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# **Estranging History: Alterity and Capitalism in Speculative Fiction**

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## **Lay Summary**

The aim of this dissertation is to examine several narrative strategies by which contemporary speculative fiction politically engages with its historical context of production. Drawing on recent Marxist literary criticism, my thesis maintains that narrative works of speculative fiction, due to their alterity function, perform an estrangement effect on historical reality. This textual effect has the political potential to challenge hegemonic and regressive ideas concerning historical progress. Through its construction of narrative worlds that refuse to represent objective reality, speculative fiction engages with its historical context of production by conceptualising and interpreting social development in a totalising manner. The main point of contention of my thesis is that it is precisely due to its alterity function that speculative fiction can provide a suitable model to render visible the role of fantasies in the organisation of capitalist social practice. The thesis outlines the political potential of narrative estrangement in contemporary speculative fiction to critically interrogate historicity in the context of global capitalism.

## Abstract

Speculative fiction has been traditionally studied in Marxist literary criticism, following Darko Suvin's paradigmatic model of science fiction, according to a hierarchical division of its multiple subgenres in terms of their assumed inherent political value. By drawing on an alternative genealogy of Marxist criticism, my dissertation attempts to achieve a non-hierarchical understanding of the estrangement connecting all varieties of speculative fiction. The objective of my thesis is to outline the political potential shared across the full spectrum of speculative fiction, along with its specific narrative strategies by which it critically engages with its historical context of production. My main point of contention is that speculative fiction performs an estrangement effect on historical reality that can potentially render visible the role of fantasies in the organisation of capitalist social practice. This narrative effect enables an anamorphic perspective by which the novel interprets and interrogates and conceptualises historical reality in a totalising manner.

Each chapter deals with texts that productively engage with their context of production and are exemplary of major currents in contemporary speculative fiction. Chapter 1 deals with China Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy and its metaphorical use of Weird manifestations to assert a Marxist understanding of economic crises and promote revolutionary praxis. Chapter 2 examines neo-slave narratives in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and argues that these novels implement speculative fiction tropes to render visible the afterlives of slavery in contemporary conditions of existence. Chapter 3 explores contemporary dystopian fiction in Jeff Noon's *Falling out of Cars* and Mike McCormack's *Notes from a Coma*, showing how the texts challenge cultural studies of postmodern schizophrenia. Chapter 4 analyses the use of social reproduction as the basis for patriarchal violence in the feminist narratives of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Anne Charnock's *Dreams Before the Start of Time*.

## **Contents**

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Marxism as Narrative World-Building Method.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Speculating on the Afterlives of Slavery.....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Challenging Cultural Studies through Dystopian Fiction.....</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Extrapolation and Social Reproduction.....</b>	<b>183</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>Woks Cited.....</b>	<b>241</b>

## INTRODUCTION

From its very moment of inception, Marxist literary criticism has maintained an apprehensive and, at times, hostile stance towards the fantastic in art and literature. This genealogy can be traced back to the conflicts between Surrealism and the Communist International, to Georg Lukács' attacks on non-mimetic arts and literature, and, more pertinently to the subject of this research, Darko Suvin's categorical rejection of fantasy in his theory of science fiction. Within mainstream Marxist criticism, fantasy has been often targeted with claims of misrepresenting empirical reality and, hence, the historical contingency of social struggles. On this basis, fantasy has been accused of presenting a 'mystified' or ahistorical vision of social reality. These points of criticism have ranged from elaborate literary models to absurd allegations disguised in the form of *ideologiekritik*. China Miéville provides one illustrative example of this latter tendency in Nadezhda Krupskaya's denunciation of Kornei Chukovsky's *The Crocodile* – a forbidden children's book in the Soviet Union during the 1930s – as 'bourgeois fog' on the grounds of 'distorting the facts about animals and plants', namely due to the empirical fact crocodiles do not stand on two legs and smoke cigarettes ('Marxism and Halloween'). Similar objections can be found in Suvin's accusation of folk tales on the basis that '[t]he stock folktale accessory, such as the flying carpet, evades the empirical law of physical gravity' and, likewise, 'evades social gravity' (21). In spite of the absurd nature of these charges, this view of the fantastic prevails in the still-influential Suvinian model of fantasy, which has dominated Marxist criticism.

Marxist scholars have traditionally aimed to compartmentalize the forms of estrangement in speculative fiction. This taxonomic effort has been often pursued in hierarchical terms with the aim of comparing the political primacy among estranging genres of narrative fiction – science fiction, fantasy, horror, the Weird and Gothic. The aim of this research, on the contrary, is a

response to China Miéville's invitation in 'Cognition as Ideology' to explore the specificity of estrangement which unites all forms of speculative fiction, that is, to shift literary criticism away from the 'epiphenomenal distinctions that have long been deemed definitional to the field, to the fundamental alterity-as-estrangement shared *across* the field: what it does, how it does it; and what we might do with it' (244; emphasis in original). Miéville's functionalist perspective invites literary critics to consider estrangement in its specificity as a narrative device with singular textual effects, structural mechanisms and political potentials. As with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of literature as assemblage, Miéville's invitation follows the claims that '[t]here is no difference between what about book talks about and how it is made' (*A Thousand Plateaus* 2). Mainstream Marxist criticism, as I aim to argue, has advanced too rapidly in assuming the inherent political value of genres within speculative fiction, a goal which has often been pursued through dubious criteria concerning the text's plausibility, historical self-consciousness and truth-claims with regard to empirical reality.

The purpose of my research is to examine the narrative strategies by which contemporary speculative fiction politically engages with its historical context of production. Drawing on recent Marxist literary criticism, I will aim to argue that narrative works of speculative fiction, due to their alterity function, perform an estrangement effect on history. Through its construction of estranging narrative worlds that refuse to represent objective reality, speculative fiction offers interpretative frameworks through which the text assesses historical development in a totalising manner. Narrative estrangement in speculative fiction performs an anamorphic effect on perspective which both relativizes dominant perceptions of history and provides an alternative hermeneutic to interpret historicity. My main point of contention is that it is precisely due to its alterity function that speculative fiction can provide a suitable model to think and render visible

the role of fantasies in the organisation of capitalist social practice. The thesis outlines the political potential of narrative estrangement in contemporary speculative fiction to critically interrogate history in the context of global capitalism. Each chapter deals with speculative fiction texts that productively interrogate contemporary history in different areas of the capitalist social-material world.

The selected works of speculative fiction comprise authors from diverse Anglophone nations – United Kingdom, United States and Ireland – and are limited to the post-2000s historical period, with only a few exceptions. The global scope of this selection, as I hope to demonstrate, exhibits the widespread relevance of the genre in capitalist social formations across different geographical and cultures parameters. While attentive to cultural parameters and differences, these narrative works examine and explore the underlying systemic capitalist underpinning of the social issues they depict. These texts demonstrate the political potential of speculative fiction to deal with specific historical events and social tendencies in the context of contemporary global capitalism. Each chapter deals with narrative works belonging to broader and pivotal movements of speculative fiction – New Weird fiction, neo-slave narratives, feminist SF and dystopian fiction – utilising estrangement with clear political aims. These texts also represent the specificity and validity of the speculative fiction as a genre as depicted in their combination of components from its multiple subgenres. In this sense, these novels challenge the dominant generic determinations found in traditional Marxist literary criticism. Speculative fiction works which do not belong to the contemporary period function, within the context of the thesis, to exemplify the ongoing political implementation of estrangement in literary movements emerging in the past but still relevant in the present. The literary selection thus aims to prove the global significance of speculative fiction to interrogate contemporary historicity in capitalist social formations.



From a Suvinian perspective, one immediate problem emerges from the selection of this object of study: the choice of speculative fiction, a broader and less-defined term, rather than science fiction or fantasy. This choice, as I aim to demonstrate, follows a methodological and theoretical purpose: on the one hand, my research is focused on the estrangement performed not only by science fiction or fantasy but novels whose themes and tropes blur generic determinations – Weird fiction, fantasy, dystopian fiction, the Gothic – yet still fall under the umbrella term of speculative fiction; on the other hand, I do not aim to pursue a taxonomic effort of selecting the most adequate criteria by which genres should be compartmentalized, but, rather, to analyse the political potential of the estrangement shared across the full spectrum of this type of narrative fiction. It is only within the broader category of speculative fiction, as I aim to demonstrate, that estrangement can be assessed in its specificity, detached from the epiphenomenal criteria dominating traditional Marxist criticism, as a narrative device with particular political potentials and effects.

Any type of Marxist criticism aiming to study estrangement in speculative fiction has to deal with the category of ‘cognitive estrangement’ elaborated by Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) – the most influential work within this field of study. As Mark Bould remarks, ‘[h]owever one responds to it, Suvin’s definition (and its elaboration) itself arrived like a novum, reordering SF theory and criticism around it, idiosyncratically and contingently wedding SF to Marxism’ (‘Introduction’ 19). Suvin introduces the term cognition in order hierarchically to separate the rational estrangement of science fiction from the ‘anti-cognitive’ laws of fantasy (21). According to Suvin,

SF ... is a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition... Estrangement differentiates SF from the

‘realistic’ literary mainstream extending from the eighteenth century into the twentieth. Cognition differentiates it not only from myth, but also from the folk (fairy) tale and the fantasy. (20)

Fantasy, while performing an estrangement effect over its depicted reality, does not ‘rationally’ account for its alterity and is thus ‘committed to the interpretation of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical world and its laws’ (21). It is due to its ‘inimical’ stance towards ‘the empirical world’, that Suvin claims that fantasy is a ‘subliterature of mystification’, ‘proto-fascist revulsion against modern civilisation’ and ‘overt ideology plus Freudian erotic patterns’ (21; 85; 82). Similar to the estrangement effect (*Verfremdungseffect*) deployed and theorised by Bertolt Brecht, cognitive estrangement involves the notion that science fiction encourages readers to engage in rational terms with the text and draw parallels between its represented reality and their own social environment. Crucial to this divide is the idea that whereas SF worlds are plausible and posit an ‘alternative reality on the same ontological level as the author’s empirical world’, fantasy worlds are implausible and predicated on impossible laws (87). Due to this use of reality-claims as criteria for literary criticism, Suvin claims that the ‘commercial lumping of [fantasy] into the same category as SF is thus a grave disservice and rampantly socio-pathological phenomenon’ (21). From this point of view, the category of speculative fiction constitutes an even more dangerous trend further obscuring the political progressiveness of SF in its association with regressive genres such as fantasy, horror and the Gothic.

The model of cognitive estrangement has dominated, albeit not without modifications or partial disagreements, Marxist literary criticism as shown in the works of Carl Freedman and Fredric Jameson. Drawing parallels between Suvin’s theory of SF and Georg Lukács’s analysis of historical realism, Freedman argues in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000) that the category

of cognitive estrangement is ‘not only fundamentally sound but indispensable’ (17). Freedman, nonetheless, addresses the problematic category of cognition; a term whose reality-claims, as he admits, have caused ‘generic distinctions on the basis of matters far removed from literature and genre’ (17). Attempting to solve this predicament, Freedman clarifies that ‘cognition proper is *not*, in the strictest terms, exactly the quality that defines science fiction’, but, rather, what he refers to as ‘*cognition effect*’ (18; emphases in original). The cognition effect does not depend on ‘any epistemological judgement external to the text itself on the rationality or irrationality of the latter’s imagining, but rather... the attitude of the *text itself* to the kind of estrangements being performed’ (18; emphasis in original). This inventive move succeeds in shifting cognition from the empirical and locating it within the internal reality of the text. As Miéville points out, this is a distinction which should force Freedman to consider the proximity between fantasy and SF, namely by ‘acknowledging that unscientific but *internally plausible/rigorous*, estranging works share crucial qualities of cognitive seriousness’, and revealing that ‘what is usually deemed the specificity of ‘sf’ can be shared by ‘fantasy’’ (‘Introduction’ 44; emphasis in original). In spite of this accomplishment, as Miéville notices, ‘strictly speaking ‘the text itself’, of course, has *no* attitude to the kind of estrangements it performs, nor indeed to anything else’ (‘Cognition as Ideology’ 235; emphasis in original). As a consequence of this conceptual ambiguity, Freedman still maintains Suvin’s hierarchical divide, claiming that science fiction should be separated ‘from the irrationalist estrangements of such essentially ahistorical modes as fantasy or the Gothic’ (44). In this sense, while questioning the use of truth-claims in relation to empirical reality in generic determinations, Freedman is unable to overcome his bias in favour of science fiction in his use of binary oppositions such as rational/irrational and progressive/regressive.

The study of fantasy and the fantastic within Marxism criticism – including its cultural, literary and social dimensions – has been dominated by a crude materialism using instrumental notions of rationality and plausibility as criteria for generic determination. Freedman’s Suvinianism, as Istvan Csicsery-Ronay remarks, involves the ‘vulgar Marxist position that a work of art is about *presenting alternatives* to social-political realities as they are conceived by Marxist theory... exposure, rational plausibility, the primacy of the political-economic explanation’ (293-294; emphasis in original). Understood in these terms, overtly fantastic genres are at a clear disadvantage with regards to its realist counterparts. This reductive Marxist view of the fantastic has been similarly expressed in the analysis of the relation of the text to its historical context. While fantasy is characterised as an ahistorical genre whose estrangements are irrational and mystifying, the science-fictional future, in Freedman’s view, ‘is portrayed with full awareness of the temporal and social distance that separates it from the society in which the novel is produced, but with equal awareness of the driving historical forces that line the two eras in a continuum that is social, economic, political, and cultural in nature’ (*Critical Theory* 44). These points are reiterated in Fredric Jameson’s *Archeologies of the Future* (2005). Jameson condemns fantasy in similar terms to Suvin and Freedman: the genre promotes a regressive ethics of Good and Evil, is ‘technically reactionary’, depicts a ‘non-historical vision’ analogous to ‘modern racialisms’, ‘expresses the aristocratic ideologies of the medieval aesthetic’ and promotes ‘an imaginary regression to the past and to older pre-rational forms of thought’ (58; 60; 63; 64). Similar to Suvin’s objection on fantasy, in Jameson’s view, ‘[w]hether legitimately or not, the scientific pretensions of SF lend the Utopian genre an epistemological gravity that any kinship with generic fantasy is bound to undermine and seriously to unravel’ (57). What Jameson refers to as epistemological gravity implicitly follows

the same logic as previous denunciations of fantasy, namely the genre's allegedly overt indifference in representing 'real' history and empirical conditions of existence.

