her to reach out to her friends even more, making her even more self-conscious, ashamed and disgusted with herself, and so on *ad nauseam, ad absurdum, ad infinitum*. Her narcissistic depression forces her to turn to her friends and her therapist, which in fact only fuels her narcissism and deepens her depression. As Zadie Smith observes, it is certainly easy enough to read the whole story as a critical comment on therapeutic logics and discourses that focus on etiology, childhood traumas and interpersonal wholeness, but this seems like “[a] dull drum to beat”, she writes, before continuing: “More significant is this idea of a looped discourse, of a language meant to *heal* the self that ends up referring only *to* the self.” (270). As Boswell summarizes the bleak conclusion to “The Depressed Person”: “In short, whenever she seeks relief from her depression, she ends up feeling more depressed.” (205).

¹¹¹ Many stories in the collection are interviews, presented in a classic Q&A form, but with the important modification that all the questions have been left blank, making it impossible to determine what the answers are answers *to*.

What is funny and not so funny about “The Depressed Person”

This kind of vicious infinite regress is not only tragic; it is inherently comical.¹¹² Let us conclude this scene by looking at how and why this is the case. It involves, strangely enough, Wallace’s relationship to Wittgenstein, which I both hinted toward earlier in this chapter and in the introduction to this dissertation. From beginning to end, Wallace was in a sense a student of Wittgenstein, always trying to live up to the latter’s dictum in *Philosophical Investigations*: “The philosopher treats a question; like an illness.” (98 (§ 255)) – though naturally for Wallace this was transformed into a question of aesthetic or literary methodology. In the same book Wittgenstein wrote: “There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were.” (57 (§ 133d)). The project of philosophy is thus, simply, “[t]o show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.” (110 (§ 309)). Wallace adopts almost completely this ambitious project and original imagery. As already stated, he does not believe that literature should be satisfied with showing how dark the world is; it has to include a therapy or remedy – to apply CPR – which is to say: Show the fly a way out of the bottle, or show the human a way out of the labyrinth. The only issue is that in Wallace’s writing, the way *out* of the labyrinth may finally lead deeper and further *into* it; the abandonment of the self may finally be an affirmation of the self. When Wallace tries to gesture toward an exit – or a way out of the bottle, in Wittgensteinian imagery – there is always the possibility that that exit is in fact the entrance to another bottle. To quote a passage from *Infinite Jest*, to which I shall return in scene three: “What looks like the cage’s exit is actually the bars of the cage.” (223). A paradoxical and dark variety of comedy emerges here. This is indeed the comedy of “The Depressed Person”. As Wallace wrote himself in an essay on Kafka, whose humor was marked by – and arose out of – a “harrowing spirituality” that is deeply relevant here:

“To envision us readers coming up and pounding on this door, pounding and pounding, not just wanting admission but needing it, we don’t know what it is but we can feel it, this total desperation to enter, pounding and pushing and kicking, etc. That, finally, the door

¹¹² Michael North is one of the readers of Wallace who has a very strong sense of the comedy of his works (169ff.).

opens...and it opens outward: we've been inside what we wanted all along. *Das ist komisch.*" (*Consider the Lobster* 65).¹¹³

What is not *komisch* at all, however, is that the laughter in "The Depressed Person" is directed toward the depressed person herself: The joke is on her alone. It is even intimated that *she* is to blame for her own depression, that she in a rather demonic way she "*chosen or chosen to cling to*" the chronic depression as a way of precluding intimacy, that her depression is actually an "emotional defense-mechanism" to keep others at a distance and make herself invulnerable to the judgment of others (49). In the story, reflection and faith are juxtaposed as the crucial conflict and choice, and Wallace refers, explicitly and more than once, to "a leap of faith" (51): Precisely what the depressed person in her state of depression is incapable of taking.

As mentioned earlier, according to Franco 'Bifo' Berardi the refrains of poetry and literature can in themselves constitute a deviation from the hardened, compulsive rhythm of depression. Not so in "The Depressed Person". The depressed person *as a person* risks no empathy¹¹⁴, but neither does "The Depressed Person" *as a text* by David Foster Wallace. If, as a line in one of the other stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* goes, rhythms are "relations between what you believe and what you believed before" (195), then the vertiginously looped story "The Depressed Person" remains a utterly a-rhythmic piece of fiction –in spite of its repetitive, obsessive cadence (of course arrhythmia is in itself a kind of rhythm). What this means is that the story reads like a broken record, like a vinyl skipping the whole way through; its rhythm remains desynchronized to the very end; the story does not pull the emergency brake on the vicious infinite regress. No difference is established, then, between what you believe and what you believed before and what you believe(d) was and still is: Nothing at all.

¹¹³ In *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein offered a similar image: "Someone is *imprisoned* in a room if the door is unlocked, opens inwards; but it doesn't occur to him to *pull*, rather than push against it." (48).

¹¹⁴ The phrase "no risk of empathy" appears in *Infinite Jest* (740).

Scene 2: “It’s like horror more than sadness” (Kate Gompert and *Infinite Jest*)

“What I am trying to ask, I think, is whether this feeling you’re communicating is the feeling you associate with your depression.’

Her gaze moved off. ‘That’s what you guys want to call it, I guess.’

The doctor clicked his pen slowly a few times and explained that he’s more interested here in what *she* would choose to call the feeling, since it was her feeling.

The resumed study of the movement of her feet. ‘When people call it that I always get pissed off because I always think *depression* sounds like you just get really sad, you get quiet and melancholy and just like sit quietly by the window sighing or just lying around. A state of not caring about anything. A kind of blue kind of peaceful state.’ She seemed to the doctor decidedly more animated now, even as she seemed unable to meet his eyes. Her respiration had sped back up. The doctor recalled classic hyperventilatory episodes being characterized by carpopedal spasms, and reminded himself to monitor the patient’s hands and feet carefully during the interview for any signs of tetanic contraction, in which case the prescribed therapy would be I.V. calcium in a saline percentage he would need quickly to look up.

‘Well *this*’ – she gestured at herself – ‘isn’t a state. This is a *feeling*. I feel it all over. In my arms and legs.’

‘That would include your carp – your hands and feet?’

‘All over. My head, throat, butt. In my stomach. It’s all over everywhere. I don’t know what I could call it. It’s like I can’t get enough outside it to call it anything. It’s like horror more than sadness. It’s more like horror. It’s like something horrible is about to happen, the most horrible thing you can imagine – no, worse than you can imagine because there’s the feeling that there’s something you have to do right away to stop it but you don’t know what it is you have to do, and then it’s happening, too, the whole horrible time, it’s about to happen and also it’s happening, all at the same time.’” (*Infinite Jest* 73¹¹⁵)

The depressed woman in this story is Kate Gompert from David Foster Wallace’s magnum opus of 1996, *Infinite Jest*. With its more than 1000 pages and numerous, endless footnotes the novel is somewhat resistant to a brief summary but: The novel is set in a near future, so altered in terms of political landscape that the United States, Canada and Mexico have become The Organization of North American Nations (abbreviated in the novel as O.N.A.N. in a not so subtle reference to the biblical figure of Onan) – against which a group of *Quebecois* wheelchair terrorists stage a sophisticated and violent revolt – and so commercialized that every calendar year is designated by corporate brands – Year of the Whopper, Year of the Perdue Wonderchicken etc. – rather than

¹¹⁵ The story is henceforth abbreviated to *IJ*.

successive numbers. The main part of the novel takes place in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment and has as its central locations the Enfield Tennis Academy (ETA) and Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, both situated in Boston, Massachusetts. And Kate Gompert, a 21-year-old woman working as a “data-clerical in a Wellesley real estate office” (69), does in fact become a resident at the halfway house, as the drug and alcohol recovery house is colloquially called. However, when we first meet her she is still at a psychiatric clinic on “suicide watch” as a result of her unipolar depression – intimately tied up with her substance abuse of marijuana – and her fourth failed suicide attempt.

In comparison to “The Depressed Person”, the above scene with Kate Gompert is, in simple terms, more interested in the phenomenological experience of depression than its psychology. What kind of feeling is depression? What is the temporality of that feeling? And how does this feeling feel? At times the analysis carried out in this scene may assume a perhaps somewhat myopic characterological focus but the implicit assumption in the following is that, despite the singularity and specificity of Kate Gompert’s depression and her, on the surface, somewhat peripheral role, she nonetheless serves a paradigmatic function within the overall framework of *Infinite Jest*: She functions as a paradigmatic example of the Gordian knot of depression and addiction that Wallace puts on display. This is not to say that all the characters of the novels are depressives or addicts but that her figure is the prismatic and pathological vantage point, from which everything and everyone somehow must be viewed; an echo sounder from far beyond.

The Bad Thing, or, the Black Hole of Depression (depression vs. anxiety)

In the scene Kate, curled up on the bed in her room at the clinic, is approached by a doctor who attempts to engage her in conversation about her depressive state. What she is quick to point out in this dialogue with the rather uncomprehending doctor, who persistently translates everything she says into his own technocratic language – “The doctor recalled classic hyperventilatory episodes being characterized by carpopedal spasms” – is that for her, depression is a feeling, and not one of sadness but of pain and horror (“It’s like horror more than sadness” (73)). This horror has something to do with affect (the feeling of sheer physical pain in her “head throat, butt”), with

imagination (“the most horrible thing you can imagine”) and time (“it’s about to happen and also it’s happening, all at the same time”).

The doctor still does not understand: “So you’d say anxiety is a big part of your depressions”, he tries. But no. It is not sadness, nor anxiety. “‘Listen’, Kate Gompert said. ‘Have you ever felt sick? I mean nauseous, like you know you were going to throw up?’ The doctor made a gesture like Well sure. ‘But that’s just in your stomach,’ Kate Gompert said. ‘It’s a horrible feeling but it’s just in your stomach [...] imagine if you felt that way all over, inside. All through you. Like every cell and every atom or brain-cell or whatever was so nauseous it wanted to throw up, but it couldn’t, and you felt that way all the time, and you’re sure, you’re positive the feeling will never go away, you’re going to spend the rest of your natural life feeling like this.’” (74).

This passage is an almost verbatim copy of Wallace’s early and unusually autobiographical story “The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing” from 1984, where depression is, simply, “the Bad Thing”. In some emphatic lines the narrator notes that “it’s like having always before you and under you a huge black hole without a bottom, a black, black hole, maybe with vague teeth in it, and then your being part of the hole, so that you fall even when you stay where you are (...maybe when you realize *you’re* the hole, nothing else...)” (10). In the same passage – obviously the source of our scene in *Infinite Jest* – he describes The Bad Thing as follows: “Just imagine that, a sickness spread utterly through every bit of you, even the bits of the bits. So that your very...very essence is characterized by nothing other than the feature of sickness; you and the sickness are, as they say, ‘one.’” (11). Emphasized here is not just the unrepresentable character of depression, but its sheer, all-encompassing and enveloping physical and psychic pain, as well as the fact that depression is not so much a bottomless hole in front or outside of you, as a hole *inside* you; you and the hole are one; you *are* the hole. The thing about depression, according to Wallace, is that it is impossible to get on the outside of it. Depression saturates being; it is a feeling, which takes complete possession of the human being that experiences it. In that sense the allusion to the physical concept of black holes is not out of place, since there is no bottom to a black hole; it simply engulfs you, rips you further and further apart in the dead mass of darkness, where the pull of gravity is so strong that even light cannot escape. It reflects no light.

The feeling of the feeling of depression (depression vs. anhedonia)

This is the reason Kate says that, when she is feeling depressed, she is utterly convinced that the present feeling is going to stretch eternally into the future, and it is impossible to imagine any alternative: “You’re positive the feeling will never go away, you’re going to spend the rest of your natural life feeling like this.” (74). To which the doctor remarks: “And yet this nauseated feeling has come and gone for you in the past, it’s passed eventually during prior depressions, Katherine, has it not?” (ibid.). Kate replies: “But when you’re in the feeling you forget. The feeling feels like it’s always been there and will always be there, and you forget [...] I can’t stand feeling like this another second, and the seconds keep coming on and on.” (ibid.). The temporal experience Kate expresses here is that her sense of chronology is lost. Past and future blur and time is thus reduced to an entirely frozen time, creating a sense that the feeling of depression is all there is, and always has been and always will be.¹¹⁶ It is a coming catastrophe that has already taken place and keeps taking place. As quoted earlier: “It’s about to happen and also it’s happening”. This is the horror of the depressive affective temporality in Wallace’s work.

At the same time this aspect obviously relates to what was earlier defined as a meta-feeling: a feeling of a feeling. As has already been discussed, depression can be described as the lack of feeling (you do not feel anything) and as a feeling of a feeling (but this feeling of not feeling anything is itself a feeling; indeed it can feel horrifying not to feel a thing). When she talks about what “the feeling feels like”, Kate Gompert seems to be well aware that a given feeling can be felt in various ways and that a lack of feeling can feel terrible. But her problem is not that she does not feel anything. She explicitly states that she would rather “feel nothing than this.” (72).

What this translates into, 500 pages later in the novel, is that the kind of clinical depression that Gompert experiences may not quite be understood as anhedonia; an inability “to feel pleasure or attachment to things formerly important” (692), “a kind of emotional novocaine” (692), an anesthetic condition of affective numbness wherein one does not feel a thing. Here, anhedonia is further defined as “a kind of radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content. Terms the undepressed toss around and take for granted as full and fleshy – *happiness, joie de vivre, preference, love* – are stripped to their skeletons and reduced to abstract ideas. They have, as it were, denotation but not connotation.” (693). A

¹¹⁶ This is reminiscent of Martin Wyllie’s concept of “negative eternity” discussed in the previous chapter.

geometrical transformation or perversion of the immediate *Umwelt* is here brought about to such an extent that “[e]verything becomes an outline of the thing. Objects become schemata. The world becomes a map of the world. An anhedonic can navigate, but has no location. I.e. the anhedonic becomes, in the lingo of Boston AA, Unable To Identify.” (693). In short, everything becomes “as moving, all of a sudden, as a theorem of Euclid.” (692). This particular understanding of anhedonia, as well as the reference to Euclid, are interesting for at least two reasons. Firstly, the evocation of Euclid in *Infinite Jest* is lifted directly from the passage of William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* that I mentioned in the chapter on Houellebecq. Here, James quotes a certain professor Ribot who describes an anhedonic man as being in a state where “[e]very emotion appeared dead within him” and “[t]he thought of his house, of his home, of his wife, and of his absent children moved him as little [...] as a theorem of Euclid.” (146). In this state, one simply loses touch with the objects and the others around oneself. Secondly, the passage is undeniably analogous with some we have looked at in the novels of Houellebecq. The scene in *Atomised*, for instance, where Michel lies in his tent and objects are hollow and alien, and the surroundings reduced to their contours: “Raindrops fell with a dull sound on the canvas...” (99-100). Or in *The Map and the Territory* where the artist Jed Martin seems to have taken on the artistic consequence of the fact that the world has become, in the words of Wallace, a map of the world.

What Wallace takes great care to emphasize in this particular context of the novel is the difference between fashionable anhedonia and clinical depression. He writes that “[i]t’s of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool.” (JJ 694). This attitude has little to do with clinical, pathological depression, with the “Bad Thing”, or “It”, as it is called here. Tellingly, this late passage in *Infinite Jest* accommodates a juxtaposition between Kate Gompert and Hal Incandenza; the youngest son of the Incandenza family, an extraordinary tennis talent, and a highly intellectually gifted person, who suffers terribly from anhedonia. Hal has not, the narrator states, “had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarefied equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he’s there, inside his own hull, as a human being – but in fact he’s far more robotic than John

Wayne [another tennis player at the academy].” (694). According to the narrator, Hal is too young to realize that anhedonia – a robotic existence, or a “numb emptiness” (695) – is not the worst kind of depression: “Dead-eyed anhedonia is but a remora on the ventral flank of the true predator, the Great White Shark of pain. Authorities term this condition *clinical depression* or *involutional depression* or *unipolar dysphoria*.” (695). What matters here is clearly not the terminological differences, but the affective differences between anhedonia and depression; the differences between how those feelings feel. The difference between the two – which seem and *almost* are identical – is the difference between a Euclidean and a non-Euclidian world, between a world that is nothing but geometry and a world that goes beyond geometry as we know it. It is the difference between “numb emptiness” and “The Great White Shark of pain” (695); between the affectlessness of abstraction and concrete, visceral pain; between cold forms that exists within the reach of the human imagination and an ungraspable black hole. It is in short the difference between an anhedonic who feels *nothing* and a depressed person who *feels* nothing.

Terror of the flames and the question of suicide (depression vs. sadness)

It is here, in the latter condition, that suicide presents itself as a real danger. As Wallace writes in *Infinite Jest*:

”The so-called ‘psychotically depressed’ person who tries to kill herself doesn’t do so out of quote ‘hopelessness’ or any abstract conviction that life’s assets and debits do not square. And surely not because death suddenly seems appealing. The person in whom *Its* invisible agony reaches a certain unendurable level will kill herself the same way a trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise. Make no mistake about people who leap from burning windows. Their terror of falling from a great height is still just as great as it would be for you or me standing speculatively at the same window just checking out the view; i.e. the fear of falling remains a constant. The variable here is the other terror, the fire’s flames: when the flames get close enough, falling to death becomes the slightly less terrible of two terrors. It’s not desiring the fall; it’s terror of the flames. And yet nobody down on the sidewalk, looking up and yelling ‘Don’t!’ and

'Hang on!', can understand the jump. Not really. You'd have to have personally been trapped and felt flames to really understand a terror way beyond falling." (695-6).¹¹⁷

Earlier in her conversation with the doctor, Kate Gomperts goes to great lengths to distinguish her depression from that of others, though she does not want to use the word depression: "I'm not one of the self-hating ones", she says. "The type of like 'I'm shit and the world'd be better off without poor me' type that says but also imagines what everybody'll say at their funeral. I have met types like that on wards. Poor-me-I-hate-me-punish-me-come-to-my-funeral. Then they show you a 20 X 25 glossy of their dead cat. It's all self-pity bullshit. It's bullshit. I didn't have any special grudges. I didn't fail an exam or get dumped by anybody. All these types. Hurt themselves." (72). She is not 'just' sad, nor does she 'just' want to hurt herself. She wants to kill herself. There is big difference, she says, between the two, between wanting to hurt herself and kill herself (71). "The last thing more I'd want is hurt." (72). Suicide is precisely to be understood as an attempt *not to hurt anymore*: "It's not wanting to hurt myself it's wanting to *not hurt*." (78 – emphasis in original). This explains Kate Gompert's only wish: ECT or a sustained period of sedation, "a month on the outside." (75). Eventually, Kate Gompert does get more than a month on the outside: The plot of the novel involves a film called *Infinite Jest*,¹¹⁸ so lethally entertaining that anyone watching it will never want do anything else for the rest of his or her life, leaving the (un)fortunate viewer in a vegetative zombie-like state. This is the destiny that awaits Kate, who in the end gets, not what she deserves, but what she wants: *A way out*.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Again this description is lifted almost directly from the story "The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands In Relation To The Bad Thing"

¹¹⁸ The title of both the film and the novel is, of course, taken from the scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where Hamlet exclaims: "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest".

¹¹⁹ The last thing we hear of Kate Gompert is that she sits in bar with Remy Marathe, a member of the Canadian group of Wheelchair Assassins. In this scene Kate is drinking alcohol, on the verge of taking up her substance abuse again, and Marathe seems about to kidnap her and convince her to watch the film *Infinite Jest*. Before that, however, Marathe tells the strange story of how he lost his legs, became depressed, and met his wife (who has no skull) and basically *chose* to love her, at which Kate declares: "Ramy, I don't think I'm like thinking this is a feel-better story at *all*." (779).

Depression and Bob Hope

To recapitulate so far: The depression of Kate Gompert in *Infinite Jest* is not quite sadness, not quite anxiety, not quite even anhedonia. However, there is a point of conjunction, especially insofar as the comparison between depression and anhedonia is concerned: A total lack of empathy. Despite the fact that depression does not amount to feeling nothing, it involves a loss of, not only the feeling *for* but, more radically, the feeling *of* the other. This is what the depressed person in the story of the same name and Kate Gompert have in common, despite the various differences between the two characters and the fictional frameworks within which they appear. In *Infinite Jest* this is described as follows, again referring to depression as *It*:

It is also lonely on a level that cannot be conveyed. There is no way Kate Gompert could ever even begin to make someone else understand what clinical depression feels like, not even another person who is herself clinically depressed, because a person in such a state is incapable of empathy with any other living thing. This anhedonic inability to identify is also an integral part of it. If a person in physical pain has a hard time attending to anything except that pain, a clinically depressed person cannot even perceive any other person or thing as independent of the universal pain that is digesting her cell by cell. Everything is part of the problem, and there is no solution. It is a hell for one. (696)

Whether because of the endless narcissistic loops of the depressed consciousness – and consciousness of consciousness of consciousness – as in “The Depressed Person”, or because of the sheer psychic and physical pain that wraps Kate Gompert in “*Its black folds*” (695), it is in both cases impossible to attend to anything or anyone other than the self itself. Both have lost the feeling of the other, and thus also, if we follow Levinas’ definition of the other as a futural figure, lost the future. In that sense there is a spiritual component to depression, an element of despair.¹²⁰ The reference, in *Infinite Jest*, to William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* makes

¹²⁰ In “The Depressed Person” an important distinction is made between sadness and despair. In one of the numerous footnotes, it says at one point that the depressed person realizes “that she herself had rarely if ever used the word “sad” in the therapeutic process’s dialogues. She had usually used the words “despair” and “agony”.”(61). In his long essay, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again”, which was written after

this all to clear. Later in the novel there is even talk of a “spiritual turpor” (692), which Timothy Jacobs, picking up on this reference, states is equivalent to an “earthly, unspiritual, and unbelieving orientation”, in that the characters in question have no “belief in something greater than themselves—that is, they have no belief in anything beyond the ‘hot narrow imperatives of the Self’” (276).

So we do find several points of convergence and quite a few fellow sufferers, even if *Infinite Jest* itself makes an effort to emphasize the specificity of clinical depression and the singularity of Kate Gompert’s ‘case’. On more than one occasion toward the end of the novel, Hal, for example, is described as walking around with a rather weird “hilarity-face” (875)¹²¹ that is not immediately decipherable to the people around him. This is intentionally reminiscent of Kate Gompert, who goes “through a series of expressions that made it clinically impossible for the doctor to determine whether or not she was entirely sincere.” (76).¹²² Likewise, at one point in the novel there is a late-night conversation between Kate Gompert and another Ennet House resident, Geoffrey Day – a “red-wine-and-Quaalude man who [...] manned the helm of a Scholarly Journal” (272) – who has obviously had some of the same awful experiences with depression as she has. During that particular conversation, Day discloses how, on numerous occasions, he has seen or felt

Wallace spent seven days on board a luxury cruise ship heading out for the Caribbean in March 1995, the concept of despair is introduced at very beginning: “There is something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that’s unbearable sad. Like most unbearably sad things, it seems incredibly elusive and complex in its causes and simple in its effect: on board the Nadir—especially at night—I felt despair. The word’s overused and banalified now, *despair*, but it’s a serious word, and I’m using it seriously. For me it denotes a simple admixture – a weird yearning for death combined with a crushing sense of my own smallness and futility that presents as a fear of death. It’s maybe close to what people call dread or angst. But it’s not these things, quite. It’s more like wanting to die in order to escape the unbearable feeling of becoming aware that I’m small and weak and selfish and going without doubt at all to die. It’s wanting to jump overboard.” (*A supposedly* 261). As already stated the fact that despair can be viewed as a crucial component of depression is not totally unwarranted within the psychiatric literature, nor it is unconventional within the scholarship on Wallace. Mary K. Holland writes about “narcissism as postmodern despair” (63), Stefan Hirt connects the problem of despair to the disappearance of the other in postmodern culture (79; 147) and Malcolm Boswell argues that that almost every one of Wallace’s characters “suffers from this despair of not wanting to be themselves, or, more pointedly, a self at all” (138). Though both Hirt and Boswell draw upon the work of Kierkegaard – referring to the concept of an aesthetic existence as well as that of the sickness unto death – the conceptualization remains pretty vague. More importantly they fail to grasp the absolute horror of this kind of despair, its clinical aspects, not to mention the suicidal dangers.

¹²¹ When we meet Hal in the first chapter of the novel, which, chronologically speaking, ought to be the last, he is in a catatonic state, unable to utter a single comprehensible word, whether due to the incredibly potent drug DMZ, to a withdrawal from marijuana, or to a mold he ate as a child.

¹²² Cf. Allard den Dulk 217.

“a large dark billowing shape” rising up before him, how it was “total psychic horror” and how he then “understood what people meant by *hell* [...] I understood on an intuitive level why people killed themselves. If I had to go for any length of time with that feeling I’d surely kill myself.” To which Kate replies, rather poetically: “Time in the shadow of the wing of the thing too big to see, rising.” (648-651).

What Hal, Geoffrey and Kate all have in common – besides painful experiences with anhedonic or depressive episodes – is an addiction to alcoholic or narcotic substances. After her hospitalization, Kate seeks admittance to the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. She smokes a lot of marijuana or ‘Bob Hope’, as she calls it. She even, quite wittingly, suggests that her depression “maybe had to do with Hope”, but the doctor does not understand the slang. She goes on to explain to him that she does “love it *so much*” (76), that at times she smokes it excessively, but that she always stops after a given period of time. This is where “this *feeling* always starts creeping in” (77), meaning the feeling of depression:

“And then but no matter what I do it gets worse and worse, it’s there more and more, this filter drops down, and the feeling makes the fear of the feeling way worse, and after a couple of weeks it’s there all the time, the feeling, and I am totally inside it, I’m in it and everything has to pass through it to get in, and I don’t want to smoke any Bob and I don’t want to work, or go out, or read, or watch TP, or go out, or stay in, or either do anything or not do anything” (77).

This puzzles the doctor, since none of the clinical literature he has read “suggested any relation between unipolar episodes and withdrawal from cannabinoids.” (78). Nonetheless, it is beyond any doubt that the convergence between addiction and depression is consistently at the forefront of the novel and thus, naturally, moves to the center of the next scene as well.

Scene 3: “What looks like the cage’s exit is actually the bars of the cage” (Joelle van Dyne and *Infinite Jest*)

“Joelle van Dyne is excruciatingly alive and encaged, and in the director’s lap can call up everything from all times. What will be the most self-involved of acts, self-cancelling, to lock oneself in Molly Notkin’s bedroom or bath and get so high that she is going to fall down and stop breathing and turn blue and die, clutching her heart. No more back and forth [...] No more throwing the Material away and then half an hour later looting through the trash, no more all-fours scrutiny of the carpet in hopes of a piece of lint that looks enough like the Material to try to smoke [...] No more clutching her heart on a nightly basis. What looks like the cage’s exit is actually the bars of the cage. The afternoon’s meshes. The entrance says *EXIT*. There isn’t an exit. The ultimate annular fusion: that of exhibit and its cage. Jim’s own *Cage III: Free Show*. It is the cage that has entered *her*, somehow. The ingenuity of the whole thing is beyond her. The Fun has long since dropped off the Too Much. She’s lost the ability to lie to herself about being able to quit, or even about enjoying it, still. It no longer delimits and fills the hole. It no longer delimits the hole. There’s a certain smell to rain-wet veil. Something about the caller and the moon, saying the moon never looked away. Revolving and not. She had hurtled on back home on the night’s final T and gone home and at least finally not turned her face away from the situation, the predicament that she didn’t love it anymore she hated it and wanted to stop and also couldn’t stop or imagine stopping or living without it. She had in any way done as they’d made Jim do near the end and admitted powerlessness over this cage, this unfree show, weeping, literally clutching her heart, smoking first the Chore Boy-scrap she’d used to trap the vapors and form a smokable resin, then bits of the carpet and the acetate panties she’d filtered the solution through hours earlier, weeping and veiless and yarn-haired, like some grotesque clown, in all four mirrors of her little room’s walls.”

(*IJ* 222-223)

In this scene a couple of hundred pages into *Infinite Jest*, Joelle Van Dyne prepares for her last taste of homemade freebase cocaine, which she smokes at a party at her friend Molly’s apartment, before she admits to her drug problem and arrives at the doorstep of the Ennet House. Joelle van Dyne is a mysterious character. Using the pseudonym Madame Psychosis, she hosts a radio show popular among the tennis players at the Enfield Academy; she is also called P.G.O.A.T., an acronym denoting 'prettiest girl of all time', and perhaps her stunning beauty is the reason she hides behind a veil, never letting anyone see her face (in the scene above, she is “veiless” because she is alone and her veil is “rain-wet”). Her own explanation is that she is in fact not pretty at all, but so disgustingly deformed that not only has she hidden behind a veil for quite some time, but has joined the U.H.I.D. – the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed (531ff.). Moreover,, she has been one of Orin Incandenza's lovers and acted in several of his father’s

experimental movies, including the infamous “Infinite Jest”. However, this scene is riveted on the problem of her addiction, which means that the explicit problem of depression will be put aside for the time being.

Too much fun

So, in this scene, what Joelle experiences is clearly not anhedonia, but it is not hedonia either. Rather, it seems like a case of an inability to do anything but to pursue *unpleasure*.¹²³ Her drug taking has gone from fun to unfun: It has “long since dropped off the Too Much”. She hates doing it and yet she cannot *not* do it: “she didn’t love it anymore she hated it and wanted to stop and also couldn’t stop or imagine stopping or living without it”. Now that Joelle has – supposedly – had enough, this is it: One last hit and then it stops, no more “back and forth”. She does not want to throw all her “Material away” and then regret it half an hour later, “no more all-fours scrutiny of the carpet in hopes of a piece of lint that looks enough like the Material to try to smoke”.

The reason that Joelle began to smoke freebase cocaine in the first place is never unraveled. She did not have a rosy upbringing: Her own father fell in love with her, which appalled her mother/his wife so much that she eventually killed herself by sticking her arms into the garbage disposal. Yet, as always with Wallace, it is not tenable to place too much emphasis on these kinds of causal, etiological explanations. Nor is it, to repeat a point from the introduction, expedient to pay too much attention to the question of what addiction *is*. As it is stated at one point in *Infinite Jest*, “addiction is either a disease or a mental illness or a spiritual condition (as in ‘poor of spirit’) or an O.C.D.-like disorder or an affective or character disorder” (203). The crucial question is how addiction *works* and what addiction *does*. What remains clear is that addiction in Wallace’s work always functions as a kind of (damaged) defense mechanism. As Andrew Weil makes clear at the outset of *The Natural Mind: A new way of looking at drugs and the higher consciousness* (1972) – another book that Wallace had read and kept in his private library – his “real interest is not drugs at all but consciousness.” (9).¹²⁴ The same goes for Wallace with one decisive modification: The thing that Joelle and every other character in *Infinite Jest* look for in the

¹²³ Cf. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 22.

¹²⁴ What Weil and Wallace do not in any way share is Weil’s romantic and rather dated conception of psychosis as something *positive*: “I am almost tempted”, Weils writes at one point, “to call psychotics the evolutionary vanguard of our species.” (182).

various substances they consume is not an *altered* consciousness, as in the psychedelic sixties, but a *suspended* consciousness. This is more in line with what Christopher Lasch briefly indicates in *The Culture of Narcissism*, which I briefly mentioned in scene one: “Anything to get his mind off his own mind.” (99). With regard to depression, it has already been noted that depression and addiction often go hand in hand, and according to Ehrenberg – whose general and persuasive idea is that “depression and addiction are what trace the outline of the individual at the end of the twentieth century” (12) – addiction is a way to fill “the depressive void”, a way “of compensating for it.” (133).¹²⁵

In Wallace’s work of course, addiction does not fill or erase the depressive void, nor do addictive habits help to take the drug addict’s mind off his or her own mind. Rather, it intensifies obsessive thinking. Examples are legion. The narrator of *Infinite Jest*, for example, claims “[t]hat most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking [...] the cute Boston AA term for addictive-type thinking is: *Analysis-Paralysis*.” (203). In *The Pale King* this is referred to as *obetrolling*: When the character Chris Fogle, a total “wastoid”, does drugs he often experiences a heightening if not doubling of awareness, which is sometimes a nice experience, and sometimes not: “The awareness could sort of explode into a *hall of mirrors* of consciously felt sensations and thoughts and awareness of awareness of awareness of these.” (188 – my emphasis). This kind of stoned thinking has the negative effect of exploding awareness or consciousness into a “hall of mirrors”, a metaphor that we have already come across in Wallace, not least at the end of the scene above: “All four mirrors of her little room’s walls”. The dominant image, though, is that of the cage, the unpleasant logic being that when Joelle tries to exit the cage, the exit is not an exit at all but simply leads deeper into the cage or into another cage; the thinking intensifies or the depression deepens. In any case, it only ever gets worse: “What looks like the cage’s exit is actually the bars of the cage. The afternoon’s meshes. The entrance says *EXIT*. There isn’t an exit [...] The Fun has long since dropped off the Too Much.”

¹²⁵ Addiction can thus be seen to be a defense against depression, but in some cases depression can also act as a defense against addiction (cf. van den Berg, n. 92).

Cruel optimism, slow death

Joelle's behavior is a perfect but painful example of what Lauren Berlant calls 'cruel optimism' in her book of the same name. Berlant's fundamental idea is that all relations and attachments to any given object are optimistic in as much as they entail a certain promise (23).¹²⁶ Optimism thus manifests in what Berlant calls structures of relationality and can be defined as "the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept or scene." (1-2). And then Berlant adds: But optimism might not *feel* optimistic. She does not, in other words, equate "the optimism of attachment with the feeling of optimism itself" (12). The feeling of this relationality and attachment might "*feel* any number of ways." (13). This is what I have earlier conceptualized as a metafeeling, the feeling of feeling. The cruelty emerges when the optimistic attachment turns out to be 'toxic', in "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too possible*, and toxic." (24). In other words: "Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object." (24). Or as Wallace himself writes in the essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction", where he confronts the intimate relation between addiction and technology, or television to be exact: The cruel thing about addiction is that "(1) it causes real problems for the addict, and (2) it offers itself as a relief from the very problems it causes." (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* 38).