### **Gothic Marxism: Historical Materialism and the Fantastic**

Gothic Marxism seems to be a far more adequate tradition to formulate the estrangement common to all speculative fiction. This line of Marxist criticism uses historical materialism as a method to explore the role of the fantastic as an intrinsic part of social practice. In *Profane Illuminations* (1995), Margaret Cohen outlines the principles of this tradition and its opposing stance towards the vulgar materialism of mainstream Marxism. Gothic Marxism, according to Cohen, 'charts the contours of a Marxist genealogy fascinated with the irrational aspects of social processes, a genealogy that both investigates how the irrational pervades existing society and dreams of using it to affect social change' (1-2). Likewise, in Michael Löwy's view, Gothic Marxism is 'a historical materialism sensitive to the marvellous, to the dark moment of revolt ... a reading of Marxist theory inspired by Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and the English Gothic novel' (22). According to Cohen, the defining features of this tradition are: a 'notion of critique moving beyond logical argument and the binary opposition to a phantasmagorical staging more closely resembling psychoanalytic theory'; a theoretical valorisation of 'culture's ghosts and phantasms as a significant and rich field of social production rather than a mirage to be dispelled'; and an 'appeal to the fissured subject of psychoanalysis to modify the conscious and rational subject dear to practical Marxism' (11, 11, 6). This methodology does not aim to reject rationality but to overcome the reified versions of rationality and irrationality reproduced by capitalist ideology. Marx himself, as Steven Shaviro points out, constantly appealed to a 'Gothic codex' to describe capitalism: 'Marx's *Capital* begins, after all, by seeing the 'monstrous [*ungeheure*] accumulation of

commodities’ as the symptom of something gone terribly wrong in liberal political economy’ (2). This Gothic vocabulary, as Andrew Rowcroft points out, ‘is much more than a rhetorical flourish, but an essential representational strategy for expressing the capitalist social relation’ (192). Gothic Marxism thus attempts to render visible the already present considerations of the fantastic in Marx’s critique of political economy.

There is a vast Marxist tradition which has analysed the fantastic as a crucial component to understand the social and cultural fabric brought about by capitalism as a mode of production. Considerations of the fantastic, as Miéville points out, ‘stretch from the Frankfurt School Marxists and Walter Benjamin on Surrealism, Kafka and Disney, to Ernst Bloch on Utopia, to *trotskyisant* surrealists... and the sloganeering of the situationists attempting to turn the fantastic and dreams into class weapons’ (‘Introduction’ 40). One could add to this genealogy the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis aiming to integrate Marxism with Lacanian psychoanalysis but, also, as Mark Fisher does, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s schizoanalysis as proposed in the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Flatline Constructs 27)*. According to Fisher, ‘Marx ... is describing an economic system, capitalism, which is positively Gothic in its ability to transform matter into commodity, commodity into value, and value into capital’ (*Flatline Constructs 27*). Capital, as Fisher points out, ‘does not exist in any substantial sense, yet it is capable of producing practically any kind of effect’ (*The Weird and the Eerie 64*). Similarly, for Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism ‘is the thing, the unnameable’ (*Anti-Oedipus 176*). The fantastic is not a mere metaphor but an essential aspect of Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism as social practice: ‘the fantastic form of a relation of things’ rather than among human beings, and according to which ‘the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses’ (*Capital Vol I 43*). The Marxist thesis of commodity fetishism, as

Slavoj Žižek points out, is ‘that *the things (commodities) themselves believe in their place*, instead of the subjects: it is as if all their beliefs, superstitions and metaphysical mystifications, supposedly surmounted by the rational, utilitarian personality, are embodied in the ‘social relations between things’’ (*Sublime Object* 32; emphasis in original). From this point of view, any approximation to ‘reality’ must take into account its ‘monstrous’ distortion at the level of social praxis in the form of commodity fetishism.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Žižek outlines his theory of fantasy as a support of reality. Fantasy, according to Žižek, ‘is on the side of reality: it is, as Lacan once said, the support that gives consistency to what we call reality’ (44). Likewise, ideology is not simply a false consciousness of social reality which must be located at the level of knowledge and illusory beliefs, but, rather, operates as ‘a distortion which is already at work in social reality itself, at the level of what the individuals are *doing*, and not only what they *think* or *know* they are doing’ (28; emphases in original). This distinction is crucial also to achieving a better understanding of how speculative fiction – a narrative and fictional form already disavowing any approximation to reality – might engage with historical reality. Speculative fiction can be interpreted as following the Lacanian thesis ‘that it is only in the dream that we come close to the real awakening – that is, to the Real of our desire’ (47). In capitalist social practice, ‘[i]deology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself’ (45). In this sense, any approximation to social reality must consider this illusion already structuring social relations and the organization of the means of production.

While commodity fetishism is probably the domain in which the link between fantasy and social reality has been most commented upon, Marx follows this same thesis in his study of capital

accumulation and financial crises. Marx reiterates this point in his analysis of interest-bearing capital, claiming that the notion of ‘capital as value that reproduces itself and increases in reproduction, by virtue of its innate property as ever persisting and growing value ... leaves far behind the fantasies of the alchemists’ (*Capital Vol III* 519). The three volumes of *Capital* demonstrate how these fictions are not simply mirages to be dispelled by rational thinking, since they actively intervene in both the organisation of social relations and the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production. Financial markets are, perhaps, the most illustrative example of the complex interrelationship between the imaginary and the material. In *Imagined Futures* (2016), Jens Beckert argues that ‘imaginaries of the future are a crucial element of capitalist development’ and ‘fictionality... is a constitutive element of capitalist dynamics, including economic crises’ (4-5; 12). Fictional expectations in the economy, Beckert argues, are ‘not free-floating fantasies’ since they have a direct influence over financial speculation and capitalist crises, as well as being ‘socially constrained through the distribution of wealth and power’ (60). In this sense, the capitalist world is irreducible to a naïve empiricism since fantasies are embedded in the functioning of the capitalist mode of production.

### **The Critique of SF Theory**

Marx’s analysis of the complex relationship of the fantastic and capitalism complicates the instrumental notion of rationality promoted by Suvin. In spite of this longstanding tradition of Marxist criticism drawing parallels between the fantastic and capitalism, the Suvinian paradigm of SF has only been a target of significant criticism in the past two decades – a period which overlaps with the popularisation of the term speculative fiction in literary criticism and cultural production. Films like Guillermo del Toro’s *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) and literary works such as



Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy (2000-2004) or Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy (2014) have combined tropes from previously distinct genres and deployed fantasy themes with clear radical political purposes. Japanese anime series such as *Texhnolyze* (2003) and *Ergo Proxy* (2006) have equally raised awareness concerning political issues, such as climate change and eugenics, through a novel combination of fantasy and science fiction. As Andrew Milner notes, 'the empirical convergence between SF and fantasy does seem to be a 'fact' of contemporary cultural life' (220). However, merely pointing the examples of the cultural production mixing these genres is not enough to refute the model of cognitive estrangement. The Suvinian paradigm of SF has been challenged in two defining instances: the 'Marxism and Fantasy' (2002) symposium in the journal *Historical Materialism* and the anthology *Red Planets: Science Fiction and Marxism* (2009). In spite of the promising theme of the symposium, only China Miéville's 'Editorial Introduction' and Mark Bould's essay directly challenged Suvin's model of fantasy and SF. The other group of essays, as Csicsery-Ronay points out, had the more constrained goal of figuring 'out in what form, and by what name, fantasy might be approved in Marxist thought' (290). In addition to this, the 'theoretical pluralism' of the symposium, showed that 'its participants have no shared idea about what 'fantasy' or 'the fantastic' mean' (290). Both Freedman and Jameson maintained their usual criticism towards fantasy. Freedman's 'A Note on Marxism and Fantasy' (2002) asserted that J. R. R. Tolkien's 'Middle Earth', and by extension fantasy in general, 'leaves out most of what makes us real human beings living in a real historical society' (263). Jameson's 'Radical Fantasy', likewise, while allowing 'for a certain kind of historical trace in fantasy', still promotes the idea that the genre constitutively involves a displacement of politics to an ethics Good and Evil which 'is incompatible with history' (274). The theoretical heterogeneity of the symposium exhibited Marxist criticism's long withstanding indifference and hostility towards fantasy.

Since the ‘Marxism and Fantasy’ symposium, scholars have contributed to developing a new understanding of fantasy and science beyond the traditional scheme of Suvin’s theoretical framework. In order to achieve this goal, Marxist literary critics have attempted to dismantle and critique this paradigm of SF theory. The criticism directed towards the Suvinian paradigm can be divided into two key associated points: the ideological connotations in the category of cognition and the historical self-consciousness ascribed to SF. These two points have operated as the hierarchical measure by which SF exerts its supposed political primacy over the illegitimate and irrational estrangement deployed by its cognate genres. Suvin’s bias towards science fiction has been the main obstacle in reaching any type of theoretical understanding of the estrangement shared across the field of speculative fiction. It is only through the dismantling of the divide between SF and fantasy that Marxist criticism can develop a model of estrangement specific and shared by the full spectrum of speculative fiction.

In the ‘Editorial Introduction’ to the symposium, Miéville challenged the notion of scientific rationality promoted by the Suvinian paradigm of SF. Miéville points out that the ‘pseudo-science of so much sf... radically undermines the notion that sf deals in a fundamentally different kind of ‘impossible’ than fantasy’ (45). The speculative fiction author and radical feminist Joanna Russ had already stated this argument in ‘SF and Technology as Mystification’ (1979), remarking that technology – either in its technophobic or technophilic version – operates as a mystification tool used by people in privileged positions of power to conceal the economic and politic underpinning of social issues: ‘The technology-obsessed must give up talking about technology when it is economics and politics that are at issue’ (37; 39). Theodor Adorno, likewise, had already asserted that ‘[a] technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself’ (121). In the afterword of the *Red Planets* anthology, ‘Cognition as Ideology’ (2009), Miéville similarly

argues that Suvin's notion of rationality is 'based on capitalist modernity's ideologically projected self-justification: not some abstract/ideal 'science', but capitalist science's bullshit about itself' (240). According to Miéville, the cognitive effect performed by the science-fictional text – 'rationally' accounting for its alterity – is one of ideological *persuasion* related to the 'function of (textual) charismatic authority' rather than a proof of its rational logic (238). The cognition effect is 'created even though neither writer nor reader finds cognitive logic in the text's claims. Instead, they *read/write as if they do*' (239; emphasis in original). In addition to this, the mainstream Marxist model prescribing 'a 'scientific rationality' that is 'progressive' in opposition to 'reactionary' 'irrationalism' is, generously, roughly nine decades out of date – a bad joke after World War I, let alone after the death camps' (241). In this sense, science-fictional texts do not perform a cognitively or progressively superior form of estrangement to fantasy ones. Cognition in science fiction is thus a profoundly ideological effect whose effectiveness does not rely on its cognitive logic or plausibility but the appearance of control over the language of science.

The attribution of a degree of historical self-consciousness is directly linked to science fiction's supposed ability to rationally account for the estrangement it produces. This is an argument maintained by Suvin and Freedman but also, most surprisingly, Jameson – a literary critic who claims that literature is a socially symbolic act and that 'history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form' (*Political Unconscious* 20; emphasis in original). As Darren Jorgensen points out in 'Towards a Revolutionary Science Fiction' published in the *Red Planets* anthology, Jameson's 'assumption that SF is more historical than other genres contains a contradiction: if history determines genre, no one genre should be more historical than any other' (197). In Jorgensen's view, the paradigm's 'historicist circularity wants to claim agency for a genre that speaks of its

own conditions of production' (197). This assumption, however, is an intrinsic part of Suvin's contention that 'the historical quality of the genre is its ability to illuminate the author's empirical environment' (197). Considerations for any possible productive connection between non-cognitive forms of estrangement and history have been widely dismissed by mainstream Marxist criticism. It has been widely accepted that estrangement, besides its science-fictional iterations, lacks the 'epistemological gravity' to engage with history in any critical manner. Any theoretical attempt to outline the estrangement common to all speculative fiction has to get rid of the notion of some genres being more historical than others.

Fantasy provides crucial hints to delineate the estrangement common to all speculative fiction, as the genre deploys this narrative device in its most unapologetic form and highest degree of alterity. In spite of 'deconstructing' the ideological biases of traditional Marxist SF theory, Miéville provides only a few outlines as to what a Marxist theory of fantasy might look like. Miéville's 'Editorial Introduction' briefly delineates some of the areas of interest for a Marxist criticism on fantasy. Following Marx's view of capitalist social practice as a fantastic form, Miéville begins his essay with the contention that "'Real' life under capitalism *is a fantasy*' and that "'realism', narrowly defined... is as partial and ideological as 'reality' itself" (42 emphasis in original). One of the most interesting points of contention stated by Miéville is that the fantastic 'might be a mode peculiarly suited to and resonant with the forms of modernity', and it is precisely 'because 'reality' is a grotesque 'fantastic form' that fantasy 'is *good to think with*' (42; 46; emphasis in original). In this sense, the usual accusation that fantasy is 'escapist, incoherent or nostalgic... though perhaps true for great swathes of the literature, is only contingent on *content*' (42; emphasis in original). Unlike the 'progressiveness' ascribed to SF in Suvin's model, Miéville does not attribute any inherently subversive tendency to fantasy and warns that the genre does not

provide ‘a clear view of political possibilities or [act] as a guide to political action’ (46). On the contrary, Miéville remarks that ‘[w]hat is necessary is to acknowledge the fantastic’s specificity – granting it its own borders that do not require constant reference to the everyday for validation’ (47). In spite of effectively dismantling the ideological biases in SF theory as well as providing some crucial hints concerning the alterity-as-estrangement shared across the field, Miéville does not provide a model of speculative fiction. His insights, however, convincingly reveal the necessity of developing a Marxist model of fantasy – a narrative framework suited to think the fantastic form of capitalism itself.