Joelle is indeed attached to what Berlant calls a "significantly problematic object". Sadly, however, this problem is not hers alone: In the works of Wallace, and nowhere more so than in *Infinite Jest*, virtually every person is, in some sense, an addict. It seems that every optimistic attachment is a potential addiction, or in the words of Bernard Stiegler, "the object of desire is *always*, in its very structure, an object of addiction. The desired object is the object on which the subject of desire depends..." (*The Lost Spirit of Capitalism* 3). It is thus not only Kate Gompert or Joelle van Dyne who are tormented by drug habits, but every character in *Infinite Jest*. In his book *Machine-Age Comedy* Michael North points out that, whether we are talking about tennis or entertainment, marijuana or freebase cocaine, every activity follows the same pattern: "An initial desire for fun, freedom, or even just change leads ironically to repetition, routine,

¹²⁶ The question of promises will return, in a more conceptually elaborated form, in the chapters to follow

machine dependency, and sometimes death. The master pattern is ironically recursive: the more the original impulse feeds on itself, the more its meaning is inverted. The term that Wallace uses for this process is *annularity*, a word he adopts from biology to denote a system that runs around in circles after its own tail.” (174). In the scene with Joelle, the term “annular fusion” does in fact turn up. As the title of North's book indicates, and as we have already witnessed in “The Depressed Person”, this process of recursivity or annularity – or vicious infinite regress – is not without its comical effects. It is the stuff of deep despair *and* of true comedy. People running away from themselves towards themselves. Dogs chasing their own tails. In a significant scene from the movie *Infinite Jest*, the character played by Joelle meets a long lost friend as she walks through a revolving door, but as this person attempts to follow her inside, she tries to follow the person in question out, so the two of them end up going round and round in the revolving door.¹²⁷ *Das ist aber auch sehr komisch*. A circular comedy; a comedy of the circle. However, some of the comedy in *Infinite Jest* is more slapstick, for instance in a scene in which a man becomes completely addicted to M*A*S*H (638ff.)!

There is of course a difference between being addicted to M*A*S*H and to MDMA, but the logic of the process seems to be the same. At one particular Boston AA meeting in the novel, it becomes clear that all the speakers' stories are alike:

“[f]un with the Substance, then very gradually less fun, then significantly less fun because of like blackouts you suddenly come out of on the highway going 145 kph with companions you do not know, nights you awake from in unfamiliar bedding next to somebody who doesn't even resemble any known sort of mammal, three-day blackouts you come out of and have to buy a newspaper to even know what town you're in; yes gradually less and less actual fun but with some physical need for the Substance, now,

¹²⁷ A great deal of mystery surrounds this film, which ostensibly exists in various versions (five or six). According to Joelle, she appears in two scenes in the lethally entertaining version (which is either *Infinite Jest V* or *Infinite Jest VI*). In addition to the scene with the revolving doors, there is second in which Joelle, leaning into a crib where an infant lies, repeats the line “I am sorry, I am so so sorry” over and over again in a wobbly, blurred shot as if seen from the infant's point of view (938-941). But her friend Molly suggests that the movie consists of another scene as well, in which a naked Joelle features as “some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure death”, meanwhile explaining to the camera that “Death is always female, and that the female is always maternal. I.e. that the woman who kills you is always your next life's mother.” (788). This mother-theme is unfortunately beyond the framework of the present work.

instead of the former voluntary fun; then at some point suddenly just very little fun at all, combined with terrible daily hand-trembling need, then dread, anxiety, irrational phobias, dim siren-like memories of fun, trouble with assorted authorities, knee-buckling headaches, mild seizures, and the litany of what Boston AA calls Losses.” (345)

In the vocabulary of Kierkegaard, what we see in this near-future world of capitalist consumption, is that possibility is almost always already perverted into necessity. In more prosaic terms: Want turns into need, attachment into addiction, fun collapses into Too Much Fun, and the pleasure principle is nothing more the death drive at its purest. This is addiction’s sickness unto death in *Infinite Jest*. There is, as mentioned, a dark comedy to this despair, but there is also a tragic, even demonic side to it, characterized by the following paradoxical, cruel logic: A person in despair cannot or will not do anything else but stay in his or her despair. This brings us back to Berlant, who elegantly captures the *double bind* at work in any relation of cruel optimism, of which addiction is an extreme version: “A binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent.” (*Cruel Optimism*, 51). She might as well be speaking of Joelle, or one of the other members of AA or NA: Their attachments to their particular choice of drug are unhealthy and threaten their flourishing, and yet they cling to it, they want to yet cannot stop, even though it is killing them, not instantaneously, but slowly, ever so slowly: “A fuckin' livin' death, I tell you it's not being near alive, by the end I was undead, not alive, and I tell you the idea of dyin' was nothing compared to the idea of livin' like that for another five or ten years and only *then* dyin’,” (347), as one of the speakers at the aforementioned AA meeting says, and the audience nods: “*boy* can they ever Identify.” (ibid. – italics in original).

Wallace in Vegas: An addictive zone where man and machine are one

In his anatomy of addiction, Wallace is not merely interested in drugs – such as heroin, marijuana, Demerol, freebase cocaine – in a narrow sense. It would seem that we need a broader concept of addiction to understand Wallace’s work; one that, on the one hand, is not reducible to alcohol and narcotics, and on the other, is able to capture the simultaneous spiritual and technological dimensions of the relation between the subject and the desired object. Stiegler’s concept of *spirit*

is once again relevant here, but perhaps even more so is the concept of 'drugs' proposed by Felix Guattari: "We must begin by enlarging the definition of drugs. In my view, all the mechanisms producing a 'machinic' subjectivity, everything that contributes to provide a sensation of belonging to something, of being somewhere, along with the sensation of forgetting oneself, are 'drugs'." (*Soft Subversions* 158).

Machines and technological apparatuses certainly play a central role in Wallace's works. For one, drug addicts watch enormous amounts of television and other forms of recorded entertainment in *Infinite Jest*. In the second 'chapter' we meet Ken Erdedy who plans to spend "two straight days of heavy continuous smoking in front of the Inter-Lace viewer in his bedroom" (22); the Inter-Lace viewer being the future version of television. But it is not only drug addicts whom the Inter-Lace viewer is able to allure and bewitch, even if it is obviously not as lethal as the movie *Infinite Jest*. The general problem Wallace tries to address here is a society saturated with images and information; one of the reasons behind the excessive footnotes in the book which are supposed, in Wallace's own words, "to mimic the information-flood and data-triage I expect'd be an even bigger part of US life 15 years hence" (quoted in: Max 195).¹²⁸ Wallace is basically preoccupied by the pathological consequences – obsessive, compulsive or addictive behavior – of the daily overload of digital data. In the essay "E Unibus Pluram", Wallace contends that television has become our interior in such a way that it is hard to find a single human being whose attention, consciousness, sensibility, desire, perception and affectivity has not been captured and modulated by the technological apparatus of television: "Television has become able not only to ensure that we watch but somehow to inform our deepest responses to what's watched." (*A Supposedly Fun Thing* 40). Wallace explores this idea in this essay, in *Infinite Jest*, as well as in *The Pale King*, where, for example, people are at one point described as "data processors." (340). What is fabricated in the world of Wallace is, indeed, a 'machinic' form of subjectivity – at the level of consciousness, desire, imagination and affect.

Indeed, empirical research supports this idea. In her book *Addiction by design. Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (2012), American anthropologist Natasha Dow Schull details how gamblers do not play the slot machines to win; they play to play, to keep playing, to stay in the zone, in which a

¹²⁸ As one reviewer wrote "[t]he book is not *about* electronic culture, but it has internalized some of the decentering energies that computer technologies have released into our midst." (also quoted in: Max 218).

suspension of clock time and of chronological time is produced. She refers to an informant named Mollie, who states that her only goal is "[t]o keep playing – to stay in that machine zone where nothing else matters" (2). Another informant, Lola, tells Dow Schull that she is "always hypnotized into *being* that machine [...] It's like playing against yourself: *You are the machine; the machine is you.*" (173). In this machine zone of addiction, subject and object, man and machine are one. As Dow Schull herself writes: "When addiction is regarded as a relationship that develops through "repeated interaction" between a subject and an object, rather than a property that belongs solely to one or the other, it becomes clear that objects matter as much as subjects." (17).

This corresponds to the more speculative thoughts that Guattari and his collaborator Gilles Deleuze advanced in *A Thousand Plateaus*, making a distinction between *social subjection* and *machinic enslavement*, their own example also being television: "One is subjected to TV insofar as one uses and consumes it", they write, but

"one is enslaved by TV as a human machine insofar as the television viewers are no longer consumers or users, not even subjects who supposedly 'make' it, but intrinsic components, pieces, 'input' and 'output', feedback or recurrences that are no longer connected to the machine in such a way as to produce or use. In machinic enslavement, there is nothing but transformations and exchanges of information, some of which are mechanical, others human." (506).

In the process of machinic enslavement, a subject does not merely use an object as this distinction no longer makes sense. A person caught up in this process is, as Maurizio Lazzarato comments, "*of a piece with* the machinic assemblages but he is also *torn to pieces* by it." (*Signs and Machines* 27).

The point here is that addiction in Wallace's work always operates as a form of machine enslavement, which simultaneously pertains to something smaller and larger than the (addicted) individual or self. At one level, the individual – or dividual, as Deleuze and Guattari sometimes prefer to call it – is nothing but input and output, a small part in a gigantic statistical set of data based on algorithms of stunning sophistication. At another level, what is at stake is the innermost being of the individual, the neuronal networks and the minuscule movements of desire and affect. The zone of addiction is a prosthetic zone where one is "at piece with" the machine

and yet “torn to pieces by it”. It is a zone where all that matters is to keep playing, to stay in the rhythm. Strictly speaking one does not play to win, nor, according to Dow Schull, to be entertained. She quotes one of her interviewees from within the gambling industry – from the other side of the table: “What we didn’t get at the beginning is that people don’t really want to be entertained. Our best customers are not interested in entertainment – they want to be totally absorbed, they want to get into a *rhythm*.” (168 – my emphasis). As yet another informant, Julie, points out: “You’re not playing for money,” [...] you’re playing for credit – credit so you can sit there longer, which is the goal. It’s not about winning, it’s about continuing to play.” (199). In that regard she is fully in line with Wallace who, in the essay “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” from 1988, notes that television strives “merely and always to *engage*, to *appeal to*. Its one end – openly acknowledged – is to *ensure continued watching*.” (*Both Flesh and Not* 52 – emphasis in original).

What is to be done?

Although this scene took the character Joelle van Dyne and her addiction to drugs – culminating in her last hit of freebase cocaine – as its point of departure, it has been imperative, following Guattari’s lead, to enlarge the definition of drugs. Television can function as a drug, as can tennis. The common denominator is a zone in which the distinction between subject and object, man and machine breaks down to the extent that it no longer makes any sense to say that the former is simply using the latter: The entanglement is far deeper than that. By now we have, for instance, become familiar with the cruel and yet somewhat comic logic present in Wallace’s work, through which every act of entertainment, pleasure or fun can evolve into obsession and addiction. We have seen how an attempt to escape the cage of addiction almost always leads deeper into the cage, and every attempt to escape a current situation and a present self by way of addiction – in order to suspend consciousness, stop thinking, numb the physical or psychic pain etc. – only seems to make matters worse: “[W]hat looks like the cage’s exit is actually the bars of the cage.”

What, then, is the solution? What does the cure entail? Is the only way out a form of disentanglement, an abandonment of attachments that are always on the verge of mutating into debilitating addictions? It does not seem so. Guattari seemed to offer a more viable approach in *The Anti-Œdipus Papers*, where he wrote, quite provocatively: “The criticism that consumption

society deserves is that there are not enough things: we need more gadgets, and things and stuff, that we can box into other things, all this crap, a whole sexuality of gadgets. The Puritans still have too much control over consumer society!” (79). I do not mean to suggest that Wallace follows Guattari’s schizoid thinking all the way – which he certainly did not¹²⁹ – but that he acknowledges that there is, for all the cruel cul-de-sacs looming on the horizon, basically no going back. We cannot shrink away from the “things and stuff”, that are, for better or worse, the texture of the world today (*The Last Interview* 9). We cannot *not* believe, we cannot *not* attach ourselves to something: Everybody worships something or someone (*This is Water* 96-101).¹³⁰ On the other hand it is obvious that Wallace did not want his characters – or his readers for that matter – to plunge heedlessly into the abyss of attachments. In reality though, Wallace’s concerns were more orientated towards people than towards things, toward the Other rather than toward the object. However, Wallace cherished no illusions that relations between people could be easily established, let alone maintained. As he said in the interview with Larry McCaffery: “We all suffer alone in the real world. True empathy's impossible”, although he then added: “But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character's pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with their own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. It might just be that simple.” (*Conversations* 22).

As the following scene – an analysis of the story “B.I. #20 12-96. New Haven CT” from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* – will hopefully illuminate, Wallace’s ethico-spiritual ‘solution’ to the problematic of depression – to a great extent also a problematic of addiction – consists in a recovery of the Other. That recovery necessitates an act of empathy, or in the idiom of the next

¹²⁹ In the dissertation *Overcoming the impasse: Sonic Fiction and 21st Century Pop*, which engages with *Infinite Jest* from a Deleuzian/Guattarian perspective, Macon Holt notes that Wallace’s work is not “schizoanalytic” because he “is looking to resolve a contradiction, rather than move beyond it.” (93).

¹³⁰ One thread of the plot of *Infinite Jest* to which I cannot do justice are the strange sequences of dialogue that unfold in the mountainous desert of the American Southwest between the O.N.A.N agent Hugh Steeply (in disguise as a female reporter) and Remy Marathe, supposedly a member of the Wheelchair Assassins (Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants, abbreviated A.F.R.), but in fact more like a triple or quadruple agent. Marathe opens one of their philosophical discussions by saying: “Our attachments are our temple, what we worship, no? What we give ourselves to, what we invest with faith.” (107). Steeply’s reply “Herrrrre we go” is a clear indication of the cynicism and irony that permeates American culture according to Wallace as well as Marathe, who continues: “Are we not all of us fanatics? I say only what you of the U.S.A. only pretend you do not know. Attachments are of great seriousness. Choose your attachments carefully” (107).

scene, a work of love, though this has almost nothing to do with a mushy empathy, meant to unite self and other in simple and uncomplicated harmony.

Scene 4: Empathy as a radical, therapeutic work of love (“B.I. #20”)

“Q....

‘Yes and so in the anecdote there she is, blithely hitchhiking along the interstate, and on this particular day the fellow in the car that stops almost the moment she puts her thumb out happens to – she said she knew she’d made a mistake the moment she got in. The car. Just from what she called the energy field inside the car, she said, and that fear gripped her soul the moment she got in. And sure enough, the fellow in the car soon exits the highway and exits off into some kind of secluded area, which seems to be what psychotic sex criminals always do, you’re always reading *secluded area* in all the accounts of quote *brutal sex slayings* and *grisly discoveries of unidentified remains* by a scout troop or amateur botanist, et cetera, common knowledge which you can be sure she was reviewing, horror-stricken, as the fellow began acting more and more creepy and psychotic even on the interstate and then soon exited into the first available secluded area.” (*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* 293-4)

“B.I. #20 12-96. New Haven CT” (hereafter “B.I. #20”) is the penultimate story in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*: A man tells a story to one of the book’s numerous interviewers about a woman he once met, who told him about a time she was hitchhiking and was picked up by a man who turned out to be a rapist and potential murderer but could not fulfill his horrendous undertaking because of a radically empathetic act on her part; a work of love. As is probably already evident, the story entails a number of rather complicated features, such as the framework of the story and multiple layers of storytelling, and a broader, societal question of a misogynistic culture.¹³¹ What I wish to focus on is the moment where the woman saves her life. How does she do that, what happens, how are we, as readers, to interpret it, and what kind of model of empathy or love is provided by the story? Taking my cue from Søren Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, where we find a radical version of the Christian imperative to love thy neighbor, I suggest that this particular story by Wallace is not about practicing a love *of* or an empathy *for* the other but of presupposing the capacity for love and empathy *in* the other. Although the story “B.I. #20” does not deal directly with depression, I take it to be the most exemplary model of the therapeutic work of fiction in Wallace’s *oeuvre*. It crystallizes the relation between empathy, therapy and fiction.

¹³¹ For more on the latter topic, which I shall refrain from touching on, see Rachel Haley Himmelheber’s article “I Believed She Could Save Me”: Rape Culture in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20’”, although she would probably accuse me, as she does of Christoforos Diakoulakis’ article “‘Quote Unquote Love ... a Type of Scotopia’: David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*”, of conducting an “irresponsible interpretation”.

New Age goo: A strategy for survival

Sitting in the car with her future assailant, the female protagonist of the story feels instantly that something is terribly wrong. “The crux being”, the male interviewee tells the interviewer in *his* account of *her* account of the episode,

”that despite the terror she is somehow able to think quickly on her feet and thinks it through and determines that her only chance of surviving this encounter is to establish a quote connection with the quote soul of the sexual psychopath as he’s driving them deeper into the woody secluded area looking for just the right spot to pull over and brutally have at her. That her objective is to focus very intently on the psychotic mulatto as an ensouled and beautiful albeit tormented person in his own right instead of merely as a threat to her or a force of evil or the incarnation of her personal death.” (300-301).

The rather cynical male interviewee, who tells the story to the interviewer knows that this might come across as one big, stupid cliché so he not only uses verbal quotation marks around words such as “connection” and “soul”, but hastens to add, just to be on the safe side: “Try to bracket any New Age goo in the terminology and focus on the tactical strategy itself if you can because I’m well aware that what she is about to describe is nothing but a variant of the stale old Love Will Conquer All bromide”. (301). And, miraculously, the “mulatto” does not kill the woman. He rapes her, so it is not as if nothing happens, but he does not kill her. She saves her life by this act of “New Age goo”, and later she (Sarah) meets the man (Eric) who is being interviewed in the story.

In the beginning his interest in her is purely sexual. She is, in his offensive formulation, “a quote Granola Cruncher, or post-Hippie, New Ager,” who is sexy, not very intelligent and whose “prototypical Cruncher morphology” makes the closing of the erotic deal “almost criminally easy.” (288). But when Sarah starts telling Eric the story everything changes, in the sense that her ability to evoke empathy not only pertains to the unnamed rapist but to Eric as well. However, the ending is rather ambivalent and disturbing, ending with Eric saying: “I believed she could save me. I know how this sounds, trust me. I know your type and I know what you’re bound to ask. Ask it now. This is your chance. I felt she could save me I said. Ask me now. Say it. I

stand here naked before you. Judge me, you chilly cunt. You dyke, you bitch, cooze, cunt, slut, gash. Happy now? All borne out? Be happy. I don't care. I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story." (318). What Eric thus definitely shares with the rapist is that neither of them has any capacity for empathy and they both have a noticeable tendency to treat women as "objects or dolls, *Its* and not *Thous*" (301), which is precisely what Simon Caron-Cohen would take as a symptom of an erosion of empathy.

So far this is a very standard interpretation. Matthew Campora, for instance, writes that "[b]y seeking to make a 'quote connection' with him, she is attempting to evoke his empathy, force him to see her as a human being as opposed to an object [...] The 'connection' that saves the woman is an empathic one, and what becomes evident in the interview is that the strategy used by the narrator to seduce the young woman and the one used by the serial killer to dehumanize her before raping her both arise from the same place: a lack of empathy. Both men, however, fail in their attempts to dehumanize the woman, and it is her New Age religious practice that saves her." (30-31). Along the same lines, Malcolm Boswell argues that "she tries to empathize with him human-to-human, to enter his interior, however cosmically, and force *him* to see her not as a thing but as another human being [...] this process of human-making is a reciprocal arrangement: we acquire our sacred rights as humans only by *granting* those rights to others, however hideous." (196). This much remains clear: "B.I. #20" is a story about empathy. But what does this even mean or entail? What about the story's *production* of empathy as opposed to its representation of it? Is Wallace really trying to "test the boundaries of our willingness to 'empathize'", as Boswell puts it? This is where the parable of the Good Samaritan enters the picture.¹³²

Wallace and the parable of the Good Samaritan

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10, 36) is the well-known story about a man – a Jew – who has been assaulted by robbers. A priest passes by without offering to help the poor man. A Levite also happens by, but he does not do anything either. It is finally a Samaritan – Jews and Samaritans ordinarily despised each other – who comes to the man's rescue.

¹³² Both Campora and Boswell actually rely on a Kierkegaardian framework, at least in part, but neither of them deals with *Works of Love*.

In the Bible, this is the story that Jesus tells to a Pharisee lawyer. But as Kierkegaard stresses in his breathtaking interpretation of the parable in *Works of Love*, the Pharisee completely misunderstands the point of the story. The Pharisee thinks that the central question is: Who is my neighbor [Næste]? That question, however, is deeply irrelevant, both to Jesus and to Kierkegaard. Instead of answering that question, Jesus, in Kierkegaard's re-telling, cunningly asks the Pharisee: "Which of the these three seems to you to have been the neighbor to the man who had fallen among robbers?" (*Works of Love* 22). Formulating the question in that way now makes the Pharisee incapable of answering the question incorrectly. The neighbor to the man who had fallen among robbers is the Samaritan, the Pharisee says, whereupon Kierkegaard notes:

"The one to whom I have a duty is my neighbor, and when I fulfill my duty I show that I am a neighbor. Christ does not speak about knowing the neighbor but about becoming a neighbor oneself, about showing oneself to be a neighbor just as the Samaritan showed it by his mercy. By this he did not show that the assaulted man was his neighbor but that he was a neighbor of the one assaulted." (ibid.).

Thus, the question is not "who is my neighbor" but "who is the neighbor of the other", which naturally will always be *me*. In Kierkegaard's account this is the way the story unfolds and the recognition that is at stake. The assaulted man is not the Samaritan's neighbor, it is the other way around: The Samaritan is the neighbor of the assaulted man. That was what the Samaritan understood in stark contrast to the Levite and the priest. He was the only one truly able to love. But the act – or work – of love did not consist in the Samaritan loving his neighbor; the love of the Samaritan entailed presupposing the capacity for love in the neighbor. In that sense alone is love "upbuilding" [*opbyggelig*], as Kierkegaard formulates it: "*Love builds up by presupposing that love is present*" (222 – emphasis in original).

One of the aims of Kierkegaard is to distinguish love (of the neighbor) from compassion, pity and charity: "Ah, let the newspaper writers and tax collectors and the parish beadles talk about generosity and count and count", he writes satirically at one point (300). Also, as a figure, the neighbor is not identical with a loved one or a friend since, according to Kierkegaard, such persons are only versions or variations of the self itself: "In the beloved and the

friend, it of course is not the neighbor who is loved, but the *other* I, or the first I once again, but more intensely.” (59). The point here is that the Other, in such relations and acts, is transformed into a projection of the self – to an other I – and the so-called good deed is really an expression of self-love or even narcissism. As Kierkegaard observes: “Love for the neighbor cannot make me one with the neighbor in a unified self,” (58), as if the task of love merely consisted in walking around in the world, looking for lovable people. On the contrary, for Kierkegaard the more cumbersome task is tantamount to being able to find any given object or person lovable, even to find “the unlovable object lovable” (374). This radical act implies presupposing the capacity for love even – or especially – in a person who not only seems rather unlovable but also, and more importantly, utterly unloving. One might wonder if it is at all possible to love a person who is incapable of loving, and the answer is yes – except that it is precisely not to be taken as a question (am I able to love that person?) but as an imperative (you have to love that person!). Presupposing the capacity for love in the Other is not about presupposing that this person *is* really capable of loving but that he or she *might* be able to; love is presupposed as a possibility, which means that love is also a matter of faith, of belief. You can never know for sure if the other is, ultimately, able to measure up to the infinite height of love. What is certain, though, is that you do not, under any circumstances, presuppose love in the other in order to be loved in return (as I shall detail below, love does not keep accounts). So goes the Kierkegaardian logic.

If we follow this reading of the Good Samaritan in order to transpose it to a reading of Wallace’s short story “B.I. #20”, then could it not be said that what Sarah does is precisely to presuppose the ability to love in the psychotic rapist, an un-lovable object if ever there were one? She attempts to entertain the idea that the rapist’s neighbor is actually *her*: Quite a disturbing thought. She does not say, “you are my neighbor,” but rather, “I am *your* neighbor.” The difference is radical, since she does not make him into an object of her hippie-like, new-age-ish love, but presupposes the capacity for love in him, thereby making *her* into the object of his potential love. More accurately, she makes herself into the Thou that is so unfamiliar and frightening to the rapist. The radical and perverted gesture on her part is based on the premise that she is his neighbor – his Other – not that he is her Other, her neighbor. In this sense the story is not a test of whether we as readers are able to empathize with or even love the hideous men, but rather an imperative to presuppose the

capacity for empathy and love in them. In that sense, Wallace – for all his thoughts on the subject – avoids the narcissistic and ultimately dehumanizing act of reducing the other, the rapist, to an object of my love. The question of empathy and love is pushed to an extreme: Love does in fact “Conquer All”.¹³³

Infinite debt

The temporal mode here is one of relationality and futurity, in that this gesture reaches out for something in another person that is not quite there yet¹³⁴ (indeed, in the cases of the men in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* the current absence of love is extremely apparent). To repeat the phrase from Levinas’ *Time and the Other*: “The very relation to the other is the relation to the future.” (77). For Levinas, the other, as a figure of exteriority and transcendence, opens a vertical dimension of infinity. Thus, the relation between self and other is not characterized by a reciprocal altruism, whereby I do something for you *now* in expectation that you will return the favor *in the future*. In a similar albeit less explicit thematization of the temporality at work in the relation to the other, Kierkegaard writes that love transcends every form of “bookkeeping arrangement.” (*Works of Love* 176).¹³⁵ Love is a gift that one gives without expecting something in return, without any demand for profit or repayment. True love has never heard of the principle *quid pro quo*, it knows no numbers. Paradoxically, in an act of love, it is the giver and not the receiver who puts himself in debt. In this regard Kierkegaard speaks of an *infinite debt* (175ff), which defies any kind of arithmetical calculation.

¹³³ The story “B.I. #20 12-96. New Haven CT” may seem as though it needs to be read with certain reservations. However, I think that the opposite is the case. I believe that it must to be taken precisely at face value, not *despite* of the ironic and cynical comments about “New Age goo” and “a quote soul-connection, unquote” but *because of them*. Readers familiar with the works of Wallace will know that he tends to put the statements that he really means into the mouths of people who often *do not speak English so well*. The German tennis coach Schtitt and the Canadian terrorist Marathe in *Infinite Jest* are obvious examples, the retarded and physically deformed Mario is another: All of them seem to speak the truth but in very broken English. The obnoxious Eric of “B.I. #20” is well aware of this: “That even if the whole focused soul-connection theology, that even if it was just catachrestic New Age goo, her belief in it had saved her life, so whether it’s goo becomes irrelevant, no?” (317).

¹³⁴ Cf. Søltoft 113.

¹³⁵ I am, of course, not ignorant of the differences between Levinas and Kierkegaard, not least Levinas’s criticism of Kierkegaard’s subjectivism and the consequent lack of the other as a category, and though it would be a digression to plunge into those matters here, I do want to remark that Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, with its emphasis on the neighbor, certainly does not dispense with the Other in any way.

This thought is not only echoed in Wallace's idea of infinity, as presented both in *Infinite Jest* and *Everything and More*, where two varieties of infinity are distinguished; a 'good' one like that proposed by Kierkegaard, and a 'bad' one like that referred to throughout Wallace's work as a vicious infinite regress.¹³⁶ It also ties in with the discourse of the AA and NA in *Infinite Jest*, adhering to the clichés of taking it *One Day at a Time* and living completely *In the Moment* (858-860): "It's a gift, the Now: it's AA's real gift; it's no accident they call it *The Present*" (860). The present – or what Kierkegaard conceptualized as the Moment or Instant (*Øieblikket*) – is a gift but it is not a gift one receives, it is something one gives, something one passes to an other, placing oneself in a situation of *infinite debt*. The difficult task then, is one of staying in debt to the Other, in the infinity of it. That is, Kierkegaard writes, the "element" of love. The decisive condition is that one refrains from engaging in any accounting measures, that one avoids doing "bookkeeping" and that one leaves all judgments and comparisons behind. "Beware of comparison!", Kierkegaard even cautions the reader of *Works of Love* (186¹³⁷), a warning one could have wished that the protagonist of "The Depressed Person" could have known and taken note of, for what is her mental apparatus but one big machine of comparison? Is she not continuously "working on the treadmill of comparison" that Kierkegaard describes so well (185)? One of the remarkable symptoms of her depressive condition is that she constantly compares her cheerless life with the vibrating, active and meaningful lives that she – unjustly and erroneously – imagines the members of her Support System lead. In the words of Kierkegaard, she cannot help "counting and weighing" (183), as she is caught in the compulsive refrain of comparison.

It is the belief and not the god that counts

That for Wallace, empathy – which, as I have just argued, is to be taken somewhat synonymously with the Kierkegaardian notion of love in his reading of the Good Samaritan – is an inherently 'therapeutic' project, is strikingly clear in the way AA and NA operate in *Infinite Jest*. Functioning

¹³⁶ Cf. North 175ff.

¹³⁷ Kierkegaard actually compares (pun intended) the act of comparing to an arrow flying through the air: As soon as it becomes aware of itself and of what it is doing, as soon as it "dwells" on itself and begins comparing one state with another, it falls to the ground (*Works of Love* 182). One might think of the prototypical scene in a cartoon in which a character runs at full speed beyond the edge of a cliff and according to the law of gravity ought to fall, but does not, remaining suspended in mid-air. However, the moment the character looks down, comparing its own situation to the requirements of physical laws, *then* it immediately crashes to the ground.

as one of the novel's "technologies of the self" (Hayles 693) – the others being AFR and ETA, terrorism and tennis – AA/NA is a place for listening to the stories of other addicts without ever judging or comparing. A place for empathy. "Empathy, in Boston AA, is called Identification", the narrator of the novel states, which means that the participants, particularly newcomers, are encouraged to "Identify instead of Compare. Again, *Identify* means empathize." (345). The procedure of identifying and empathizing is not about comparing, as Kierkegaard just reminded us, nor about erasing the otherness of the other, so that the other merely becomes a version or an alter ego of the I. As Levinas writes: "The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place; we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery." (75).

Where Wallace parts ways with both Kierkegaard and Levinas, is in his emphasis on the communal quality of AA/NA. This idea brings us back to Karl Jaspers, to whom the question of belief and faith was a practical, collective question. In his *General Psychopathology*, Jaspers argues that psychotherapy itself "must be set within a frame of common beliefs and values" (792), hopefully bringing about "collaboration of doctor and patient in a mutual philosophical faith." (805). But it is not only within the therapeutic relation that belief is shared; as such belief(s) depend upon others. To put it slightly differently, any existence depends upon belief and trust in other people. "*Sharing in something objective* – whether symbols, a faith, the accepted philosophy of some group – is a necessary condition for any profound cohesion among men [...] Many modern psychotherapists labour under the illusion that, when faced with neuroses and personality disorders, the highest possible expectation is realisation of the patient's own self..." (792). Belief, in other words, is a shared enterprise.

We see here, on the one hand, a movement beyond pure logic and knowledge and, on the other, a movement beyond a solely subjective level. Wallace highlights the very same movements in his depiction of AA in *Infinite Jest*. The thing about "this unromantic, unhip clichéd AA thing" (350) is that the clichés, in the novel's view, tend to be true and to function at the same time. "It starts to turn out that the vapid the AA cliché, the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers." (446). The important thing is not how it works – "it seemed to be impossible to figure

out just *how* AA worked” (349) – but the sheer fact that it does work. The important thing is not *what* you believe in or *why* you believe, but *that* you believe.

At the same time, it is crucial to remember that, like Jaspers, all the characters in *Infinite Jest* – not to mention Wallace himself – remain skeptics. They are people who do not have any faith to begin with, to whom faith and belief are strenuous, tedious tasks that require – for all their quotidian qualities – a leap of faith in the sense deployed by Kierkegaard, who not only stressed the absurdity of this leap but fought hard to maintain belief in his own private life. What we have here is belief without belief, maybe even a belief against belief, a kind of faith of the faithless. “It is the belief and not the god that counts,” the poet Wallace Stevens wrote in the text *Adagia*. “The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe it willingly.” (163).¹³⁸

“true in transit” – fabulation as cure

The concept of *fiction* is important here. At the outset it is quite clear that the preceding considerations have some implications for a rethinking of the relationship between fiction and empathy in Wallace’s work. Firstly, if depression can – and indeed must – be understood as a lack of empathy, and if fiction is understood as an exercise in empathy, then fiction and ‘therapy’ are consequently brought into an intimate affiliation with one another: It is here, potentially, that other rhythms can arise and a restoration of empathy take place. Secondly, if we follow Kierkegaard – as I am adamant we should – in regarding empathy as a radical work of love (of the other, of the neighbor) then the questions are not: Can I as a real human being empathize with this or that fictional character, however hideous, however inhuman a stranger? Or, is she my neighbor, am I able to love her? Rather, it seems that the empathetic power of literature is more radical or even perverse than that. Let me, as a means to conclude this scene, offer some brief and scattered reflections on this issue.

¹³⁸ Coincidentally, these particular lines by Stevens are not only cited in Simon Critchley’s *The Faith of the Faithless* (91), but also in Malcolm Boswell’s *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (147).

The whole oeuvre of Wallace is saturated with scenes of fiction, storytelling, or fabulation as I would prefer to call it.¹³⁹ The community of AA/NA in *Infinite Jest* is a case in point: The sharing of stories forms the foundation of every meeting and every group, which Stefan Hirt calls "an intersubjective community based on storytelling." (104). The story "B.I. #20" is evidently another. Taking the overall framework of the story into account, we have a nameless and implicit narrator who tells a story to the reader about a man – the interviewee – who tells a story to his interviewer, about a story a woman told him, about a time when she was raped and nearly killed. In these multiple layers of fabulation, what is key is the concrete situation of narrating and listening. To be more precise, the emphasis is not so much on the narrator as on the listener in Wallace's works. It is really the latter upon whom it depends.¹⁴⁰ This is the case in "B.I. #20", the posthumous *The Pale King* – where the character Shane Drinion is capable of listening with so much focus and concentration that he literally elevates from his chair (p. 444-509) – and *Infinite Jest*, in which the deformed Mario is the ultimate listener, as his brother Hal realizes: "And maybe that's the key. Maybe then whatever's said to you is so completely believed by you that, what, *it becomes sort of true in transit*. Flies through the air toward you and reverses its spin and hits you true, however mendaciously it comes off the other person's stick." (773 – my emphasis).