### **Mark Bould’s Paranoid Theory of Fantasy: Ontology as Hermeneutics**

Mark Bould’s essay ‘The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory’ offers an elaborate Marxist model of fantasy. His essay is particularly important as it foregrounds the specificity of fantasy – the subgenre of SF performing its most unapologetic form of estrangement – and, hence, it is pivotal to achieving a better understanding of speculative fiction as a whole. Bould starts his essay by addressing some of the issues in Tzvetan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson and José B. Monleón’s theories of fantasy. Bould traces two major problems in these literary models of fantasy. On the one hand, these theories fail to account for the whole spectrum of fantasy, dealing only with its canonical version and either ignoring or rejecting its popular and most commodified forms. On the other hand, these theories reduce the fantastic to irrational eruptions repressed by capitalist economic rationality thus maintaining a binary opposition between the rational and the irrational. Monleón, for instance, claims that fantasy arose from the dialectic of reason and unreason that emerged in modernity: the repression of feudalism’s irrational forms of thinking and knowledge in favour of capitalism’s rational mercantilist order (14).

Likewise, for Jackson, fantasy ‘suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems’ (4). Both models of fantasy depend on an irrational. Due to this prevalence of the therapeutic over the political, these accounts fail to historicise and politicise the private subject of psychoanalysis; a task which, in Bould’s view, is crucial for developing a Marxist theory of fantasy.

A politicized psychoanalytic method can potentially provide a theoretical framework to grasp the specificity of fantasy beyond Marxism’s traditional mystificatory conception of it. According to Bould, ‘the potentially most useful psychoanalytic category one can use to link this process of imaginary and material shaping in human labour to a more-political-than-therapeutic model of fantasy is that of paranoia’ (79). As Aaron Schuster notes, for psychoanalysis, even extreme perceptions of reality such as the ones displayed in paranoia are ‘essentially an exaggeration of the more familiar experiences of self-observation and self-surveillance associated with moral conscience’ (31). Developing a model of the subject as such will establish a historical underpinning between psychoanalytic phantasy and fantasy in its literary form. Bould’s theory of fantasy combines Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic views on paranoia and Louis Althusser’s account on subject interpellation. Following Althusser, Bould points out that subjects under capitalism are constantly being interpellated by multiple and contradictory ideological discourses. In this context, the subject ‘is not to be considered as a singular point, monadic intersection, through which all hailings pass, but as a cluster or cloud of positions, constantly shifting and repositioning in response to each new haling’ (77). This model of the subject allows Bould to recuperate ‘the fantastic ... from the realms of unconscious eruption favoured by Jackson and Monleón, and to restore some notion of agency to the authoring of fantasy without surrendering to

determinism or succumbing to voluntarism' (77). Lacan views paranoia as not only a psychopathology but as a crucial step in the psyche's integration into the Symbolic order – the law, the signifier, and subjectivity. Paranoia is the basic mental operation through which subjects under capitalism can organise their experience of the world in somewhat stable terms. Bould asserts that '[t]he paranoiac is not only someone for whom every detail is meaningful – for whom nothing can be left uninterpreted or taken for granted – but someone who holds a conception of meaning that is both totalizing and hermeneutic (77-78). The world constructed by the paranoiac is 'internally logical' and 'capable of explaining the multitude of observed phenomena as aspects of a symmetrical and expressive totality' (78). Since for Lacan the Real is ultimately traumatic and beyond signification, 'the ego is structured on a paranoiac basis' and 'taking one's place in the Symbolic Order... means living in a paranoiac system that is currently sanctioned' (79). Subjects under capitalism are constantly interpellated by a myriad of ideological discourses, and like paranoiacs, are forced into the action of 'shuttling between the vast array of subject positions on offer, which must in some way be reconciled with each other if the subject is ever to feel unified or whole' (80). Paranoiac fantasizing, in this sense, is the basis of subject formation in capitalism.

Paranoia serves as a hermeneutic model to the world-building process in fantasy fiction. Paranoia, in Bould's view, is a 'ruthless hermeneutic' akin to fantasy world-building (77). Both paranoia and fantasy fiction follow a totalizing tendency in relation to reality according to which every detail is subsumed into an interpretative framework. This world-building process is the feature which distinguishes fantasy from other forms of narrative fiction (81). As Bould points out,

[a]ll fiction builds worlds which are not true to the extratextual world (itself an ideological – and, arguably, therefore a fantastic – construct), but fantasy worlds are constructed upon a more elaborate predicate: they are not only not true to the extratextual world but, by

definition, do not seek or pretend to be. Recognising its status, fantasy disavows the very possibility of a territory which is not its map. This concern with world-building, with the paranoid construction of textual ontologies, is consistently foregrounded in fantasy and the fantastic genres. (81)

The paranoid textual ontologies of fantasy fiction are indicative of the impossibility of representing ‘real’ life in capitalist societies. The assumption of this impossibility at the level of narrative world-building constitutes fantasy fiction’s potential for criticism: ‘[i]t is, paradoxically, the very *fantasy* of fantasy as a mode that, at least potentially, gives it space for a hard-headed critical consciousness of capitalist subjectivity’ (84; emphasis in original). Similar to Miéville, Bould argues that what separates fantasy from ‘mimetic art is a frankly self-referential consciousness... of the impossibility of ‘real life’, or Real life’ (83). In addition to this, Bould adds that ‘[a]ny Marxist attempt to eulogise fantasy fiction *as a mode* as being ‘subversive’ or ‘progressive’ will be as one-sided as the alternative stern denunciation of the form as ‘mystificatory’ or ‘reactionary’ (83; emphasis in original). Bould’s theory, in this sense, succeeds in developing a Marxist model of fantasy which takes into account its specificity as a genre in the construction of textual ontologies but, also, as a basic component of subject formation in capitalist social practice.

In spite of not directly dealing with the concept, Bould’s theory of fantasy provides an essential model to define the specificity of estrangement in speculative fiction. What Bould refers to as paranoid ontologies in fantasy – a world-building whose internal realism evades any ideological mimetic approach to the extratextual world – can be subsumed under the more general category of estrangement. Estrangement, as defined by Freedman, is the ‘creation of an alternative fictional world that, by refusing to take our mundane environment for granted, implicitly or explicitly performs an estranging critical interrogation of the latter’ (*CTSF* 16). The critical



component of this interrogation, however, cannot depend on the text's ability to rationally account for its alterity. Bould's theory of paranoid ontologies foregrounds that it is fantasy's very radical alterity and unreality that enables it to potentially account for capitalist subjectivity. Fantasy and alterity provide good models to think the monstrous fantastic form of capitalist social practice and mode of production. Bould's theory also demonstrates, at the level of narrative form and logic, that fantasy narrative world-building does not necessarily entail a condensation of the wealth of history into a reductive metaphysical struggle between Good and Evil. Paranoid ontologies can offer multiple all-encompassing hermeneutic systems by which to comprehend history and capitalism. In this sense, Tolkien-esque narrative-world building is one among many other possible totalizing hermeneutics that paranoid ontologies can offer to develop an understanding of capitalist social practice and subjectivity.

### **Anamorphic Estrangement**

China Miéville's call to define the alterity-as-estrangement common to all speculative fiction has three interrelated areas of enquiry: what it does, how it does it and what we might do with it ('Cognition as Ideology' 244). In spite of being described as a theory of fantasy, Bould's concept of paranoid ontologies can be applied to a vast corpus of sub-genres of speculative fiction. These totalising ontologies provide a guideline, at the level of narrative world-building, to grasp the forms of estrangement performed in a plethora of other genres: science-fictional alien civilisations and parallel dimensions; Gothic underworlds; hallucinogenic realms and virtual reality in cyberpunk novels; and any possible mixture of these components. As these examples demonstrate, the sense of alterity brought about by these textual ontologies is shared across the entire field of speculative fiction. The sense of alterity in these estrangements is totalising with regards to its

world-building process and involves the exercise of creating textual ontologies ruled by ostensibly different parameters to the text's context of production. However, it should be noted that estrangement in speculative fiction is not only introduced by radically unfamiliar ontologies. There are multiple works of speculative fiction in which alterity is introduced into the familiar through manifestations showing inconsistencies and gaps within 'normal' reality. It could be considered that while paranoid ontologies bring about totalising hermeneutics, this second form of estrangement proceeds by internally undermining dominant perspectives of what 'reality' is. These two types of estrangements can be subsumed under the concept of anamorphosis.

In 'The Anamorphic Estrangements of Science Fiction' contained in the *Red Planets* anthology (2009), Matthew Beaumont uses the category of anamorphosis as conceived in art to elucidate the specificity of estrangement in science fiction. As with Bould's theory of fantasy, Beaumont's concept of anamorphic estrangement is applicable not only to science-fictional narratives but to speculative fiction in general. In basic terms, anamorphosis is a distorted perspective which requires the viewer to occupy a specific position in order to recompose the image. Anamorphosis is most noticeably referenced in the optical illusion at play in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1553). The skull at the centre of the painting maintains a discordant perspective with regards to the rest of the composition, hence both reconstructing and distorting the integrity of the scenery represented in it. As Beaumont points out, anamorphosis 'was initially established as a technical curiosity, but it embraces a poetry of abstraction, an effective mechanism for producing optical illusion and a philosophy of false reality' (34). This anamorphic presence 'posits the coded presence of an almost unimaginable reality that momentarily obtrudes on ideologically constituted reality, thereby rendering it arbitrary, ontologically inconsistent' (33-34). Anamorphosis, according to Beaumont, has the effect 'of extreme relativization' and

‘demonstrates that the dominant perception of reality is not natural but cultural’ (34). This relativization of dominant perception is the basic procedure of anamorphosis and what constitutes its specificity as a narrative device in literary works.

The estrangement performed by science fiction texts follows the same logic of radical relativization that Beaumont attributes to anamorphosis. In science fiction, according to Beaumont, ‘the representation or inclusion of the alien other functions as a kind of anamorphic stain’ (36). These manifestations of profound alterity constitute ‘the point from which the SF text looks back at us, radically estranging our empirical, social environment and revealing its arbitrariness, its basic fungibility’ (36). While these manifestations have the effect of distorting a dominant perspective of social reality, the narrative means by which they achieve this goal can be divided into two different methods. Beaumont distinguishes two main types of anamorphic estrangements in science fiction:

In the more common form, the entire composition is anamorphic – as in Nicéron’s experiments in perspective, which effectively involved taking an image in the shape of a square and re-plotting its coordinates in the shape of a trapezoid. This composition can be identified as *anamorphosis*. In the less common form, the composition is dominated by linear perspective but incorporates one anomalous, anamorphic image – as in ‘The Ambassadors’. This image, as a component of the composition, can be identified as *anamorph*. The distinction roughly corresponds to the difference between SF set exclusively (or almost exclusively) in an ‘unfamiliar’ or irrealist world and SF set in a ‘familiar’ or realist world that nonetheless contains traces of an ineluctable otherness. (38-9; emphases in original)

Beaumont's definition has the benefit of not relying on any reality-claims to empirical reality or plausibility, since both forms of estrangement effectively operate by distorting a normalized perspective. These categories are not merely applicable to the world-building at play in science fiction but the whole spectrum of speculative fiction. Following Beaumont's conceptualisation, while paranoid ontologies can be identified as anamorphoses in which the entire narrative space is anamorphic and distorted, the sense of alterity evoked by unfamiliar manifestations into familiar setting can be classified as anamorphs. In this sense, although both forms of anamorphic estrangement proceed through different narrative means, their effect of radical relativization remains the same. Following Beaumont's account, estrangement can potentially serve to question ideological visions of 'reality' by relativizing and rendering them arbitrary.

Speculative fiction complicates any straightforward approach to social reality, since it takes estrangement as an inevitable component to any approximation to 'real' life. Following the Lacanian vocabulary of Bould's theory of fantasy, it could be formulated that anamorphic estrangement further emphasises the psychoanalytic distinction between reality and the Real. This psychoanalytic concept of reality principle is crucial to the demystification of any notion of reality that is presented as being natural or factual. As Alenka Zupančič argues, the reality principle

is not some kind of natural way associated with how things are... the reality principle itself is ideologically mediated; one could even claim that it constitutes the highest form of ideology, the ideology that presents itself as an empirical fact (or biological, economic...) necessity (and that we tend to perceive as non-ideological). It is precisely here that we should be most alert to the functioning of ideology. (77)

The Real is precisely what the reality principle attempts to repress and it is through this very suppression that reality itself is constituted. According to Lacan, the reality principle is the primary

defence mechanism against the Real and operates ‘in the mode of detour, precaution, touching up, restraint’ (32). On the contrary, the Real, as Fisher remarks in *Capitalist Realism*, is ‘an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality’ (18). Capitalist realism, in Fisher’s view, is the ideological version of reality presented as natural in social practice (18). Anamorphic estrangement, in this sense, can operate to render visible the inconsistencies in reality and evoke ‘the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism present us’ (18). As Žižek similarly argues, ‘[a]n ideology is really ‘holding us’ only when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality – that is, when the ideology succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself’ (*Sublime Object* 49). This is the same political potential that Bould and Miéville attribute to fantasy, namely, the ability to enable a mode of thinking which, by paradoxically avoiding any approximation to capitalist realism, provides an adequate model to the role of fantasies in the organisation of social forces and the mode of production. This open refusal to engage with extratextual reality is what makes speculative fiction a good means to think the role of fantasies in the shaping of social reality under capitalism.

Following Bould and Miéville, it should be added that the anamorphic estrangements of speculative fiction possess no inherent political inclination. This point is never addressed in Beaumont’s positive view of narrative anamorphosis according to which science-fictional texts produces ‘a feedback oscillation that moves from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality to the narratively actualized novum in order to understand the plot-events, and now back from those novelties to the author’s reality, in order to see it afresh from the new perspective gained’ (39). In Beaumont’s view, ‘[o]nce internalized, the anamorphic perspective irrevocably transforms the normal’ (41). It should be noted that the perspective gained by anamorphosis can have multiple

political implications towards the estrangement it produces on the familiar. As Žižek remarks, the gaining of this new anamorphic perspective operates as a succinct formulation of ideology' ('Melancholy and the Act' 659). Social reality, Žižek adds, might normally appear as being chaotic, but from the perspective of ideology, such as anti-Semitism, 'everything becomes clear and acquires straight contours – the Jewish plot is responsible for all our woes' ('Melancholy and the Act' 659). This myopic perspective on social reality can be observed in a vast corpus of Tolkien-esque fantasy as manifested in its reduction of socioeconomic contradictions into struggles between Good and Evil forces. By rendering 'reality' arbitrary and cultural, the anamorphic perspective can alternatively serve as a regressive or progressive interpretative framework through which the reader recomposes social reality as a totality.