Again we see that the focus is less on the self, on the Samaritan or on the narrating figure than on the Other, the neighbor, the listener. Wallace's literature does not train our capacity for empathy and our moral imagination by inviting or forcing us as readers to put

¹³⁹ For the time being I am using the term *fabulation* in a fairly everyday sense, but the concept, theoretically developed by Henri Bergson, harbors many interesting perspectives that shall be elaborated in chapter four.

¹⁴⁰ Of course, the story puts emphasis on Sarah's "odd affectless sincerity" (297), her "poseless" and unself-conscious way of telling a story, which strikes Eric as an extraordinary accomplishment. It would be a mistake, however, to ascribe an unequivocally positive value to this kind of honesty and 'poselessness'. Wallace is obviously famous for his anticipation, in the essay "E Unibus Pluram", of "[t]he next real literary 'rebels' in this country [who] might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue." (*A Supposedly Fun Thing* 81). But he was also acutely aware that honesty can be used as a cynical strategy; "sincerity with a motive" it is called in *Infinite Jest*. In other words: An abyssal discussion is hidden here. It pertains not only to Wallace's struggle with sincerity, banality and the dialectical relationship between irony and cynicism, all of which needs little narration here (see, for instance: *A Supposedly Fun Thing* 64-67; 81-82). It also pertains to a more general question of postmodernism and literature and to newer, conceptual neologisms such as post-irony, new sincerity and metamodernism. For one of the best texts that grapple with some of these issues, see Kelly 2010 (see also Hirt 34; Jeffery 49).

ourselves in another person's shoes for a while. Unlike, for example, Martha Nussbaum¹⁴¹, who has worked a lot on the relation between literature and empathy, the critical thing is not that the reader is or becomes able to empathize in order to arrive at the point at which a moral judgment can be made. It is precisely the act of comparison and judgment that we need to leave behind; to paraphrase Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, Wallace's stories constitute no court of judgment. The task is to listen: "I.D.ing without effort. There's no judgment." (IJ 379). Only in this way is fiction able to achieve a therapeutic and ethical function, reconstructing the relation to the other that has been lost or damaged in depression. Fiction can, in the words of Berardi, make possible a different and less obsessive refrain than that of depression; it can create a change in the rhythms of life, another set of "relations between what you believe and what you believed before." (*Brief Interviews* 195). And sometimes it can or does not, as in "The Depressed Person", where the protagonist's narcissistic narration leaves no room for listening (maybe that would in fact make the story an even stronger and more radical version of Kierkegaard's imperative of love, since all the work would need to be done by the reader in relation to this totally unlovable, depressed protagonist, given that the story itself makes no attempt to love her?).

At issue here is not only the concrete scenes and situations in Wallace's body of work; it is also, and perhaps above all, related to what the works themselves do, what they practice and carry out. It stands to reason that the relation between speaker and listener *in* the respective stories reflects the relation between narrator or writer and reader *of* the stories. Here too, it is the case that whatever is said and told, only becomes "true in transit". In Wallace, the act of fabulation is not only the possibility of empathy, love and a restoration of the Other but, more strongly, a precondition. It bears repeating that it is not a matter of who my neighbor is but who the neighbor of the other is, which also means that Wallace's works are not intended to test the limits of his reader's empathy. Being able to love an unlovable object *is* imperative – and the men in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* are most certainly unlovable – but it can only be done if I presuppose the capacity for empathy and love in the other, not through exposing or subjecting him or her to my overwhelming empathy, compassionate love or moral judgment. Wallace's fiction is an 'upbuilding' form of literature, which is what the story "B.I. #20" shows more than any other piece by Wallace: It builds up love and empathy by presupposing that love and empathy are

¹⁴¹ Nussbaum speaks of a moral judgment based on an "empathic imagining" (68), i.e. on "experiencing what happens to them [the characters] as if from their point of view" (66).

present in the Other, even – and especially – when love and empathy are clearly not there at all. This therapeutic, ethical and even spiritual project in a literary form, animated and made necessary by the pathological problem of depression, radicalizes questions of empathy and love. Whether it is translatable into a political project, or capable of assuming a form and function that goes beyond the relatively limited sphere of writer and reader, or a community of ex-addicts, is a question for another occasion.

One-two-three paradoxes (threshold)

What the first two scenes of this chapter have shown regarding the problem of depression is that, whether the problem and pathology is related to a narcissistic self-consciousness and self-absorption, as is the case for the female protagonist in “The Depressed Person”, or to a sheer physical and mental pain, as is the case for Kate Gompert in *Infinite Jest*, the result is the same: A loss of empathy, a loss of the Other as a category of futurity. In spite of the disparate nature of the two stories, with regard to content and form, this is the point of convergence characteristic of the experience of depression in Wallace's works: “A person in such a state is incapable of empathy with any other living thing.” (IJ 696).

This is the problem of depression that Wallace presents and responds to. As we have seen in scene three, it is a problem that is inseparable from a more general and thoroughly American problem of addiction. What is articulated in Wallace's work in general, and in *Infinite Jest* in particular, is that addiction to drugs is the mirror image of depression, or in the words of Alain Ehrenberg, the other of Janus' two faces: “the impotence void and the compulsion void.” (*The Weariness of the Self* 134). Within the framework of this dissertation, depression and addiction mirror each other in that a total *isolation* from the other – person or object – is at work in depression, whereas in addiction the issue is one of total *immersion*. While there is an obvious contrast between depression and addiction – isolation vs. immersion, detachment vs. attachment – and while the two meanings can thus be seen as opposed to each other, this may not necessarily be so. Both can be said, in Wallace, to form part of the same repetitive circle, the same loop of reflection, the same form of bad infinity, the same version of vicious infinite regress, which in the end (if not immediately) leads to a devastating loss of the future. And both lose the other, though from opposite directions so to speak. That is the pathological figure as Wallace exposes it, but there is another figure, one that contains the possibility for change, and of a therapeutic cure. This is the straight line that breaks open the circle and leads where, exactly? Into the unknown. It can lead to death and suicide, but it can lead to redemption, reparation and recovery too, it can lead to a restoration of the being of the other. As evidenced in scene four of this chapter a leap of faith is required, a radical work of love, a transcendent trajectory that disrupts the circular rhythm of pure pathology.

But is this leap of faith even possible for the depressed person, given that (s)he is depressed? Is there not something paradoxical in this demand? Kierkegaard notes this very paradox in *Works of Love*: “Humanly speaking, it is indeed most strange, almost like mockery, to say to the despairing person that he shall do that which was his sole desire but the impossibility of which brings him to despair. Is any other evidence needed that the love commandment is of divine origin!” (42). The paradox is, in other words: How do you reach out to and for the other when the other is that which cannot be reached? As Kierkegaard repeatedly emphasized, faith or love are paradoxical and absurd as such. True belief is not to believe in the possible but the impossible; it does not make itself known in situations of an excess of energy and an abundance of possibilities but, on the contrary, unfolds in precarious and sudden situations of great pain and unbelievable misery, in defiance of the absence of possibilities. Possibility follows from belief, not the other way around. A similar idea is expressed by Levinas, who writes in *Time and the Other* that “[t]he relationship with the other will never be the feat of grasping a possibility.” (76). To a certain extent, he explicates, the relationship to the Other is only possible for a being “whose solitude has reached a crispation through suffering.” (76). Strangely, the impossibility of the other becomes the possibility of the other (first paradox).

Another question emerges though: How can we know that the restoration of the other does not cause a heightened rather than diminished risk of violence? How would we ensure that a new attachment does not mutate into a new addiction, that optimism does not become cruel, that surrender of the self to something bigger than the self does not lead to totalitarianism, or a new narcissism?¹⁴² How do we know that the self is not selfish in its utter selflessness, that the exit from the cage of depression does not lead deeper into the cage? The point is, we would not know, nor could we ever know. This is, so to speak, the basic condition of faith. There is only one resolution which is that there is no resolution (second paradox).

In any case, it ought to be clear by now that Wallace was a deeply *spiritual* writer. He thought it was time to take seriously such questions of depression, addiction and belief, of therapy and art; questions that ultimately converge in the notion of spirit. This was what he attempted to do in his

¹⁴² Cf. Berlant, *Cruel optimism* 124.

writing and, as already mentioned, the reason he remained fascinated with religion.¹⁴³ He praised Kafka's (and Kierkegaard's) "harrowed spirituality", and Dostoevsky' "spiritual urgency" rather than his "technical abilities or special talents." (*Conversations* 157).¹⁴⁴ That was also the reason his private library was half full of self-help books.¹⁴⁵ Of course, it is more than possible and perfectly legitimate to dismiss those kinds of books as pure nonsense, or unadulterated ideology. But as Jon Baskin writes in his article "Untrendy problems: *The Pale King's* Philosophical Inspirations", in contemporary America "the pervasiveness of self-help, not to mention books of affirmations, yoga, evangelical preaching, and television makeover shows, might be seen as evidence not of the insignificance or shallowness of the problem of adolescence, but of its depth and urgency." (155). What we have seen in the analysis of Wallace's works is that they show how what one attaches oneself to is of the greatest and gravest importance. As the character Remy Marathe says in *Infinite Jest*: "Our attachments are our temple, what we worship, no? What we give ourselves to, what we invest with faith" (107), adding: "Choose with care. You are what you love. No?" (107). We cannot *not* believe in something. Everybody worships. Emancipation in Wallace is clearly not a Pinocchian endeavor, it does not equal an autonomous state without strings. Rather, it entails being well attached to the Other: "That is real freedom." (*This is Water* 121).

And where does this leave fiction? Is literature to be understood as spiritual therapy? Is it true, as Susan Sontag writes in her journal, that "[a]rt is a form of nourishment (of consciousness, the spirit)." (*As consciousness* 73). Sontag opens her text "The Aesthetics of Silence" from 1967 with the words: "Every era has to reinvent the project of "spirituality" for itself" (3), but what would that mean in the case of Wallace? Perhaps the production of a literature that would not be content with – cynically and ironically, *à la* Easton Ellis or Houellebecq

¹⁴³ In an interview Wallace stated that he is interested in religion (and tried to become a catholic twice, but to no avail) "only because certain churches seem to be a place where things can be talked about. What does your life mean? Do you believe in something bigger than you? [...] One place where I discovered stuff was being talked about was AA meetings. I'm not in AA, but I went to open meetings. There's a certain amount of goo, and there's a certain amount of serious stuff." (*Conversations* 79-80).

¹⁴⁴ See also Wallace's essay "Joseph Frank's Dostojevsky" (*Consider the Lobster* 255-274).

¹⁴⁵ In this library Wallace kept a deeply annotated version of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by the renowned psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who is mentioned in *Infinite Jest* (965). In *The Pale King*, moreover, we find a scene where the author David Wallace, who makes several appearances in the novel, reads a piece of self-help literature (302). A great deal of humor surrounds these instances, but the problem of Wallace's intimate familiarity with this kind of literature must still be confronted directly, which – with a few exceptions – has not been the case so far within the academic scholarship on Wallace. It must be taken seriously that Wallace read these books and, to a certain extent, took them seriously.

– exposing and criticizing the world as it is, and that would not be reducible to “a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything.” (*Conversations* 26). A literature, in other words, based on the recognition that critique and negativity is not, in itself, enough.

This was what William James realized and pointed out perceptively more than one hundred years ago. In *Varieties of Religious Experience* – a book that Wallace, as we have seen, had read and appropriated in his writing on depression – the chapter on the sick souls is preceded by a chapter on the mind-cure movement, also known as New Thought. Here James records a significant shift in society: The replacement of traditional religious institutions and movements by other forms of therapeutic relief and redemption. As he writes: “The mind-cure with its gospel of healthy-mindedness has come as a revelation to many whose hearts the church of Christianity had left hardened.” (113). According to James the movement is based on principles of health, happiness and optimism, and the conviction that “thoughts are things” (107), implying that what matters most is not objective reality but subjective thoughts, perceptions and feelings pertaining to this reality. In other words: If one changes one’s mental apparatus, then one can change reality. “You are saved now, if you would but believe it” (108); words that bear striking resemblance to the jargon of contemporary self-help books, positive psychology, and cognitive therapy, where happiness is a matter of personal choice and the right attitude. Yet, instead of simply dismissing this movement out of hand, James took it seriously and treated it as “a genuine religion.” (133). As a consequence, anyone interested in offering an alternative to this ‘genuine religion’ must acknowledge the need for relief for sick souls and be prepared to offer an equally appealing alternative if one wishes to have any effect at all: “No prophet can claim to bring a final message unless he says things that will have a sound of reality in the ears of the victims [...] But the deliverance must come in as strong a form as the complaint.” (162). However, in Wallace’s writing the deliverance that James talks about is often denied to the very characters that need it the most. There is, for instance, no “deliverance” for the depressed person from the story of the same name, nor is there one for Kate Gompert in *Infinite Jest*, though of course Wallace’s task as a writer is not to ensure a happy ending for each and every one of his characters. One can almost hear them whispering to themselves, quoting Kafka: Oh, there is hope, only not for us (third paradox).

Chapter 3

Claire Fontaine

Intro

Even the name is a ready-made. Claire Fontaine is a French company that specializes in stationery, but since 2004 it has also been the name of a duo formed by the Italian artist Fulvia Carnevale and the British artist James Thornhill. The artist Claire Fontaine not only makes ready-made art, she¹⁴⁶ is a ready-made artist who, practicing a radical, uncompromising avant-garde art of a conceptual and minimalist disposition, has renounced on the idea of a creative, artistic and rather romantic subject. Within the scene of contemporary art, Claire Fontaine is one of the artists who have worked in the most concentrated and consistent way with the problem of depression. In their work, depression is always already *political* and must be understood in relation to its real basis in social conflicts within a neoliberal economy of debt and financial speculation.

In her art Claire Fontaine thus responds to depression as a pertinent contemporary problem, just as we have seen Michel Houellebecq and David Forster Wallace do. However, whereas Houellebecq's ontological/technological response pertains to something other than being, and Wallace's ethical/spiritual response pertains to the being of the other, Claire Fontaine's response takes a radically different form. Indeed, from her point of view, Houellebecq's response is probably to be condemned for being reactionary, and Wallace's for being too humanistic and apolitical. For Claire Fontaine, depression is – or can be – a political action, a human strike, which thus becomes a contemporary and psychopathological form of strike. Neoliberal capitalism, in her understanding, forms a totality that does not only have an effect on society at a structural level or on people at an individual level, but encroaches on social relations, feelings and the very being of human beings. The strike must therefore interact at all those levels as well, and assume a total character. The human strike is – as Claire Fontaine herself articulates it in the text “Human Strike Within the Field of Libidinal Economy”, which features in the book *Human Strike Has Already Begun & Other Writings* – “a type of strike that involves the whole of life and not only its professional side, that acknowledges exploitation in all the domains and not only at work.” (38-9). Accordingly, the human strike is not about ceasing to work for the purpose of improving working conditions, for instance. In fact, the human strike is purely and exclusively a process of the present

¹⁴⁶ The use of pronouns poses somewhat of a problem, but I shall alternate between the plural of the two artists that make up the duo (them), and the singular of the artist as an interface (her).

and has no future objectives; it is not means to an end but pure means, as Claire Fontaine puts it using a formulation borrowed from Giorgio Agamben.

It is clear that Claire Fontaine has moved far beyond the domain of clinical depression. More importantly, and in further contrast to the two previous chapters, we find no phenomenological experience of depression in Claire Fontaine; in her works there is no representation of a depressed subjectivity. This does not mean that Claire Fontaine is not interested in the question of subjectivity, only that they, to repeat a point made in the introduction to this dissertation, are less interested in the subjective experience of the economy than in the production of a particular subjectivity within the economy, i.e. a process of a specific subjectivation. As I also argued in the introduction, this question is inextricably linked to a question of temporality and futurity, and to a question of affectivity.

Moreover, it should be said, before we even begin, that there is something strange about some, if not most of Claire Fontaine's works. Powerful and dramatic as they certainly are, they do not really appeal to analytical inquiry; something about them seems to ward off a detailed and meticulous close reading.¹⁴⁷ This has two general consequences for this chapter: Firstly, the chapter will assume a less analytical and more theoretical character than the other chapters so far. Secondly, the chapter will not deal directly with depression to begin with. Because of the nature of Claire Fontaine's work just specified, I have deemed it advisable simply to start with the political economy as anatomized by Claire Fontaine and only then, gradually, move closer to – or return to – the explicit problematic of depression. It may seem counter-intuitive to proceed in this way, just as it may seem that we have moved too far away from our topic, but it is, I would argue, a necessary or at least logical procedure in the case of Claire Fontaine.

¹⁴⁷ Maybe this is why very little has been written about Claire Fontaine, at least within academic and scholarly circles – Hal Foster being one exception (see his essay “None Reasons Why the Avant-Garde Shouldn't Give up” in the catalogue *Foreigners Everywhere* (144-159)) – but several useful interviews exist. In one of them, a dialogue between Claire Fontaine and Bernard Blistène and Nicolas Liucci-Goutnikov, the latter remarks “[i]f, as I believe, the artwork only has accounts to settle with the history of its own genre, the dissensus it engenders must have to do with what it is” (*Foreigners Everywhere* 40), and that the work “seems to oscillate between utopia and melancholy” (48). In any case, it is fair to say that Claire Fontaine is an artist who has a strained relationship to herself as an artist, as well as to the very institution(s) of art, even if she has never left it.

More concretely, scene one will examine the critique of the political economy that Claire Fontaine unfolds in their video installation *P.I.G.S* from 2011. The prismatic vantage point for this scene is the concept of debt. As I will point out in more detail below there is an intimate relation between the current debt regime and neoliberal capitalism. Of particular interest will be the implications of debt on the level of temporality and subjectivity. Scene two and scene three then begin to hone in on depression. Using the ready-made work *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)* from 2011 as an object of analysis and an occasion for reflection, scene two concentrates on the question of temporality, while scene three attends to the question of subjectivity in Claire Fontaine's video work *Untitled (Why your psychology sucks)* from 2015, which offers a stark yet rather comical critique of the self-help ideology. Scene four then goes on to address the question of how depression can be seen as a human strike in the work and world of Claire Fontaine and if depression should perhaps be seen as a 'solution' to the contemporary crisis rather than as 'symptom' of it?

In addition, a continuous albeit irregular reflection on the question of avant-garde art runs through the chapter. Notwithstanding the fact that she is clearly working within that tradition, Claire Fontaine seems to be a totally exhausted, if not downright depressed avant-garde artist who has lost any belief in the future.¹⁴⁸ This deserves a few preliminary, explanatory remarks: The danger that Claire Fontaine seems to be acutely aware of is that art works are not only always recuperated in the flow of capital but also, to a certain extent, superfluous. The issue of the potential redundancy of art is confronted in the aforementioned essay, "Human Strike Within the Field of Libidinal Economy", where Claire Fontaine also discusses the ready-mades of Duchamp. They write: "The task of making of objects expressive and responsive to human feelings, which for thousands of years had been performed by artists, is now performed by capitalism essentially through television." (*Human Strike Has Already Begun* 47). It is by now a tired truism that art has become a commodity, sold for outrageous sums on an ever-expanding art market.

¹⁴⁸ I caution you not to be too parochial about my use of the word avant-garde in this chapter. I am not even going to pretend that I will be able to (let alone have a desire to) unravel all the complexities hidden in the history of the avant-garde, which means that I am not going to have a very elaborated concept of the avant-garde, nor do I wish to engage in lengthy discussion of the canonical texts on this subject (for instance, Peter Bürger's influential book *Theory Of the Avant-Garde* from 1974). I am simply going to operate under the assumption that the project of the avant-garde was characterized by the attempt to unite art and life and by a general futurism, which is to say, a belief in the future, or, rather, a belief in the capacity of avant-garde art to initiate and create a new and better future.

However, the problem that Claire Fontaine confronts is much more profound and, in a sense, the opposite: Namely the problem that capitalist commodities seem to be artworks in themselves. The diagnosis of the present that underlies the poetics and politics of Claire Fontaine is thus not only related to a capitalist world of an ever more adhesive infiltration of art and capital, culture and economy¹⁴⁹ but, more fundamentally, to a contemporary condition under which life has been invaded by art, placing regular, mortal life – as well as art as such – in a precarious position. To shape oneself and one's self as a work of art is no longer a utopian demand, a fantastical claim that only a very exclusive avant-gardist crowd can live up to; it has become a demand that radiates from the modern labor market, targeting anybody who wants to assert him or herself within it. We are, in a sense, all artists today: Every worker is a creative entrepreneur.¹⁵⁰ And the question is: Where does that leave art? Where does that leave Claire Fontaine?

These are the questions in this chapter, the structure of which follows, in the order given, four key concepts: Debt, depression, strike, and (avant-garde) art.

¹⁴⁹ See for instance: Jameson, *Postmodernism* 48

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Reed 524; Steyerl 110-111. Considering the global world as a whole and the spread of precarious working conditions, this is obviously a qualified truth that only applies to some very specific contexts in the Western world; or at least, this is the myth sold to a section of the de-industrialized working class.

Scene 1: Burning P.I.G.S (debt in the neoliberal era)



P.I.G.S. Video. Plaster wall, matchsticks, concealed corridor, H.D. video color and sound, dimensions variable. 2011

A white wall and thousands of matches. This is what Claire Fontaine's installation video *P.I.G.S.* consists of, at least at the outset. The matchsticks are placed in the wall in the form of maps of Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain; the countries that make up the so-called PIGS at the periphery of the Euro zone.¹⁵¹ The derogatory term denotes the nation-states that suffer the most under the current debt crisis: Greece, for instance, had a public debt burden of almost 180% of its GDP in 2014. Southern Europe is – so to speak – in flames, which is what the work by Claire Fontaine aims to show in a very concrete way. In the video a hooded man enters the frame with a flamethrower in his hand. He approaches the eastern part of the map and ignites Portugal and Spain, then Italy, and finally Greece. Then he leaves. The image is nothing but fire and there is no sound except for the crackling wood and the soaring flames, which last until everything is burned down to an

¹⁵¹ Sometimes Ireland receives the 'honor' of being included in this group, transforming PIGS to PIIGS.

incinerated color and only a glowing red is visible at the edges of each ash-defined country. Parts of the wall have by now also been smeared black by the fire and a dark smoke becomes ever more intense, rising upward and clouding most of the screen. At some point an alarm goes off, possibly a fire alarm. After close to ten minutes, the video ends. *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni...*

Flames of debt in Southern Europe

Every single one of Claire Fontaine's works interrogates the contemporary condition, the current crisis, or rather, plural crises. The work "Gather in multiple groups" (2011) is a comment on Occupy, re-appropriating various statements from a flier found in Zuccotti Park in New York and spray painting them unto a canvas. The ongoing series "Foreigners Everywhere", comprising neon signs that utter the sentence "Foreigners Everywhere" in various languages, is a comment on the so-called refugee crisis. "P.I.G.S" unearths the disastrous debt situation in the southern part of the Euro zone.

Addressing the economic system in place – and in crisis – today, activist and sociologist Andrew Ross, who is engaged in Occupy and in particular the offshoot movement "Strike Debt", has developed the concept of a *creditocracy*. In his book of the same name Ross is concerned with the seemingly endless accumulation of debt, whether in relation to housing, student, or medical loans. These loans are, according to Ross, not by-products of the economic and financial system, but absolutely necessary for this system to function, and equally for nation-states to maintain and increase their respective GDP-growth, if indeed they have growth at all. A similar analysis is made by the anthropologist David Graeber, whose bestseller *Debt – the first 5000 years*, makes the case that debt is at the center of political life in an unprecedented way, to the extent that "U.S. household debt is now estimated at on average 130 percent of income." (70).¹⁵² By the same token – and as intimated in the dissertation's introduction – sociologist Wolfgang Streeck has detailed how the state has gradually moved from being a tax state to a debt state, concluding that "[t]he present financial, fiscal and economic crisis is the end point so far of the long neoliberal transformation of postwar capitalism." (165).¹⁵³ It is indeed "a crisis that has a

¹⁵² Graeber defines debt as follows: "What is a debt, anyway? A debt is just the perversion of a promise. It is a promise corrupted by both math and violence." (391).

¹⁵³ For more on Streeck's take on debt in the Southern part of the Eurozone, see: 343ff.

long story and, in all likelihood, a long future” (Marazzi 10). Or as Kojin Karatani writes in *Transcritique*: “Credit and crisis go hand in hand.” (220).

Although it is not as though debt was not a problem before the crisis of 2008 – given both that the relation between debtor and creditor is, in a sense, as old as human kind and that the transition toward a neoliberal economy of debt has been at least four or five decades in the making – it has surely become an ever more pertinent problem after the crisis, to say nothing of the role that the infamous collateralized debt obligations and credit default swaps played in the excessive acts of financial speculation during the years leading up to it. In less than ten years, levels of debt have simply exploded. The October 2016 Fiscal Monitor of the IMF even issued a report with the unbelievably commonsensical title “Debt. Use It Wisely”, which stated that:

“[a]t 225 percent of world GDP, the global debt of the nonfinancial sector—comprising the general government, households, and nonfinancial firms—is currently at an all-time high. Two-thirds, amounting to about \$100 trillion, consists of liabilities of the private sector, which, as documented in an extensive literature, can carry great risks when they reach excessive levels. However, there is considerable heterogeneity, as not all countries are in the same phase of the debt cycle, nor do they face the same risks.” (*Fiscal Monitor* ix).

That global debt is at “an all-time high” is not in the least surprising, but 225% of world GDP is still a very high number indeed, amounting to roughly \$152 trillion. Of course, as the report also observes, debt is not distributed equally; neither on a personal nor on a national level. Some people and some countries carry a greater burden than others. An accompanying blog post from October 05 on IMFdirect – the International Monetary Fund’s global economy forum – emphasized precisely that though the “picture is not pretty”, not “all countries are in the same boat”.¹⁵⁴ For instance, it is well known that Southern Europe suffered the hardest blow under and after the economic crisis, and has still not recovered. In the report, a table of the general government debt-to-GDP ratio in the so-called advanced economies – showing the amount of a country’s total gross government debt as a percentage of its GDP, indicating how healthy and

¹⁵⁴ www.blog-imfdirect.imf.org/2016/10/05/big-bad-actors-a-global-view-of-debt/

sustainable each economy is – Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain are placed at the very bottom – or top, depending on how one looks at it – among European countries. The general government gross debt for Greece was thus 183.4% of its GDP in 2016, compared with 103.1% in 2007; for Italy it was 133.2% in 2016, versus 99.8% in 2007; for Portugal 128.4%, versus 68.4%; and for Spain 101.5%, versus 35.5% (*Fiscal Monitor* 69). It is not a pretty picture at all.¹⁵⁵

No accident then, that Claire Fontaine chose these four countries to be set on fire, since they are, in a sense, already in flames. Of course in this work Claire Fontaine is not interested merely in the fiscal policy of Southern Europe. They are not content with simply mapping out the socio-political structure in an abstract yet dramatic fashion; what good would that do? *P.I.G.S* moves beyond pure description; it entails a call to action, a prescriptive encouragement. As argued by the curators for the 4th Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, which featured *P.I.G.S*, “[t]his fire, which represents at present time merely the destructive violence of the financial crisis, could be the one of a revolution, burning the debt before people get burned.”¹⁵⁶ Burning the debt was indeed part of the strategy of the Strike Debt movement of Occupy. Under the slogans “Debt resistance for the 99%” and “you are not a loan”, this movement has produced *The Debt Resisters’ Operations Manual*, launched the Rolling Jubilee – “a Strike Debt project that buys debt for pennies on the dollar, but instead of collecting it, abolishes it”¹⁵⁷ – and staged several debt burnings in San Francisco, New York and elsewhere. Claire Fontaine clearly alludes to such movements and moments in *P.I.G.S*. One of their other works is a white, blue and red neon sign saying “Sell your debt”, which for one exhibition was accompanied by *burnt/unburnt*, a work almost identical to *P.I.G.S*, except the matches form a map of the U.S.

The first point to take away from this is that Claire Fontaine’s work is as prescriptive as it is descriptive. The second is that the crisis, the artistic anatomy of which they perform, is not

¹⁵⁵ Post-crisis development in Southern Europe needs little narration here. The back and forth between Greece and the IMF and EU is, for example, a story in itself: the bailout loans, the austerity measures imposed on Greece in return, Alexis Tsipras and Yanis Varoufakis demanding debt relief, Angela Merkel and the European Banks refusing etc.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. www.biennale4.thessalonikibiennale.gr/content/claire-fontaine

¹⁵⁷ Cf. www.rollingjubilee.org/ At the time of writing, the organization has raised \$701317 and abolished \$31,982,455.76 of debt. See also Yates McKee’s “*DEBT: Occupy, Postcontemporary Art, and the Aesthetics of Debt Resistance.*”

only an economic crisis. In their eyes it is a crisis of subjectivity, affectivity and temporality as well. So let me venture further into that now.



Untitled (Sell Your Debt). Neon. 2012

The indebted subject (money is time)

In the book *The Making of the Indebted Man. An essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, Maurizio Lazzarato presents two fundamental hypotheses about debt. 1) Debt is the paradigm of the neoliberal economy of today. 2) Debt does not only amount to a structural question of the neoliberal economy. As for this second hypothesis – the first is accepted without further ado – Lazzarato makes clear that debt or credit produces a specific trinity of subjectivity, morality and temporality (52). He draws for this idea upon Nietzsche, who in the *On the Genealogy of Morality* attached great importance to the two-fold meaning of *Schuld*, connoting both economic indebtedness and moral guilt (39). Moreover, Nietzsche states that debt always assumes the form of a promise¹⁵⁸ that for the parties involved, implies not only a “memory of the future” but makes the subject responsible for his or her own future. The indebted subject, as someone who makes a promise, becomes “answerable for his own *future!*”, Nietzsche emphatically writes, adding that this “is precisely what constitutes the long history of the origins of responsibility.” (36). In this

¹⁵⁸ “To breed an animal with the prerogative to promise - is that not precisely the paradoxical task which nature has set herself with regard to humankind? Is it not the real problem of humankind? (*On the Genealogy of Morality* 35)

sense, through the combination of responsabilization and futurity, the credit-relation pertains to the very being of indebted man, insofar as what is affected is the "morality of the debtor, his mode of existence (his 'ethos')", in the words of Lazzarato (55).

Needless to say, the temporal relation of credit is first and foremost a relation of futurity; a relation to the future. As Lazzarato also notes, debt is based on the promise of a future installment or reimbursement: "What is credit/debt in its most elementary sense? A promise of payment. What is a financial asset, a share, or bond? The promise of future value." (39). And what is the debt economy? "The debt economy is an economy that requires a subject capable of accounting for himself *as a future subject*, a subject capable of promising and keeping a promise, a subject that works on the self." (88 – my emphasis). Paraphrasing Judith Butler, one might say that today more than ever, to give an account of oneself means to give it in the future tense. The double meaning of the phrase 'to account for' should not be forgotten; to present oneself *and* to be accountable for oneself – *as a future self*.

Debt and depression ("I am not committing suicide. They are killing me")

In short, debt in the neoliberal era cannot be reduced to a question of economic structures alone. As argued by Lazzarato and Nietzsche, the implications of debt on human subjectivity are quite severe. It could even be stipulated that a specific pathological structure is created in a situation like the present. If the periodization of the present just elucidated intimates an almost intrinsic relation between capitalism and credit, between what Lazzarato calls the neoliberal condition and the indebted man, then what remains to be attended to is the relation between debt and depression, as depression is the predominant pathology within this historical formation.

Following in the wake of the current economic crisis, a plethora of studies have looked into the psychological consequences of debt.¹⁵⁹ In the article "Debt and Depression: Causal Links and Social Norm Effects" economist John Gathergood published the findings of a study that showed that people awash in a sea of debt experience and exhibit a variety of mental problems, including depression (1114ff.). By all accounts, it seems that being indebted can, and indeed does, lead to an increased risk not only of depression but also suicide. This is the point of interest for the mental health scientists who authored the article "Personal debt and suicidal ideation," where

¹⁵⁹ See for instance Brown et al. 2005; Bridges and Disney 2010; and Sweet et al. 2013.

they report that “[t]hose in debt were twice as likely to think about suicide after controlling for sociodemographic, economic, social and lifestyle factors.” (Meltzer et al – quoted from abstract). And in *The Body Economic: Why Austerity Kills*, David Stuckler and Sanjay Basu have conducted an epidemiological research project, using statistics and large-scale data sets to understand health epidemics and economy, which demonstrates that austerity policies – rather than recession as such – have disastrous consequences for the state of public and private health (xiv). At one point in their book Stuckler and Basu refer to a particular study of Americans over the age of fifty which found “that between 2006 and 2008, people who fell behind on their mortgage payments were about nine times more likely to develop depressive symptoms” (127). Their bleak conclusion is that austerity not only hurts, but kills, exemplified by the tragic case of the Greek Dimitris Christoulas, who on April 4, 2012, “put a gun to his head in front of the Greek parliament and declared: ‘I am not committing suicide. They are killing me.’ Then he pulled the trigger.” (xviii).

This example could have been taken directly from Claire Fontaine’s portfolio. In 2010 they made a video called *Suicide Stack*, which revolves around the software engineer Joseph Stack who in February 2010 flew a small airplane into the building where he worked – an IRS office in Austin, Texas – killing himself and a fellow worker.¹⁶⁰ He left a suicide note online that ended with the

¹⁶⁰ It should be noted in passing that the incident is not only reminiscent of Dimitris Christoulas but also of the German pilot Andreas Lubitz, who in March 2015 deliberately crashed an aircraft in the French Alps, killing all 144 passengers and the six crew members on board. One might even include in this tragic tradition Seung-Hui Cho, the depressed American teenager – born in South Korea – who in 2007 shot and killed 32 people before committing suicide at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in what was to become known as the Virginia Tech Massacre. Like many before him, Cho had a history of mental health problems, including a diagnosis of a major depressive disorder. There are, of course, some obvious differences: Firstly, Christoulas’ and Stack’s actions were clearly politically motivated while Lubitz’ motive remains a mystery to this day. Secondly, Lubitz had been diagnosed with depression and treated for suicidal tendencies on several occasions, whereas there are no psychiatric reports on either Stark or Christoulas. However, the decisive point of affinity is the fact that they each turned their suicide into murder, thus turning their desperation, if not depression, outwards. Their actions thus, for better or worse, voluntarily or involuntarily, immediately acquired a political significance. Explosion rather than implosion. In one of his new books *Heroes. Mass murder and suicide*, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi writes about such persons as Joseph Stack, Andreas Lubitz and Seung-Hui Cho – although only the latter is treated specifically in the book – calling them, quite provocatively, heroes. This claim is to be taken in a very specific sense however: “I write about spectacular murderous suicides”, Berardi writes at the outset, “because these killers are the extreme manifestation of one of the main trends of our age. I see them as heroes of an age of nihilism and spectacular stupidity: the age of financial capitalism.” (3). Berardi’s concern here is the point at which the psychopathologies of contemporary capitalism are turned outwards; the point at which depression becomes aggressive and violent; the point at which suicide is transformed into mass murder. Earlier I dared

words (in *Suicide Stack*, Claire Fontaine project this note onto a screen so that it looks like the closing credits of a film):

“I saw it written once that the definition of insanity is repeating the same process over and over and expecting the outcome to suddenly be different. I am finally ready to stop this insanity. Well, Mr. Big Brother IRS man, let’s try something different; take my pound of flesh and sleep well.