### **Estrangement and Historicity: What we might do with it?**

Having defined the anamorphic estrangement shared across the field of speculative fiction, it is possible to respond the question: what we might do with it? One of the main preoccupations of Marxist criticism has been the analysis of estrangement and history. Estrangement has only been deemed an effective tool to think history through its link to the category of cognition. A helpful illustration for the type of interrogation of history exclusive to estrangement pertains to the origin of the term as conceptualised by Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht. The term estrangement was coined by the Russian Formalist Shklovsky in his essay 'Art as Technique' (1917). Shklovsky used the term *ostranenie* – translated as either estrangement or defamiliarization in English – to articulate 'the differences between the laws of practical and poetic language', claiming that 'the device of art is the *ostranenie* of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and the complexity of perception' (78; 80). Estrangement is implemented as a formalist

tool in Shklovsky's study of Leo Tolstoy to expose how his prose defamiliarizes the reader's perception of everyday objects and enhances their features as if they were being observed for the first time. In 'Verfremdung effects in Chinese Acting' (1936), Brecht introduces the category of estrangement as theatrical effect aimed to discourage the audience from identifying with the illusory world and characters presented by the play (182). Subsequently, in *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1948), Brecht explains that the *Verfremdungseffekt* is designed to 'remove only from those incidents that can be influenced socially the stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today' (8). As Douglas Robinson remarks, both Shklovsky and Brecht's theories of estrangement follow the same attempt to 'repersonalize their alienated or anesthetized audience by intensifying and belabouring the aesthetic forms of depersonalization' (xii). These two forms of estrangement perform the basic operation of removing familiar objects from the automatism of perception.

Estrangement in speculative fiction, however, renders visible a crucial distinction between *ostranenie* and *Verfremdungseffekt* related to the target on which they exert their defamiliarization of perspective. While Shklovsky's estrangement involves the idea of enhancing the sensuous perception of everyday objects in order to contemplate them anew, Brecht's V-effekt maintains an abstraction tendency on representation which forces the audience to bypass the immediacy of the object in order to appreciate their historical and social determination. The potential to interrogate history in speculative fiction is closely linked to this second definition of estrangement. The anamorphic estrangement of speculative fiction always entails an abstraction from empirical and social reality. This abstraction tendency from historical factuality, however, has been traditionally viewed as a sign of weakness. As Freedman comments, in the case of science fiction, its 'historicizations generally display a certain kind (but not the worst kind) of *abstraction* owing to

the greater autonomy and distance from stuff of real history' (*Critical Theory* 58; emphasis in original). This abstraction from 'real' history, nonetheless, constitutes the genre's potential to interrogate and engage with history in a productive manner. Capitalism constantly refigures and manipulates history according to the interests of its defenders. The 'ideology of capitalism', as Deleuze and Guattari claim, is a 'a motley painting of everything that has ever been believed.' 'The real is not impossible; it is simply more and more artificial' (48). To this point they add: 'the capitalist machine's time is diachronic. The capitalists appear in succession in a series that institutes a kind of creativity of history, a strange menagerie: the schizoid time of the new creative break' (258). By defamiliarizing these ideological conceptions and manipulations, speculative fiction can, through its abstraction tendency, productively interrogate capitalist historicity and offer new modes of thinking history.

Marxist criticism has been predominantly preoccupied with the future-oriented narratives of science fiction and, to a lesser degree, utopian fiction. Ernst Bloch's concept of the *novum* has operated as the theoretical matrix by which Marxist criticism has analysed the utopian impulses of science fiction. This bias for future-oriented narratives has been also manifested in the analysis of utopian fiction in Marxist criticism. Marx and Engels themselves, nonetheless, were considerably sceptical of utopian socialists, claiming that they equivocally 'wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, and endeavour, by small experiments, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of example, to pave the way for the new social Gospel' (48). Utopians, in their view, lack any programmatic or strategic concern for revolutionary praxis in the present. Considering these points of criticism, as Miéville rightly points out, '[i]t is ironic that utopianism... as an aesthetic form, [has] often been considered the only fantastic mode permissible for the Left' (47). Future-oriented speculative fiction – utopian, dystopian and science-fictional – has been the main object of study



for Marxist literary criticism due to the implicit assumption that the only means by which estrangement can productively interrogate history is through the exercise of extrapolating social tendencies into the future.

In spite of consisting of a wide corpus within the genre, future-oriented narratives constitute only a fraction of speculative fiction. Anamorphic estrangement does not necessarily involve the exercise of extrapolating historical tendencies into the future. Anamorphs, such as the ones presented in counter-factual historicity or Gothic narratives, follow the opposing tendency to the future-oriented genres privileged by Marxist criticism, that is, the estrangement they perform is deployed on the historical past rather than the future. These non-mimetic narratives openly deviate from any attempt to describe historical events in a factual manner. This deviation from historical factuality is even more blatantly exposed in the case of anamorphoses dealing with alternative universes in the form of paranoid ontologies. Narrative spaces – such as C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* series or H.P. Lovecraft's Weird universe – do not even pretend to share the same ontological parameters with the reader's empirical environment or historical context. It is due to these reasons that the estrangement performed by these texts has been deemed as illegitimate, ahistorical and irrational. The relationship between text and history has been one of the most contentious topics in the study of estrangement in Marxist criticism. One of the most problematic topics pertains to the alterity function of the fantastic with regards to historicity. If history is contemplated as a distinct object only approachable through inert factuality and historical extrapolation, subgenres across speculative fiction must be surely classified in hierarchical terms. In this sense, if speculative fiction in general has any potential to engage with history, let alone interrogate it, its alterity-as-estrangement must be assessed as a productive means to achieve this

goal on its own terms without resorting to epiphenomenal criteria such as cognition, scientific rationality or historical accuracy.

Brecht's model of V-effekt provides a crucial illustration of the critical interrogation of history of which speculative fiction is capable. Abstraction from the givenness of history and empirical reality constitutes the main political potential of speculative fiction. The dialectical approach is often understood as aiming to locate the object of study within its historical context and to bring about its manifold connections to other social phenomena. According to this point of view, as Žižek remarks, 'one should see not just the thing in front of oneself, but this thing as it is embedded in all the wealth of its concrete historical context' (*Sublime Object x*). Abstraction, for this methodological procedure, is guilty of fetishizing the object as being independent of its context. In Žižek's view, for a Hegelian dialectical approach, however, this abstraction is essential to achieving a better understanding of the object: 'the fact that when we observe a thing, we see *too much* in it, we fall under the spell of the wealth of empirical detail which prevents us from clearly perceiving the notional determination which forms the core of the thing' (*Sublime Object x*; emphasis in original). According to Hegel:

The richest is therefore the most concrete and most *subjective*, and that which withdraws itself into the simplest depth is the mightiest and most all-embracing. The highest, most concentrated point is the pure personality which, solely through the absolute dialectic which is its nature, no less *embraces and holds everything within itself* (841; emphasis in original).

This same notional determination procedure can be applied to speculative fiction's anamorphic estrangement of historicity. From a Hegelian perspective, Žižek adds, 'the problem is thus not that of how to grasp the multiplicity of determinations, but rather of how to *abstract* from them, how

to constrain our gaze and teach it to grasp only the notional determination' (*Sublime Object* xi; emphasis in original). Speculative fiction, likewise, proceeds by abstracting history from actual states of affairs and imposing a hermeneutic by which social contradictions and political conflicts should be assessed. This conceptual determination enables a vision of history which might establish a causality among otherwise unrelated events. Neo-slave narratives, such as Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), use speculative elements to show the afterlives of slavery connecting the Antebellum period with the supposedly 'post-racial' contemporary conditions of existence. These novels estrange dominant perceptions of history and materialize the afterlives of slavery in post-slavery conditions in the United States. Speculative fiction offers marginalized authors a tool to think beyond the immediacy of the present and the factual historicity of the past, that is, a narrative device that enables a temporal understanding of history as a continuum linking manifold events. This abstraction tendency is even more prevalent in paranoid ontologies, alternate universes in which social struggles are fully detached from 'real' history: the givenness of what has been actualized in the present and ossified in the past. It is not surprising that marginalized authors, as in the case of women writers from the New Wave of science fiction in the 1960s and 1970s or afro-futurist novels in the twentieth-century, have favoured speculative fiction as a genre to interrogate hegemonic perceptions of history. Speculative fiction, through its anamorphic estrangement of dominant perception, offers manifold narrative strategies to interrogate hegemonic narratives of historical development.

Estrangement, in the case of speculative fiction, entails a denaturalization and relativization of dominant perception which can be applied to develop new modes of thinking historical shifts and development. This anamorphic perspective is the means by which speculative fiction engages with historicity without necessarily referring to actual historical events from a factual point of

view. In spite of this potential for criticism, there is no guarantee that this interrogation, through the means of totalizing hermeneutics, will be either regressive or progressive. Both Miéville and Tolkien use elements from speculative fiction with radically different political results and agendas. In this sense, speculative fiction challenges Jean François Lyotard's notion that the postmodern condition involves an 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (xxiv). It could be formulated that the anamorphic perspective established by speculative fiction always produces an abstract metanarrative, through its estranging narrative world-building, by which the text approaches history. Anamorphosis does not only involve the exercise of relativizing dominant perceptions of history, but also proposes a fictional perspective according to which history's social contradictions can be grasped and understood. This formulation of anamorphic estrangement has the benefit of granting speculative fiction a certain type of generic specificity which does not exclude any of its subgenres or measures them in any hierarchical manner. In opposition to traditional Marxist criticism, the criteria developed by Beaumont and Bould offers a greater degree of flexibility concerning the political potential of what estrangement as a narrative device may potentially do. The uses of estrangement within speculative fiction can offer both politically enabling and disabling perspectives on social reality.

### **Overview of the Book**

This book is divided into four chapters dealing with speculative fiction novels that interrogate historicity through distinct implementations of anamorphic estrangement. One of the criteria to divide chapters is the temporal disposition of the estrangement(s) performed by the respective novels. While Chapters 3 and 4 deal with future-oriented narratives, Chapter 1 analyses the alternative temporality of paranoid ontologies and Chapter 2 explores the counter-factual

historicity of neo-slave novels implementing time-traveling tropes. The novels studied in each chapter explore highly relevant issues from the perspective of historical materialism and demonstrate the value of speculative fiction as an object of study for Marxist criticism.

Chapter 1 deals with the relationship between paranoid ontologies and historicity in China Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy. This chapter explores the question concerning how paranoid ontologies in speculative fiction engage with historical shifts in capitalist conditions of existence. Weird manifestations in Miéville's narrative corpus operate as polysemic metaphors which refer to capital's logic as an ongoing process in a state of permanent crisis. By deviating from any mimetic approach to reality, these metaphors maintain a twofold meaning: on the one hand, they operate as a narrative device accounting for the radical alterity at the core of capitalism's mode of production; and, on the other hand, they work as a persuasive rhetorical device asserting capitalism's tendency to historical shifts and revolutionary praxis. Miéville's Gothic Marxism offers a link between New Weird fiction and radical politics by highlighting the unpredictable alterity in capitalism's crises.

The main thesis of Chapter 2 is that Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* offer counterfactual narratives that challenge antiquarian accounts of the Antebellum period. The counterfactual historicity of these novels create a common causality between distant events and challenges teleological visions of the Antebellum period. Both texts demonstrate the ability of speculative fiction to render visible historical continuity of racial institutional violence. My main point of contention is that speculative narrative tropes in the neo-slave narrative tradition have served to materialize the historical forces involved in the afterlives of slavery/property – a concept outlined by Christina Sharpe to describe the contemporary Black condition in the United States. Counterfactual historicity in *Kindred* and *The Underground*

*Railroad*, as I aim to show, establishes the Trans-Atlantic slave trade as the paradigmatic event in the construction of the Black condition in the United States and depicts it as an ongoing event co-existing with the post-slavery future. In this sense, both texts challenge post-racial ideology by rendering visible how the ongoing financial logic of the slave trade persists beyond the Antebellum period.

Chapter 3 draws on some productive parallels between dystopian fiction and cultural studies through the concept of the cultural dominant deployed in postmodern accounts of late capitalism. The main question dealt with in this chapter is: what does late capitalism's mode of temporality reveal about the logic linked to its mode of production? This chapter establishes a dialogue between theoretical works concerned with this question and Jeff Noon's speculative fiction novel *Falling out of Cars* (2002) and Mike McCormack's *Notes from a Coma* (2005). Drawing on Marxist criticism in the works of Fredric Jameson and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, this chapter proposes that both novels develop a catatonic mode of temporality which critically challenges these authors' diagnosis of schizophrenia as the cultural logic of late capitalism. Both novels offer a dystopian version of the future in which catatonic subjects function as the norm for the system's optimal operation. The catatonic temporality of the novels emerges as the cultural logic underlying this transformation, namely, as the passive assimilation of the individual to the system's economic rationale, which no longer needs any active human agency in order to operate. Noon and McCormack's novels follow a catatonic temporal structure comprising a negative reaction to an overwhelming and chaotic experience of time. This experience entails a state of disorientation caused by indistinct temporal layers and manifold time leaps. These novels not only deploy these narrative techniques on a purely aesthetic basis, but explicitly link them to the objective conditions of the world they aim to represent.

Finally, Chapter 4 explores the extrapolation of social reproduction as the basis for world-building in Anne Charnock's *Dreams Before the Start of Time*. Extrapolation is a narrative technique traditionally associated with a rigorous scientific-based approach to world-building in speculative fiction. This technique, however, as I aim to argue, maintains an aporetic structure which complicates this instrumental idea of rationality. In the case of Charnock's extrapolative narrative, science is used as a rhetorical device to generate a plausibility effect over the future presented by the text. This extrapolation has a twofold effect: on the one hand, it reflects financial capitalism's speculative tendencies at the level of narrative logic; and, on the other hand, it also maintains a critique of this same economic rationale in the relationship between technological progress and social reproduction in the case of women's oppression in capitalist societies. My main contention is that Charnock's extrapolation narrative maintains a socialist feminist critique of social reproduction as the basis of women's oppression in the context of global capitalism.

The conclusion briefly revises the major claims made throughout the thesis as well as acknowledging the limitations of its theoretical focus and literary scope. This section outlines possible areas of enquiries to be examined by future Marxist criticism on speculative fiction. The analysis of canonical texts leaves out the vast majority of the genre's corpus comprised of its most commodified literary production. This research can be further expanded into the analysis of non-literary cultural production such as films and series. Another possible area of enquiry corresponds to the study of generic classifications in literary criticism. Establishing estrangement as a narrative device shared by all speculative fiction opens the discussion concerning the possibility of reaching definitions of its multiple subgenres beyond the traditional criteria developed in Suvinian literary criticism. These areas of enquiry, as I aim to argue, are a productive pursuit for any Marxist criticism preoccupied with the more general relationship between capitalism and its cultural

products. Since speculative fiction is one of the most widely consumed narrative genres, its study can be helpful to achieve a better understanding of capitalism's manifold cultural logics.

Chapter 1 outlines the fundamental arguments developed throughout the thesis maintaining the potential of estrangement to challenge dominant visions of history in the context of global capitalism. Miéville's *Bas-Lag* trilogy productively engages with its historical context of production through the radical alterity of Weird manifestations and its estranging narrative world-building. The trilogy demonstrates the critical use of estrangement to interrogate post-industrial historical accounts of financial markets but, also, to persuasively promote an alternative vision of history in its Marxist understanding of economic crises. These texts exemplify how radical alterity in speculative fiction, in spite of not dealing with particular historical events or empirical reality, can still be articulated to promote radical progressive values and visions of history through a Marxist world-building methodology. In addition to this, Miéville's New Weird fiction exposes the shared political potential of speculative fiction by combining elements from its different subgenres. This chapter describes some of the main narrative strategies by which estrangement in its most radical forms can offer critical models to render visible the role of fantasy in capitalism's mode of production.



## **Marxism as Narrative World-Building Method: New Weird Fiction and Capitalist Crisis in China Miéville's Bas-Lag Trilogy**

How do speculative elements and tropes in an alternate narrative universe engage with 'real' historical shifts and events in the context of global capitalism? This question is at the core of China Miéville's New Weird fiction and critical accounts of Marxist literary criticism. Since the publication of his Bas-Lag trilogy – *Perdido Street Station* (2000), *The Scar* (2003) and *Iron Council* (2004) – literary critics have been at odds in providing an answer to this question when discussing Miéville's New Weird fiction. My main thesis for this chapter is that Miéville's paranoid ontology in his Bas-Lag trilogy evokes a sense of crisis which acts as a persuasive tool for revolutionary praxis. Miéville's Bas-Lag universe works as a polysemic metaphor which engages with its contemporary context by following a Marxist understanding of crises as historically contingent events emerging from the internal contradictions of industrial capitalism. This Marxist world-building method, as I aim to argue, challenges the prevalent post-industrial ideology concerning financial crises in the late 1990s and 2000s. In opposition to post-industrial accounts, and by simultaneously stressing the radical alterity of both the universe and the mode of production, the estrangement performed by Weird manifestations suggest that even the most incomprehensible and 'weird' aspects of crises are firmly linked to the material conditions of industrial capitalism.

The Weird has been the predominant theoretical lens through which literary critics have analysed Miéville's narrative corpus. Miéville's public affiliation and understanding of the label of Weird fiction, along with his various statements on the issue, reflect the significance of the term in his own narrative fiction. Haute Weird fiction is the tradition associated with William Hope

Hodgson, Arthur Machen, H.P. Lovecraft and other writers from the 1880s to the 1940s. In Miéville's entry on the term for *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, he stresses the sublime as being one of the pivotal categories that define the Weird. Similar to classic theorists of the sublime, such as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, Miéville asserts that the Weird is linked to that which is, either in scale or quality, unrepresentable and opposed to the beautiful ('Weird Fiction' par. 5). However, in opposition to theories of the sublime,

the Weird ... punctures the supposed membrane separating off the sublime, and allows swillage of that awe and horror from 'beyond' back into the everyday – into angles, bushes, the touch of strange limbs, noises, etc. The Weird is a radicalized sublime backwash. ('Weird Fiction' par. 5)

The Weird is thus not an object beyond the familiar but, rather, an anamorphic perspective that actively defamiliarizes the mundane by introducing a sense of radical alterity to its setting and objects. This concept should, nevertheless, not be associated with the Freudian uncanny, that is, with the emergence of strangeness within the familiar resulting from the return of the repressed (151). Monsters from Weird fiction, as Miéville points out, never belonged to any previous Western mythology and are both 'indescribable and formless *as well as being and/or although they are and/or in so far as they are* described with an excess of specificity' ('Quantum Vampire' 105; emphases in original). The Weird, according to Miéville, is not uncanny but rather *abcanny* and 'represents *à la* Cthulhu, that which shriekingly declaims that it has never been known, is beyond any notions of repression, could not have been known to be repressed in the first place' (424; emphasis in original). As a result, manifestations of the Weird are indicative, in Kantian terms, of the limits of the subject's cognitive faculties, that is, of how her perception of the world is organised prior to her conscious experience of it. The Weird thus puts emphasis on dimensions of

reality or entities which, even though they are beyond human cognition, have an active influence on the world. This disjunction between cognition and reality is explicitly thematised in the relationship between Lin and Isaac in *Perdido Street Station* (2000). Lin, a khepri humanoid whose insect kaleidoscopic vision radically differ from other beings, explains to Isaac, a human scientist, how his perception of the world seems deeply absurd to her: *'You must process as one picture. What chaos! Tells you nothing, contradicts itself, changes its story. For me each tiny part has integrity, each fractionally different from the next, until all variation is accounted for, incrementally, rationally'* (PSS 20; emphasis in original). As Sherryl Vint remarks, these differences in the character's perception of the world 'is one of the ways that the techniques of SF (through insect-hominid characters such as Lin) enables a fuller picture of the 'real' world than does mimetic realism' (44). This simple detail indirectly challenges the usual Suvinian critique on the fantastic due to its alterity function and, as Vint adds, 'reminds us that how one sees the world, literally and metaphorically, is never mimetic of the world as it is' (44). Miéville's Bas-Lag world is polyphonically composed by heterogenous voices which – either respectively or collectively – can never fully account for its complexity. Like Lin's kaleidoscopic perception of the world, Bas-Lag must be simultaneously processed according to the singularity of each narrative voice along with their conflicting variations and abcanany gaps asserting the radical alterity of the universe.

'Haute' Weird fiction combines elements from all speculative fiction and thus challenges its compartmentalization into multiple subgenres: horror, fantasy, science fiction, and so on. One of the reasons why Weird fiction is attractive to Miéville is the 'blurry line' it draws 'between the fantastic and the science fictional' – a division which, as he himself remarks, 'is a spurious distinction' ('A Conversation' 64). Weird fiction, in this sense, represents the shared aesthetic and political potentials of speculative fiction. Miéville's speculative fiction is an illustrative example

of the Weird's 'liquefaction of generic frontiers... weav[ing] seamlessly between beloved genre staples and a philosophical interrogation of the alterity that such genres afford' (Edwards and Venezia 6). This is one of the reasons why Miéville is highly critical of Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* and its predilection for the supposedly rational estrangement of SF over the illegitimate anti-rational laws of fantasy (11). The Weird, for Miéville, is a 'counter-tradition' that offers a 'rebuke of the narrowly instrumentalist 'cognitive' 'rationality' often associated with SF in the Suvinian model' ('Morbid Symptoms' 200, 199; emphasis in original). According to Miéville, estrangement is the central category of speculative fiction: 'the atom of SF's and fantasy's estrangement ... is their unreality function' of which they simply are different 'iterations of the estrangement that ... both sub-genres share' ('Cognition as Ideology' 243; 244; emphasis in original). Weird fiction evokes the estrangement shared by all speculative fiction and, hence, dismantles the compartmentalization of the genre according to epiphenomenal criteria such as marketing and ideological biases.

It should be noted that the use of speculative fiction tropes and elements in Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy presents both a stylistic continuity and political departure from the previous Haute Weird fiction tradition. Like its Haute predecessors, enigmatic entities are often in New Weird fiction associated with an abcanmy alterity which challenges and complicates the characters' understanding of empirical reality. The city Palimpsest in Catherynne M. Valente's *Palimpsest* (2009) and Area X in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014) are illustrative New Weird examples of locations which radically estrange dominant perceptions of reality by introducing an abcanmy sense of ontological uncertainty. Miéville's New Weird fiction follows a similar principle to H.P. Lovecraft's opening statement in 'The Call of Cthulu': 'The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of

ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity' (139). As Freedman notes, New Weird fiction, is 'fundamentally *inflationary* in tendency' and attempts 'to suggest reality to be richer, larger, stranger, more complex, more surprising—and indeed, 'weirder'—than common sense would suppose' ('From Genre to Political Economy' 14; emphasis in the original). Miéville's New Weird fiction, however, also uses the Weird's 'inflationary' tendency in order to bring a dynamic socio-political complexity and uncertainty to Bas-Lag's global capitalist system. As Aishwarya Ganapathiraju points out, Miéville's Bas-Lag universe is profoundly intricate in its socio-political dimensions: '[w]ithin this narrative space he hails the socio-political constructs of identity (based on class, gender, sexuality and ideology) and then deftly interweaves them with genre archetypes, to construct stereoscopic environments, characters and situations' (4). The Weird in Miéville's speculative fiction, according to Caroline Edwards and Tony Venezia, 'is the moment when disparate and wholly incompatible entities are yoked together into a bastardized assemblage which cannot be reconciled into any form of union, but jostle uneasily' (14). The tension within this assemblage is thus the result of the conflictive relationship held between these antagonistic socio-political constructs and agents. Crises in Bas-Lag are both a result of the irreconcilable nature of this assemblage and the unpredictable Weird forces bringing radical historical shifts to its dynamic narrative space.

### **Weird Metaphors: A Fantastic Interrogation of History**

Bas-Lag's trilogy consists of *Perdido Street Station* (2000), *The Scar* (2003) and *Iron Council* (2004). Miéville's trilogy combines elements from all speculative fiction: different types of magic, otherworldly entities, awe-inspiring monsters, steampunk technology and parallel dimensions. Bas-Lag is populated by different types of humanoid and non-humanoid species which not only

provide a vast cultural and social complexity to its universe, but also account, in phenomenological terms, for radically different types of subjectivity along with their respective modes of perceiving reality. Bas-Lag is also a geologically and politically demarcated world composed of manifold continents and divided by national borders drawn according to economic and imperialistic interests. New Crobuzon is the most detailed and complex metropolis of the whole Bas-Lag universe in socio-political terms. The city-state is governed by a parliamentary republic and capitalist oligarchy serving the economic interests of a human elite. New Crobuzon is ostensibly divided by internal class struggle as demonstrated in the economic demarcations between towns and ghettos within the city. As Bas-Lag's undisputed power, New Crobuzon is constantly extending its economic and military influence over the whole globe. The same level of world-building intricacy is expressed in Bas-Lag's linguistic diversity as illustrated in the plethora of languages – verbal and non-verbal – and dialects spoken by the manifold cultures found in this world. Miéville's alternate universe offers great illustration of Mark Bould's theory of fantasy as the construction of paranoid ontologies whose internal logic and realism do not seek or pretend to be true to the extratextual world (80). Likewise, Bas-Lag's intricate 'paranoid construction' expresses, at the level of narrative world-building, the 'interconnectivity of a ruthless hermeneutic' according to which socio-economic and historical coordinates of the aporetic assemblage are carefully arranged (80). The anamorphic estrangement is performed on the entire composition of the Bas-Lag universe from its very material foundations and internal realism to its socio-economic coordinates and political history.

The more specific question still pertains to how Miéville's paranoid ontology critically engages with capitalism as its historical context of production and subject matter. Miéville's New Weird fiction maintains a dialectical structure consisting of two apparently opposing tendencies:

the totalising hermeneutic of his paranoid ontology and the inflationary logic of Weird metaphors. While Miéville's alternate universe maintains a metonymic affinity to Marxism as a world-building method, Weird manifestations constantly show gaps and inconsistencies within this totalising hermeneutic. The debate concerning this question, nonetheless, has been framed into two diverging positions: on the one hand, an allegorical one, maintaining the primary role of 'real' historical events as an essential framework for the interpretation of the text; and, on the other hand, a metaphorical one, claiming that speculative elements maintain an internal logic which stands as a model for the social and economic dynamics in capitalism's mode of production. According to allegorical readings, Miéville's alternative universes maintain a concealed parallel with contemporary states of affairs – *The City and The City* as the Palestine and Israel conflict or as an 'allegory on social justice'; *Perdido Street Station* as a representation of the Post-Fordist capitalist era (Wood 76; Cowley and Hanna 6; Marks 231). Miéville himself has asserted, in an interview with Stephen Shapiro, that he prefers the term metaphor over the one of allegory:

I am much happier with the notion of metaphor than allegory because metaphor is much more 'fractally begetting' than a one-to one allegory. That is not a failure of genre; it is actually a strength, which is shared by science fiction. To literalize your metaphor does not mean that it stops being a metaphor, but it invigorates the metaphor because it embeds its referent within the totality of the text, with its own integrity and realism. (65)

According to this metaphoric model, speculative elements in Miéville's work must be interpreted within the totality of the Bas-Lag universe in order to draw productive parallels to its contemporary context of publication. Miéville's fractal and literalized metaphors are by no means a new vision of this literary figure. As Donald Davidson argues 'metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation mean, and nothing more' (2). Davidson points out that the common

misconception about metaphors is that they possess a figurative meaning ‘in addition to [their] literal sense or meaning’ (2). Metaphors, in Davidson’s view, are closer to the use domain of words than the one of figurative signification and, as such, are ‘something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences and depend entirely on the ordinary meaning of those words’ (3). This perplexing idea, however, deeply resonates with Miéville’s own view that the Weird ‘is irreducible ... [a] Weird tentacle does not ‘mean’ the Phallus; inevitably we will mean with it, of course, but fundamentally it does not mean at all’ (‘M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire’ 112). Weird manifestations in Miéville’s speculative fiction maintain a non-figurative and literalised meaning which must be apprehended within the totality of the Bas-Lag narrative space. In this sense, Weird metaphors can be both read as being profoundly polysemic or having not meaning at all. As with Davidson’s model, these metaphors are primarily *used* to produce a certain effect on the reader rather than conveying specific concepts or ideas.