The communist creed: From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.

The capitalist creed: From each according to his gullibility, to each according to his greed.”

Stack seems well aware that people may consider him to be insane, but in his eyes it is capitalism and the U.S. Government that lives up to “the definition of insanity”. He is not committing suicide, he is being killed or – in the logic of van Gogh – suicided by society. According to (t)his logic, Stack’s suicide is not an indication but an interruption of insanity. Despicable as this may be, not least due to the fact that innocent people were hurt and killed, it is clear that Claire Fontaine finds the suicide letter interesting, and to a certain extent agrees with Stack’s stark, very real, and visceral critique of capitalism.¹⁶¹ Maybe, as Claire Fontaine suggests on a poster, it is the capitalistic economy that could be said to constitute and display a form of mental illness (Untitled (*What is freedom?*), 2012).

only intimate that *perhaps* terrorism and depression could be seen as two sides of the same coin, but in the case – and from the perspective – of Claire Fontaine, there is little doubt left.

¹⁶¹ They have stated in an interview that “[t]he suicide letter is interesting because Stack’s confusion makes his final gesture understandable.” (Ward, “Just who on earth is Claire Fontaine?” – unpaginated).

WHAT IS FREEDOM IF NOT A PRODUCT OF LIBERALISM? IS THERE ANY POSSIBLE FREEDOM FROM THE MARKET AND ITS UNREASONABLE RULES? WHAT IS A SHARED REALITY IN A WORLD WHERE PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES ARE ENTIRELY CONDITIONED BY THEIR LEVEL OF INCOME? WHY IS ART THE ONLY SPACE OF EXPRESSION FOR A LUXURIOUS AND EXCLUSIVE PRINCIPLE OF REALITY THAT MAKES ABNORMALITY INTO A SOURCE OF WEALTH AND A DESIRABLE CONDITION? WHO JUDGES THE VALUE AND THE LEGITIMACY OF OUR DESIRES BESIDES THE MARKET LAWS? WHY IS CAPITALISTIC LIBIDINAL ECONOMY NOT A FORM OF MENTAL ILLNESS?

Untitled (What is freedom?). Screenprint on paper. 2012

Capitalist depression

Summing up, this scene has been intently focused on the relation between debt and the neoliberal economy. However, as we have seen, it is possible to generalize debt beyond a strictly economic level. Debt entails a certain modulation of subjectivity and temporality – and a certain pathological structure too. Although there is a connection between the current state of affairs and the contemporary proliferation of the diagnoses of depression – not to mention the numbers of suicides in some countries in the western world – my concern has not so much been empirical cases and epidemiological facts as it has been to dwell upon the way these interrelated problems are imagined and constructed at a cultural level in the particular case of the art of Claire Fontaine. Here, there is no phenomenological experience of depression. In their artworks, depression is immanently political and related to the current crises, which could be said collectively to constitute a fundamental crisis in and of time. A crisis of temporality, but also a crisis of subjectivity.

As Lazzarato pointed out in *The Making of the Indebted Man*, where he highlighted the relation between temporality and subjectivity within the debt economy, "debt appropriates not only the present labor time of wage-earners and of the population in general, it also preempts non-chronological time, each person's future as well as the future of society as a whole. The principal explanation for the strange sensation of living in a society without time, without possibility, without foreseeable rupture, is debt." (46-7). In Claire Fontaine's work that "strange sensation" is akin to depression, but in their work it is not simply the case that the future has been lost. At this point, I wonder, then, if it is not perhaps necessary, in the further analysis of Claire Fontaine's practice, to differentiate between two different levels of futurity in an almost dialectical manner:

On a 'objective' level, the hegemony of the politics of necessity and capitalist realism only seems to allow for neoliberal austerity, which is just another name for *more of the same*, or, in the words of Beckett, another name for *the nothing new*. There is no alternative, as Thatcher said around the same time that Sid Vicious bawled the no-future mood of a new generation. Furthermore, financial speculation transforms any given future to a set of calculable probabilities, thus eliminating the contingency and indeterminacy of the future proper, while debt and credit are an effective way of reducing, in the words of Lazzarato, "what will be to what is" (ibid. 46).

On a more 'subjective' level, subjectivity is (ideologically) posited as entrepreneurship. *Human capital* is the keyword here: The self is seen as capital that needs to be invested, but in what? Invested in the self itself, invested in the self in an ideal, possible and future form. In the current climate of self-realization work is never just work, it is always already a work on the self, it is a question of (im)proving and realizing your self (and the question that concerns us here is of course: What happens when that work does not work?).

These two levels obviously mirror each other. On the one hand, it seems as if everything is permeated by a dizzying freedom, as if the whole world lies at one's feet, as if the future is an open field of pure possibilities. On the other hand, it is as if the game is rigged, as if one breathes nothing but a suffocating air of necessity, as if the future is merely a continuation of the present, an affirmation of the status quo. In fact, the levels – which, using a Kierkegaardian vocabulary, could be called a level of possibility and a level of necessity (*Sickness unto Death* 36-40) – not only mirror each other, they depend upon and reinforce one another. The next two scenes will thus venture into these two levels, while beginning to engage more directly with the phenomenon of depression. Despite being a rather analytical distinction, scene two will focus on the 'objective' level – or the question of temporality – while scene three will focus on the 'subjective' level – or the question of subjectivity.

Scene 2: The spectral temporality of capitalism¹⁶²



Untitled (The Invisible Hand). Modified ready-made sculpture of a Newton's cradle, customized by Lehman Brothers. Wood, plastic, brass, metal, magnet, nylon threads and battery. 2011

Frankfurt, autumn 2014. In one of the rooms of the exhibition *Unendlicher Spaß (Infinite Jest)* at the Schirn Kunsthalle three works by Claire Fontaine are on display. One of them is called *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)* (2011),¹⁶³ a readymade of a Newton's cradle, specially produced by Lehman Brothers. The cradle is in vogue among businessmen, directors and executives (as it says somewhere online: *executive playground!*). Claire Fontaine has equipped this *objet trouvé* with batteries to maintain the constant pendulum movement of the small metal balls. Moreover, they have changed the base of the cradle so that it resembles a miniature tennis court, with white lines,

¹⁶² As part of my research for this chapter, I took a trip to Frankfurt in 2014. This scene takes the trip as its point of departure. Parts of the text originated in a review/essay I wrote on the exhibition for the Danish newspaper *Information* (Frantzen 2014).

¹⁶³ The two other works are *Untitled* from 2008 – an amputated arm made of latex, holding its fist closed and carrying a Rolex Submariner watch with a Pepsi-Cola dial – and *Untitled (Tennis Ball Sculpture)* from 2010 – consisting of hundreds of tennis balls lying around on the floor of the gallery floor. The balls have been sliced open and filled with various objects – pencils, toothbrushes, cell phone chargers. Reportedly, things are smuggled into American prisons in this way...

a golden net and the word 'networking' written humorously on the side. Above all the work is about movement and time in financial capitalism, so, against the background of the last scene, this is what this scene will bring into focus now.

The invisible hand, or the kinetics of capitalism

Back and forth they go, the silvery balls in Claire Fontaine's *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)*. Although it is actually only the two outermost balls that move. The three in the center are virtually still, while one of the other two swings to the side, only to come back and hit the three in the middle, setting the fifth in motion. It is like a tennis match: The spectators turn their heads to one side of the court, then to the other, then back again. This pendulum movement is, however, more than an allusion to the (upper class) game of tennis. It could, evidently, also be said to resemble the perpetuum mobile of contemporary capitalism. The steady, endless, accumulative movement of capital. Everything is a means to a means, movement for the sake of movement, production for the sake of production, consumption for the sake of consumption, circulation for the sake of circulation. Marx already wrote in *Capital* that money performs the function "of a *perpetuum mobile* of circulation" (140) and that "[t]he circulation of money as capital is [...] an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits." (163). In a similar vein, Moishe Postone argues that "[p]roduction in capitalism becomes a means to a means [...] The goal of production in capitalism is an absolute given that, paradoxically, is only a means – but one that has no end other than itself." (181-2).

This is the secret kinetics of the capitalist system shown by Claire Fontaine in *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)*: To keep the system in motion no matter what (thereby ensuring endless accumulation). As with the gamblers in Vegas, whom we encountered in the last chapter, one only plays to keep playing. That is all there is to the addictive, compulsive, almost pathological rhythm of capitalism – the only difference being that gamblers usually go home broke, while good capitalists get rich. Inevitably, though, this kind of kinetics betrays a certain stasis at the heart of the matter. The pendulum of the cradle in actuality makes manifest an infinite movement on the spot: It literally goes nowhere at all (a *stehender Sturmlauf*, Kafka would have called it). Everything changes, and yet everything stays the same. All that moves remains in place.

After the party

Referring to David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*, the curatorial idea behind the exhibition in Frankfurt is to scrutinize the relation between, on the one hand, entertainment, enjoyment and euphoria, and on the other, despair, sadness and depression.¹⁶⁴ The point of departure for the exhibition *Infinite Jest* appears to be a society in which fun and happiness have developed into an ever-more intense imperative that tends to collapse into a state of exhaustion; just think of advertising slogans like Coca Cola's *Enjoy*, Nike's *Just do it* and Amazon's *Work hard, have fun and make history*. The question is: What if you are unable to do *it*, what if you do not have the energy to work and have fun and make history 24/7? A lot of the works engage with these particular moments and feelings.

Lara Favaretto's work *Tutti giù per terra* is a kind of playroom filled knee-deep with blue confetti. But it is impossible to enter, so one must watch the fun the room contains from the outside through a couple of glass windows. Standing on the floor are four fans that, according to the small accompanying brochure, are supposed to make sure that the confetti is kept in "constant motion, recirculated and tossed into the air". That is not entirely true, however: As time has passed the four fans have indeed dug four valleys into the confetti before them – appearing as traces of a distant, geological past – but otherwise the wind is only visible as minuscule, quivering movements in some single pieces of confetti. At a distance the room comes across as a frozen and immobile space, a post-apocalyptic wasteland, a geologically depressed landscape in monochrome blue. The party is definitively over.

Several of the other exhibited works tie in with this feeling of being late. Peter Coffin's *Untitled* is an enormous conveyor belt that transports nothing but a bouquet of flowers, round and round. Two works by Alicja Kwade also make manifest a circular movement. One of them, *Reise ohne Ankunft*, is a retro racing bike, folded and twisted into a rounded sculpture that brings to mind the figure of a dog trying to catch its own tail (cf. the chapter on Wallace). The other, *Kreisel* (Inception) – which refers to the Hollywood movie of the same name – is a video of a spinning top in action. Using a high-speed camera for the recording, while playing it in slow

¹⁶⁴ No coincidence, perhaps, that I came across a so-called *Spielothek* and the European Central Bank on my route from the airport to the museum. A culture of instant gratification and the politics of necessity, or infinite jest and infinite debt; this is the dual reality that the works in the exhibition confront in various ways.

motion, it is as if the spinning top is suspended in its spinning movement, never once falling to the ground, spinning on and on in an infinite loop.

Somehow, though, the works of Claire Fontaine were a bit misplaced in this curatorial context. Not because *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)* is not about depression, but because the framework of Wallace's novel does quite fit with the practice of Claire Fontaine (except for mutual references to the game of tennis). Of course, to present such a contrast could be part of the curator's overall strategy, yet it remains clear that Claire Fontaine is committed to a kind of Marxist or materialist critique of the political economy that is alien to Wallace and a lot of the other works in the exhibition as well. Moreover, there is something quite direct and almost militant to the art of Claire Fontaine, and a focus not only on the movement(s) of capital, but also on the very temporality of financial capitalism.

A hauntological temporality

In my reading, *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)* shows how capitalism today operates not only at the level of things but at the level of time itself.¹⁶⁵ In recent years, a wide range of thinkers have made analyses of the contemporary regime of debt that support and supplement the one made by Lazzarato in relation to the temporal changes resulting from that regime. Although approaching the problem from a different angle, this is what Stiegler is preoccupied with in several of his books, most notably in *For a New Critique of Political Economy* in which he conceives of credit as the ultimate form of economic protention (67¹⁶⁶). According to Stiegler, the debt and speculation that permeate not only the financial economy, but the economy as a whole, annihilates the future if one perceives and conceives of the future as something *indeterminate*. "As pure calculation, it denies the very possibility of a future, given that the future cannot be calculated because it is essentially indeterminate: a calculable future is no longer a future but just the consequence of the present." (68). In his book *Das Gespenst des Capitals*, Joseph Vogl argues that the algorithmic models driving financial speculation – futures, derivatives etc. – are a way of 'taming time' and in particular the future, which is even more visible and violent when it comes to debt. In that sense,

¹⁶⁵ As Berardi wrote in the lines already quoted in the introduction to this dissertation: "Now that every inch of the planet has been colonized, the colonization of the temporal dimension has begun." (*After the Future* 24).

¹⁶⁶ See also this dissertation's introduction page 21ff., and the chapter on Houellebecq (page 71-72).

the title indicates that the ghost of capital is not a ghost from the past but from the future. As Vogl states in an interview, in an inversion of the famous opening lines of the communist manifesto: “A spectre or an apparition is a present reminder that something has gone awry in our past. A debt has remained unpaid, or a wrong has not been righted. The spectre of capital works the other way around, signaling that something in the future will be wrong. It is a future of mounting debt that comes to weigh on the present. The ‘spectre of capital’ does not come out of the past, but rather as a memento out of the future and back into the present.” (“Capital and Money are Profane Gods” – unpaginated).

But the spectrality or hauntology of *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)* works in a slightly different way. Here, the mechanical necessity that Newton ascribed to the natural laws seems to have been transferred to the economy. In the text/talk by Bruno Latour, “On some of the affects of capitalism”, which I refer to and comment on in the chapter on Houellebecq, Latour mapped out precisely the way in which the traditional relationship between nature – “binding necessities” – and capitalism – “boundless possibilities” – has today been turned upside down. In the words of Latour, economy and earth have switched roles for good: “It is the Earth that is undergoing subversion at a dizzying pace and the Economy – that is, second nature – that still runs like clockwork.” (7). Especially notable is the fact that, even after the bank crises and crash of 2008 of which Lehman Brothers more than any other came to be an emblematic symbol, the economy still runs like clockwork. This is the proper hauntological effect of Claire Fontaine’s work: The cradle carries out and delineates a “ghost movement, that can now reproduce itself without human intervention, is a disquieting message that reaches us from an economic moment that has now past but that is still secretly alive and active under the skin of our present”.¹⁶⁷ It is indeed a perverted version of the invisible hand, a zombieified rendition of the Duracell Bunny, a capitalist automaton. Thus, in *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)* we once more encounter a spiritual dimension of contemporary capitalism, albeit in a more ‘spooky’ and spectral form than previously. Here I must digress a bit (more) in order to elucidate this dimension properly.

In an essay called “The Ghost in the Financial Machine”, Arjun Appadurai notes how today “it is possible to identify a series of magical practices (by which I mean both coercive and divinatory performative procedures) at the heart of global capitalism and, in particular, of the

¹⁶⁷ I quote here from a gallery text for Claire Fontaine’s first solo exhibition in Rome at Galeria T293 in Spring 2012 (www.t293.it/exhibitions/claire-fontaine/)

financial sectors.” (527). This magic, this ghost, is above all to be understood in a quite technical sense, i.e. as the ways in which all the algorithmic transactions at the heart of the capitalist machinery are based on “a general, absolute, and apparently transcendent faith in the market” (527). Appadurai more or less exclusively engages with the work of Max Weber, but the idea in his essay seems also to resonate with the speculative fragment, *Capitalism as Religion*, that Walter Benjamin presumably wrote in 1921. In this small text of no more than three pages, Benjamin analyses capitalism as a permanent and perverted cult – permanent in the sense that every day is a festive day and perverted in the sense that the *cultus* of capitalism is what Benjamin calls *verschuldend*. The (poor but impossible) English translation reads: “[T]his is a cult that engenders blame. Capitalism is presumably the first case of a blaming, rather than a repenting cult. Herein stands this religious system in the fall of a tremendous movement.” (259).¹⁶⁸ Thus, *Capitalism as religion* has no conciliatory function, it offers no redemption, it bears no hope and no further promise. It merely creates greater debt and greater guilt (*Schuld*). Here, we must remember the double – economic and moral – meaning of the German word “Schuld”.¹⁶⁹ The essential thing for our present purpose is that this *verschuldenden* character of capitalism has assumed proportions that Benjamin, however clear-sighted, could have had no chance of foreseeing. Since the moment that Nixon canceled the direct convertibility of the U.S. dollar to gold in 1971, it has become clear that the credit system is one that, much in the manner of a religious body, can only be maintained and sustained through operations of trust and confidence, financial terms in themselves. The moment that money is no longer tied to the gold standard and has become what Marx would call purely fictitious, money no longer has any reference in reality, but only an abstract self-reference.

¹⁶⁸ The German original reads: “Dieser Kultus ist zum dritten verschuldend. Der Kapitalismus ist vermutlich der erste Fall eines nicht entschuldigenden, sondern verschuldenden Kultus. Hierin steht dieses Religionssystem im Sturz einer ungeheuren Bewegung.” (*Gesammelte Schriften* 100).

¹⁶⁹ The point of the fragment was not that capitalism is based on a protestant ethos (Weber), nor that capitalism is a kind of opium for the masses (Marx), but that capitalism is an “essentially religious phenomenon” (259). Of course Marx’s critique of religion was far more complicated than that, all the more since for him, as he wrote in “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction”, the “criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism” (175). In the same text he even wrote: “To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand the real happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of tears, the halo of which is religion.” (176). As for the critique of capitalism *as religion* it was, as Karotani writes, “in the monetary economy that Marx saw ‘secular religion’, as it were. Marx’s critique of the political economy was an extension of his critique of religion.” (212; see also 220ff.)

As a consequence of this disappearance of materiality, the religious, magical or spiritual but in any case ghost-like character of capitalism is consolidated for good.

No present(s)!

However, what is at stake in *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)* is not only the pure abstraction of money, or the ever more religious character of capitalism, but the ways in which this development in the economic domain towards a system fueled by debt and financial speculation profoundly effects temporality as such.

This is also the reason that so many of Claire Fontaine's works deal explicitly with temporal questions, which is just another way of saying political questions. In neon works such as *Past Present Future* and *Please God Make Tomorrow Better*, Claire Fontaine hints at a global and contemporary situation in which the combination of debt and financial speculation seems to make the future a calculable and profitable domain for a small elite, and a source of endless desperation and depression for the rest.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Visitors to galleries exhibiting Claire Fontaine's works are often met by such one-liners before they have even entered the gallery space. Often the neon signs are placed at the very entrance, ensuring that the visitors really cannot miss them. Most of the signs are blue, red and/or white, some flash, others do not. In most cases it is clear *what* the utterances are referring to; what is less clear is *who* the senders and perceived receivers of the utterances are. To put it in dusted structuralist terms: There is an abyss between the *énoncé* the *énonciation*, between what is said and the act or process of saying it. There is also, more often than not, no decipherable subject behind the enunciations. Again, this has to do with the fact that some, if not all, of the neon signs are ready-mades: *Past Present Future* presumably reproduces a sign from a clairvoyant shop in New York. As for the sign, *Please God Make Tomorrow Better*, it is an open question, who the subject behind this sentence is? Is it the voice of financial capital – Lehman Brothers perhaps – or the voice a depressed person, or a revolutionary prayer stemming from Claire Fontaine herself? Unfortunately I cannot go more into this question of language and linguistics here.



Past Present Future. Neon. 2011



Please God make Tomorrow Better. Neon. 2008

At the 4th Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, Claire Fontaine's *P.I.G.S* was accompanied by a neon work of theirs that read "No Present". Obviously re-appropriating the 'No Future' catchphrase of the punk movement, the work by Claire Fontaine, in the astute words of the curators,

"refers to the economical and historical conjuncture that sees many countries and their inhabitants deprived not only of a future but also of the possibility of a daily life that isn't just survival. The debt caused by the greed of a few in fact burdens entire populations, obliterating the minimal rights for millions of people, such as getting married, leaving one's parents' house, or hoping to get a job. It can legitimately be said that now there is no present in a similar sense that the Sex Pistols used to sing "No Future". The present is always something shared and collectively created; a sum of solitudes only creates an absence of the present, the impossibility of its narration and the difficulty to grasp its transient consistency. No Present also has a double meaning, which is "There are no presents for anyone", as this is a time where everything must be earned and often at an unfair price."¹⁷¹

In David Foster Wallace's writing, we also came across a concept of debt and of a present, in both senses of the word, but here the terms acquire a rather different meaning. A Kierkegaardian idea of infinite debt as an antidote of love to the pathology of depression would, in the eyes of Claire Fontaine, be absolutely meaningless in the current situation and, what is worse, inevitably lead to a voiding of the political as such. A generalized condition of debt precisely carries with it, to reuse Lazzarato's phrase, a preemption of the future, i.e. a reduction of "what will be to what is" (*The Making of the Indebted Man* 46). According to Claire Fontaine, though, it seems that our present misery is not due to the fact that we have lost the future, but rather the present. Significantly, the sign above does not read "No future" but "No present". So what if the problem is not that what will be is reduced to what is (in the sense that the future is nothing but a continuation and confirmation of the present) but that what is is reduced to what will be (in the sense that the speculative projections of financial capitalism eradicate the present as such by over-determining it

¹⁷¹ Cf. www.biennale4.thessalonikiennale.gr/content/claire-fontaine

in a kind of spectral feedback loop)? As will become more apparent in scene four, Claire Fontaine has deliberately renounced any strategy that involves a reparation or reconstruction of the relation to the future, which marks a decisive shift with regards to the (historical) avant-garde. The future is not something to be (re)created in the world of Claire Fontaine; the symptom is not something to be erased so that the social, economic, political structure can afterwards keep reproducing itself, thereby probably prompting the same or a new symptom in due time. What needs to be done something about is the present.

Yet, the small ready-made *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)* is not exactly an optimistic piece of art. The question of what *is* to be done must be followed by a question of what *can* be done. And the answer that Claire Fontaine provides in this work – and, more or less, in their practice as a whole – is: Not much. Though the work is cleansed of any subjective feelings and affects, there is a certain affectivity at play in the work: An affect of pessimism, or impotence, which is less subjective than structural, implying among other things that is not easy to say whether the impotence must be ascribed to financial players, avant-garde artists or the workers of the world.¹⁷² What is certain is that *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)*, as already mentioned, functions as a critical comment on the eerie clockwork of capitalism but the work seems to be conscious of the impotence of this criticism at the same time. The work thus comes to reflect the fiscal and financial crisis exemplified by Lehman Brothers, as well as a crisis within art around its ability to really do anything about that crisis. In that sense, the empty, abstract movement of the balls occasions a depressed feeling that not only pertains to capital but to art itself: The sad little monotonous movements of the balls swinging back and forth are also somewhat telling and symptomatic for contemporary artists like Claire Fontaine, who find themselves incapable of doing anything about the capitalist clockwork, condemned as they are to participate in – and to a certain extent reproduce – a game that is totally rigged in the first place. That is the political *and* aesthetic depression *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)* indexes in a militant yet mirthful way.

Neither *Untitled (The Invisible Hand)*, nor the other two works with which Claire Fontaine participated in the exhibition in Frankfurt, addresses the problematic of depression directly. But numerous of their other works do exactly that. For example, *Study for pill spill (Prozac)*, an installation or sculpture of piles of anti-depressants (2010); *Vivre! Vaincre soi-meme*,

¹⁷² Appadurai also speaks of “structural pessimism” but he refers to the affect of the “financial players” (526).

la depression (Brickbat), a brick wrapped in the cover of a French self-help book named simply *Vivre! Vaincre soi-meme, la depression* (which can be roughly translated as “Live! Defeat depression yourself”) and, believe it or not, written by an author named Claire Fontaine (2006)¹⁷³; and *Untitled (Why your psychology sucks)*, a readymade video to which I shall now turn (2015).

¹⁷³ When Claire Fontaine participated in the exhibition *Depression* (2009) at Marres Centre for Contemporary Culture in Maastricht, The Netherlands, they presented this specific work amongst others. The subtitle for this exhibition read: “When I am depressed, there is a power at work somewhere.”

Scene 3: Why your psychology sucks

“Why are you depressed? What is the cause of your depression? What is the root cause? And what are some of the ways that you can start to get a handle on it? Depression is an epidemic. It’s out there. So many of us, especially in first world countries nowadays, are starting to actually get more and more signs of depression.

Why is this going on? What’s happening here? What’s the rock bottom truth about depression? All right, here’s the deal. I wanna be blunt with you here, ‘cause the bottom line is, the reason you’re depressed is because your psychology sucks. All right? You’ve got shit psychology. Now, I’m not blaming you, I’m just telling you a fact [...] you’re causing your own depression.” (Claire Fontaine, *Untitled (Why your psychology sucks)* (00:16))

The person speaking in this fragmented transcription of the video work *Untitled (Why your psychology sucks)* is an African-American woman wearing a black suit and a white shirt. She is not an authentic self-help authority, though she certainly sounds like one, but an actress, performing/reciting a text lifted word for word from a presentation by a man called Leo Gura – I suppose the surname guru would be a bit too much – who is, according to his Twitter profile, “a professional self-development junkie, life coach, video blogger, entrepreneur, and speaker.” Gura, a bald man with a beard and founder of actualized.org, where the video “Why Am I Depressed?” and accompanying transcript can be found, helps “people design awesome lives.” (again taken from his Twitter account).¹⁷⁴ This is the source of the performance in the ready-made video, lasting a little more than twenty minutes, the critical point of which is how it entails a specific form of subjectivation that seems to correspond perfectly to the neoliberal economy. As the video engages the viewer in a process of personalization and responsabilization – you alone are responsible for your own depression – a view of the self as a self that works (or ought to work) on the self gradually emerges.

¹⁷⁴ It must be mentioned that the two presentations are not one hundred percent identical, though almost. Claire Fontaine have changed some minor things in their work of re-appropriation, but only in order, it seems, to make the speech more idiomatic by adding an “and” or a “now” here and there. The video by Leo Gura can be found here: www.actualized.org/articles/why-am-i-depressed. And his Twitter profile is: www.twitter.com/leogura1?lang=da.

“you are causing your own depression”

In the video by Claire Fontaine, the female actor acts with great authority, determination and persuasive power, gesturing like a person who is trained to speak and to sell. That her message is quite strong should surprise no one, given that the subtitle of the original video by Leo Gura was “The Shocking Truth About Depression.” As can be assured by examining the quote that opens this scene, the core truth of her message is that if one is depressed there is only one person to blame: “You are causing your own depression”, the woman boldly declares. There is something wrong with your mental and affective apparatus, your psychology is “shit”. Stop being a victim and take ownership of your psychology, she exclaims at one point (04:00).

The logic of her speech is simple: People create their own reality. Thoughts alone can change things (remember the mind-cure movement that William James spoke about in the chapter on Wallace?). This means that *you* weave the thread of your own fate, there are no external circumstances and no excuses. A psychology in good shape can even “totally” negate genes and biology, i.e. “the clinical stuff”, the woman claims (03:05). According to the video, you are causing your own depression and thus the reason you are depressed “is because you are too self-absorbed. You’re too self-identified and you’re too egotistical [...] You’re egotistical in the sense that you have a strong sense of who you are.” (04:33). She admits that this may seem harsh, and that it is actually a “deep idea”, “an enlightenment level idea.” (05:20). What “you” have to realize is that your ego is purely conceptual: “It doesn’t actually exist anywhere. That ‘I’ you call you, that ‘I’ that’s depressed, it doesn’t actually exist.” (06:05).

What is the solution then? It ought to be mentioned that, at the beginning of the video, the speaker, having said that depression is an epidemic, makes a somewhat careful distinction between clinical cases of depression involving biological and genetic factors (01:08) and “the other half of people”, the overwhelming majority of the depressed, who are really just in a “bad psychological state.” (02:07). It is the latter group of people she addresses in the video. The solution for them is not psychiatry or psycho-pharmaceuticals but simple meditation. The solution is to be (in the) present:

“Take this exercise for example: If right now you dropped your past history completely, I mean forget about it, at least for a second, forget your past history, forget your future

history, forget that you have a future, forget the you have a past. Be completely in the moment right now. *Get rid of every single thought that you have in your mind. Get rid of your idea of yourself. Pretend like you are dead.* You have no more life. You have no more ego. You have no more conceptualizations. You have no more beliefs about how the world is, and how it works. And you just sit in peace and quiet.” (11:24 – my emphasis).

The point of meditating is to get rid of the ego, to get rid of yourself by pretending “like you are dead”. There is “a lot of deep stuff here,” she admits once more, and it is definitely not going to be easy, but it is worth it. These daily exercises can, in the long run, not only help you overcome depression but help you, more generally, to “master your psychology” and eventually put you in a state of “total bliss and happiness.” (12:48).



Untitled (Why your psychology sucks). Video. 2015

A self that works on the self

If we have already, in the preceding scene, dealt with the ‘structural’ side of the neoliberal regime, this is the other and more ‘subjective’ side: The self has become an investor in its own future, pure

human capital.¹⁷⁵ To repeat the lines from Lazzarato's *The Making of the Indebted Man*: "The debt economy is an economy that requires a subject capable of accounting for himself as a future subject, a subject capable of promising and keeping a promise, a subject that works on the self." (88). An ideological interpellation thus takes place in the video by Claire Fontaine, which interpellates the subject as a subject and not as an object. As The Invisible Committee writes in their latest book, *To Our Friends*: "We shouldn't think they're out to *destroy* us. We should start rather from the hypothesis that they're out to *produce* us." (163). This expands on a thought already present(ed) in the book *The Coming Insurrection* where they argue that in a society "where production no longer has an object", everything becomes a question of "[p]roducing oneself", because "[i]deally, you are yourself a little business, your own boss, your own product." (49-51). This is indeed the view that the female in the video promotes. You are your own boss, even when it comes to mental illness. Here, the Kierkegaardian definition of the self as a "relation that relates itself to itself" (*Sickness unto Death* 21) is taken to new and perverted extremes (and Kierkegaard's thoughts have certainly been used and abused by the self-help industry): The self becomes, or ought to become, a self that works on itself nonstop.

Moving beyond the stalemate of critique

The immediate paradox is that what this self-help offers is essentially more of the same. It proposes an introspection on the introspection that, according to the speaker's own logic, is what causes the depression in the first place. Instead of killing the – purely conceptual – ego, the ego appears conversely to be vigorously raised from the dead:

"You do not need anybody to fulfill you. In fact, nobody else in life can fulfill you. No human being can fulfill you. No external object can fulfill you. This is all a question of your inner psychology. This isn't a problem just for depressive people, this is a problem for

¹⁷⁵ In his article "Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital", Michel Feher details how human capital as "a dominant subjective form" has become "a defining feature of neoliberalism." (24). Referring to Foucault's lectures on biopolitics and neoliberalism, Feher further writes: "[I]f we take seriously the subjective apparatus of human capital, we can see that neoliberalism in fact treats people not as consumers but as producers, as entrepreneurs of themselves, or, more precisely, as investors in themselves" (30). His point is that a transformation in subjectivity has occurred: In contrast to the alienated, split subject of Fordism, the Postfordist, neoliberal subject is not split, since human capital "does not presuppose a separation of the spheres of production and reproduction" (30).

almost everybody out there. It's failing to realize that you can't find deep fulfillment in anything external. It's all internal." (16:26).

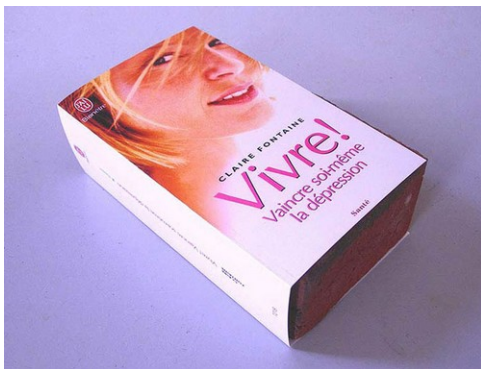
It is all internal; that is what has to be realized. But the consequence of this "powerful" idea is that the only thing that can fulfill the self is the self itself, a solipsistic trap worthy of the works of David Foster Wallace. Indeed a part of the presentation appears as though it were an exact description of the condition of the depressed person in his story of the same name.

This is one of the clear aims of the ready-made video by Claire Fontaine: Not to criticize this kind of grotesque self-help discourse from without, but rather to let that discourse speak for itself, thereby exposing its defects and self-contradictory logic to the point where it merely becomes grotesque and rather comical. If one consults the original presentation by Leo Gura, it gets worse (or better). Here, after a short introduction, a flashing sequence of catchphrases or keywords momentarily interrupts Gura's speech. In the order given the words read: "Success, happiness, self actualization, life purpose, motivation, productivity, peak performance, creative expression, financial independence, emotional intelligence, positive psychology, consciousness, peak performance, personal power, wisdom." (Apparently, the concept of a "peak performance" is so important that it must be repeated).