Weird manifestations are metaphorical not because they support a secondary figurative meaning, but because, in their literal sense, they enable multiple ways of thinking a subject with the aim of achieving a certain effect on the reader. Miéville’s *Railsea* (2012) can be read as a parodic meditation on the subject of literary interpretation, a seafaring novel in which sailors across the ‘railsea’ pursue monsters which they refer to as their ‘philosophies’: ‘Zhorbal & the Too-Much-Knowledge Mole Rats ... Naphi & Mocker-Jack, Mole of Many Meanings’ (93). This parallel between monster-hunting and literary interpretation is developed throughout the entire novel. Captain Naphi, for instance, insists on ‘how careful are philosophies’, and ‘[h]ow meanings are evasive’ (92). She remarks to her audience of sailors how ‘the ivory-coloured beast had evaded my harpoon... resisting close reading & solution to his mystery. I bellowed, & swore that one day I would submit him to a sharp & bladey interpretation’ (92). Miéville’s metaphors and Bas-Lag as



a whole is resistant to interpretation in the same manner as ‘philosophies’ are: namely, they must be understood according to their literal albeit monstrous polysemic dimensions. As Sherryl Vint acutely remarks, ‘[a] metaphor *is* whatever it claims to be in the narrative and, at the same time and through this, suggest an abundance of other possible associations’ (105; emphasis in original). Following this premise, ‘philosophies’, such as the Mole of Many Meanings, metaphors, like the Weird, have an inflationary tendency on meaning. These estranging metaphors open up a semantic space which is not reducible to any form of taxonomic thinking. Miéville’s metaphors have a dynamic meaning which must be grasped within the totality of the Bas-Lag universe and not as direct allegorical parallels to historical events.

### **Marxism as Narrative World-Building Method**

In spite of rightly pointing out at the polysemic quality of Weird entities, metaphorical interpretations offer an incomplete model to analyse the Bas-Lag trilogy. In order to effectively engage with historical reality, the referent of Miéville’s Weird metaphors must be situated within the totality of the text and its internal realism. While Weird metaphors radically estrange the reader’s perception of reality and open meaning to new possibilities of thinking, the Bas-Lag narrative space itself is, contrary to this tendency, conceptually arranged and defined according to a meticulous Marxist world-building method. In opposition to this first metaphorical approach, this second tendency to narrative world-building can be labelled as a metonymic one which, as in its conventional literary sense, involves the association by *affinity* of two ideas or concepts. In Miéville’s New Weird trilogy this tendency is fulfilled through the exhaustive effort of describing and itemising the socio-political coordinates of the narrative space according to a methodology akin to Marxist criticism. Contrary to Tolkien-esque fantasy, in which ethics of Good and Evil are

reified into the narrative space, Miéville's Bas-Lag universe reflects a historical materialist perspective towards conflicts and crises. As William J. Burling remarks, 'f]ar from being set in a Manichean universe of good versus evil ... the depicted crises are not idealist or metaphysical but material and dialectical' (331). Miéville's conceptualization of crises is wholly dependent on the dynamic relationship established between the polysemy of Weird metaphors and the metonymic affinity of Bas-Lag to Marxist criticism in terms of narrative world-building. The interaction between these two tendencies shows a dynamic Marxist understanding of crises as being endogenous to capitalist development and presenting opportunities for revolutionary organisation.

The method by which Miéville's political commitments are expressed in his fictional work is not as self-evident as in his theoretical corpus – *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (2018) or *Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law* (2006). In spite of the concealed nature of this link, the relationship between Miéville's New Weird fiction and Marxist theory has been studied by multiple literary critics. According to Freedman, for instance, 'Miéville's perspective is not only socialist and left-wing generally but rigorously and precisely Marxist: and in a way, moreover, that is based more on the works of Marx's full maturity – above all the three volumes of *Capital*' ('The Marxism of China Miéville' 25). According to this view, Miéville's Marxism is not only expressed at the level of thematic content but, as Rich Paul Cooper notes, as a narrative world-building method: '[t]he theoretical content, Marxism, is also incorporated and internalized in the process of world creation itself *as method*' (216; emphasis in original). Bas-Lag as a whole maintains an anamorphic perspective according to which conflicts are defined by a Marxist understanding of political economy. This anamorphic view shows that the 'dominant perception of reality is not natural but cultural; and this, potentially, is politically enabling, because it reveals that reality can be altered' (Beaumont 34). As Freedman rightly points

out, since Marxism is already expressed in the conflicts underlying Bas-Lag's social reality (i.e., class struggle, exploitation of social labour, economic imperialism), this content can be easily dismissed by the reader: 'The theoretical content of the Bas-Lag novels is so thoroughly incorporated into the latter's narrative structures that it remains relatively un-obtrusive and may even be missed altogether on a first or second reading' ('The Marxism of China Miéville' 31). This metonymic tendency is thus expressed in the internal conceptual organization of this alternative universe according to a Marxist understanding of political economy and through the social contradictions resulting from Bas-Lag's global capitalist system.

Speculative fiction elements follow a metonymic function by rendering sensible a Marxist criticism in a narrative setting governed by ostensibly different ontological parameters. The effect of this narrative process thus is establishing capitalism as a universal truth of history resulting from the necessary development of previous social formations. Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy, in this sense, shares Deleuze and Guattari's idea of capitalism as 'the universal truth', that is, as the '*negative* of all [previous] social formations' which inevitably emerges 'from a long history of contingencies and accidents' (178-79; emphasis in original). Capitalism is depicted throughout the trilogy as a system where '[a]ll that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned' (Marx and Engels 6). New Crobuzon exerts its economic imperialism across the whole Bas-Lag globe, destroying and assimilating non-capitalist social formations according to its capitalist interests. Small communities of foragers and hunters, such as the stiltspire in *Iron Council*, are annihilated without hesitation by New Crobuzon's militia for the sake of further expanding the State-city's commercial railroads across the Bas-Lag world: 'For centuries there have been communities by the scrags of forests. Wars between subsistence farmers and hunters ... trade and treaties between the natives and settlers... Now this native economy is cut open, and New Crobuzon hears its rumours' (*IC*

194). As these conflicts demonstrate, the Bas-Lag trilogy depicts capitalism as a ruthless economic system absorbing and destroying all previous social formations for the sake of capital reproduction and accumulation.

While the fantastic is metonymically articulated to express a Marxist understanding of social reality, it does not present a mere extrapolation of Miéville's radical politics in a figurative or allegorical manner. Bas-Lag is an alternative universe which is internally exuberant in meaning as a result of this exhaustive contextualisation. The overabundance of contextual details, as Freedman notes, is one of the most characteristic qualities of Miéville's 'three-dimensional world-building' and the main reason why 'we can hardly believe that Bas-Lag exists 'only' on paper and in the author's imagination' ('This Census-Taker' 107). Borrowing Miéville's own terminology in his essay 'Cognition as Ideology', this descriptive 'method' can be seen as the main '*trickery* effected' by himself as an author to persuade the reader of Bas-Lag's internal reality (238; emphasis in original). This sheer level of detail is also one of the reasons behind Miéville's fascination with RPG games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and their similar 'mania for cataloguing the fantastic' along with their 'weird fetish for systematization [and] the way everything is reduced to 'game stats'' ('Revealing in Genre' 355-6). As Miéville points out with regard to literary studies of Lovecraft, 'the approach ... that only stresses the 'beyond representation' sometimes misses the kind of nerdy categorizing – almost Pokémon-like – specificity of impossible physical form' ('Afterword' 232). This itemization of the fantastic is directly involved in the effectiveness of the Weird's metaphoric and inflationary tendency 'in a way that is simultaneously faithful to the impossibility of representation and also neurotically like a naturalist's exactitude of representation' ('Afterword' 232). In the case of Miéville's New Weird fiction, this naturalistic tendency follows a metonymic affinity to Marxist criticism. Miéville's

trilogy follows a similar dialectic of representation: on the one hand, it neurotically attempts to itemise its teratology and historical reality according to a metonymic affinity to Marxist criticism and; on the other hand, it undermines this representative effort through the Weird's metaphoric insistence on abcanny and unpredictable dimensions of reality. It is due to Bas-Lag's internally consistent and intricate world-building, that Weird manifestations appear as being more persuasively real and strange with regards to the familiar, albeit fantastic, setting to which the reader is accustomed through sheer detail and documentation.

### **Bas-Lag and Marx's Theory of Crisis: The Possibility of the Impossible**

The relationship between metaphoric and metonymic tendencies are crucial to achieve a better understanding of the capitalist crises depicted in Miéville's trilogy. Each Bas-Lag novel is driven by an endogenous crisis which, even in its most abcanny and supernatural dimensions, is a direct consequence of capitalism's inherent tendencies and social contradictions. Crises in the Bas-Lag trilogy follow a Marxist methodology which, at its time of publication, had been repeatedly challenged by multiple areas of cultural criticism and political economy at the time of the novels' publication. In this historical context, Miéville's trilogy can be read as posing a challenge to post-Marxist accounts by following a rigorous Marxist approach to economic crises through a novel utilisation of elements shared across all speculative fiction. Marx's theory of crisis, as Andrew Kliman points out, 'can be characterised as an endogenous theory of recurrent crises' (245). Marx argued that the rate of profit tends to fall in the long run: '[t]he progressive tendency for the rate of profit to fall is thus simply *the expression, peculiar to the capitalist mode of production*, of the progressive development of the social productivity of labour' (*Capital Vol. III* 319, emphasis in original). As Kliman aptly summarises: '[w]hen productivity increases, less labour is needed to

produce a product, so it can be produced more cheaply. As a result, its price tends to fall. And when prices tend to fall, so do profits and the rate of profit' (243). According to Marx, the 'falling rate of profit ... has constantly to be overcome by way of crisis' (*Capital Vol. III* 367). Contrary 'to economists like Ricardo, who take the capitalist mode of production as an absolute' and claim that the decline in the rate of profit would lead to an internal equilibrium in the economy, Marx argued that '[c]rises are never more than momentary, violent solutions for the existing contradictions, violent eruptions that re-establish the disturbed balance for the time being' (*Capital Vol. III* 350; 357). The falling rate of profit leads to 'a periodical devaluation of existing capital, which is a means, immanent to the capitalist mode of production' (*Capital Vol. III* 358). Financial speculation, from a Marxist point of view, is directly involved in the forestalling and intensification of these crises. This counteracting measure, however, does not resolve the contradictions of capital but only forestalls and intensifies a worse crisis to come, which is the reason why Marx claims that fictitious capital has the 'nicely mixed character of swindler and prophet' (*Capital Vol. III* 573). As Slavoj Žižek argues, '[c]apitalism is structurally always in crisis ... it can only reproduce itself by way of 'borrowing from the future'; by way of escaping into the future. The final settling of accounts when all debts would be paid cannot ever arrive' (xv). Financial speculation and fictitious capital, according to Marx, make evident that 'the *true barrier* to capitalist production is *capital itself*. It is that capital and its self-valorization appear as the starting and finishing point, as the motive and purpose of production; production is production only for *capital*' (*Capital Vol. III* 358; emphases in original). The main insight of Marx's theory of crisis, as Annie McClanahan claims, is that 'even the most fictional forms of immateriality turn out to be inescapably historical and irreducibly material' (91). Even the seemingly insubstantial domain of financial markets and

fictitious capital is firmly connected to the material and historical conditions of an industrial mode of production.

The Bas-Lag trilogy's affinity to Marx's model of crisis is crucial to achieve a better understanding of the type of engagement it maintains with its historical context of production. The period of the trilogy's publication (2000-2004) is the prelude to the 2007-2008 economic crisis, but, also, a historical moment in which revolutionary movements defied global capitalism. As Miéville himself points out in an interview:

The Bas Lag books ... were a response ... very directly to the post-Seattle anti-capitalist movement ... What characterizes the Gothic and fantastic fiction of that period is a sense of potentialities, and even the dark books, the gritty books, the sad books and the bleak books are exuberantly bleak because potentialities are being opened up. (Miéville in McNeill 93)

The Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in 1999, as McNeill points out, sparked the circulation and revitalisation of old and new ideas in the left: 'For a heady two years after Seattle ... it felt as if, following years of defeat, the left was moving through a cycle of advancing, regrouping, and advancing again' (93). This ethos is expressed in the revolutionary potentials, dilemmas and failures depicted in each Bas-Lag novel. The novels depict many of the same concrete issues raised by the Seattle protests: the economic globalization of capitalism's mode of production, the imperialistic logic underlying this expansion and the strategic dilemmas involved in revolutionary action against it. As Christopher Palmer notes, Bas-Lag's revolutionary movements irredeemably fail, but '[t]heir failure, which is in various ways qualified and by no means total, is not surprising given the weight of the challenges and oppressors within the city' (226). Similar to the Seattle demonstrations, the Bas-Lag trilogy addresses issues which are not

ubiquitous to a specific social formations but, on the contrary, are applicable to the global scope of the capitalist economy. In this sense, while not directly representing the Seattle demonstrations or other specific events, Miéville's trilogy engages with its historical context by engaging with highly relevant socioeconomic issues and challenging dominant ideas about capitalist crises at its time of publication.

By asserting the primacy of industrial production and social labour in its novels, Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy challenges the prevalent ideological prognosis of a post-industrial mode of production during its historical context of production. As McClanahan remarks, this was an idea propagated by both capitalist defenders – politicians and economists – and left-wing cultural critics alike by the end of the Fordist-Keynesian period in the 1980s (80). In brief terms, this discourse 're-imagines economic crises as economic triumphs [and] transform *de*-industrialization and the decimation of the working class into *post*-industrialism and the ascendance of the 'creative class'' (80; emphases in original). This ideology prognosed the advent of a new economy free of contradictions – inflation, unemployment, exploitation – making material resources obsolete along with Marx's ideas concerning the primary role of industrial production in capitalist systems (80). As Marx had already asserted concerning ideologues of the financial sector, 'the conception of capital as value that reproduces itself and increases in reproduction, by virtue of its innate property as ever persisting and growing value ... leave[s] far behind the fantasies of the alchemists' (*Capital Vol. III* 519). According to post-Marxist accounts, the 'creative class' associated with the 'immaterial labour' of the service and financial sectors is an indicator of a new mode of production 'simultaneously superseding and rendering obsolete the centrality of factory labour in Marx's critique of political economy' (Clover 110). Following this premise, post-Marxist accounts claim that 'financial accumulation produces a form of autonomous and performative value capable of



leaping over the physical and historical limits of capitalist accumulation' (McClanahan 86). Post-industrial ideology is thus not only explicit in the discourse of capitalist defenders and politicians but also, implicitly, in left-wing post-Marxist accounts asserting the autonomy of financial markets as a dematerialised interplay of signifiers unaffected by industrial labour.

The crises driving the plot of the Bas-Lag novels follow the main insights of Marx's theory as developed in the third volume of *Capital*. Miéville's trilogy, in this sense, performs a critical interrogation of the post-industrial ideology of that historical period. Bas-Lag is portrayed as a global capitalist system with an industrial mode of production resembling nineteenth-century conditions of existence. This steampunk world, as most universes in this retro-futuristic subgenre of speculative fiction do, combines steam-based technology and nineteenth-century architecture with various types of magic implemented for both repressive state purposes and revolutionary action. Miéville's decision to opt for a distinctly industrial capitalist mode of production is a clear sign of his metonymic affinity to Marxism as a world-building method. In addition to this, as William J. Burling accurately remarks, the conflicts depicted in the novels are decidedly connected to material and historical crises held within the mode of production:

Miéville's New Crobuzon depicts the mechanisms and effects of economic exploitation and ideological mystification under industrial capitalism in a literal, non-allegorical, and cognitively estranging sense. We have before us the longshoremen, meat cutters, common laborers, and unemployed as directly represented in the specific and detailed circumstances of their alienated and exploited class conditions. (331)

Considering the trilogy's context of publication, Weird metaphors can be observed as a rhetorical tool against post-industrial ideology, namely by reinstating, in McClanahan's terms, Marx's main insight 'that even the most fictional forms of immateriality turn out to be inescapably historical

and irreducibly material' (91). As in Marx's theory, crises in the Bas-Lag trilogy emerge endogenously from the internal dynamics of the system. Weird manifestations throughout Miéville's trilogy further emphasise this fact by showing how seemingly supernatural crises, like financial ones, are always connected to the historical and material contingency of capitalist dynamics. The plot of each novel is driven by a Weird or supernatural crisis – more explicitly in *Perdido Street Station* and *The Scar* – which seems to be entirely detached from capitalist dynamics and social reality. However, each novel follows a demystification narrative which gradually exhibits the material and historical scope of these crises. Speculative fiction elements are crucial to challenge post-industrial accounts of financial of crises, since they demonstrate that, even in their most unreal or 'weird' dimensions, these always refer to the internal industrial dynamics of the system.

### **Bas-Lag's Abcanny Universe: Benjamin's Allegory**

How does this dialectic of metaphorical polysemy and metonymic Marxism, however, compare to allegorical accounts of literary production and historicity? Perhaps one of the most nuanced, albeit idiosyncratic, theoretical accounts of allegorical writing belongs to the Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin. In a traditional literary context, a representation is considered allegorical when its internal meaning is subsidiary and dependent on an external referent not provided by the text itself. Allegories, as Lloyd Spencer points out, depend 'on the reader's grasp of an interpretative context not given (although it may be referred to) in the text itself' (62). Benjamin's terminology, on the other hand, 'sees the evocation of that 'framework' of meaning for allegory – and especially the forced, deliberate or ostentatious evocation of such a framework – as itself symptomatic of a significant loss of a sense of genuine, immediately accessible, imminent meaning' (63). Allegories

always maintain a concealed melancholy attachment to something no longer present in the social field; a loss which they attempt to redeem through the foreclosure of interpretation by their insistence on external referents. Baroque German plays follow an allegorical structure in which, according to Benjamin, ‘[t]he greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance’ (*German Drama* 166). This opposition between external superordinate and debased physicality is at the core of Benjamin’s link between allegories and commodities: ‘the singular debasement of things through their signification ... corresponds to the singular debasement of things through their price as commodities’ (*Arcades P* 22). As Ian Baucom remarks, ‘[t]hings, in both allegory and commodity, come to signify by reference to an external value or meaning detached from themselves. Commodities are, in this sense, allegories in the sphere of social practice’ (18). The implications of this analogy, as Robert Halpern notes, is that ‘[t]he commodity renders allegory obsolete by perfecting and globalizing the latter’s logic of representation. Under mature capitalism, allegory is no longer a simple literary technique but is rather the phenomenology of the entire social-material world’ (13). Allegories thus have a profoundly dialectical structure consisting in the aporetic conflict between commodity and aesthetic form: an attempt to redeem the detritus of the past following the same logic of the system allowing its destruction. This type of writing is, in this sense, both a reflection and reaction against capitalism’s commodification of social life.

Miéville’s speculative fiction, nonetheless, exhibits a distinct approach and way of ‘contemplating’ social reality to Benjamin’s model of allegory. One of the most obvious differences is that whereas allegories, in Benjamin’s view, establish a symptomatic link to capitalist commodification, Miéville’s metaphors explicitly deal with capitalism as a subject matter. However, the fundamental difference between both models pertains to their designation of

distinct areas of struggle in capitalism's social-material world. This difference can be further elucidated by the distinction between the uncanny and the abecanny as conceptualised by Miéville himself. Similar to the uncanny, Benjaminian allegories maintain a link to a repressed past which returns as a symptom in their allusion to a lost transcendental meaning debased by capitalist commodification. On the contrary, Weird metaphors explicitly focus on the abecanny potentials – the unknown beyond any notion of human cognition or repression – already contained in the *present*. The abecanny emphasises the radical alterity which permeates everyday life and signals the inevitability of capitalism's crisis. This abecanny focus on the historical presents is directly manifested in the meticulous description of Bas-Lag. As Freedman notes,

Constructed from the ground up, as it were, in seemingly endless detail and with careful attention to virtually all major forms of human activity (e.g., economic, political, military, legal, artistic, intellectual, religious, sexual, interpersonal), Bas-Lag attains a solidity and a concretely plausible *presence* ... So inflationary can weird fiction become in Miéville's hands that we accept the (alternative) reality of a whole inhabited planet of which no one had ever before heard ('From Genre to Political Economy' 15; emphasis in original).

It is due to this careful arrangement of socio-political coordinates that Miéville's literalised metaphors are absolutely dependent on the historical and material coordinates of the entire text. Miéville's alternative Bas-Lag universe engages with its historical context of production through an inflationary narrative logic which combines Weird entities with a meticulous socio-political world-building. The Weird, however, is not just a cosmetic or ameliorating force to an otherwise rigorous historical and materialist Marxist approach to narrative world-building. On the contrary, Weird manifestations, due to their radical alterity, operate as a persuasive tool to emphasise the revolutionary potentials inscribed in the present and capitalism's endogenous tendency towards

crises. As in Marxist theory, the apparently ‘dematerialized’ aspects of crises in the Bas-Lag universe – Weird manifestations, magical powers and incomprehensible events – are ultimately grounded on the material realities of class struggle and industrial production. Crises, however, are never fully reducible to either the fantastic or the historical. These events, rather, must be grasped as the dialectical conflict between these two dimensions of material reality.

### **Bas-Lag’s Industrial Capitalism: A Fantastic Documentation of Capitalist Crises**

Miéville’s Bas-Lag world is dialectically constituted by the interaction of Weird entities whose inflationary meaning is profoundly metaphoric and the complex socio-political coordinates determining its narrative space. Crisis functions as the narrative logic by which conflicts are articulated throughout the trilogy. This Marxist understanding of crisis is not only manifested thematically but, also, through textual markers in the narration. One of the most patent forms via which Miéville’s intricate world-building expresses a Marxist sense of crisis is through the metaphors used to describe the narrative space of the city. New Crobuzon is portrayed in both *Perdido Street Station* and *Iron Council* as a narrative space in a constant state of decay. This sense of crisis is constantly manifested through the eschatological imagery used to refer to the city’s endemic social discontent. Biological decay operates as a metaphor standing for the social whole: the endogenous tendency of the mode of production towards crisis. These metaphors act as markers for New Crobuzon’s oppressive capitalist system and class struggle. The foreign Garuda named Yagharek – a deserted bird-humanoid of a nomadic community outside New Crobuzon – describes the city-state as a rotting body in the opening pages of *Perdido Street Station*: ‘[r]ailways trace urban anatomy like protruding veins’; ‘houses which dribble pale mucus’; factory workers with ‘[c]hains swing[ing] deadweight like useless limbs, snapping into zombie motion’; ‘[t]he gates to

*the Old City, once grandiose, now psoriatic and ruined* (PSS 2; 3; 4; emphasis in original). Yagharek concludes this passage with the ominous statement: ‘[t]his great wen, this dusty city dreamed up in bone and brick, a conspiracy of industry and violence, steeped into history and battened-down power, this badland beyond my ken. New Crobuzon’ (PSS 5; emphasis in original). These biological metaphors are repeated throughout *Iron Council*: ‘A city of markets, a city of windows. New Crobuzon again. Unceasing, unstintingly itself. Warm that spring, gamy: the rivers were stinking’; ‘[t]he streets sputtered under the bilious elyctro-barometric shop signs’; vagabond ‘[g]rey-faced women and men in clothes like layers of peeling skin’ (IC 63; 76; 98). As these metaphors denote, the endemic decay of the urban space is directly associated with capitalism’s organisation of productive forces and social relations as demonstrated in the description of impoverished sectors and neighbourhoods. The undead quality of the urban space renders visible that in capitalism ‘the result of the contradiction is always a *certain equilibrium*, even when this equilibrium is attained by way of a crisis’ (Balibar 325; emphasis in original). Capitalism is depicted as an infection inherent to the functioning of the social body of New Crobuzon. As in the case of zombies in horror novels, capitalism is a functional malady which thrives in its rotting state of crisis.

Overproduction along with financial speculation are, according to Marx, precipitating and forestalling factors and indicators of a crisis in the mode of production. Bas-Lag’s metonymic affinity to Marxist criticism is manifested in the documentation of crisis indicators throughout the trilogy’s narration. Overproduction is shown in both the intensification of labour exploitation and wage reduction in *Perdido Street Station*. Indicators of social discontent are expressed in the strikes led by Vodyanoi workers – an amphibian-hominid species – demanding for better wages and working conditions in the docks New Crobuzon: ‘As the sun rose, the vodyanoy at the river’s

bottom and lining the banks unfurled banners. FAIR WAGES NOW! they demanded, and NO RAISE, NO RIVER' (*PSS 360*). These forestalling and precipitating factors to economic crises are explicitly addressed by the plethora of revolutionary movements presented in *Iron Council*. As in Marx's theory, New Crobuzon's tendential fall in the rate of profit is described as being combated through financial speculation on future fictitious value. This point is explicitly made in the circulation of the *Runagate Rumpant* – a dissident newspaper written by an anarchist group of New Crobuzon:

An absurd orgy of speculation, the financiers swimming like grease-whales in a slick of stolen and invented cash, prices for land and the stocks of the TRT soaring. It will not last. As returns slow, as the stench of TRT corruption and government collusion grows overpowering, the weakness at the base will show. When the rich grow afraid, they get nasty. We say: *A government for need not greed!* (*IC 239*; emphasis in original)

The revolutionary newspaper portrays speculation as being a direct consequence of capitalist greed. As the events of *Iron Council* depict, the speculative activities of the TRT – a company building commercial railroads across the Bas-Lag world – are directly linked to the exploitation of proletarians and slaves. This is demonstrated in the delay of their salaries which barely cover the living expenses: 'The tunnellers are enraged. They have been working on promises, are owed months of backpay they thought the train would bring. The graders refuse to continue' (*IC 249*). Workers of the TRT company construct rail lines and tunnels in extremely precarious conditions: 'A tunnel man is injured – an everyday terror in this backpowder land, but he responds with an outrage as if it is the first such a thing has happened – Look it, he says folding up his blooded hand ... They letting us fucking die here' (*IC 249*). In opposition to post-industrial accounts, financial markets are depicted as being strictly linked to the realities of social labour – precarious working

conditions, slavery, prolongation of the working day, delayed wages – and not some independent domain detached from industrial production. In addition to this, the capital of the financial sector, as in Marx's theory of fictitious value, is described by the Runagate Rumpant as 'stolen' and 'invented' and forestalling a structural crisis 'at the base.' The process of speculation is described by the Runagate Rumpant as a counteractive and desperate move to forestall an economic crisis. This crisis, however, is not depicted as an exclusive economic affair, but deeply linked to the class antagonism driving the plot of *Iron Council*. It is in this moment of crisis that multiple radical political movements emerge to exploit the social discontent and revolutionary potentials from this event.

As with Marx's theory of the tendential falling rate of profit, capitalist social formations are portrayed as being in a constant state of decay. This endogenous state of decay is not only expressed through the eschatological metaphors referring to the urban space but also in the steampunk industrial landscape. As Nicholas Birns argues, steampunk's 'hypostatization of the Victorian as the present' evokes the historical moment associated with industrial capitalism (203). According to Burling, '*Perdido Street Station* exemplifies a wholly new form of the fantastic responding to historical developments in global capitalism in the *fin de siècle*' (326). The industrial landscape of New Crobuzon, however, does not simply draw an allegorical parallel to nineteenth-century historical conditions. Bas-Lag's steampunk landscape works, rather, as a persuasive tool to imply that crises are always connected to an endogenous crisis in the industrial mode of production. Even though there is no economic account of New Crobuzon's profitability rates in the Bas-Lag trilogy, Marx's theory is metonymically embedded as a method in Bas-Lag's world-building. Eschatological metaphors of decay and the abject process of Remaking are deeply connected to the material and historical reality of industrial capitalism. These traditional Marxist



themes, however, are deployed with full awareness of their relation to social constructs of gender, sex and race. Class struggle is deeply interweaved with social identity and racial violence in the Vodyanoy strikes in *Perdido Street Station*. While groups of human workers side with Vodyanoi strikers by holding supportive signs such as ‘HUMAN AND VODVANOI AGAINST THE BOSSES!’, others explicitly denounce the protests through racial hatred: ‘The screamed abuse at the vodyanoy, calling them frogs and toads. They jeered at the striking humans, denouncing them as race-traitors’ (*PSS* 361). Similar to Marx’s tendential falling rate of profitability asserting the reduction of wages and intensification of labour exploitation as symptoms to upcoming crises, this state of decay is depicted as the normal course of development in the mode of production. In opposition to post-industrial ideologues arguing for the primacy of ‘immaterial labour’, these awe-inspiring metaphors render visible the material underpinning of capitalism’s economic rationale: labour exploitation, slavery, famine and unemployment.