Criticism of this particular discourse, so dominant in the western world of today, admittedly feels a little cheap and ultimately rather unsatisfying, as Claire Fontaine herself seems all too aware. One of their other works *Untitled (Stalemate)*, is a chessboard placed vertically on a wall with the remaining pieces caught in a situation of stalemate, a dead end of the game where neither white nor black can win, the analogy being that this critical disclosure of the self-help ideology can all too easily end in aesthetic, as well as political stalemate. That is not to say, however, that Claire Fontaine renounces criticism entirely. Contrary to many contemporary artists and critics who seem all too satisfied to abandon critique, with reference to its anachronistic, suspicious, paranoid, and rigid character¹⁷⁶, Claire Fontaine, as we shall see more clearly in what follows, wants to hold on to the political potential of art regardless of how impossible that might seem today. This implies that an artistic critique cannot stand alone and, however radical, is not enough in itself. A significant work in this regard is *Vivre! Vaincre soi-meme, la depression. As*

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Mikkel Bolt's "På råbeafstand af marxismen" (2016).

already mentioned, for this work Claire Fontaine took the cover of a book of the same name and wrapped it around a brick (a typical tool of destruction on the militant Left). They have carried out this maneuver before, for instance with Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, which – one cannot help but presume – is closer to Claire Fontaine's heart as a formative text than *Vivre! Vaincre soi-meme, la depression*. Earlier they used the idea of transforming the use and function of various objects: The sliced tennis balls that was part of the exhibition in Frankfurt are one example; coins furnished with steel box-cutter blades, thus transforming them into potentially vicious weapons, is another (*Change*, 2004-8). And in their neon works even the signs of language are reduced to pure objects or primitive tools, rather than functioning as socialized means of communication.



Vivre! Vaincre soi-meme, la depression (brickbat). Brick and bookcover. 2006



Change. Quarters, steel box cutter blades, solder, and rivets. 2004-8

All this testifies to the practical and militant function that the art of Claire Fontaine aspires to, though it cannot transcend the level of pure gesture. As Andrew Culp and Ricky Crano observe in an interview with Claire Fontaine, on the one hand the objects are the “usual commodities in an art world ruled by collectors and deals,” and on the other, these “familiar objects [are] turned into tools for sabotage.” (46).¹⁷⁷ In a way, this is precisely the impossible position in which Claire Fontaine has placed herself in her attempt to escape the aforementioned stalemate, or what Ben Davis has called the Manichaeism of contemporary art in his book *9.5 thesis on art and class*: “The

¹⁷⁷ According to Culp and Crano “[t]he question thus posed, by the brickbats and by much of CF’s art, is not ‘What does it mean?’ nor ‘What can we do with it?’ but ‘What do we want to do?’ and, even more important, ‘How is it that we, good consumers of capitalist art that we are, come to repress those desires?’ The brick, the coins, the keys, and so on, all express, on the one hand, pure exchange value, but, on the other, also pure potentiality.” (46).

Manichean position of seeing art as either commercial and corrupt or noncommercial and pure.” (25). In another interview Claire Fontaine – always able to conduct analytical and theoretical conversations about their own art – state the problem and their solution to it as follows:

“Our strategy consists in refusing to go and die in the countryside, refusing to believe that intellectual and aesthetic space are the private property of the entertainment industry, refusing to believe that a radical political position can only exist on the level of direct action and its tragic consequences, and that the rest is an opportunist and pathetic gesticulation [...] For radical people our attitude is a compromise, for conservatives it is a fraud, this logic must be exploded: it is literally bringing people to suicide.” (Realism Working Group – unpaginated).

There is thus no question of Claire Fontaine wanting to initiate or realize an immediate passage to direct action; as well as rejecting the idea of a withdrawal into a politically passive position *within* the aesthetic domain, they refuse the opposite idea of an exit *from* art in favor of a purely political practice.

Pretend like you're dead

Going back to *Why your psychology sucks*, I have traced and outlined how the female speaker's *personalization* of depression stands in stark contrast to Claire Fontaine's *politicization* of depression. At the same time, though, it is strange to see how some of the themes at the end of the promotional video resonate with some elements of Claire Fontaine's own diagnosis and prognosis.¹⁷⁸ “Who wants to just come out of a depression to a normal kind of life?”, the female speaker asks, adding: “That's probably why you were depressed in the first place.” (22:02). One can easily imagine the artist duo subscribing to a statement like that.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, some of the thoughts that appear in the passage on meditation are also present in other areas of Claire Fontaine's *oeuvre*, not least the idea that the cure to depression is to get rid of yourself and your

¹⁷⁸ As a gallery text puts it: “In a troubling way, it does contain a small dose of truth” (www.t293.it/exhibitions/claire-fontaine-pretend-to-be-dead/)

¹⁷⁹ Even if the very next sentences are: “You don't really have a strong sense of purpose. I want you to set some huge goals for yourself. I want you to set an amazing vision for yourself.”

self. “Get rid of your idea of yourself. Pretend like you are dead”, as it is put in the video. *Get rid of yourself*¹⁸⁰ is, incidentally, the name of a film made, not by Claire Fontaine, but Bernadette Corporation, an artist collective that work in the same tradition as Claire Fontaine and also functions as the space where Claire Fontaine’s works are shown in New York. Taking its point of departure in the so-called Black Bloc, part of the anti-globalization events in Genoa, Italy, during the G8 summit in 2001, *Get Rid of Yourself* is a kind of (anti-)documentary in a montage form: Image and text, voice over and dialogue, actors and ‘real’ protesters are incorporated within a zone of indistinction so radical that there is no way of discerning who is saying what. At the beginning some sentences run across the screen: “They say, ‘another world is possible.’ But I am another world. Am I possible?” (06:24). At another moment a voice says (in French): “You’re no longer a subject, the points of reference are lost.” (09:42). This is the point of the film: To be rid of all reference, all identity, and all sense of self-hood. Later, a female voice says (in English) that this process is all about “de-sub-jec-tiv-i-zation”:

“to become opaque, extracting ways of living and of fighting so that, at a chosen moment, I test this slight displacement. I become a-whatever-singularity. Everything that isolates me as subject, as a body endowed with a public configuration of attributes, I feel it dissolve, bodies fray at their edges, at their limit they blur. Little by little, I achieve a new nakedness. That’s what our need for communism is. A need for nocturnal spaces, where we can find each other beyond our qualities.” (43:10)

The references here – and clearly Bernadette Corporation have not abandoned intertextual references – are not only to Agamben’s concept of the whatever-singularity, but also to Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*. Melville’s *Bartleby* looms here also. What is interesting about the Black Bloc is that “everybody is looking the same so it is far more difficult to spot out...uh... individuals”, as an English voice-over tells the viewers in an exaggerated stutter (07:46).

¹⁸⁰ As Chris Kraus writes about *Get Rid of Yourself*: “The film intercuts mock studio shots of hyperbolically blank fashion models with hand-held street footage of anarchist youths smashing ATMs and looting supermarkets. Conceived in the 20th century tradition of *cinéma vérité*, *Get Rid of Yourself* provides a startling snapshot of somebody’s present.” (*Where Art Belongs* 121). The film is available here: www.vimeo.com/25952876.

According to this logic, the sentence “pretend like you are dead” must instead be read; pretend like your self is dead. To be without qualities, to get rid of yourself, is the ultimate political or communist dream. Depression thus offers an opportunity in that it is a kind of “nocturnal space” in which the subjectivity is dissolved. As The Invisible Committee – a further development of Tiqqun and thus part of the same *milieu* as Bernadette Corporation and Claire Fontaine¹⁸¹ – puts it in their usual bombastic fashion: “We are not depressed; we’re on strike. For those who refuse to manage themselves, ‘depression’ is not a state but a passage, a bowing out, a sidestep towards a *political* disaffiliation.” (*The Common Insurrection* 34).

This is in other words where the concept and practice of the *strike* enters the picture. Is depression a form of strike and if so how? Is art to be considered work or rather refusal of work? What is the relation between art and depression? It is questions like these that are raised by and in the practice of Claire Fontaine, and they will thus form the foundation of the next and final scene. Here, it will become clear that Claire Fontaine’s critical tentacles reach far beyond a critique of a predominant self-help discourse like the one in *Why your psychology sucks*.

¹⁸¹ Ostensibly, however, Claire Fontaine and the remains of Tiqqun/The Invisible Committee are not on the best of terms. From the perspective of the latter, the former is guilty of selling out because of their continuous immersion in the contemporary art market, while the latter, from the perspective of the former has precisely chosen “to go and die in the countryside”, as Claire Fontaine stated in an interview already quoted; a statement hard not to read as a stab at their former more or less explicit associates (Fulvia Carnevale was in fact part of Tiqqun when the insurrectionary collective still existed).

Scene 4: The human strike

“‘Grève humaine’ is the French expression for ‘human strike’, designating the most generic movement of revolt against any oppressive condition. It’s a more radical and less specific strike than a general strike or a wildcat strike.

Human strike attacks the economic, affective, sexual and emotional positions within which subjects are imprisoned. It provides an answer to the question ‘how do we become something other than what we are?’ It isn’t a social movement although within the uprising and agitations it can find a fertile ground upon which to develop and grow, sometimes even against these.

For example, it has been said that the feminist movement in Italy during the 1970s demolished the leftist political organisations, but what hasn’t been said is what leftist political organisations were doing to the women who were part of them. Human strike can be a revolt within a revolt, an unarticulated refusal, an excess of work or the total refusal of any labour, depending on the situation. There is no orthodoxy for it. If strikes are made in order to improve specific aspects of the workers’ conditions, they are always a means to an end. But human strike is a pure means, a way to create an immediate present here where there is nothing but waiting, projecting, expecting, hoping.

Adopting a behaviour that doesn’t correspond to what others tell us about ourselves is the first step of the human strike: the libidinal economy, the secret texture of values, lifestyles and desires hidden by the political economy are the real plane of consistency of this revolt.

‘We need to change ourselves’: everyone agrees on this point, but who to become and what to produce are the first questions that arise as soon as this discussion takes place in a collective context. The reflex of refusing any present that doesn’t come with the guarantee of a reassuring future is the very mechanism of the slavery we are caught in and that we must break. To produce the present is not to produce the future.” (“Human strike has already begun” (*Human strike has already begun & other writings* 29)).

The practice of Claire Fontaine can be divided into several dimensions and domains; or perhaps it would more accurate to say that their practice encompasses dimensions and domains that are normally separated in capitalism’s infinite parceling out of specialized working tasks. Thus, the production of theoretical texts is an integral and essential part of their operation, which is why this scene is an essay, included in order to stress the fact that in the case of Claire Fontaine, it is no longer possible to uphold a traditional distinction between (art) theory and (art) practice, or between art and literature for that matter. The text in question, “Human strike has already begun”, features in the book *Human strike has already begun & other writings* (2013) and is part

of an ongoing meditation on what Claire Fontaine conceptualizes as *a human strike*. Like everything else written by Claire Fontaine, the text is marked by a certain undaunted radicalism and a slightly knowing jargon, drawing on and further developing the ideas of Tiqqun, Agamben and *Autonomia Operaia*, a 1970s leftist movement from Italy, directly referenced in Claire Fontaine's text. As a whole the text becomes a kind of theoretical ready-made. Because of that, it might be a good idea to do some preparatory work and begin by breaking down the text into a few general points regarding the totality, affectivity, (self) destructivity, and temporality of the human strike in order to arrive at an understanding of how depression might be considered a form of human strike.

The human strike: Totality, affectivity, (self-)destructivity and temporality

Scholars agree that the 'classical' strike crystallizes the fundamental conflict of the industrial age in the sense that it is the manifestation of where "the abrupt Marxian clash of capitalist class and proletariat was most neatly imaged." (Rideout 172). Admirable as that form of strike was and is, it is on the verge of becoming an empirical impossibility, given the almost vegetative state of unions today, for example.¹⁸² However, the pivotal point is that *even if* the unions still enjoyed the strength and support they used to, the strike would not be an adequate response to the current state of affairs according to Claire Fontaine. In contrast to the traditional strike form, the human strike is not a strike 'reserved to' the proletariat, nor does it 'merely' deal with, and protest against, working conditions and the modes of capitalist production: "Its subject isn't the proletarian or the factory worker but the whatever singularity that everyone is." (*Human strike* 39). For Claire Fontaine, the human strike bears upon life as such; life as a whole. It is characterized by *totality*. Why this total character? Because of the generalization of a situation in which it is impossible to distinguish between work and life, and between work on the self and simply work. Because the economy of debt casts people as human capital and entrepreneurs, and saturates life in its – libidinal – entirety: People's innermost being, their neuronal networks, protentional apparatuses and the minuscule movements of desire and affect. Because man – if there ever was such a thing as man without quotation marks – under these current conditions, is

¹⁸² Boltanski and Chiapello write that the total strike days in France annually averaged 4.000.000 in the years 1971-75 and less than half a million in 1992 (169).

no longer tormented by cold capitalism, alienation in and of the factory, or the estrangement from the product of his or her work, but a warmer and more emotional form of exploitation, where the reality is that 'man' is too close rather than too distanced from his or her work; that is to say, his or her life. Or so goes Claire Fontaine's analysis. This is why the human strike must pertain to the human being in its almost ontological totality.¹⁸³ In short: The human strike is an act of rebellion as the strike always has been, but the context for the human strike is a neoliberal economy in which subjectivity as such is at stake. In Claire Fontaine's own words, the human strike thus "attacks the economic, affective, sexual and emotional positions within which subjects are imprisoned." (*Human strike* 55). In this sense, the human strike assumes a fundamentally *affective* quality. At the same time, it recoils upon a certain self-destructivity and acknowledges that the people who go on strike, are by definition inscribed and entangled within society, a strike against which would imply that this strike must also necessarily be turned inwards against the striking subject itself. As Claire Fontaine writes: "The work of the human strike strikes against itself." (ibid. 30). The human strike so to speak has to assure that it destroys those parts of the striking subjects that are nothing but the embodiments of a surrounding society, which was and is the target of the strike in the first place. Thus, the striking subject is both the subject and the object of the strike; the critical gesture of the strike demands a dose of self-criticism or – one of Claire Fontaine's key concepts – a process of *desubjectivation* (ibid. 55), a process through which the striking subject gets rid of him or her self. As a direct consequence, the human strike can never be "an affirmation of the individual against the system", as one half of Claire Fontaine, Fulvia Carnevale, expresses it in "Grève Humaine (Interrompue)" (6), a conversation with the artist John Kelsey, 'member' of the Bernadette Corporation, which made the film *Get Rid of Yourself*.

This is the condition for the human strike. It involves, as Claire Fontaine makes clear in the essay "Human Strike Within The Field Of The Libidinal Economy", the whole of life and not just work. Better yet, it concerns work, insofar as work has invaded and become identical with the whole of life. Furthermore, the human strike is distinguishable from previous forms such as the general strike and the wild cat strike, by not having any particular *goal*, which not only makes it

¹⁸³ In her text "Affect & Exchange", Melanie Gilligan – an artists who works with many of the same issues as Claire Fontaine, most notably in works such as *Self-Capital* and *Crises in the Credit System* – writes: "In this context [of affect] it is important to understand capital as a totality, because capitalism reproduces the whole of social relations and capital production only happens if capital's constituted totality is already presupposed." (36).

less specific, but also more radical. This means, firstly, that the strike is to be considered an instance of what Agamben calls pure means (*Means without End* 60), and secondly, that the strike is not orientated toward the future, only toward the present. As it says in the text that is the scene of this part of the chapter: “To produce the present is not to produce the future.”

This should give us reason to pause for a moment, because it might come across as a bit odd. If the analysis is that we live in a world in which debt and financial speculation have confiscated the future and occupied every – individual and collective – protentional capacity, would that not necessitate an emancipatory politics which had as one of its primary aims an opening towards another future, an expansion of the social imagination? But as we have seen, this is not quite Claire Fontaine’s analysis. The problem, in their eyes, is not that the future but the present has been lost. In fact, the slogans “human strike” and “sell your debt” could, and indeed should, be seen as attempts to refuse to participate in any (re)production of the future as such. Why help neoliberal capitalism with restoring a future that would merely end up as more of the same? That accounts for the temporality of the strike, which involves a suspension of any kind of progressive or teleological notion of time (Carnevale and Kelsey 1). The strike thus possesses a certain rhythmic quality; a rhythm of interruption. It becomes a temporal hole in itself, a negative eternity, a crisis in and of time, nothing but pure *durée*, approximating in the last resort – if not to begin with – a rejection of the (fantasy of the) future. This is where depression and strike become one. As a dissolution of the (identity of) self, including its temporal coherence and protentional primacy, depression can and indeed must be seen as an exemplary strike form. Depression, in Claire Fontaine’s work, is in and of itself a process of desubjectivation.

Work and art (stop making art!)

But what about art? What is the relation between the art work and the human strike? Is art work? Is the artist a worker? And if so, what class does she belong to? Is she working class, part of the contemporary precariat as some suggest, or is she rather, as Ben Davis argues, “the representative of middle-class creative labor par excellence.” (14). Of course, many artists have jobs on the side that could be said to be working class, but the artistic work in itself is, according to Davis, middle class: “This kind of intimate connection with the products of one’s labor is exactly what working

class people are denied by definition as a result of the quid pro quo that forms the central dynamic of a capitalist economy: trading your labor power for a wage.” (19).

However, perhaps such questions are not particularly relevant in this context, for would it not be possible to understand art as refusal of work by its very nature; a superfluous activity or a radical inactivity? A supreme strike? Only if one completely disregards the commodity based economy of which contemporary art is inherently part. In any event, it seems clear that the artistic strike, the refusal to work, actually requires a great deal of work. Unless, of course, the artist in question literally and *de facto* stops working, and ceases to produce art at all. This was what German artist Gustave Metzger tried to do in 1974 when he encouraged fellow artists to support an Art Strike that was to last no less than three years, from 1977 to 1980. These years without art were to be based on the premise that the artists who had accepted the challenge would no longer make or sell art, or participate in exhibitions, and thus no longer *be* artists, except perhaps an artist that had abandoned art: Paradoxically, the ultimate indication of a true artist. It is safe to say that Metzger’s project did not receive a broad support; ostensibly not a single artist joined him in his strike. Regardless, the strike that Claire Fontaine has in mind is altogether different. It is obviously possible to regard the ready-mades as some sort of strike, but that does not get to the heart of the matter. What Claire Fontaine proposes is more a strike in relation to (the production of) artistic subjectivity and identity. The point of departure for their strike is not so much the production of objects – the artworks – as the production of subjects – the artists. In the text “Ready-Made Artists and Human Strike: A few Clarifications”, they thus write: “But we are not going to trace a genealogy of transformation in the domain of the production of art objects; what interests us here is what happened in the domain of the production of artists.” (unpaginated). Irrespective of the differences between Claire Fontaine’s *praxis* and that of Metzger, it would be wrong to entertain the idea that Claire Fontaine rejects the political projects of the '70s *tout court* (in a moment we will take up the case of Joseph Beuys, though a decisive disparity comes to light here too). In the aforementioned article Claire Fontaine thus refers – as she does in the text “Human strike has already begun” above – to “[s]ome Italian feminists in the 1970s” who “envisioned a strike that would be an interruption of the relations that identify us and subjugate us more than could any professional activity.” This is the kind of the interruption initiated by the reconfiguration of the artist as a ready-made artist, or of the artist as an assistant, in the sense

given to the word by Giorgio Agamben in his book *Profanations* (29-35). “Under the conditions of production of artistic subjectivity that we have just described, we are all ready-made artists and our only hope is to understand this as quickly as possible”, Claire Fontaine writes in “Ready-Made Artist and Human Strike: A few Clarifications.” The artists themselves must get rid of themselves; they must pass through a fundamental transformation, or more specifically, a fundamental reduction or self-destruction.

A u-turn

Allow me to move on by going a little astray: At the end of an essay on art and activism on eflux, Boris Groys refers to Michel Foucault’s lectures on the birth of biopolitics (1978-9), which in reality were lectures on the birth of neoliberalism and the – at the time relatively new – concept of *human capital* as the utopian horizon for contemporary capitalism. The reason that Groys goes into those lectures is that he is interested in how different artists have responded to these ideas. His primary example is Joseph Beuys – another artist who was in his prime in the 1970s: “At the beginning of the 1970s, Joseph Beuys was inspired by the idea of human capital. In his famous Achberger Lectures that were published under the title *Art=Capital (Kunst=Kapital)*, he argues that every economic activity should be understood as creative practice—so that everybody becomes an artist.” (“On Art Activism” – unpaginated¹⁸⁴). What Beuys wanted to do was to make “the expanded notion of art” coincide with “the expanded notion of economy”, so that the boundary between the two collapsed and everybody became an artist. The historical irony of this remarkable – though in retrospect rather naïve – project, is that it turned out to be merely grist to the mill of neoliberalism: There is nothing neoliberalism would prefer more than to see all workers transformed into artists and creative entrepreneurs. As Hito Steyerl writes in the essay “Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life”: “To push the point: life has been occupied by art, because art’s initial forays back into life and daily practice gradually turned into routine incursions, and then into constant occupation. Nowadays, the invasion of life by art is not the exception, but the rule”. (110). Referring directly to Beuys’s dream, Patricia Reed makes a similar argument: “If ‘the artist’ has become a paradigmatic figure of contemporary labor, with no separation between

¹⁸⁴ Because the text by Groys is unpaginated, the numerous references to the text in what follows will unfortunately look a bit strange.

life and work, then Joseph Beuys's clairvoyance has proven perversely accurate: we are all now indeed artists." (524).

What is central for Groys is that contemporary conditions have changed to such a degree that the task of art today can no longer consist of a potentialization of human creativity, or in trying to make things or people *better*. Nor is an avant-gardistic unification of art and life to be desired. On the contrary, artists today must realize that their task is to make things worse. As Groys adds, "not relatively worse but radically worse" ("On Art Activism"). For Groys, it is "this artistic, social, and political alpinism" demonstrated by Beuys, that due to the historical changes having taken place in the meantime, must now be laid aside. An art that wants to be politically relevant at the present time "does not develop 'human potential' but annuls it. It operates not by expansion but by reduction." (ibid.) According to Groys this has historically been what has separated art from design: Whereas design has always had an urge to ameliorate and beautify the world, to make things work and function, the tendency of artists has always been in the opposite direction, namely "to discover their dysfunctional, absurd, unworkable character—everything that makes them nonusable, inefficient, obsolete." (ibid.) Whereas design wants to "improve the status quo", art accepts the status quo, but – and this is a crucial modification – "it accepts it as a corpse, after its transformation into a mere representation" (ibid.)

Groys does not mention depression in his text "On Art Activism", but from my perspective it is nearly impossible not to interpret his text in this direction. When for instance, he writes that art should not develop but annul human potential, and that art should operate by reduction rather than by expansion, he seems to be describing the kind of depressive art that Claire Fontaine carries out. As a contemporary strike form, or as an emblematic example of the human strike, depression in itself appears to involve and embody what Groys looks for: "A U-turn against the movement of progress, a U-turn against the pressure of upward mobility" (ibid.). As pure immobility and inactivity, depression brings about a rhythmic suspension of the order of the world – a caesura, a desynchronization – which is not pathological but political in its temporal and affective consequences. As John Kelsey suggests in the aforementioned interview with Fulvia Carnevale: "Human strike can produce a sort of displacement that happens only by preferring not to be moved. In the heart of a movement or within a situation of enforced mobilization, the invention of a new immobility. Depression, too, can be a mode of human strike – a refusal to

participate in the post-Fordist exploitation of our most human capacities.” (“Grève Humaine (Interrompue)” 5). Indeed, that is the refusal to work, the u-turn, the Bartleby-like inactivity, that Claire Fontaine seeks in depression.

The return of the depressed and the question of the avant-garde (threshold)

Let us take stock. In the previous scenes we witnessed how in certain works, Claire Fontaine depicts depression as a symptom of a society whose economy rests on the twin towers of debt and financial speculation. That has, indirectly, been the case for the ready-made sculpture *Untitled (The Invisible hand)*, and neon works such as *Past Present Future, Please God Make Tomorrow Better* and *Untitled (Sell your debt)*. However, some of Claire Fontaine's ready-mades have confronted the problematic of depression directly, for instance in works such as *Study for pill spill (Prozac)*, *Vivre! Vaincre soi-meme, la depression (Brickbat)*, and, above all, the video *Untitled (Why your psychology sucks)*. In the latter, a pungent and quite comical criticism of the self-help industry's ideological personalization of depression and generalized responsabilization of the subject as such is unfurled.

What Claire Fontaine tries to do is “to transcribe symptoms of the crisis, visually, and conceptually” (Saltz, “Musings” – unpaginated). Depression is one of those topical symptoms, but so is art. Claire Fontaine's symptomatology is so radical that their art is not exempted from being considered a symptom of the crisis (in this respect there is a resemblance to the work of Houellebecq). Thus, though there is a certain resonance between works such as *P.I.G.S* and *Untitled (Sell Your Debt)*, and the Strike Debt movement of Occupy, there is also a crucial difference. There is no direct action in Claire Fontaine's works, no catharsis, or potent multitude that rises to face and rebel against an unjust economic system, be it in the southern European crisis countries or in the major cities of the U.S. Rather, there is a sense of impotence in their works, which makes for a strange kind of avant-garde art. As such, the (historical) avant-garde entailed a certain futurism typical of the 20th century.¹⁸⁵ In itself it was a temporal figure; a figure of the future, a frontrunner and a vanguard. Claire Fontaine is no such thing, though she places herself in the avant-garde tradition, using the methods of re-appropriation, ready-made, and *détournement* that Duchamp, the Situationists and many others developed and practiced. Claire Fontaine is an avant-garde without any vanguard, an avant-garde that has, paradoxically, no

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Berardi, *After the Future*, 126. See also the introduction to this dissertation (10-11).

revolutionary belief in the future, the one thing that defined the avant-gardism of yesterday. They have, in their own words, “lost the hope the avant-gardes had of using art as a means of liberating life.” (Kelsey 4). In that sense Claire Fontaine is an exhausted, depressed avant-garde. All that remains are gestures, reduced to their formal skeleton; a dried up didacticism: “In our lifetime, we’ve only had the chance to see the effects of the Situationalist religion, this purism and extreme moralism that doesn’t help to change anything at all. We needed to make fun of such a paradoxical position. But today, maybe it’s like shooting the ambulance.” (Huberman, “Claire Fontaine” – unpaginated). Naturally, this ambivalent attitude toward the tradition of the avant-garde has some specific historical reasons, which to a large extent is external to art history. The general problem faced by Claire Fontaine is this: What happens to avant-garde art in a Western world where everybody has in a sense become creative entrepreneurs, innovators, that is to say, artists in one way or the other (again it has to be emphasized that this is a somewhat qualified truth)? What happens to an artist like Claire Fontaine that works in the avant-garde tradition but finds herself in a world where the avant-garde – from a certain perspective and to a certain extent – is not a solution but part of the problem; where the dream of the avant-garde has turned into a nightmare that, to quote Marx, weighs on the brain of the living?

Perhaps, though, this departure from the avant-garde is not so much to be taken as an involuntary defeat that once and for all lays the avant-garde to rest. Perhaps the art of Claire Fontaine is less a monument to the death of the avant-garde than a deliberate strategy that has taken stock of the contemporary condition *and* taken the consequences thereof. After the analysis of the previous scene in this chapter, we are in a position to appreciate that the phenomenon of depression for Claire Fontaine and in their work, is not merely a symptom, a passive reaction, or even a pathology that must be therapeutically cured. These last conjectures have been an attempt to understand (Claire Fontaine’s understanding of) depression as a contemporary form of strike; a human strike that can actually be said to constitute – or at least delineate the contours of – a political act, at least insofar as depression does not correspond to “the secret texture of values, lifestyles and desires hidden by the political economy”, discussed by Claire Fontaine in the text, “Human strike has already begun”, that was quoted at the beginning of this chapter. It is not only the case that the depressed person has every reason to be depressed, nor merely that depression

becomes a fully legitimate action¹⁸⁶; it is also to be understood that, according to Claire Fontaine, depression is a insurrectionary reaction to the society of the present; a ‘normal’ response to an ‘abnormal’ society. In other words, the sickness of depression is not only a *symptom* of a sick society; depression can be seen as a *subversion* of that society. Depression is the epitomization of an exhausted *No, I can’t* in a world that revolves increasingly around an emphatic *Yes, I can.*¹⁸⁷ As Claire Fontaine herself writes in “Ready-Made Artist and Human Strike: A few Clarifications”:
“Human strike proposes no brilliant solution to the problems produced by those who govern us if it is not Bartleby’s maxim: I would prefer not to.” (unpaginated).

This also requires that the human strike of depression is to be understood as pure means. The human strike does not have any goal by definition, but is an event that takes place here and now, having abandoned any “guarantee of a reassuring future” (*Human strike has already begun & other writings* 29). Or as stated in the text taken as the point of departure for the last scene: “To produce the present is not to produce the future.” This statement, which might seem surprising at a first glance, is not far from Walter Benjamin’s conceptualization of the strike as a real state of exception, a divine violence beyond teleology and instrumentality, a purely destructive act that grabs for the emergency break on the train of history.

So although Claire Fontaine’s diagnosis of the times may seem to dwell upon a loss of the future, their main concern is actually a loss of the present. In their eyes the problem today is that there is ‘No Present’, rather than ‘No Future’. As a consequence, their goal is not to re-establish some or other future, insofar as the incessant futurizing and endless reproduction of financial capitalism are what must be dodged or, preferably, destroyed. So if there is a cry of ‘No

¹⁸⁶ As Walker Percy writes in his mock self-help book *Lost in the Cosmos*: “You are depressed because you have every reason to be depressed. No member of the other two million species which inhabit the earth—and who are luckily exempt from depression—would fail to be depressed if it lived the life you lead. You live in a deranged age—more deranged than usual, because despite great scientific and technological advances, man has not the faintest idea of who he is or what he is doing. Begin with the reverse hypothesis, like Copernicus and Einstein. You are depressed because you should be. You are entitled to your depression. In fact, you’d be deranged if you were not depressed. Consider the only adults who are never depressed: chuckleheads, California surfers, and fundamentalist Christians who believe they have had a personal encounter with Jesus and are saved for once and all. Would you trade your depression to become any of these?” (76)

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Jan Verwoert’s illuminating text “Exhaustion and Exuberance. Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform” (13ff.).

Future' in Claire Fontaine, this is not a diagnostic elegy but a possible cure, a militant cry of resistance.

We have, in other words, come to see come to see how depression, and the depressive art of Claire Fontaine, is perhaps less a 'symptom' of the historical development of neoliberal capitalism and the contemporary crisis than a 'solution' to it. Of course, the question remains: How valid and tenable is this solution, if indeed it is a solution at all? We must also wonder whether Claire Fontaine might not conflate future and progress to a certain extent, and whether individual depression can be endowed with the collective dimension that has always been integral to strikes historically. Perhaps it is rather the very historical passage from resistance to pathology to which one would need to be more sensitive here; to the historical transition from strike to depression: Whereas people used to strike collectively, today they become depressed individually so that a critique of the system seems to collapse into a critique of the self. Lastly, it appears that Claire Fontaine's practice is caught in an unresolvable paradox: One would think that a true strike, a proper depression, would lead to a relinquishment of artistic activity and production as such. For Groys however, art – and especially art activism – will always be caught in this kind of self-contradictory or paradoxical position. This is not discouraging news, but rather an encouraging condition: "The fact that contemporary art activism is caught in this contradiction is a good thing. First of all, only self-contradictory practices are true in a deeper sense of the word. And secondly, in our contemporary world, only art indicates the possibility of revolution as a radical change beyond the horizon of our present desires and expectations." ("On Art Activism" – unpaginated).

One thing is certain: The depressive art of Claire Fontaine poses a persistent paradox. They are deeply critical towards the institution of art, yet continue to present their works within the four walls of the white cube. Their art calls for political action, yet puts on display its own political impotence *as* art. The works aim at concrete change, yet remain at an abstract, conceptual and gesticulative level. They invoke strike, yet do so by means of signs and language alone: A neon sign that reads STRIKE. Significantly, the version of this neon sign, which was shown at the Tate in London, is fully conscious of this paradox and even plays with it. A movement detector controls the white fluorescent tubes of the neon sign, establishing a relation between the motion of the visitors and the light. However, unlike the way in which such works normally



STRIKE (K. font V.II). White florescent tubes, colored gel, steel wall mounted or free-standing frame, movement detector, and circuit-breaker. Installation view, Tate Modern, London. 2005-7

operate, the light is not turned on by the movements of approaching spectators, but on the contrary, turns off as soon as someone draws close to the work. Conversely, the light turns on when there is no movement at all. As it reads on the Tate's home page: "Only if there is no movement do they switch on again. Appropriately, suspension of activity is required to animate the word strike."¹⁸⁸ Thus, the presence of visitors – or the manifestation of a movement on their part – would activate the artwork as strike, but de-activate it as art. By the same token, the absence of visitors – or the absence of movement – would activate the work as art but de-activate it as (an artistic) strike. At night the sign would shine for no one but the occasional passer-by and the offices of The City of London. That is the impossibility, not to say loneliness, at work in Claire Fontaine's art. It continually oscillates between the resistance of depression and the depression of resistance.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/level-2-gallery-irresistible-force/level-2-gallery-irresistible.

Chapter 4

Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*

Intro¹⁸⁹

No more happy endings! That was Lars von Trier's cheeky catchphrase for his movie *Melancholia* when it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011. At first glance, the ending of the film is far from happy: In a spectacular apocalyptic event that takes place in the final scene the – hitherto unknown – planet Melancholia collides with Earth, manifesting the end of the world as we know it, including the life of the two main protagonists, sisters Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst) and Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), as well as the latter's son Leo. In this sense, the film is an act of uncorrupted cinematic killjoy. No more joy or happiness; only shattering disaster, sheer catastrophe. However, as the title of the film suggests, the film is not only about the end of the world, but also about depression, specifically Justine's depression. Thus, the first part of the movie is called "Justine".¹⁹⁰ As will become clear in the first part of this chapter, Justine's pathological condition is to be understood above all as a defect futurology; as an inability to project and form plans. This pathology is highlighted to the extreme when confronted with an external environment that constantly makes plans.

Melancholia opens with a wedding in a grandiose setting. Justine is getting married to Michael (Alexander Skarsgård). It is supposed to be the biggest and best day of Justine's life but it is not. Indeed, she is quite miserable, a fact that does not escape the other guests, especially Justine's brother in law, John (Kiefer Sutherland). In his eyes, the way Justine behaves, and the fact that she is so obviously and obtrusively *not* happy, is totally unacceptable. During a significant scene, John delivers an imperative of happiness to Justine: "You better be goddamn happy." (37:47). Claire, his wife and Justine's sister, is not much better: "Be happy please" (1:40:48), she implores Justine on several occasions. Throughout the film this demand is persistently placed before Justine: You ought to be happy; you have no right to be unhappy. What is strikingly clear,

¹⁸⁹ Parts of this chapter are based on the article "Depression og/eller apokalypse: Lars von Triers *Melancholia*", which I co-authored with Jens Christian Bjerling.

¹⁹⁰ As far as clinical terms go, I shall speak about Justine's depression, even though the movie is called *Melancholia*. The reason for using the concept of depression instead of that of melancholia should be clear from the introduction to this dissertation and will be taken for granted in what follows. A couple of times, however, given the title of the movie and the vocabulary it generally employs, I have found myself compelled to use the word melancholia to refer to Justine's condition, but the conceptual meaning remains the same.

however, is that within the depressive horizon of, not only Justine, but also the film as a whole, this demand cannot be met in any way whatsoever. “I smile and I smile and I smile,” says Justine at one point in a tone that is both wicked and wry. I shall expand on this topic in the second part of this chapter.

The first part of the film closes with the end of the wedding. The second part – covering roughly five days and nights – closes with the end of the world. Some time after the wedding, Justine, in a state of extreme depression, returns to the estate of John and Claire where the wedding took place so that they can take care of her. It is during this second part of the movie – entitled “Claire” – that the planet Melancholia enters the scene. Until this point, it is only Justine who, occasionally gazing up at the sky, notices a strange new phenomenon, which the hard-headed John, in all his scientific certainty, has identified as Antares in the constellation Scorpio. “I am amazed that you can see that!”, he exclaims (11:16). At the end of the first part of the film, however, Justine looks up again, realizing, as a threatening omen, that “Antares is no longer there.” (1:05:48).

By the beginning of part two it has become common knowledge that the astronomical object is Melancholia, but whether the planet’s trajectory entails a collision or merely a so-called fly-by is still unknown, at least to the people *in* the movie, with the possible exception of Justine. We, the viewers, know all too well that this planetary dance, this ethereal ballet through empty space, will have a tragic outcome, since the movie’s eight-minute prologue features a series of tableaux, not quite still images but ultra-slow motion ‘prophesies’, accompanied by the overture from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. Due to this cinematic structure of ellipse, the apocalypse at the end is a repetition – though not a totally exact one¹⁹¹ – meaning that the spectator knows how it will end before it even begins. This raises pertinent questions of time and movement inherent to cinema as an art form, as Gilles Deleuze among many others has argued and shown. These questions are also very specific both to the phenomenon of depression, and to the apocalypse in which time – as it is written – shall be no more. At issue is not so much the end of time, as the time of the end. Only subsequently is one able to reflect upon the question that Paolo Virno puts forth in *Déjà Vu and the End of History* (2015): “What type of historical narration establishes itself at the ‘end of history’?” (51). Though, a slight modification is needed

¹⁹¹ As Mark Sandberg points out: “None of the tableau scenes repeats exactly later in the film, but closely enough to be recognized as an approximation.” (113).

for our present purposes, so that the question becomes: What type of historical narration establishes the end of history?¹⁹²

The relation between disaster and depression moves to the forefront in the third part of this chapter.¹⁹³ In terms that I will expound more fully, this section is animated by the claim that the relation between Justine's melancholia and the planet Melancholia is *not* metaphorical, or allegorical for that matter; it is therefore not the case that her depression is a metaphor for the end of the world nor, conversely, is the apocalypse a picture of her mental constitution. The relation is not *causal*: Her depression is clearly not an effect of the imminent catastrophe, nor is the catastrophe, as an imaginary phenomenon, a consequence of her mental illness. But in this case, what function does depression have in this apocalyptic movie? Why has von Trier chosen to make a movie with two parts, a movie about depression *and* apocalypse, and not a movie about only one or the other? I would like to suggest that there is an obscure yet literal communication between the person and the planet, an echo, or a common refrain, not least in the way in which Justine's personal pathology of time seems to coincide with a more general problem: The problem of historical time as such. The question is therefore whether Jameson's prediction – that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism – literally comes true in *Melancholia*?

Such questions form the point of departure for the fourth and final part of the chapter. Here, attention will be directed toward the different ways in which the characters deal with the disaster. Would it be possible to say that the movie is not concerned with what we may *know* about the coming catastrophe, but rather with how we *act*, where it is what we *do* that counts? Is the problem thus displaced in the direction of *practice*? Do we move from epistemology to eschatology? It is of the utmost importance to pay close attention to what Justine actually does in the final scenes of *Melancholia*. Despite what the movie otherwise sets the stage for, what Lars

¹⁹² A set of concurrent questions would be: And what kind of fiction or fabulation? What kind of comedy, even? And, also, what kind of utopian impulses?

¹⁹³ There is not a single reading of *Melancholia* that does not deal with the apocalyptic aspect of the movie, but quite a few leave out the question of Justine's depression, as though the two could be easily separated. Even in brilliant readings such as Sandberg's "Apocalypse Then and Now: *Verdens Undergang* (1916) and *Melancholia* (2011)", or Bonnie Honig's "Public Things: Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope*, Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, and the Democratic Need", the phenomenon of depression is almost entirely absent. A further tendency in the, by now, rather extensive scholarship on the movie *Melancholia* is that *when* depression gets the attention it deserves it often has, as we shall come to see, a rather romantic lopsidedness.

von Trier's inclinations may usually be, and what Justine herself has hitherto expressed, she leaves cynicism, nihilism and pessimism behind. She abandons a position that emanates a tense and obstinate *whatever*. Instead she takes care of her nephew and together they build 'a magic cave' whose architectural structure can perhaps best be described as a provisional and porous tipi made out of wood. This is how they face the end of the world. Drawing on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I read this gesture on Justine's part as a fabulative and reparative act, a symbolic fiction not to be mistaken for escapism, Buddhist bliss or an inner freedom gained at the expense of the outer world. In this sense, and in the last instance, I read *Melancholia* as an optimistic film. Whereas Houellebecq's response to the problem of depression was techno-ontological, Wallace's ethico-spiritual and Claire Fontaine's radically political, von Trier's is cosmological and eschatological. In the face of depression and disaster, his movie provides an impetus for what I would call an eschatological hope.¹⁹⁴ Thus the end, so the argument and conclusion go, is a surprisingly happy one.

¹⁹⁴ This conceptualization is inspired by Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* and Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*.

Scene 1: Party like there is no tomorrow



Sitting at her own wedding with an empty look in her eyes, while the guests dance and have fun, Justine is clearly not feeling well. She is depressed. But why is she depressed? Is it her off-putting job in the advertising business? Is it her husband, her family, her life, the world? In *Melancholia*, Lars von Trier refrains from offering any etiology, let alone any explanation. It is totally unclear why Justine suffers her depressive breakdown.¹⁹⁵ But she does. The first act of the movie follows the wedding party of Justine and Michael as it proceeds, as the relations between some of the guests become increasingly awkward and a depression increasingly takes possession of Justine's body and mind. This act is part slapstick and part kitschy dialogue, in a manner reminiscent of Thomas Vinterberg's dogme 95 movie *Festen (The Celebration)*, with respect to the audiovisual expression produced by the handheld camera and the interaction between farcical cinematic technique and serious existential themes, such as Justine's depression. If looking for causes will not do us any good, analytically speaking, we might instead look for symptoms of her depression.

¹⁹⁵ We are told that Justine has suffered from depression before: "We agreed you weren't going to make any scenes tonight", Claire says to Justine at the beginning of the film.

Some preparatory remarks on the tragedy and comedy of *Melancholia*

As a combination of Racine’s Phaedra and Shakespeare’s Ophelia, Justine seems to plod her way through the movie. One of the images from the prologue that is not repeated in the remainder of the movie is of Justine lying in a river that carries her, ever so slowly, down toward the bottom of the screen in a perpendicular shot. She is wearing her wedding gown, eyes almost closed, the bridal bouquet still in her hands. Her veil billows in the water, where white water lilies also flow. The colors are green and white. Her predecessor is, of course, Ophelia from *Hamlet*. Like her, Justine is – in the words of Ophelia’s mother Gertrude – “incapable of her own distress”, though unlike Ophelia, Justine’s destiny is not a “muddy death.” (act 4, scene 7). Nonetheless, the resemblance is striking and deliberate.¹⁹⁶



The intertextual reference to Phaedra is far more implicit. But like Phaedra, it is as if Justine is carrying a weight that is too heavy, that she cannot bear. Something is wrong with gravity, it seems; something is weighing her down. Like Phaedra, her legs tremble, she has trouble standing up, let alone walking. “These silly ornaments, these veils – the weight of them”, Phaedra

¹⁹⁶ It is, of course, also impossible to ignore the allusion to the pre-raphaelite painting of Ophelia by John Everett Millais (1851 and 1852).

declares when we first meet her in Rancine’s version of the story (1,3). “Whose meddling hand has tied up all these knots,/Arranged my hair so carefully across my brow?/All things distress and hurt. They plot to hurt.” (ibid.). Like Phaedra, Justine has the painful feeling that her clothes are too heavy, a burden to bear. In particular her wedding gown and bridal veil – those “silly ornaments”¹⁹⁷ – appear to bother Justine throughout the evening, as epitomized by a shot from the prologue, in which Justine struggles to walk through one of the more overgrown areas of the estate. Some roots or lianas have wrapped themselves around her and intertwined with her bridal clothes until she is so entangled that it is nearly impossible for her to move at all, an impression reinforced by the very nature of the prologue with its ultra-slow images that occupy a space between photography and film.



Justine later refers to this feeling, if not this image, in a conversation with her sister. She has just tucked her nephew into bed, and is so exhausted that she has decided to take a nap herself, when her sister enters the room, asking quite reasonably – it is Justine’s wedding after all – what is going

¹⁹⁷ Interestingly, emphasis is also put on Ophelia’s clothes in Shakespeare’s play: “But long it could not be/Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,/Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay/To muddy death.” (4, 7).

on. Justine replies in a flat almost dream-like voice: “I am trudging through this gray woolly yarn...it's... clinging to my legs. It is really heavy to drag along.” (28:14).

There is, in other words, a great deal of tragedy in *Melancholia*, though I want to be clear that I use the word tragedy in the completely ordinary sense of the word, not as a genre or a grandiose philosophical concept. As a character, Justine has a close kinship with tragic heroines such as Phaedra and Ophelia. All things do indeed “distress and hurt”. At the same time, however, the movie has a certain comic quality, and this comedy is inseparable from Justine’s depressive character, or perhaps more accurately, from the desynchronization between Justine and her surroundings; between her behavior and the expectations and conventions of the environment. It is a contrast that creates comedy. For example, when the wedding planner (played by Udo Kier, a long-time favorite actor of von Trier) cannot stand the sight of her because she ruins the party he has been hired to curate, and for that reason holds a hand before his eyes every time she is nearby. Or when the wedding cake cannot be cut because Justine is up in her room, taking a bath. Or when she cannot throw the wedding bouquet because she is, at this stage, in a state of catatonic depression, requiring her sister Claire to come to her aid, demonstratively hurling the bouquet from a balcony in her place.

According to Bergson, comedy arises precisely when a human recalls a machine, when the animate approaches the inanimate, and when the human body appears as artificial and mechanical. The “deflection of life towards the mechanical”, as Bergson writes in *Laughter*, is a “real cause of laughter” (36). Is this not exactly how Justine and her body appear in the first part of *Melancholia*? As an automaton, as something living a (non-)life of its own, alien to itself as well as to the people around it. In the movie, there is a comical gap between what one can and cannot do, physically *and* socially: What Justine wants to do is physically impossible; what she does do is socially inappropriate. In *Laughter*, Bergson quotes Napoleon’s famous definition: “The transition from tragedy to comedy is effected by sitting down.” (51). This is the very transition that Justine carries out in the still above. In the midst of dancing guests, she has simply sat down to great comical effect. And yet there is something about *Melancholia* that is not funny at all, though, as Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant point out in the article “Comedy Has Issues”, “the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it.” (234). It is clearly not the direct variety of comedy of *The Kingdom* (*Riget*, 1994/1997), *The Idiots* (*Idioterne*, 2003), or *The Boss of it*

All (Direktøren for det hele, 2006). The comedy of *Melancholia* is more flat and one-dimensional; indeed at one point the laughter simply dies away, mutating into a fixed, mirthless smile.

Time and movement, cinema and depression

Justine's psychopathological condition and the medium of film intersect in her slow physical movements (one hesitates to write the word in plural). Even the smallest movement is an Olympian struggle for her, and though psychomotor retardation is, of course, a well-known component of depression, in the case of Justine we have to take seriously the art form in which her depression appears. Cinema is, by its very definition, images in motion. We have already touched upon the prologue's ultra-slow images as an indication of Justine's depressive slowness. What remains to be explored is the relation between movement and time within the overall framework of a cinematic depiction of depression.

In the preface to the English edition of *Cinema 2*, Deleuze talks about a reversal, first happening within philosophy, of the "subordination of time to movement", so that "time ceases to be the measurement of normal movement" and instead "increasingly appears for itself and creates paradoxical movements." (xi). Deleuze quotes Hamlet's famous statement that "time is out joint", remarking that "Hamlet's words signify that time is no longer subordinated to movement, but rather movement to time. It could be said that, in its own sphere, cinema has repeated the same experience, the same reversal, in more fast-moving circumstances." (xi). In Deleuze's two books on cinema, this is part of a larger argument about the history of cinema and the transition from what he calls the movement-image to the time-image that occurred after the Second World War, though this is not relevant for us here. What is relevant is the idea that time does not necessarily (have to) function as a measurement of movement, as a clock measures the speed at which a distance is traveled (a person travels from A to B in X minutes, hours or days...). Instead, contemporary cinema – to which Lars von Trier's movies belong – manifests a reversal "which means that time is no longer the measure of movement but movement is the perspective of time." (*Cinema 2* 21). If we transpose this idea to our reading of *Melancholia*, we are able to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the slow-moving images from the prologue and of Justine's depression, which is then not merely to be interpreted as a purely physiological debilitation in which time is subordinated to movement, but also and perhaps above all, as a

temporal condition where time itself has come to a standstill, making the most simple movement virtually impossible. As Deleuze also writes: “At the point where the cinematographic image most directly confronts the photo, it also becomes most radically distinct from it.” (ibid. 16). Pushing Deleuze’s point slightly, it would appear from our analysis of *Melancholia* so far made that cinema and depression stand in an intimate relationship to one another. One could even go so far as to say that depression is a very cinematic pathology. In a perverse way, depression on screen seems to fulfill Deleuze’s cinematic fantasy of a non-chronological or non-successive sequence of time-images (a little time in its pure state as Deleuze was fond of quoting Proust), of minimal movement and no action at all. For is this not an accurate description of depression as a temporal pathology? Is this not exactly what Lars von Trier gives us in *Melancholia* through the character of Justine?

In any case, it can safely be said that Justine incarnates a depressive temporality in the sense given to it by Thomas Fuchs, whose idea of a temporal desynchronization we have already examined. His empirical work still provides a helpful framework for understanding this desynchronization as “an uncoupling in the temporal relation of organism and environment, or of individual and society.” (“Melancholia” 179). The most general characteristic of von Trier’s aesthetic method in *Melancholia* is precisely a permanent juxtaposition of two temporal regimes. Almost every shot in the prologue is a juxtaposition, or perhaps more accurately, a superimposition of two images with two different temporalities, and thus two movements with different speeds. The background, for instance, is nearly completely still like a photograph, while something or someone in the foreground moves, albeit in the most minuscule and imperceptible way – or vice versa. Through this layering technique the prologue evidences a temporal disjunction; formally, the time is utterly out of joint. Two temporalities are constantly contrasted, from the human to the planetary level, where planet Earth and the planet Melancholia also belong to two discrete regimes of time.¹⁹⁸

Although one might be led to believe that this depressive desynchronization is played out exclusively in the natural world – as in the image of Justine entangled in nature’s tentacles – this is not entirely true. As the image at the top of this scene shows, the desynchronization at work in Justine’s depression is inherently social and is played out very

¹⁹⁸ Doublings saturate the entire movie: there are two planets, trees cast two shadows etc.

concretely – and quite comically – in various scenes where Justine is simply unable to follow the temporal script for the wedding ceremony: She is constantly late when it is time to cut the cake, make a speech, and perform the first dance. Existentially, bodily as well as socially, time is severely out of joint for Justine.



Infinite plans

One might specify the temporal desynchronization in *Melancholia* even further and say that everyone around Justine is engaged in one protentional activity or another, while she herself is not. They are all futurizing, planning ahead, drawing up possible scenarios. Her neurotic, uptight sister Claire, organizes the course of events for the wedding; her brother-in-law, a severe caricature of an enlightenment man, tries meticulously to figure out astronomical trajectories and is all too willing to tell those around him about his latest conjectures; her boss, an incredibly unsympathetic ad man, wants Justine to come up with a tagline for a new advertisement; and so on. In the encounter with these characters and their respective futurologies, Justine emerges as fixated and observing. The world around her is in a perpetual transit between present and future, whereas Justine manages barely to withdraw to one of the estate's many rooms (Leo's bedroom, the bathroom etc.). However, this withdrawal occurs not only in the encounter with others'

futurologies, but more precisely, in the encounter with the gaze of the others toward *her* future: Her mother, the perfect picture of a bitter divorcee, expects Justine's marriage to end in rapid and absolute failure – “Enjoy it while it lasts” (19:30) – her sister announces the next item on her wedding-agenda – “We are going to move to the living room so that we can clear some tables. Then the newly-weds will dance, and, uh, then at 11:30 the bride and groom will cut the cake” (26:00) – and her husband shows her a picture of a plot of a land he has bought in Italy – “In ten years time, when the trees have grown, you can sit in the shade, in a chair, and if you still have days when you feel a little sad, I think that'll make you happy again ... maybe we can have a little swing hanging from one of the trees.” (36:32).¹⁹⁹

On all of these occasions the camera pans very explicitly towards Justine's facial expression, which shows signs of an insurmountable obstacle. It is not that she does not *want* to meet the futurological propositions emanating from her family and friends; it is that she *cannot* understand and relate to them because, as a result of her depression, her very capacity for futurizing is absent. To imagine and plan *whichever* future is beyond her. Any appeal to this or that future is thus to be seen as a demand for the initiation of a speculative process, to which she – at the present point in time – does not have access. The depressed gaze – or at least Justine's gaze – does entail a gaze toward the future, but only in the sense of a gaze toward other people's gaze toward the future, and the request to participate in an act of speculation, with which such a gaze always seems to be concomitant. Justine is not only portrayed as a human being who does not have a future; she is a human being to whom depression *is* this loss of the future as such.

The tapestry of interwoven futures

We now seem to be in a position to summarize what is at stake in this first part of *Melancholia*. Because cinema is an art form that is distinguished by its engagement with time, depression in von Trier's movie is transposed into a negotiation between the temporality of the movie's images, the temporality of Justine and the temporality of the other characters. In this negotiation, Justine's experience of a frozen future is not only manifest as a purely psychological pathology; it is also asserted bodily, as a kind of slowness, inertness or pure immobility. The surrounding movements fixate her as immovable.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Frantzen and Bjering 168.

This is what is meant by the temporal desynchronization of depression in *Melancholia*. Justine's depression is characterized by a defect futurology, whose symptoms are rendered visible in the confrontation with an environment in which constant planning appears as a *sine qua non*. Through this mania of forward planning, often cast in a comical light, a certain model of subjectivity is drawn out according to which the subject is an animal who makes plans. In phenomenological terms with which we are now familiar, being is protentional. However, the many plans for the future that the characters frantically design are not strictly speaking to be viewed as projections from a fixated temporal subject position, but rather as projections in a Heideggerian sense ("Entwurf"). To Heidegger being as such ("Dasein") is a projection toward a futural field of possibilities. The notion of *Entwurf* is closely related to Heidegger's fundamental insight that being is ec-static, outside itself, besides itself, ahead of itself. This implies that any given human being is always coming from somewhere and going somewhere else, and that the present is thus blurred, flowing out into the future in advance in the form of expectations, hopes, projections and plans.²⁰⁰

In *Melancholia*, the people around Justine are, therefore, not so much subjects who make plans for the future; they make plans to the extent that they are subjects. But *Melancholia* differs from *Sein und Zeit* in at least one decisive way: The *Entwurf* in von Trier's movie is not a personal *Entwurf* alone, an already-in-the-future-being-with-myself. As we have seen in Justine's interaction with the wedding guests, the futurology is necessarily a futurology addressed to others. In his book *Agonie des Eros*, in which the first chapter is devoted to an analysis of *Melancholia*, German philosopher Byung-Chul Han condenses this point into a single sentence: "Die Zukunft ist die *Zeit des Anderen* [the future is the time of the Other]." (23 – emphasis in original). But *Melancholia* is – unlike David Foster Wallace's work – not about the *Other*, the time of the Other, unless in a very abstract sense. The time of the *Others* seems far more pertinent in *Melancholia*: (Planning for) the future is a social and collective affair. In fact, this forward planning holds social life together as such. When any given knot in the tapestry of interlaced and woven futures unravels, the whole thing falls apart, revealing, in that very moment, its *modus operandi*. This is what happens when Justine is no longer capable of sustaining the futurological network:

²⁰⁰ Cf. *Being and Time* 370ff. (323ff. in the German original *Sein und Zeit*). In what follows, each reference to *Being and Time* will be accompanied by a reference to the corresponding page in the German original.

The guests become angry, her husband leaves the wedding prematurely, and the whole social event is simply pulled to shreds.

One question remains, though: What is the purpose of this incessant planning? What animates all of the character's plans, at least in the first part of the movie? The answer is simple: Happiness.

Scene 2: “I smile and I smile and I smile”



It is no small irony that Justine’s father says to her at the beginning of *Melancholia*: “I have never seen you look so happy”. It really takes a charlatan whose charm as a human being is only equaled by his irresponsible and egoistic absence as a father, to fail to see that Justine is not happy at all. However, the truly remarkable feature of the movie, and Justine’s depression, is not that her father is so full of himself that he fails to see what is right in front of him, nor that Justine is unhappy at her own wedding. Rather, what the movie wants to underline, it seems, is that Justine’s depression is a thorn in the side of everyone else. It is as if her depression is a disruption to their planning fever; her unhappiness a violation of the moral imperative to be happy, above all and always. In a film almost demonstrably destitute of – spatial and temporal – traces of the world of today, this moral, if not ideological, imperative to happiness stands out all the more, demanding attention and analysis.

“You better be goddamn happy”

“I smile and I smile and I smile” (42:29), Justine desperately says at one point, having just been confronted by her sister, who wants an explanation: Why is she not happy, why is she constantly disappearing from the party (*her party!*), why can she not cut the wedding cake or throw her bridal bouquet from the balcony? Can she not at least pull herself together? But I try, Justine

objects. She smiles and smiles and smiles. Her sister is not convinced one bit; in fact, this response infuriates her even more: You are lying to all of us, she exclaims.

If Claire – in all her patronizing passive-aggressiveness – is still the most understanding and gentle of all the people around Justine, this is only because the other guests are very explicit and even quite brutal in their reaction to Justine’s demeanor. As mentioned, the wedding planner, for instance, cannot stand the sight of her, which he makes no effort to hide. But John, Justine’s brother-in-law, is by far the worst. In a scene where Justine once again retreats to Leo’s room, John is already there, sitting in the shadows as if waiting for her. It is here that he delivers the harsh line: “You better be goddamn happy.” (37:47). “Yes, I should be. I really should be”, Justine – seemingly – complies. Still, John is not satisfied. The rest of the painful, cringeworthy dialogue unfolds as follows:

John: Do you have any idea how much this party cost me? A ballpark figure?

Justine: No. I don't. Should I?

John: Yes, I think you should. A great deal of money. A huge amount of money. In fact for most people, an arm and a leg.

Justine: I hope you feel it's well spent.

John: Well, that depends whether or not we have a deal.

Justine: A deal?

John: Yes, a deal. That you be happy.

Justine: Yes, of course. Of course we have a deal.

In the end Justine is just too exhausted not to humor John. Yes, of course we have a deal, she says. Good, he says, kissing her on the cheek. Congratulations, he says and leaves her alone, whereupon Justine gives herself a fake smile in the mirror. Good girl.

Happiness as industry, ideology and moral imperative

In the danger of letting von Trier’s movie hang in mid-air for a moment, some context must be provided. As Will Davies has shown in *The Happiness Industry* (2015), happiness has indeed developed into a real industry. Happiness, he writes, is what preoccupies our global elite (3).

National governments, as well as international business enterprises are increasingly interested in the happiness – and health – of their populations and workers. Inspired by the work of positive psychologist Martin Seligman, David Cameron, for instance, while still prime minister of the UK, wanted to create a national ‘happiness index’. As he said when he launched the plan in 2010, “It’s time we admitted that there’s more to life than money and it’s time we focused not just on GDP but on GWB – general well-being.”²⁰¹ Although this may seem “woolly”, as Cameron himself has admitted, with the re-union of economics and psychology in the early 1990s and advances within neuroscience, happiness is no longer to be seen as a fluffy, metaphysical concept, but rather a scientific concept that refers to a “physical occurrence” in the body, brain and behavior of human beings as such (Davies 20; 41-69). Hence, what we are dealing with here is happiness in “an objective, measurable, administered sense.” (ibid. 5).

Of course, Cameron was not doing this purely for the sake of the British population; happiness, health and general well-being are a prerequisite for any effective capitalist production. The report *The Wellness Imperative – Creating More Effective Organizations* from the World Economic Forum, on the intimate connection between wellness and business makes this abundantly clear: “Physical and psychological well-being is no longer treated as a free-floating desirable whose business benefits may (or may not) be realizable at some indeterminate point in time. Addressed at the level of structure, capacity and capabilities – of leadership and of people systems and processes – it becomes a powerful mechanism for translating strategy into measurable business performance.” (14). Happiness – or in this context: “physical and psychological well-being” – is in other words not a peripheral priority, a by-product of a successful organizational structure, but a factor that must be addressed and dealt with on a *strategic and structural level*; to be quantified, objectified and measured in order to deliver the best possible performance and ensure maximal profit. That happiness and health are a societal concern is beyond doubt; that depression and generalized unhappiness are an economic burden to society is also indisputable, despite the astronomical profits generated by the pharmaceutical industry worldwide.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Cf. www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/nov/14/david-cameron-wellbeing-inquiry. For more on this issue, see Carl Cederström and André Spicer’s *The Wellness Syndrome* (75ff.).

²⁰² Cf. the very first pages of the introduction to this dissertation. See also Davies 106ff.

Happiness, however, is more than an industry; it is an ideology, a moral imperative, a form of subjectivation. This is the reason Slovenian philosopher Alenka Zupančič develops the concept of 'biomorality' in her book *The Odd One In*, where she nails the normativity of contemporary happiness: "A person who feels good (and is happy) is a good person; a person who feels bad is a bad person" (5). It should not be cause for surprise that multiple thinkers and writers have ventured into this particular problem. In *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*, journalist and activist Barbara Ehrenreich offers a critical yet entertaining account of the cult of positive psychology, optimism and happiness. Taking as a point of departure her experience of being diagnosed with breast cancer, and being surrounded by pink ribbons and an insistent demand to be positive, Ehrenreich unfolds psychological, cultural and economic implications that extend far beyond the domain of cancer patients: "If optimism is the key to material success, and if you can achieve an optimistic outlook through the discipline of positive thinking, then there is no excuse for failure. The flip side of positivity is thus a harsh insistence on personal responsibility" (8).²⁰³ In *The Wellness Syndrome*, Carl Cederström and André Spicer critically examine and provide ample humorous examples of how "happiness and health become the fundamental criteria for what passes as a moral life" (29), and conceptualize this as an "insourcing of responsibility." (13).²⁰⁴ One element that each of these very different thinkers touch upon is the way in which positive psychology and the imperative of happiness entails a process of personal responsabilization, making each subject personally responsible for almost everything; success or failure, and health or illness are a matter of subjective willpower, lifestyle and choice alone. As we saw in the chapter on Claire Fontaine, in particular in their video *Untitled (Why your psychology sucks)*, there is no "excuse for failure", as Ehrenreich points out. If you are such an immoral and bad person that you have become unhappy – or depressed – it is you, and you alone that is to blame.

Two other authors who detail how happiness has become one of the most dominant ideological imperatives today are Pascal Bruckner and Sara Ahmed. In his book *Perpetual Euphoria: On the Duty to Be Happy*, Bruckner argues that happiness is not only "the biggest

²⁰³ Positive thinking, Ehrenreich continues, "encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune and blame only ourselves for our fate." (44).

²⁰⁴ Franco 'Bifo' Berardi is even more straightforward in his attitude: "Happiness is not a matter of science, but of ideology. This is how it should be addressed." (*The Soul at Work* 90). The smiley is of course the emblematic symbol of this ideology.

industry of the age; it is also and very precisely the new moral order, and that is why depression is spreading” (50). Unhappiness is considered, above all, a failure to be happy, and within this moral order being unhappy – failing to be happy – has become immoral (5).²⁰⁵ In her book *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed adds a now familiar affective and temporal dimension to the same problematic. As the title indicates, Ahmed scrutinizes happiness *as a promise*, which means that happiness is a relation of futurity and hope, though obviously a quite different promise to that of debt, as discussed in the previous chapter on Claire Fontaine. Promises, as Ahmed writes, make “the future into an object, into something that can be declared in advance of its arrival” (29), they “ground our expectation of what is to come.” (30). As she writes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*: “The question of the future is an affective one; it is a question of hope.” (183-4). Happiness is thus something we hope, long, and wish for; never quite here, always there but a bit out of reach, phantasmagoric and yet with very real and concrete effects in the present. It is what Lauren Berlant – to whom Ahmed refers – would call a good-life fantasy (*Cruel Optimism* 2).²⁰⁶

Now, “Life, Liberty and the *pursuit of Happiness*” is a well-known phrase from the United States Declaration of Independence. One might have good reason to object that life as such has the structure of a fantasy or a promise²⁰⁷ or that human beings “are the only beings for whom happiness is always at stake in their living, the only beings whose life is irremediably and painfully assigned to happiness,” as Giorgio Agamben has suggested (*Means without Ends* 4). To return to Heidegger, one could even say that the notion of life as a promise is congruent with his idea that *Dasein* is, in the last instance, a constant projection (*Entwurf*), a perpetual anticipation (*Vorlaufen*), an anticipation of possibility, a leaning towards the future, or a running ahead of oneself (304ff./260ff.). Irrespective of *Dasein*’s temporal triad of past, present and future, in *Being*

²⁰⁵ Bruckner explicitly links the principle of happiness to the event of '68, pointing out that the utopian dream inherent to it was “[t]o decree perpetual pleasure, a permanent state of happiness.” (116). This is perhaps why Houellebecq is so fond of Bruckner’s thinking.

²⁰⁶ Like Berlant, Ahmed is interested in the double bind of this fantasy, the moments in which the promise of happiness actually relapses into a place of unhappiness, where attachment to the fantasy of happiness becomes cruel and toxic (*Cruel Optimism* 24). And yet Ahmed also tries to recover some political, queer potential in figure and feeling of unhappiness, in the destruction of (hetero)normative fantasies, and in feminist kill joy. Without romanticizing unhappiness – or depression – Ahmed insists that in some cases the feeling of unhappiness can be legitimate; that sometimes one has the right to be unhappy; that it is not always necessary to pathologize negative feelings: “I am simply suggesting that we need to think about unhappiness as more than a feeling that should be overcome.” (*The Promise of Happiness* 217).

²⁰⁷ “Life always has the structure of a promise, not that of a program. To be born is in a sense to be promised to a promise” (Bruckner 153).

and Time, futurity is construed as the primordial temporality. Heidegger speaks of the “the primordial phenomenon of the *future as coming towards*.” (372/325 – emphasis in original). Naturally, the conferment of this primacy to the future is related to the idea of a being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*), which to Heidegger is a *seinkönnen*, being as pure potentiality: “Being towards this possibility, as Being-towards-death, is so to comport ourselves towards death that in this Being, and for it, death reveals itself *as a possibility*. Our terminology for such Being towards this possibility is ‘*anticipation*’ of this possibility” [*Vorlaufen in die Möglichkeit*].” (306/262 – emphasis in original). This is why Heidegger characterizes *Dasein* as a “*Being-ahead-of-itself* [*das Sich-vorweg-sein des Daseins*]” (236/192). In short, he wants to show how anticipation and projection, as the futural modalities of temporality, open *Dasein* in its most radical possibility. It is the possibility of seizing existence in its ecstatic totality and possibility; the possibility of freedom and *Eigentlichkeit*; and thus the possibility of tearing oneself away from an inauthentic way of living or being. Heidegger emphasizes that this possibility is *ontologisch* and *existential*, and not *ontisch* and *existentiell*. It is an existential possibility, which remains “from the existentiell point of view, a fantastical exaction [*eine phantastische Zumutung*].” (311/266).

However, the point of this brief Heidegger exegesis – obviously of a somewhat coarse-grained nature – is that the futural promise of happiness upon life, has changed character. No longer does the promise appear merely as “a fantastical exaction” from an *existentiell* point of view; rather, it is as if this possibility has transformed over time into a social necessity, into a demand that in today’s society is as economic as it is existentiell. In that sense, we must make an – admittedly ugly – synthesis of the two titles of Ahmed and Bruckner’s respective books and consequently speak of a *promise* of happiness that has mutated into a *duty* of happiness.

The happiness contract

With this, the ground has been prepared for understanding why von Trier makes so much of the problem of happiness in *Melancholia*. Although he is clearly not in the least bit interested in the economic and structural aspects of happiness, it is beyond doubt that his movie deals seriously with happiness as a biomoral imperative. This is the reason that the only character in the movie to have a relation to the outside world is an ad man, insofar as advertising is based upon what Berardi calls “imaginary models of happiness.” (*The Soul at Work* 92). This is also the reason that

all the characters are constantly planning their – near or distant – future: To sustain the fantasy of happiness, a fantasy that keeps their respective futurologies alive. Likewise, it is the reason that everyone asks, urges, or even begs Justine to be happy. The people around her constitute a choir, persistently preaching a true gospel of happiness.²⁰⁸ However, John – a man who seems only to care about astronomy and money – really takes it to the next level. As noted above, he wants nothing less than to strike a deal with Justine, and to turn her happiness into a contractual obligation: He has paid a lot of money for the wedding – “an arm and a leg” – so he deserves that she “be happy”. Her happiness is his right, and her duty. In this way happiness is transformed into a relation of debt: According to John, Justine simply owes him her happiness. A futural bind is thus created which is as economic as it is moral.

Of course, Justine cannot satisfy John’s demand: She cannot keep to the contract and she cannot reimburse him with the currency of happiness. This is because the anticipation of possibility, so integral a part of life, is not available to her; her depressed being expresses absolutely no anticipation of possibility, no “*Vorlaufen in die Möglichkeit*” as Heidegger formulated it. She is not able to run ahead of herself; she is not able to run at all. Even walking and standing, as we have witnessed, is too much for her. For her, happiness is on another planet entirely.

²⁰⁸ Thinkers such as Adorno already had a strong premonition of this development directly after the Second World War, when he, paraphrasing and inverting Kierkegaard’s *Sickness unto Death*, talks about “health unto death” in his *Minima Moralia* (58ff.), as well as about a general “gospel of happiness” (63). I would not want to suggest, as does Adorno, that the connection between happiness and unhappiness is so cruel that “there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the construction of camps of extermination.” (63).

Scene 3: Countdown, catastrophe



As Nietzsche wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “‘We invented happiness’ - say the last human beings, blinking.” (10). But what do the last humans in *Melancholia* see when they stop blinking and open their eyes? They see a planet they have not seen before, a planetary dance of death that terrifies them. From that very moment – i.e. from the beginning of part two, “Claire” – it is all about the planet Melancholia. Will it pass by Earth in a so-called fly-by or will everything end with a cataclysmic collision? The countdown has begun. A more grandiose framework of futurology seems to have replaced that of all the petty plans for happiness that circulated in part one. Yet, as Heidegger knew, the radical horizon of *Dasein’s Entwurf* and *Vorlauf* is precisely death. But in the face of total annihilation, everyone is in it together. This means – *contra* Heidegger – that we are no longer dealing with the presentiment of *my own death* but with death of *us*, humanity as such, which makes the future (death) into a *radically* shared and collective matter. What, therefore, is the relation between the existential and eschatological, the phenomenological and the cosmological, the time of the soul and the time of the world, depression and disaster? How is the world going to end (when it has been established that the planet Melancholia and planet Earth are, definitively, on a collision course): With a whimper or a bang?

TINA and the age of the Anthropocene

Let us begin with a seemingly simple question: Why did Lars von Trier choose to make a movie about depression *and* the end of the world? He could easily have chosen to do one or the other, but why a combination of the two? A preliminary answer – in need of further elaboration – is that von Trier appears to depict depression as the personalized and pathological feeling that the future is closed off, frozen once and for all. A conjuncture of psychological and historical time would seem to be at work in *Melancholia*.

“[T]he end of history will be a very sad time”, Francis Fukuyama wrote laconically in his essay “The End of History?” (18), but he had no idea of how sad it would really be. As both Steven Shaviro and Mark B. Sandberg perceptively point out in “Melancholia or, The Romantic Anti-Sublime” and “Apocalypse Then and Now: *Verdens Undergang* (1916) and *Melancholia* (2011)”, respectively, von Trier’s movie seems to index a contemporary situation in which history has ended and all that is left is the perpetual present of representative democracy and neoliberal capitalism.²⁰⁹ There is no future, all there is is what is – “There Is No Alternative,” as Margaret Thatcher triumphantly declared.

As noted in the introduction, this is what Mark Fisher conceptualizes as capitalist realism, i.e. “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.” (*Capitalist Realism* 2). We have also touched upon Fisher’s theoretical affinity with Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, who has entertained a notion of depression as a symptom of “the present collapse of the imagination of the future” (*After the future* 126), and Fredric Jameson who has written extensively on the hypothesis of an end to history, which in his mind expresses “a blockage of the historical imagination.” (*The Cultural Turn* 91). The problem, in other words, is not so much that nothing is left to the imagination, but that imagination is left to nothing (*imagination dead imagine*, as Beckett once wrote). However, in von Trier’s movie the absence of the future is not a conjecture, nor is it due to some imaginative deficit: It is pure fact. The humans in *Melancholia* literally have no future. The question posed by J.G. Ballard quite some time ago – “Does the future still have a future?” (Daily Telegraph, 1993) – is no longer a rhetorical question. Though the movie does not once mention climate change or global warming, it is impossible not to perceive these contextual

²⁰⁹ Cf. Shaviro 6-7; Sandberg 9.

connotations when watching it. Clearly, the sense of living in a time with no future has only been reinforced in an age that now goes by the name of the Anthropocene. While the Anthropocene certainly feeds into the aforementioned problem of an atrophy of historicity – dramatically conceptualized by Jameson as “the death of historicity” (“The aesthetics of singularity” 128) – it is important to take into account the specificity of the problem. As Sylvère Lotringer states in an interview: “The most disturbing aspect of our present situation is the disappearance of history – not the history of the past, but of the future. It is impossible for us to imagine that our history will have happened for no one.” (“The Last Political Scene” 374).

This is indeed the problem that *Melancholia* poses, notwithstanding its lack of explicit references to the current climate crisis. A history that will have happened for no one, but happened nevertheless. In grammatical terms, this fundamental condition of the Anthropocene is the future anterior: The inescapable fact that “there will *have been* humans”, as Claire Colebrook writes (“Anthropocene” 45). This is the light in which human existence – the human species as a whole – is cast today. As Colebrook observes once more, we have obviously always known about our own mortality, and have always been aware that we are going to die some day, but now we have been given an expiration date. Here Colebrook refers to Mikhael Bakhtin, who apparently said that “the problem with the ancient Greeks was that they didn’t know they were the ancient Greeks.” (quoted in: Colebrook, “Extinction” 143). But we *know* that we are the last humans on earth, give or take a few generations. To revisit one final time Bruno Latour and his argument that nowadays “it is the Earth that is undergoing subversion at a dizzying pace and the Economy – that is, second nature – that still runs like clockwork” (7), we can paraphrase this and say that the Earth may not run like clockwork but the clock is ticking all the more so. This would be a reason that, today, the last humans blink: They screw up their eyes and prefer to preoccupy themselves with being *happy* – for as long as it lasts – because they do not want to look reality in the eye. Alternatively, the last humans *roll their eyes* in a final act of postmodern irony.²¹⁰ Either way, what they cannot endure is, not so much the brightness of the new day, as the utter darkness of the infinite night to come.

²¹⁰ Cf. Tobias Pichard Christensen’s Master’s Thesis *David Foster Wallace og det sidste menneske* (19), a highly original exploration into the relation between notion of the last man and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* – where Mario, for example, says: “It’s like there’s some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn’t happy.” (592).

Was Jameson right?

Who could blame them though? Is it so easy to look the end of the world in the eye? Going back to Jameson's famous statement that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism – a statement which has almost become a truism by now – we simply need to ask whether it still holds. An overwhelming number of *post*-apocalyptic movies would seem to indicate the opposite, and to confirm Jean Baudrillard's hypothesis – encountered in the chapter on Houellebecq – that the paradigmatic problem of our time is not that history has come to an end, but that history cannot end (*The Vital Illusion* 38ff.²¹¹). All these cinematic depictions of worlds *after* the end of the world suggest that the end of the world was not *really* the end of the world after all.

In von Trier's *Melancholia* a constant struggle to establish the end of the world is played out. The prologue and the ellipse it creates is one such example. That we cannot take the end of the world for granted; that we perhaps need to revisit and reverse the established consensus that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism, is further implied by the music of *Melancholia*. Steven Shaviro notes that:

“the music holds back from — or indefinitely postpones — the resolution and relief of a final cadence. The world is about to be annihilated; but when there is no prospect of a future, there is also no climax, no “sense of an ending.” The *Prelude* to *Tristan* is not just played in the Prologue. It returns, again and again, throughout the film. Indeed, it is the only nondiegetic music that we hear in the entire course of *Melancholia*. And each time that we hear the *Prelude*, it starts all over again from the beginning. While the deeply ambivalent emotions aroused by this piece of music are never altogether abolished, they are worn down — turned into a kind of cliché — by excessive repetition.” (13).

Instead of an instrumental piece of music building up to a concluding climax or crescendo, *Melancholia* is haunted by endless repetitions, and endless beginnings, as though the music itself is at a standstill, incapable of moving forward towards an end forever out of reach. It is not only in

²¹¹ Of course Baudrillard's focus on information technologies and the almost infinite virtuality of contemporary reality is not something that concerns von Trier a great deal.

a visual or musical sense that von Trier plays with temporality, but also characterologically, in his choice of characters. As Sandberg has drawn attention to, the casting of Kiefer Sutherland in the role of John, and of the less well-known Brady Corbet as the advertising aspirant Tim – with whom Justine suddenly decides to have sex in the sand of the 19-hole golf course sometime during the wedding – is far from coincidental. Both appeared in the television series *24*, with Sutherland in the leading role as Jack Bauer. Sandberg suggests that this must be seen as a “radical play with the idea of incremental time” and as a “[t]ongue-in-cheek commentary on the idea of linear time and the countdown to catastrophe.” (109-110). Thus, even though there is the sense of a countdown in the movie, of a clock ticking, of time running out, we should not forget this recurrent satirizing of the countdown scenario. Von Trier seems to take a slightly skeptical stance toward the inflation that has hit these virtual countdown dramaturgies. Throughout the film he plays with his characters' expectations and fears; at one moment the planet Melancholia seems to be moving away from the earth, and the next it is approaching again. John actually constructs a gauge to be attached to the chest with which, after a five-minute wait, one can see if the planet has moved closer or farther away. It is somewhat similar to the well-known, but essentially cruel Freudian game, in which one repeatedly holds up a toy in front of a child, before hiding it behind ones back: Now you see it, now you don't; *Fort-da* on a planetary scale.



The Eschaton and the world-without-us

Yet, despite all the difficulties that the end of the world poses for the faculty of the imagination, and despite all the games on the part of the director, it all ends with a *bang*, one which Shaviro, strangely, claims is not spectacular. The world ends, and so does the movie. It is an *Eschaton* quite different from that in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, wherein it refers to a ridiculously complicated game played by students at the Enfield Tennis Academy. It would appear that what von Trier wants us as viewers to see, witness, imagine, understand, and fully and truly recognize, is indeed the end of everything. That it all ends here and that there is no possibility of any *post*-apocalyptic framework, since that would imply that things do continue, that there is a history after the end history, a time succeeding the end of time (in this sense, Shaviro is absolutely correct when he writes that *Melancholia* is a very *literal*, even *unironic* movie²¹²). This is also where Houellebecq and Trier part ways, despite their shared preoccupation with a problem that Baudrillard, among others, has laid bare. In Houellebecq's writing we get a world that ends with a whimper, a slow death, a dream of immortality and a post-human afterlife assisted by a radical ontological and technological change, and in terms of geography we get the landscape of *Possibility of an Island*, gently sloping for



²¹² “Von Trier’s own uneasiness with *Melancholia* may well stem from the fact that — for perhaps the only time in his entire career — he has made a film that is non-ironic, heartfelt, and sincere.” (Shaviro 9).

thousands of miles. Not so in von Trier's vision in *Melancholia*: Here we get the bang, the musical theme one final time, the planetary collision and then... Nothing. A black screen and no sound for approximately ten seconds before the credits start to roll. Other than that, nothing; no after-life, no post-apocalypse. Nothing.

In his reading of this ending, Sandberg refers to Peter Szendy who has called *Melancholia* "the only rigorously apocalyptic film in the history of cinema" (quoted in: Sandberg, 116), because the ending is so radical in its commitment to letting the last image really be the last image, and the last humans remain the last humans indeed. Sandberg writes:

"For the final ten seconds of the coda, there is both silence and blackness, and most critics read this total void as von Trier's final nihilistic refusal to give his apocalyptic narrative the usual hopeful remainder. Peter Szendy finds this directorial choice to be the film's greatest virtue, prompting him to frame his entire book *L'Apocalypse Cinéma* around von Trier's drastic refusal to depict the continuation of human life. As Szendy puts it, '*Melancholia* may have been and will likely remain the only film responding this purely and absolutely to the central requirement of an apocalyptic cinema: that the last image should be the totally last image, that is to say, the last of everything—of all images past, present, or future'." (ibid.).

Shaviro takes a similar view, though he approaches the ending, and the film in general, from the perspective of what has become known as *speculative realism*. Drawing upon Ray Brassier's book *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, Shaviro argues that von Trier's movie confronts his viewers with "the literal truth of extinction." (13).²¹³ As such, extinction lies beyond human experience, because we are no longer dealing with what can be conceived, experienced and thought by humans. There is literally no one left to experience and bear witness to the catastrophic event, which therefore, strictly speaking, cannot be called an event. It is simply irreducible to the correlation between world and man, object and subject. There are many synonyms within speculative realism for the spatio-temporal coordinates of extinction, which von Trier obviously cannot show but would nevertheless still seem to leave us with: The world-

²¹³ Here Shaviro refers explicitly to Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction* (see in particular 205ff.).

without-us, the thing-in-itself, the great outdoors, the omnipotence of chaos, an absolute outside, a purely glacial realm.²¹⁴ In this analysis, the residual affect of *Melancholia* as a speculative movie is what Pascal, in his *Les Pensées*, called “the terror of the eternal silence of infinite space”, a phrase of incitement, which Houellebecq by the way is also fond of quoting. One of the founding fathers of speculative realism, Quentin Meillassoux, deciphers Pascal’s phrase as “the discovery that the world possesses a power of persistence and permanence that is completely unaffected by our existence or inexistence.” (*After finitude*, 116). For Meillassoux, the primary concern is with the past, with a past before human existence – conceptualized as ancestry – but in *Melancholia* the concern is with pure posteriority: A future with no human life; a future which persists indifferently, and regardless of the existence of humanity as such. This is what Shaviro intends when he writes that *Melancholia* “makes us aware of a universe that is not centered upon, or necessarily correlated with, humankind.” (10). No (human) memorialization or conceptualization is available or adequate.²¹⁵ It is in this sense that *Melancholia*, according to Shaviro, is a truly “speculative realist’ film.” (ibid.).

A nothingness to the nth degree?

It would appear to follow that von Trier’s *Melancholia* is not only a speculative realist movie about the end of the world, but a deeply pessimistic, if not nihilist one. Repeatedly Shaviro refers to “von Trier’s cosmic pessimism” (11)²¹⁶ and “von Trier’s pessimistic aestheticism” (11), which corroborates Sandberg’s claim that “most critics read this total void as von Trier’s final nihilistic refusal to give his apocalyptic narrative the usual hopeful remainder.” (116). Pascal is not an accidental allusion, but depending on one’s predisposition and intellectual preferences, one could also draw in Schopenhauer, as Shaviro does. As I remarked in the chapter on Houellebecq, these

²¹⁴ See for instance Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* (26; 115).

²¹⁵ A similar reading is offered by Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan in “The Melancholy of Extinction”: “The starker truth with which *Melancholia* confronts us is that the end of humanity cannot and will not be internalised by any process of human memorialisation. Von Trier’s film does not portray any post-catastrophe world from which we might be able to extract a degree of psychological comfort or residual sense of mastery. Rather, the narrative frame is entirely bounded by the impact event, which we witness first in the film’s opening shots and then again at its close. There is no narrative time posterior to the impact and yet for us, the viewers, everything happens in its shattering aftermath, according to the strange non-successional logic of the future-anterior.” (unpaginated).

²¹⁶ The concept of *cosmic pessimism* stems from Eugene Thacker’s book of the same name (2015).

are the obligatory heroes, the *usual suspects* within the philosophical tradition of pessimism, as well as speculative realism. Is the ending of *Melancholia* not, by that very logic, the perfect example of what Schopenhauer calls a *nihil negativum*: An annihilation of a world, which is already *nothing*? An abolition of a will that is a void to begin with; a will to nothing, a will of nothing? As Schopenhauer writes in *The World as Will and Representation*: “What remains after the complete abolition of the Will is, for all who are full of the Will, assuredly nothing (*Nichts*). But also conversely, to those in whom the Will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies, is – nothing.” (412).²¹⁷ Do we not witness something similar in von Trier’s movie: A negation of a negation which does not bring about a beautiful Hegelian *Aufhebung*, but merely transposes the nothingness to a higher order, a nothingness to the nth degree?

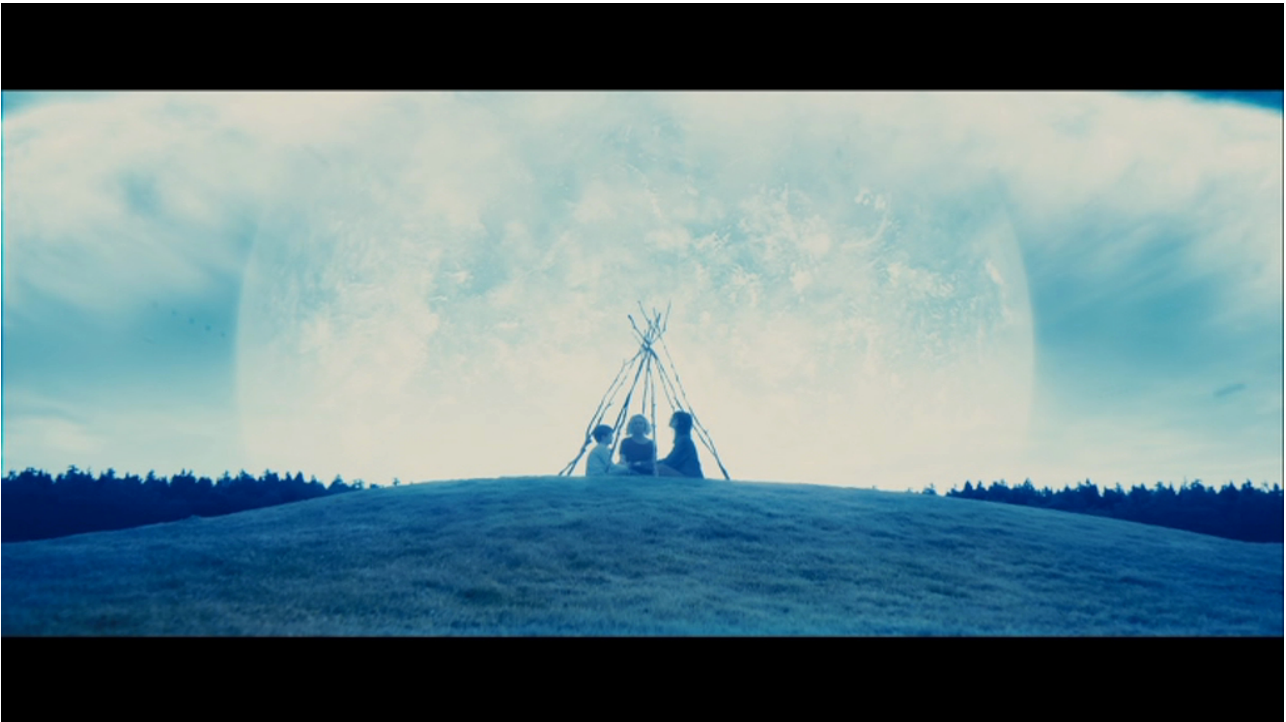
This kind of reading would imply that the planet Melancholia affirms and finally realizes the dream that Justine has been entertaining all along (a depressive’s dream about death, about the end of everything that is), or, rather, that it confirms the Nothing which she has not only *imagined* but *incarnated* herself: The emptiness of time that can be said to be depression’s *Eigenzeit*. For her part, Justine plans (her only plan!) to give the planet a warm welcome, as she lies by the creek, completely naked, bathing in its fluorescent blue light, in an orgiastic scene witnessed by her horrified sister. If she has any desire left, it seems to be inextricably bound up with the planet’s desire for destruction. As she later says to her sister: “The earth is evil. We don’t need to grieve for it” (1:31:20), “[n]obody will miss it” (1:31:29). For all its inevitability, the end of the world or the loss of the future is thus more than a *fact*; it is precisely also a *fantasy*. What David Foster Wallace wrote about suicide – that when depressed people kill themselves they do not do so because “death suddenly [seems] appealing” (*Infinite Jest* 696), but because the pain of depression has reached “a certain unendurable level” (*ibid.*) and these depressed, suicidal human beings are in fact “just being orderly” (“The Planet Trillaphon” 12), since they are in a sense already dead by this time, meaning that suicide merely serves as a (tragic) confirmation of an already established fact – does not apply here. This has less to do with the difference between suicide and collective annihilation, than with the apocalyptic fantasy sustained by Justine. Does the closing spectacle, the planetary collision, not function as the perfection of its fulfillment? Is

²¹⁷ A passage also quoted by Thacker (*In the Dust of Our Planet* 19).

this not what von Trier wants his characters and his viewers to see when they have stopped blinking: That the earth is evil and there is no reason to grieve for it; that the world ends and so much the better, the sooner the better. Is this not the cosmic pessimism and depressive cynicism, embodied by Justine and expressed by the movie?

No.

Scene 4: An eschatology of reparation, an optimism against all evidence to the contrary²¹⁸



Something happens in the ultimate, or should we say penultimate, scene of *Melancholia*. Something that should give us cause to pause for a moment and reconsider the seemingly evident interpretation of Justine as a figure of depressive cynicism, and the film itself as a harbinger of cosmic, speculative pessimism. Although Justine has unyieldingly refused to grieve for the earth, or to participate in her sister's plan to sit on the terrace with a glass of red wine and wait for the end of the world, Justine does not do nothing. She takes care of her nephew and together they build a 'magic cave', a thoroughly transparent tipi. In this final part of the chapter, I shall read this illusion as an impetus for radical hope and optimism, however paradoxical. It is not an eschatology of resurrection but a reparative and fabulative eschatology, orientated toward the future rather than the past, toward the future of things rather than the end of all things.²¹⁹ As Ernst Bloch, whose work will be a source of inspiration throughout, writes: "True genesis is not at the beginning but at the end." (*The Principle of Hope* 1376).

²¹⁸ The latter half of this title is borrowed from Chris Kraus' *Aliens & Anorexia* (202).

²¹⁹ Cf. Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (101).

Suicide in the stable or a glass of wine on the terrace

Any reading of *Melancholia* that lets itself be dazzled by the notion of a world-without-us, of a thing-in-itself, and of an inhuman objectivity, risks forgetting that what the movie is really occupied with is the (inter)subjective and bodily responses of the characters to the crisis they are facing. Shaviro, for example, writes that “[t]hanks to her radical disillusionment, Justine just sees things as they actually are, when separated from our all – too – human perspective.” (10). Ignoring, for a moment, the rather romantic yet relatively prevalent view of the depressed person as one who “sees things as they actually are” – an idea that has already been problematized and complicated, though more remains to be said about it – we can restrict ourselves to noting how Shaviro, in a quite Nietzschean manner, emphasizes the importance of abandoning an *all too human perspective*. As Rosi Braidotti observes in a principled critique of speculative realism addressed at neither Shaviro nor the movie of von Trier, it is a symptomatic feature of this kind of thinking to be “paradoxically dis-embedded and dis-embodied: they are really speaking from nowhere, though they try to hide it. They are unable to account for where they are speaking from. To me, however important it is that we concern ourselves with a-subjective or non-human matter, the politics of locations of the subject is something we cannot let go.” (Braidotti and Vermeulen, “Borrowed Energy” unpaginated). As for *Melancholia*, it can be said with certainty that it does not forget the body or the embedded, embodied perspective on the catastrophe, especially not as far as Justine is concerned. But in general and as already stated, the second part of the movie is a study of the various ways in which the different characters deal with the disaster: The (end of the) world *for us*.²²⁰

During the evening everything seems to be fine, and Claire is in a state of relative calm, falling asleep outside in a garden chair. But the next morning something is wrong: John panics, jotting down notes, making calculations by the telescope, knowing fully well that the fly-by is – and perhaps was all along – an illusion. This is the last we see of him alive. Claire wakes up and, using the gauge device described above, discovers the truth. Panicking, she searches frantically for John

²²⁰ The question is this: How to respond to an imminent disaster without resorting to over-reaction that is, trying to do something, anything, chasing one hysterical solution after the other, or to under-reaction, that is doing nothing in a state of cynical pessimism?

and eventually she finds him in the stable, dead beside the horses; he has taken the pills that she bought earlier, just in case.

In a very conscious and concise way, the film presents several models for action following the characters' realization that the planet Melancholia plans to stay on course and crash into planet Earth. John, the man of natural science, is the first to crack: He who preached to his wife that everything was going to be okay, that she needed to stay calm and at all costs refrain from doing anything stupid like killing herself, is precisely the one who commits suicide first, because he cannot face the prospect of the planetary collision. Neither can Claire for that matter, who has been all too dependent on her husband's soothing tales of scientific validity. When these are undermined by the course of events, her only wish is to sit on the porch and drink a glass of red wine with her sister and son. She wants them to spend the remaining time together, "to do it the right way." (1:55:49). However, this plan is not well received by Justine. Enjoying some decadent *bourgeois* pleasures when the end is near? No thank you. How about a song, Beethoven's Ninth, something like that?, Justine sarcastically inquires of her sister, and in fact this is exactly what Claire wants:

Justine: You want to meet on the terrace, and sip wine, the three of us?

Claire: It would make me happy.

Justine: Do you know what I think of your plan?

Claire: No. I was hoping you might like it.

Justine: I think it's a piece of shit.

Claire: Please, Justine. I just want it to be nice...

Justine: Nice? Why don't we meet on the fucking toilet?

(1:57:08).

This is the point at which Justine begins to remind everyone of her mother, who left the wedding early and does not cherish any illusions whatsoever. The mother is the perfect cynic. So, usually, is Lars von Trier, especially in his movie *Antichrist*. When Justine declares that everything tastes like ashes, or that the Earth is evil and no one will miss it, it seems like a perfect example of depressive cynicism. Except that this is not where Justine or the movie *Melancholia* ends. At the

last moment the plot and character deviate from this trajectory and the logic that the director had otherwise ruthlessly set up. One must therefore avoid the seduction of these kinds of refrains, so typical of Lars von Trier: Life is evil, chaos reigns, nothing matters anymore, everything amounts to something merely akin to playing the violin as the ship goes down.

After having realized what is happening, Leo is absolutely terrified and approaches Justine. “Dad says there’s nothing to do then. Nowhere to hide”, he says. Justine replies: “If your dad said that, then he’s forgotten about something. He’s forgotten about the magic cave.” They go to look for some pieces of wood with which to build the 'magic cave', and are sitting right there in it as the world and the movie come to an end. But how are we, more concretely, to read this final scene if it is not an instance of von Trier sadistically toying with the viewer, tempting us to sustain yet another silly fantasy? What is the alternative if he is not mocking us for being so stupid and naïve as to believe that there was any hope left?



The paranoid vs. the reparative, the shelter vs. the tipi

In the essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick develops a distinction between paranoid and reparative practice. Wanting to achieve total clarity and certainty about future events, the

paranoid mode, according to Sedgwick, shuts out any kind of unpredictability, uncertainty and contingency. A paranoid person wants first and foremost to avoid surprises, and thus lives in close proximity to a sense of the inevitable (147). This person prefers to be *right* rather than *redeemed*. It is more unacceptable and unwanted for something to be “unanticipated” than “unchallenged” (133). The reparative is an alternative model and closely related to depression, to what Sedgwick – with Melanie Klein – calls the depressive ‘position’.²²¹ This position is not only the place for a dissolution of the self but for a potential reparation as well, insofar as the depressive – as opposed to the paranoid – position is not based, and does not rely, on suspicious delusions or projections of pure hate. It is characterized by a different set of affects, an ambivalence of love *and* hate, and is not completely alien to the experience that it is, or can become, possible to ‘repair’ one’s fraught relationship with one’s self, with reality and its various subjects and objects (150).

The fundamental divergence between the two positions or practices can be perceived as two very different futurologies: “The unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance of paranoia” (13) versus the more multi-directional future-orientation of the depressive position. The closed circuit of the alert and cautious mode of paranoia versus the more open and porous state of depression. Necessity versus contingency. The paranoid gaze is one of inevitability and fatalism, a gaze sparkling with necessity: It is meant to be like this; it has to be like this; it cannot be any different. What is, is absolutely necessary. The plan, no matter how dramatic or destructive, must be taken to its ultimate limit. Conversely, the depressive and reparative gaze is not as rigid in terms of time and temporality, nor as afraid of what might happen. It is more gentle, flexible, even naïve, but this also implies that there is less comfort in the depressive position, since it is not

²²¹ Central to Kleinian theory is the relation between infant and mother, and the depressive position is taken to be a developmental achievement over the paranoid, because love and hate – or the good and the bad breast – are no longer perceived or felt as two widely separate objects. In *Notes on some schizoid mechanisms*, Klein thus writes: “With the introjection of the complete object in about the second quarter of the first year, marked steps in integration are made. This implies important changes in the relation to objects. The loved and hated aspects of the mother are no longer felt to be so widely separated, and the result is an increased fear of loss, states akin to mourning and a feeling of guilt, because the aggressive impulses are felt to be directed against the loved object.” (149). As Kristeva writes in her book on Klein: “Klein’s depressive position offers yet another innovation, one that will eventually encourage creativity: the feeling of depression mobilizes the desire to *make reparation* to objects.” (*Melanie Klein* 70). It must be noted in passing that this dissertation is not particularly committed to the field of psychoanalysis and thus, that the whole mindset is not adopted *tout court*. In this regard it is significant that the scene in the ‘magic cave’ at the end of *Melancholia* is not formed by an Oedipal triangle, but by a mother, a son and their sister/aunt: “It is notable, for example, that the family of three in the film’s closing shot is made up of two sisters and their child. There is no father in this iterative copy of the nuclear family.” (Honig 633).

characterized by the absolute certainty that marks and comforts every paranoid person. As Mark Fisher writes (in a context that has nothing to do with this one except for the relation between depression and paranoia): “The depressive cannot even lay claim to the comforts that a paranoiac can enjoy, since he cannot believe that the strings are pulled by any one. No flow, no connectivity in the depressive’s nervous system.” (*Ghosts of my Life* 61).

A comparison might be useful here: In Jeff Nichols' movie *Take Shelter* (2011), the protagonist Curtis (Michael Shannon) is a paranoid-schizophrenic whose apocalyptic visions – of a kind of motor oil rain falling from the sky – turn out in the end to be true. In the meantime, before his visions have been collaborated by reality, he takes every precautionary measure to ensure that he and his family will be safe when the disaster arrives. He thus buys a container and builds a shelter in his backyard, buried underground in an attempt to make it impenetrable and totally bulletproof. He is thus a paranoid who acts accordingly. In terms of structural engineering, the contrast with *Melancholia* could not be starker; affect and architecture go hand in hand.



Take Shelter, Jeff Nichols, 2011

In *Take Shelter* Curtis – just like John in *Melancholia* – cannot live in a world where everything is not determined in advance. He wants no surprises, takes no chances, and does not want to be

unprepared. He is a survivalist prepper. This is why he builds a tight shelter under ground, whereas Justine constructs a transparent and provisional tipi on the top of a hill. Her final reparative act, which emerges from her depressive position, is thus more attuned to the precariousness of the relations in and of life, more open towards what Sedgwick calls the “the heartbeat of contingency.” (147).

Contingency, loop time and the value of fiction

Contingency, however, is not a given. As Sedgwick draws our attention to, contingency is a continuous work. In relation to *Melancholia* the obvious question is: Which contingency? The world is undeniably coming to an end, *Melancholia* arrives, the disaster occurs, there is no doubt about it. But according to Jean-Pierre Dupuy this is precisely how we – meaning humanity as such – should approach any future catastrophe: As something that has *already happened*. As something that could not *not* have taken place. In works such as *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé: Quand l'impossible est certain* (2004) and *Petite métaphysique des tsunamis* (2005), Dupuy advances the argument that a coming catastrophe should be perceived in the future anterior, i.e. as something that will have been. This is the condition, he emphasizes, for any practice wanting to deal with climate catastrophes: That we adopt a perspective from the future, from which we can look back on the past that is our present. Dupuy calls this *loop time*, where the temporal movement takes the form of loop:

“The catastrophic event is inscribed into the future as a destiny, for sure, but also as a contingent accident: it could not have taken place, even if, in *futur antérieur*, it appears as necessary... if an outstanding event takes place, a catastrophe, for example, it could not not have taken place; nonetheless, insofar as it did not take place, it is not inevitable. It is thus the event’s actualization – the fact that it takes place – which retroactively creates its necessity.” (quoted in: Žižek, *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* 150)

The paradoxical logic is that contingency follows from necessity; that necessity, in a dialectical manner, falls back into contingency; and, that we only become free to do something about an imminent catastrophe if we perceive it as our destiny, as a foregone conclusion. This also seems to

explain the elliptical structure of Trier's movie, which precisely outlines the temporal loop conceptualized by Dupuy. The only potential way to avoid the catastrophe is, paradoxically, to accept it as necessary and inevitable.²²²

Crucially, the temporal projection called for by Dupuy is based on a symbolic fiction, "a metaphysical ruse" as Dupuy himself terms it.²²³ Put slightly differently, reparation takes the form of a fabulation.²²⁴ The condition for confronting and countering the catastrophe is not knowledge but belief. In *Melancholia*, this is what John realizes too late: In a dangerous or potentially lethal situation, science is not enough; knowledge alone is insufficient. Something irrational is needed, an illusion of some kind. Although Justine prides herself on knowing things (1:31:59), we should not, as already intimated, see her as a melancholic who is necessarily in possession of some secret and special knowledge. This would be a paranoid logic, if we were to adhere to Segdwick's conceptual pair, and in a sense science generally operates in a *paranoid* way as its entire edifice is

²²² This is roughly how Slavoj Žižek formulates it in his reading of Dupuy (see for instance: *The Puppet and the Dwarf* 164), though Žižek surprisingly does not evoke Dupuy in his later and rather sporadic analyses of *Melancholia*.

²²³ Cf. Dupuy, *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé* 194.

²²⁴ It is Henri Bergson who developed a concept of fabulation in *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion* (*Two sources of morality and religion*) from 1932. According to Bergson, fabulation – sometimes translated as myth-making or storytelling – begins with the experience, feeling, or even just an anticipation of a catastrophe. It is when one looks a threatening or traumatic event in the eye that the possibility of fabulation emerges. In Bergson's words: Fabulation is the act that carves out an event in or from "the continuity of the real." (*Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, p. 133). Notwithstanding the fact that the context for Bergson's discussion of fabulation is, in the main, religion and religious societies – the question animating his investigation being: Why do rational human beings form irrational beliefs? – it is clear that fabulation borders on the field of aesthetics and art given that it deals with the domain of the imaginary at large; with the creative and affective reactions "of man to his perception of things, of events, of the universe in general." (162). Indeed, Bergson mentions children's games, theater and hero-worship as examples of other non-religious acts of fabulation (108). It is in this specific sense that I am using the concept of fabulation in what follows, with one important modification: For Bergson, the function of fabulation is strictly conservative. Through myths, superstitious beliefs, religious structures etc., it creates obedience and social cohesion, which is why fabulation remains largely a negatively charged concept in Bergson's book, belonging primarily to primitive, so-called 'closed' societies. For Gilles Deleuze, the thinker who 'discovered' the concept in Bergson, fabulation plays a radically different role. Deleuze does not take fabulation to be a reactionary and preservative force but an almost revolutionary force, fueling changes and transformations. The 'false' and hallucinatory qualities of fabulation are thus regarded by Deleuze as purely positive. In the book *Negotiations*, Deleuze states: "We should take up again the Bergsonian notion of fabulation and give it political sense." (174). That is actually all Deleuze has to say about fabulation here. But in his books *Bergsonism* and *Cinema II* he elaborates more. In the latter book on cinema, fabulation is tied to what is called *the power of the false*. For more on the concept of fabulation, see Ronald Bogue's "Bergsonian Fabulation and the People to come".

built on the need to know all. This is the direction in which most readings of *Melancholia* go: Sandberg – who only allots a few words to Justine’s depression – refers to her as “a mystic depressive”, “the one with special depressive vision.” (13). Shaviro, who does assign some attention to the phenomenon of depression, writes – as has already been quoted – that she “just sees things as they actually are.” What these rather romantic ideas of a depressive realism – often inspired by Freud’s assessment that the depressed or melancholic person had “a keener eye for the truth than others who are not melancholic” (“Mourning and Melancholia”, 206)²²⁵ – tend to forget or overlook is that any real act requires a speculative *as if*. As Nietzsche remarks in *The Birth of Tragedy*, knowledge kills action. Belief or illusions, on the other hand, resuscitate the possibility of action. For Dupuy, it is vital to act *as if* the worst that can happen has in fact already happened in an attempt to avoid the inevitable outcome. Is this not Justine’s *modus operandi*? As Claire says to her sister at one point: “You have it easy don’t you? You just imagine the worst thing possible.” (1:41:01).

This is precisely what Justine is doing, though not in order to fall back into the comforting pillows of cynical pessimism, where the lack of illusion dictates that nothing really matters anymore, so one might as well do exactly nothing on the very last day.²²⁶ Nor does she imagine the worst in order to overreact in a paranoid fashion.²²⁷ As argued, the final scene in *Melancholia* unequivocally refuses this interpretation. Justine imagines the worst thing possible – the one thing she is able to imagine – and *then* acts by fabricating a myth, which takes the form of a declaration of love. It is as though the depressive’s imaginarium is specifically suited to perform the temporal loop that Dupuy calls for. Nothing could be easier, in this state of mind and being, than to regard the future as a thing of the past and imminent events as foregone conclusions.

²²⁵ Justine’s own statement is not the only thing that leads scholars and critics in this direction. Lars von Trier himself entertained the idea in an interview, in which he quite coquettishly mentions how his analyst told him “that melancholics will be more level-headed than ordinary people in a disastrous situation, partly because they can say: ‘What did I tell you?’” (Thorsen, “Longing for the End of All”, unpaginated).

²²⁶ According to Slavoj Žižek, the cynic is “the victim of the most radical self-deception...the cynic misses the actuality of the appearance itself.” (*Event* 89). As he writes elsewhere: “The cynic who ‘believes only his eyes’ misses the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, and how it structures our experience of reality.” (“The Big Other Doesn’t Exist”, unpaginated). What the cynic fails to see is that illusions and symbolic fictions are not necessarily, nor only, strategies for *escaping* reality, but can be strategies for *transforming* this very reality.

²²⁷ What paranoia and pessimism share is a state of absolute certainty, but while the paranoid tends to overreact on the basis of that certainty, the pessimist does not act at all.

Openness towards contingency is, in a sense, necessarily depressive, insofar as depression is permeated by a recognition of the precariousness and perishability of all things within a subjective, objective and cosmic horizon.

Justine's reparative final fabulation is of course an illusion. But as von Trier seems to say, it is a necessary illusion even if the world ends; or rather, because it ends. It is necessary to have something to believe in, because belief does not sabotage but supports the transcendental conditions of any given practice. To quote Wallace Stevens' *Adagia* once more: "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe it willingly." (163). Or as Freud wrote: "The value of a fiction depends on how much one can achieve with its help." (*The Question of Lay Analysis* 194). The reference to Freud is in fact slightly misleading, since Freud was skeptical as to the general value of fictions and illusions, not least in *The Future of an Illusion*, in which religious beliefs in particular were denounced as childish and immature (43ff.). In her article on von Trier's *Melancholia*, "The illusion of a future: hopelessness in contemporary cinema", Sylvia Chong refers to this book by Freud, even inverting its title. However, her argument is pretty close to Freud's: Chong writes that *Melancholia* denies "the possibility of a future" in a kind of emblematic sadism on von Trier's part towards his audience, whom he leaves "in deeper despair" (109). She views the film as a disruption of Hollywood's "dream factory" (107), and while it is certainly true that the movie does not exactly fit the prototypical Hollywood scheme, it does not necessarily follow that von Trier abandons the domain of dreams, fantasies and illusions *tout court*. Chong dubs the building of the 'magic cave' as Justine's "concession" to Leo, and in a similar vein states that the tipi "barely" constitutes even "the pretense of a shelter." (115). However, this is precisely the point: The tipi is not to be so readily dismissed, particularly not because it is *not* a shelter. The "pretense" and the make-believe of the 'magic cave' is what makes the final scene a hopeful one; the illusion of a future does not reinforce hopelessness; rather, it is what hope is made of. In contrast to Chong, as well as Shaviro, for whom this act by Justine is illusory (12) and thus useless, I would contend, and in what follows conclude, that the fabrication of the 'magic cave' is useful

precisely insofar as it is illusory. We must in other words question whether hope is awakened only by perfect edifices and marvelous palaces.²²⁸

Radical hope, utopian realism

In this sense, the movie instantiates a version of the kind of radical hope described by Jonathan Lear in *Radical Hope* – a book whose cover is illustrated with a tipi very similar to the one in *Melancholia*. The context for Lear’s book is the cultural devastation faced by the Crow Native American tribe around the end of the 19th century. Interviewing the former chief Plenty Coups, Lear writes that he “would like to consider hope as it might arise at one of the limits of human existence [...] What makes this hope *radical* is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is.” (103). As Bonnie Honig points out in a reading that compares Lear’s concept of radical hope with von Trier’s *Melancholia*, it is clear that:

“Justine’s magic cave will not ‘work,’ not if surviving catastrophic collision is the aim [...] And, indeed, we gain a new perspective on Plenty Coups, with von Trier’s help, because in Justine’s ritual, the aim is clearly not survival [...] Justine, Claire, and maybe even Leo all know these twigs and branches would not protect them from world destruction. And yet at the same time, building the magic cave is not just a going through the motions either [...] The importance of this flimsy little structure at the end of the film may be signaled by its absence from an earlier sequence, at the beginning of the film.” (630).

Commenting on Honig’s article, James Martel writes that *Melancholia* offers “an anti-teleological rendition of hope” (644), in that it is a hope based on contingency rather than teleology; a hope that it is not rooted in any idea of a time *after* the apocalypse, or in the dream of a hereafter succeeding the catastrophe. Nor is it a hope that goes from the present to the future, since the

²²⁸ Sedgwick also points to the paradoxical hope in the depressive position/reparative practice: “Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.” (146).

future is not the object of hope – nor its effect – but its cause; it is hope as a temporal loop, even if only for a split second before extinction.

The hope activated at the end of *Melancholia*, which leads to an exit from both a comic and a tragic *modus operandi*, is even more radical than that in Lear's book, since the destruction that Justine and her family face is not so much cultural as biological. Their situation is beyond any doubt, objectively hopeless.²²⁹ But as Kierkegaard writes in *Sickness unto Death*, religious faith – which I here take to be a synonym for hope – is most relevant when “a person is brought to his extremity, when humanly speaking, there is no possibility.” (38).²³⁰ The hope in *Melancholia* is, in a word, hope by virtue of the absurd.

Emerging – not in spite of the fact but – because we are at the end, this radical hope could even be considered a specific form of optimism. In *The Principle of Hope*, whose main focus is the eschatological ‘not yet’ (*noch nicht*), which opens a horizon of expectation in the midst of the elimination of expectation as such, Ernst Bloch calls for *an artificially conditioned optimism*, distinguishing it from “unconditional pessimism”. In his characteristically poetic style, Bloch writes: “Unconditional pessimism [...] promotes the business of reaction not much less than artificially conditioned optimism; the latter is nevertheless not so stupid that it does not believe in anything at all. It does not immortalize the trudging of the little life, does not give the humanity the face of a chloroformed gravestone.” (445). For Bloch, this artificially conditioned optimism was the way to

²²⁹ Honig, for instance, describes her own article as “[a]n effort to understand the capacity to act hopefully in hopeless conditions” (623).

²³⁰ Interestingly, some recent scholarly work has been devoted to the affinity between Lear's book and Kierkegaard's thinking. In an article on eschatological faith in *Fear and Trembling*, where we find a distinction between the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith, John Davenport quotes precisely this passage. Davenport emphasizes how Silentio, the author of *Fear and Trembling*, stated “that Abraham 'did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world'.” (91). This eschatology in Kierkegaard, according to Davenport, is directed toward the future but only in order to be blessed *on this side*. John Lippit, in his article “Learning to hope: the role of hope in *Fear and Trembling*”, goes even more directly into the question of radical hope in Kierkegaard. Going to great lengths to distinguish radical hope from both naïve hope and a lack of hope, he argues that Abraham, embodying a troubled, radical hope, “serves as a precursor of the love that *Works of Love* describes as 'believing all things' and 'hoping all things.’” (132). It is indeed in *Works of Love* that Kierkegaard, quoting from First Epistle to the Corinthians writes that “[l]ove hopes all things.” (246). Crucially, however, von Trier's movie deviates from the rather individual experience of the *eschaton* to be found in Kierkegaard (Davenport 88), but also from the individual version of radical hope in Lear. As Honig points out, in *Melancholia*, “hope insists on the importance of the held hands and not on the courage of a radical individual with radical hope. Here, courage is a trait of intersubjective alliance and not the individual virtue in the name of which such alliances have all too often been destroyed.” (633).

go, precisely because, in glaring contrast to unconditional pessimism, it does not work as an anesthetic; it does not function as a cloth soaked in chloroform; it is not a pretext for doing nothing.

This kind of optimism has little to do with what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism, or with what Lovecraft, in a more blunt manner, calls bland or smirking optimism. It is not the optimism that underpins the ideology of happiness, as exposed by Barbara Ehrenreich, and according to which Justine's depression and unhappiness is immoral, a failure of will, or even a secret will. Rather, it is an optimism *conditioned* by the recognition that things really *are* bad, that the times are dire and the end is alarmingly near.²³¹ What is important here are less causes than effects. There is no *cause for* optimism, but there are important *effects of* optimism. Conversely we might say that there is every reason and cause to be pessimistic, but no effects. This is why Bloch was able to argue during the Second World War – during which his wife's family were deported to a concentration camp, and he and his wife were forced into a wretched exile in the U.S. – that “pessimism is paralysis per se, whereas even the most rotten optimism can still be the stupefaction from which there is an awakening.” (*The Principle of Hope* 446).²³² In fact, this principle of hope – or utopian impulse – is what endows *Melancholia* with a certain realism. Instead of subscribing to the romantic notion of depressive realism – Justine as the one who knows, who sees things how they really are – our reading of *Melancholia* would benefit from following Bloch even further, to say that there can be no realism worthy of the name without a certain element of utopia. What is at stake are not the realistic qualities of utopian endeavors but, conversely, the utopian dimension of realism proper (ibid. 223). This claim is supported by Jurgen Moltmann, who in *Theology of Hope* – a work immensely influenced by Bloch but with a much more direct theological tinge – writes that “[h]ope alone is to be called ‘realistic’ because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught.” (25). In fact, as Moltmann points

²³¹ Lear also distinguishes rather sharply between radical hope and “wish-fulfilling optimism.” (115).

²³² At the end of her book *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed carries out an illuminating reading of the movie *Children of Men* (2006), where she writes “[p]essimism can offer a way of inhabiting the world through shielding oneself from possibility [...] We can examine the cynicism of disbelief as both a defense against contingency, the possibilities kept open by the ‘hap’ of what happens, and as a reasonable response to situations that seem hopeless.” (178). Quoting Jacques Derrida – “[w]hat is going to come, perhaps, is not only this or that; it is at last the thought of the perhaps, the *perhaps* itself.” (quoted 198) – she concludes that the ending of the movie is a hopeful, even happy one, because it performs this ‘perhaps’: “The happy future is the future of the perhaps.” (198).

out, it is conventional realism – “the celebrated realism of the stark facts” (25) – that is utopian, which is to say unrealistic, while utopian hope alone is realistic. This could be the radical and paradoxical lesson of Lars von Trier’s movie.

Melancholia would then be a movie that leads nowhere, except perhaps to a kind of hope. The image that thus remains after everything has ended, the screen has gone black and Wagner's music has abated, is an image of a miniature of humanity that is heading for that moment when everything seems to be moving towards the end, and yet also towards a new beginning of some kind. It is an image of the last humans, who at the edge of total collapse are reconciled in an act of cosmic reparation.²³³ However, for Bloch it was all-important to really realize utopian dreams and hopes; the essential content of hope is not hope, he wrote (*The Principle of Hope* 315). Potentialities are not enough in the end, as an end in themselves; imaginary solutions to real problems are not gateways to utopia. But in *Melancholia*, we do not get any realization of hope – which is not to say that the outcome is irrelevant, but that faith and hope do not depend on it – though we do get the gesture, the impulse, and the provisional yet real and concrete image of what Bloch called an “architecture of hope.” (ibid. 17). We get more than “stark facts”, and more than a chloroformed version of being; we get the utopianism of the not-yet, the realism of the maybe-not.

²³³ A somewhat similar reading is made by Brad Evans and Julian Reid in *Resilient Life*. They approach the movie as initiating “a post-biopolitical aesthetic; an aesthetic of life’s exhaustion” (188), and compare it with the works of Samuel Beckett (189), but recognize and are sensitive to the optimism that paradoxically resides in Justine’s exhausted condition, which has “nothing fatalistic” to it (189). Like me, they use a Deleuzian vocabulary to capture Justine’s act of storytelling, her fabulation (182), though they place perhaps too strong an emphasis on Justine as a “seer” (179) and a “prophet.” (188). As for Deleuze, he argues in *Cinema 2* that the genre of cinema has a special relationship to belief (165), and that this is a relationship that must be reckoned with in our modern world: “The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world which looks to us like a bad film.” (166). He adds: “The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible, which can only be restored within a faith. Belief is no longer addressed to a different or transformed world [...] Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link.” (166). For Deleuze, we need reasons to believe in this world, with an emphasis on *this* world, since given the history of the cinema and the current state of affairs, it is no longer a matter of “believing in another world, or in a transformed world.” (167).

Smile and die: The paradoxically happy end of *Melancholia* (threshold)

In *Melancholia*, Justine's depression takes the form of a deepening sense of alienation from the other guests at the wedding, her family, and her husband. What separates Justine from all the other guests is that, whereas all of them take part in a bourgeois futurological game, Justine is the only one who does not constantly plan ahead, anticipate what is going to happen in the near or distant future, or project hopes and expectations into the not-yet. In one shot, she sits motionless in the background, while the other guests dance in the foreground, indicating a sharply delineated desynchronization between individual and society, and a stark juxtaposition of two temporal orders. She sits, staring into the nothingness that is not only in front of her but deep within, tearing her apart from the inside out. As Wittgenstein once wrote: "The world of the happy is quite different from the world of the unhappy."

The abyss between the frantic, futurological activity of the environment and Justine's complete lack thereof, reveals more than the nature of Justine's 'illness'; it gives us an insight into a particular idea of the 'healthy' individual. The healthy individual is one who is able to plan ahead in order to maximize his or her (feeling of) happiness. In *Melancholia*, happiness is a moral imperative imposed upon Justine from every side. What is at stake, so the movie seems to suggest, is something greater than Justine's individual life. At stake is sociality as such. Every tiny moment of unhappiness and every sign of depression is an intrusion in the social order, a violation of the moral regime. In the eyes of the other characters, her happiness is not a matter of objective circumstances, genetic dispositions or external factors, but solely a matter of Justine's own choice. As Coca Cola declares in one of their latest, importunate campaigns: "Choose happiness". Obviously Justine is in no position to choose that, but she does try to put a good face on it. She knows she is perceived as a "bad person" – to use Zupančič's phrase once again – because she feels bad, because she is unhappy and depressed. So she smiles and she smiles and she smiles. Smile or die? Smile and die.

But then the planet Melancholia comes, and everything and everyone are about to vanish from the face of the earth. At first glance this only seems to confirm Justine's almost masturbatory masochism, fulfilling her apocalyptic fantasies and her longing for the end of everything. But as we have seen, it is not that simple. In the end, Justine does not fall back into a

state of comforting cynicism, nor does she indulge in what could be called the illusion of illusionlessness. It is helpful, at this point, to repeat what Mark Fisher wrote in *Capitalist realism*, that the logic and position of the depressed person is dangerously close to the one of capitalist realism: "The 'realism' here is analogous to the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion." (5). As I have argued this is not where Justine or the movie ends. The end result is not cosmic pessimism – as Shaviro seems to argue – nor is it a cynical and capitalist version of depressive realism. The realism in question is one of a different kind, a realism based on what could be rather on what is. Even though Justine has called her sisters plan to drink a last glass of wine on the terrace "a piece of shit", and totally refused to build castles in the air (not literally, of course), she takes part in a final act of illusion as she builds a 'magic cave' on the top of the hill where she, her nephew and her sister can face annihilation together. Refusing, in the last instance, to abandon the realm of illusions, Justine thus engages in an act of reparation in the form of a fabulation. In a sense we thus find a strange similarity between Lars von Trier and David Foster Wallace, in that both artists accentuate a reparative and fabulative practice as a way out of depression. The crucial point of divergence is that in von Trier's movie, this practice assumes a wholly different cosmological if not eschatological dimension. In my anti-romantic and anti-pessimist reading – is pessimism not the ultimate romantic attitude? – the 'intention' of *Melancholia* is not to confront the characters or the audience with the pure void, the ultimate *horror vacui*, or the world-without-us, but to erect a principle of hope which only becomes relevant when there is none; a hope that emerges at the horizon of pure hopelessness, or even at the prospect of the end of the world. The 'magic cave' is an eschatological reparation which has depression, simultaneously, as its affective or pathological point of departure, and as the place from which departure is actually taken in the same process. In this reading, the end – despite von Trier's promise or warning that he has done away with such things – does indeed become a happy ending.

Epilogue

Three Songs

“Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof”, sings Pharrell Williams on the monster hit “Happy” from 2014. By opening my conclusion with this song, I cannot really hope to make up for the fact that music is conspicuously absent from this dissertation, in which I have analyzed books by David Foster Wallace and Michel Houellebecq, works by the ready-made artist Claire Fontaine, and the movie *Melancholia* by Lars von Trier. The tune is relevant in this context, not only because it enounces, spontaneously and quite unabashedly, the contemporary ideology of happiness in a sing-along refrain and to an dance-able beat, but more importantly because it gives an outline of the architectural counter-image to depression. Depression is not a room without a roof but, on the contrary, a room without a floor; a fall into a never-ending abyss, a bottomless bottom. There is nothing to break the fall, no ground to stop, much less soften the fall. Alternatively, there is a sense in which there is always a bottom below, as Malvina Reynolds sings in the song with the telling title “There's a bottom below” (1970): “Do you think you've hit bottom?/ Do you think you've hit bottom?/ Oh, no/ There's a bottom below/ There's a low below the low you know/ You can't imagine how far you can go down.” In depression, there is indeed *a low below the low you know*. So naturally, one does not clap along. One does not get up, but stays in bed. Exit Pharrell, enter Le Tigre: “Do you wanna stay in bed all day? (yeah)/ Do you remember feeling any other way? (no).” (“Much finer”, 2001). In reality though, depression in this dissertation is not understood in spatial or architectural, but temporal terms. Even if depression defies definitive definitions, I work under the presupposition that depression is a temporal pathology: That the time of depression is a time outside time.

As a temporal pathology, depression – as we have seen throughout this dissertation – can be characterized as a desynchronized rhythm, or more specifically, by a sense of futurelessness that is both personal and political. I suggest that depression is the (pathological) feeling that history has come to an end, that the future is closed off, frozen once and for all. The focus of my work is not the past, on what Ernst Bloch would call the pathos of what has been, i.e. lost people or lost objects. Instead my focus is on the future, on the not-yet, and in particular the not-yet, which is no more. A present that has aborted all futures – could it not be said by now that this inversion of

Leibniz's dictum – that the present is pregnant with the future – captures the temporality of depression, its hopelessness, its futurelessness?

Following the course taken by the matter itself, I make the case that the abortion of the future that occurs in depression entails that all that remains is a kind of eternal present full of pain and horror, and the feeling that this is all there is, always has been and always will be. “It’s like horror more than sadness. It’s more like horror”, says the clinically depressed Kate Gompert in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. “I can’t stand feeling like this another second, and the seconds keep coming on and on.” Somehow answering Le Tigre’s question “[d]o you remember feeling any other way”, she laconically states that “when you’re in the feeling you forget. The feeling feels like it’s always been there and will always be there.” (74). She cannot remember feeling any other way. This is what the feeling of depression feels like for Kate Gompert, and what I call the metafeeling of depression, which at times in Wallace's writing is expressed and embodied as the feeling of not feeling anything at all.

Moreover, an emphatic sentence at the very end of Houellebecq’s novel *The Possibility of an Island* reads: “The future was empty”. As I argue, it is important to emphasize the use of the past tense: The future *is* not empty, the future *was* empty. From the point of view of the novel, the future is already considered a thing of the past. In Lars von Trier’s movie *Melancholia* this is literally and brutally the case: There is no day after tomorrow because there is no tomorrow at all. In Claire Fontaine's work the future seems completely over-determined by the twin mechanisms of financial speculation and debt that drive the neoliberal economy. Yet, as we see in the chapter on the simultaneously revolutionary and depressed avant-garde duo, it is more complicated than that, insofar as it is the present more than the future that has been lost, according to their works and texts.

As an aesthetic category, depression is an experience, a problem and a response. Sometimes the problem and the response switch places. In the works that are under scrutiny here, depression – a problem in itself, an experience in its own right – always functions as a response to a particular problem, or a set of problems. Relying on a Deleuzian vocabulary, I claim that this response is symptomological rather than etiological. One might say that people are depressed because they (feel or imagine that they) have no future, but it might also be said that they have no future

because they are depressed; causality is tricky, at best. This also means that the depressive works discussed here can be seen as various ways of responding to a problem, or even in some cases as procedures of problematization that can produce a problem where there was commonly believed to be no problem the first place. In the four analytical chapters, the problems that have emerged are competition in Michel Houellebecq, addiction in David Foster Wallace, debt in Claire Fontaine and happiness (and the end of the world) in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*: Four pertinent problems in and of the world of today, all of them occasioned by the temporal pathology of depression.

In each of the works, depression is presented – in one way or another – as a symptom of the historical crisis – or crises – that emerged following the *Les Trente Glorieuses*. What the analyses show is that this crisis is, to a great extent, not only a crisis of temporality, but a spiritual crisis as well. In keeping with the framework of the dissertation, the crisis of spirit is understood as more than a purely personal problem of depression as a kind of spiritual despair. Following Bernard Stiegler I understand spirit as a category that pertains to the political economy. The problem of spirit has shown itself to be quite urgent, and as having both aesthetic and political implications.

Three Objectives

Overall my project can be said to be about the art, politics and spirit of depression. I do not preoccupy myself particularly with the question of what depression *is*, but focus far more on *how* depression works, and on what contemporary depressive literature, film and art *does*.

The work has three broad objectives. The first is conceptual/theoretical: To offer an illuminating angle on the concept of depression. The second is analytical: To put to work the concept of depression that has been arrived at, in order to shed new light on some artists whose works are, irrespective of their contemporaneity, already relatively canonical, having received scholarly attention that could fill libraries on their own. The third is critical/political: To use depression as a prismatic vantage point from and through which to expose some aspects of the present (and pathological) condition of the capitalist economy, pursuing the idea – adapted somewhat freely from Raymond Williams and used for my own purposes – that depression is “a contemporary structure of feeling” (128), expressing an “undeniable experience of the present.” (134).

In this way, the present study of depression in contemporary cultural artifacts is conceived as an exploration of the *Zeitgeist*, or to use another German phrase, a *Gegenwartsdiagnose*. However, it was of equal importance to let the works' own cultural analyses of the present transpire in and through the scenes, just as it was paramount to avoid relying on easy criticism and preconceived conclusions. A study of depression is not an excuse to criticize everything that is wrong with the world. That said, it was an ongoing ambition to take seriously the *Anklagen* that the depressive *Klagen* harbor in the respective works. Pace Freud – who considered that the melancholic *Klagen* and *Anklagen* were always, in the last instance, aimed at the melancholic person herself, meaning that the analytical task required the discovery of what the melancholic self *in reality* had to say about herself – the underlying (methodological) argument of the preceding pages is that it is equally, if not more important to look at and listen to what the very same self has to say *about reality*. With respect to the analysis of aesthetic works of depression, one important implication was thus that attention must not only be directed toward any given work's view of depression, but also and above all toward the view of the world that the depressive experience occasions in the works. Not because the depressed artist is a seer, a prophet with privileged access to the secrets of the world, or a truth-teller who has something special to say about society, but because the aesthetic configuration of the depressive experience in all its temporal and affective dimensions can itself have something important to say about that society.

In the analysis of the particular art works, I therefore attended to their constellation of symptoms, listening to the *Klagen* and *Anklagen* that surface from the depths of depression and, like an echo, spread to the content, formal texture and stylistic strata of the works in question. This was, moreover, the reason that I committed myself to a symptomological scenography as the dissertation's mode of inquiry, as well its mode of presentation. Precisely because each scene – as a small optical and acoustic machine – is intended to express a twofold experience: An experience of depression – the symptoms of depression – and an experience of the contemporary capitalist world – depression as a symptom in itself, of something other than itself. It is perhaps even possible at this point to understand depression as a kind of phenomenology of the political economy. This would explain the seemingly strange synthesis of phenomenological psychiatry and

philosophy *and* so-called radical political theory; the odd couple of, for example, Karl Jaspers and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi.

I advocate, in any case, that a great deal may be gained conceptually by drawing liberally on both these traditions, not least if another and fourth objective is to frame the study of depression as a contemporary history of alienation. However, what some of the works show us is that the problem relating to and resonating with the phenomenon of depression is not that we are separated from our selves, each other, our work and our life in general. The problem is not one of anomie, nor of the pulverization of social bonds; this is, at most, an epiphenomenal problem. Rather, these works tell us that the core of the problem of alienation is proximity rather than distance; the total integration of work and life rather than a brutal separation between the two; a 'warm' affective economy rather than a cold and abstract one. To repeat, for the final time, the line from Andrew Solomon's *Noonday Demon* that functions as a kind of refrain in this dissertation: "We are depressed not because we are so far removed from what we want, but because we are merged with it." (326).

The fact that there are no causations and no explanations for the phenomenon of depression in the works in question does not mean that there can be no context, nor critique. Instead, there are a constellation of symptoms, an articulation of problems, and also some responses. These responses to the problems are obviously not to be understood as solutions. But there is something to be said for the various ways in which the works offer experimental suggestions for possible therapies, remedies or cures, however suspicious and outdated this may sound. As we have seen, the response in Houellebecq's *oeuvre* assumes a technological character in the (failed) attempt to overcome the human condition as such (though this endeavor is not without a spiritual dimension, not least in his latest book *Submission*). In David Foster Wallace's body of work the cure is one of radical empathy – or in the Kierkegaardian idiom of this dissertation, a work of love – which can potentially bring about a new trajectory of attachment and attention and, consequently, restore the protentional relation to the other. Claire Fontaine's *praxis* is far more political, if not revolutionary, emphasizing how depression can be seen as a contemporary strike form: A human strike. Finally, Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* offers, in my reading, a paradoxical act of cosmological if not eschatological hope at the very literal edge of extinction.

As different as in most respects they are, what the four artists share in their respective anatomizations of depression is an orientation toward the future rather than the past – thus calling into question the identity of depression so defined and the traditional conception of melancholia – a non-romantic notion of depression – thus inviting a rethink of the hypothesis of depressive realism and complicating the common assumption that the affective default mode of depression is cynicism and pessimism – while still maintaining a non-pathological view of depression – thus providing a helpful correction of the understanding of depression to be found in the diagnostic system of biomedical psychiatry.

Three Paradoxes

Never having been a great believer in scientific findings within my field of study, I must admit to having found a certain dialectics at work in the works analyzed. This dialectics takes the form of three paradoxes: The paradoxical existence of depressive art as such; the paradoxical comedy of depressive art; and, the paradoxical hope or utopia sometimes made manifest in depressive art. To illustrate this – and by way of concluding the conclusion – I will restrict myself to the third of these paradoxes. In my analysis of Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* I argue that we find a quasi-dialectical relation between despair and hope; between depression and utopia. One side of this dialectical relation is the one revealed by Bane in the Batman film *The Dark Knight Rises*: There can be no despair without hope. But conversely, what we see in von Trier's film is that there can be no hope without despair either.

As Jürgen Moltmann writes in his book *The Theology of Hope*, which together with Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* has been a great source of inspiration for my reading of the movie: "Thus despair, too, presupposes hope. 'What we do not long for, can be the object neither of our hope nor of our despair.' (Augustine). The pain of despair surely lies in the fact that a hope is there, but no way opens up towards its fulfillment." (23). The proper eschatological question according to Moltmann is the one once formulated by Kant: What may I hope for? (166). But this question is inextricable from and concomitant with a second: Of what may I, or should I despair? These two questions are, in a sense, one and the same. Perhaps depression, or depressive art, is able to show us an alternative to the dead end-dualism of escapism or maintenance of the *status quo*; between what Bloch calls rotten optimism and unconditional pessimism. Given the choice of

the two, Bloch opted for optimism, given that it is not so stupid “that it does not believe in anything at all. It does not immortalize the trudging of the little life, does not give humanity the face of a chloroformed gravestone.” (*Principle of Hope* 445).

However, if one has spent a long time living in a malevolent and hopeless state of depression, it is undoubtedly the case, to quote William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, that “the machinery for hoping requires more than twentyfour hours to get started, to get into motion again.” (445).

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Art Works

All by Claire Fontaine

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Take Shelter (director: Jeff Nichols), 2011.

Abstract

Scholars within various fields generally agree that depression has developed into the prevalent and paradigmatic psychopathology of our time with all the moral, economic and political implications that this entails. In the western world, depression has become a privileged category through which the contemporary subject is defined (and diagnosed); it has gradually achieved an iconic status way beyond the walls of psychiatry and academia. For that reason alone it seems pertinent for a cultural analysis that wants to lay claim to a certain criticality and contemporaneity to dwell on the phenomenon of depression. This is indeed what I attempt to do in this dissertation, *Going nowhere, slow - scenes of depression in contemporary literature and culture*, through analysis of books by David Foster Wallace and Michel Houellebecq, works by the ready-made artist duo Claire Fontaine and the movie *Melancholia* by Lars von Trier. The underlying premise of my project is that there is no better way to understand the problem of depression than to relate it to the problem of time, i.e. to understand depression in temporal terms, as a chronopathology, as a disease in and of time. Synthetizing the seemingly strange bedfellows of empirical, phenomenological psychiatry (Karl Jaspers, Thomas Fuchs etc.) and so-called radical political theory (Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, Mark Fisher etc.), depression is viewed as the pathological feeling that history has come to an end, that the future is closed off, frozen once and for all. Based on a method of what I call scenographic symptomatology, which means simply that the dissertation is built around specific scenes with an accompanying set of symptoms, an analysis is initiated that is divided into four chapters, all of which are variations on this personal, political if not planetary problem of futurity. In this way the present study is conceived as a way of contributing to the cultural analysis of the present, a *Zeitdiagnose* as the Germans would say, with the important caveat that it is the works' own diagnoses of the times that are the focus of attention throughout.

Resumé (in Danish)

Forskere inden for vidt forskellige felter er generelt enige om, at depression har udviklet sig til vor tids paradigmatiske psykopatologi, med alle de moralske, økonomiske og politiske implikationer dét indebærer. I den vestlige verden er depression blevet en privilegeret kategori gennem hvilket det nutidige subjekt i vid udstrækning defineres (og diagnosticeres); det har således også opnået en ikonisk status der rækker langt ud over psykiatriens og den akademiske verdens mure. Alene af den grund synes det relevant og påtrængende for en litteratur- og kulturvidenskabelig analyse, der vil gøre krav på en vis samtidighed og kritikalitet, at dvæle ved depressionsfænomenet. Det er hvad jeg gør i denne afhandling, der bærer titlen *Going nowhere, slow - scenes of depression in contemporary literature and culture*, og analyserer bøger af David Foster Wallace og Michel Houellebecq, værker af kunstnerduoen Claire Fontaine og filmen *Melancholia* af Lars von Trier. Afhandlingens underliggende præmis består i at opfatte depression som en temporal patologi, som en kronopatologi, og mere specifikt som et tab af (evnen til at forestille sig en) fremtid. Projektet tager udgangspunkt i og forsøger at syntetisere en række empiriske studier inden for fænomenologisk filosofi og psykiatri (Karl Jaspers, Thomas Fuchs etc.) og såkaldt radikal politisk teori (Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, Mark Fisher etc.). På den baggrund iværksættes en analyse af de æstetiske objekter, hvor depressionsfænomenet relateres til en (vestlig) verden, som er ankommet til historiens afslutning, hvor der ikke længere er nogen fremtid, hvis man med fremtid forstår noget andet end det, der allerede er. Den krise, som depressionen kropsliggør, bliver i den forstand et symptom på en mere generel krise. Med hensyn til både undersøgelsesmetode og fremstillingsform arbejder jeg med en scenografisk symptomatologi, hvilket betyder at afhandlingen er bygget op omkring specifikke scener med et ledsagende sæt af symptomer; tilsammen udgør disse scener fire analytiske kapitaler, der alle er variationer over den personlige, politiske hvis ikke ligefrem planetære futuritetsproblematik. Således er afhandlingen tænkt som et bidrag til det, man på tysk kalder *Gegenwartsdiagnose*, med den afgørende modifikation at det er værkernes egen depressive samtidsdiagnostik, der er omdrejningspunktet her.