### **Remaking: Radical Social Labour Exploitation**

The estrangement performed by the Bas-Lag trilogy is most immediately observed in the rich teratology inhabiting its narrative space. This teratology does not merely comprehend the natural species and sapient beings of this universe but, most importantly, the life forms emerging from the contingency of its global capitalist system. Many fantastic components in Miéville’s narrative world-building operate as condensed formulations for the intensification of labour exploitation in the industrial sector. A Marxist sense of crisis is implicit in the Weird teratology resulting from the process of ‘Remaking’. Remaking is perhaps the most illustrative metaphor for the intensification of labour exploitation and wage reduction – some of Marx’s main diagnosed symptoms of the tendential falling rate of profit – in the Bas-Lag trilogy. The Remade are

individuals sent to ‘punishment factories’ due to past criminal activities or acts of political resistance against the government. Once inside these punishment factories, criminals are subjected to the process of Remaking, a series of surgical procedures conducted through a combination of magical and scientific methods. Bio-thaumaturgy is the name of this occult science capable of modifying the body through perverse amputations and prosthetic additions of organic and non-organic parts. Remaking is not merely implemented for punitive purposes as its transformative procedure usually has the consequence of turning criminals into slaves for the exploitation of their free labour. The Remade are socially considered as subhuman commodities and constitute the labour force resulting from the slave trade between capitalist countries. Their physical appearance is a visible indicator of their social status as slave labour:

Bubbling from his chest, visible beneath a torn shirt, was a huge tumour of flesh from which emerged two long ill-tentacles. They swung lifeless, deadweight blubbery encumbrances. Like most of the transportees, the man was Remade, carved by science and thaumaturgy into a new shape, in punishment for some crime. (*TS* 32)

Slave labour in the form of Remaking is an integral part of Bas-Lag’s global economy as demonstrated in the slave trade held between multiple nations. Unlike any other sapient species, the Remade are a historically contingent product of capitalism’s mode of production and stand as a visceral metaphor for the exploitation of social labour. As their description denotes, the fantastic, as demonstrated in their abject appearance, plays a crucial role in enhancing the Remade’s marginalisation from the social order as slaves whose sole purpose is capitalist reproduction. Bio-thaumaturgical modifications thus serve as visible indicators of their subhuman status associated to their slave labour separating them from other workers. The Remade thus display the consequences of capitalism’s instrumental rationale on the creation of socially constructed

identities as well as their productive role in the mode of production. The visceral quality of Remaking as a speculative fiction metaphor also shows that social identity is not merely a discursive phenomenon – an ideological mirage to be dispelled by progressive thinking – but deeply connected to the material violence of capitalism as a mode of production.

Similar to the eschatological imagery used to characterise the urban space, the Remade stand as a metaphor for capitalism's unleashed economic rationale and the mode of production's endogenous tendency towards crisis. Estrangement, in this sense, is articulated with the aim of rendering visible the capitalist logic underlying slave labour. Slave labour in the form of Remaking stands as a metaphor for the overproduction of New Crobuzon's insatiable economy. According to Marx, there are several counteracting factors to the tendential rate of profitability, 'checking and cancelling the effect of the general law and giving it simply the character of a tendency' (*Capital Vol. III* 339). These are the factors which make it a tendency and not merely a law. Both Remaking and New Crobuzon's eschatological imagery function as metaphors for Marx's counteracting and precipitating factors to crises: the intense exploitation of labour, the reduction of wages below their value and the cheapening of the elements of constant capital. As Freedman rightly points out, Remaking 'deftly figures some of the social relations inherent to the commodity form. The violence of the wage relation... the 'remaking', as we might say – of labor into labor-power' ('The Marxism of China Miéville' 32). Remaking, however, does not only stand for the general transformation of labour into labour-power but, more specifically, for its transmutation into slave labour separated even from working class humanoid and non-humanoid proletariats. This distinction is explicitly thematised in the Remade treatment by other workers in the construction of TRT tunnels and railroads: 'And there are Remade. They do not look at the whole men, free workers, the aristocracy of this labour' (*IC* 182). The Remade here stand as metaphor

for the whole intensification of labour exploitation in the form of slave labour. As a worker remarks expressing his disdain at reading the Runagate Rumpant's political programme to free the Remade: 'Who ain't for fair pay? And if there are them as wants guilds I ain't got no problem, but free Remade? They're fucking criminals' (*IC* 236). As Weather Wrightby, an investor of the TRT company in charge of building commercial railroads across the Bas-Lag world, remarks to Remade slaves: 'I don't make laws. You have debts to the factories that made you. Your lives are not your own. Your money ... you have no money' (*IC* 278). By blurring the boundaries between the organic and the inorganic, Remades also render visible the indistinction of social labour from means of production once turned into slave workers. As Jonathan Newell notes, 'Miéville's fiction is highly visceral: even the magic in Bas-Lag, thaumaturgy, is really a form of fantastic materialism, a fantasy science' (496). Fantastic components operate here, in similar terms to Bould's theory of fantasy, as 'a hard-headed critical consciousness of capitalist subjectivity' (84). The visceral quality of this punishment is strictly related to its systemic determination by the global capitalist economy as shown in the slave trade among Bas-Lag nations. As the opening pages of *The Scar* expose, the slave trade is fundamental to Bas-Lag's global economy: 'The transport never stops. New Crobuzon is insatiable' (*TS* 9). Remaking thus exhibits how slave labour is not a remnant of less civilized times but a constitutive part of the capitalist world economy and one of the main counteracting factors to forestall crisis.

Remaking exhibits capitalism's implication in the construction of socio-political identities and interrogates radical movements whose agendas do not acknowledge these issues. Even within radical movements such as the Iron Council or the Runagate Rampant, Remades are treated as slaves relegated to a marginal role in their 'liberation' projects. *Iron council* extensively deals with the confrontation between Remades, revolutionaries and proletariats: 'Behind them, cuffed to their

meal by guards, the Remade eat what is left ... Those prisoners with boilers hexed to them are issued enough culm and low-grade coke to work' (*IC* 233). *The Scar* also raises this dilemma in Bellis and Tanner's arrival in Armada – the renegade pirate state where Remade are treated as equals – and their perplexed response at the sight of free Remade: 'Neither could get used to it. A place where the Remade were equal. Where a Remade might be a foreman or a manager instead of the lowest labourer' (*TS* 118). Besides showing the systemic determinations in the creation of socio-political identities, Miéville's speculative fiction is deeply aware of the discourses promoted in such constructs as well their internalisation by characters in privileged positions of power. This internalisation of class exploitation is displayed in Bellis's conscious attempt to ignore the slaves being transported as cargo inside the ship she departs in from New Crobuzon: 'The fact of the ship's sentient cargo discomfited her' (*TS* 30). Bellis's attachment to New Crobuzon as her hometown is deeply connected to this discursive order and biases against the Remade and her privileged position as a free human. The plot of *The Scar* gradually exhibits the ideological bias in Bellis's position as an impartial observer whose actions against Armada – a place of emancipation for renegades and marginalised people across the globe – are justified by her nostalgia to return to her home of New Crobuzon: 'New Crobuzon is my home; it will always be my home' (*TS* 95). Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy shows an extreme awareness of how imperialism and class difference are also discursively internalised by characters in the form of ideological biases informing their motives and actions.

Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy shows the political potential of speculative fiction to engage with historical reality through a metonymic link to Marxism as world-building method. The fantastic is contextualised in a capitalist universe ruled by the manifold social contradictions of capitalism: social labour exploitation, slave trading and capitalist crises. The magic of bio-

thaumaturgy problematises the historical contingency in the creation of social identities as observed in the process of Remaking. Magic, in this sense, functions as a literalised metaphor for the capitalist transformation of labour into slave labour. This is the same meaning that Marx's thesis of commodity fetishism attributes to the fantastic, namely a transformative power according to which the 'social relation between men' assumes 'the fantastic form of a relation between things' (*Capital I* 43). Fantasy renders visible this Marxist thesis through the visceral metaphor of Remaking: individuals who are magically transformed into commodities through bio-thaumaturgy and considered as sub-human by the rest of society. Fantastic species also serve the purpose of displaying the interrelationship of social identities in the forms of class and race. These points are thoroughly problematised in the internal struggles within revolutionary movements composed by humans and other species. This metonymic tendency to world-building is also expressed in the rigorous Marxist documentation of capitalist crises along with their precipitating and forestalling factors: the intensification of labour exploitation, financial speculation and precarious working conditions. Estrangement is crucial to establish a conceptual affinity between Bas-Lag as a narrative space and Marxism as a theoretical framework. Rather than drawing allegorical parallels between Bas-Lag and historical events, Miéville's New Weird fiction arranges a narrative space which, in spite of being ruled by ostensibly different ontological parameters, is still ruled by the same capitalist dynamics as 'real' history.

### **The Plague of Nightmares: Weird Approximations to Capitalism**

The Plague of Nightmares in *Perdido Street Station* renders visible the Marxist view that speculation is a contributing factor to the mode of production's endogenous industrial crisis. The supernatural crisis unleashed in *Perdido Street Station* is fully connected to the financial

speculation of New Crobuzon's capitalist elite. This crisis is not only portrayed in the social themes developed throughout the narration but also in the Weird teratology whose metaphoric meaning is radically determined by its historical context and mode of production. The slake-moth plague in *Perdido Street Station* develops a metaphoric parallel between the Weird's inflationary logic and capitalist crisis. Similar to the Remaking process, slake-moths also have a transformative effect on the subject. However, in opposition to Remaking, slake-moth power is exerted on the subjectivity and mind of the individual rather than its physical attributes or body parts. Slake-moths are extremely dangerous creatures which feed upon the unconscious of sentient creatures until leaving them in a catatonic state: 'They draw the dreams out with their wings, flood the mind, break the dykes that hold back hidden thoughts, guilty thoughts, anxieties, delights, *dreams* (PSS 456; emphasis in original). Their description evokes, like most Weird monsters, a sense of ontological uncertainty associated with their trans-dimensional existence: 'Wings – of unstable dimensions and shapes, beating as they do in various planes ... Slake-moths don't live entirely in our plane' (PSS 456). Slake-moths, as one of its researchers claims, originate from the Fractured Land; the primary locus of radical alterity in the Bas-Lag world where normal ontological parameters disintegrate (PSS 454). The plot of *Perdido Street Station* is driven by the release of slake-moths onto New Crobuzon: the 'Plague of Nightmares.' This crisis, however, is by no means reducible to the supernatural but strictly connected to New Crobuzon's expansionist economic pretensions. As one of the bio-thaumaturgists involved in the 'slake-moth project' reveals, the slake-moths were subjected to research by the State for military and economic purposes: 'It wasn't quick enough for the sponsors, you know? ... The applications they thought there might be... military, psychodimensional... they weren't coming. The subjects were *incomprehensible*, we weren't making progress ... and they were *uncontrollable*, they were just too *dangerous*' (435; emphases

in original). Slake-moths thus act as metaphors rendering sensible the speculative economic aspects at play in crisis in the mode of production. These creatures show the dangerous consequences of the state's speculative investment in uncertain futures and fictitious value. New Crobuzon's motivations to begin and quit the project are purely economic and imperialistic in scope. The Weird's radical alterity is articulated to further emphasises the danger intrinsic to the mode of production's financial investment in uncertain future.

Slake-moths embody the axiomatic logic of unleashed capitalism and its compulsion to foster capital accumulation at any cost. The radical alterity of these monsters is a reflection of capitalism's inherent dynamics of capital reproduction but, also, its culminating point of crisis threatening the existence of the system itself. As Steve Shaviro notes, the slake-moths' teratology and behaviour resemble Marx's own metaphoric use of vampires and zombies in his critique of political economy (287). The catatonic subject resulting from the slake-moth attack can be seen as a radicalisation of the process of zombification. Zombies, as Shaviro remarks, are 'already-exhausted sources of value, former vessels of creative activity and self-reflexivity that have been entirely consumed and cast aside. No longer capable of living labour, they are not a renewable source' (287). As Shaviro adds, these 'are creatures of sheer excess; this is how they embody the depredations of an inhuman vampire-capital' (287). Slake-moths are a metaphor for capitalist economic rationale driven to its own self-destructive excess. Unlike Remaking, they do not merely modify the subject with the aim of exploiting its labour, but in order to digest its very subjectivity until its absolute depletion. In this sense, slake-moths follow a similar logic to McClanahan's description of fictitious capital as they both signal a crisis of solvency in which productive capital – social labour, factories, means of production – is massively unemployed and, instead of the 'irreality of the post-industrial economy ... we find the ever-expanding masses of the unemployed



and a rate of profit in precipitous decline' (90). The simultaneity of the Vodyanoi strikes with the slake-moths release from the laboratories is indicative of this link between speculation and labour exploitation (*PSS* 360). 'The Plague of Nightmares' renders visible the destructive potential of financial speculation through the metaphor of slake-moths: uncontrollable and unchallenged predatory creatures which can potentially extinguish all life in New Crobuzon.

Slake-moths also trace the dangerous trajectory of capital production and its dangerous reproduction at any cost. After being captured by the state apparatus of New Crobuzon and proving not to be profitable, the slake-moths are sold to Motley, the leader of the city's most dangerous underworld gang. Motley sells the commodity produced by their milk called 'dream shit'; a powerful and addictive hallucinogenic drug which is illegally purchased and widely consumed in all New Crobuzon. The circulation of capital follows the underground of New Crobuzon; a scene predominantly run by Motley's gang, which owns most of the means of production of 'dream shit'. As Robert Brown claims, '[t]he crisis of capitalist accumulation ... is deeply embedded in the structure of the novel' (77). The 'Plague of Nightmares' is unleashed when Isaac unknowingly purchases and feeds a slake-moth caterpillar in his lab as a specimen to study winged creatures for his experiment to make Yagharek regain his flight. Once this slake-moth reaches its final form, it flees to release its siblings at Motley's laboratory. It is from this point onwards that the crisis is unleashed. The trajectory of the crisis in *Perdido Street Station*, in this sense, accurately follows the stages of capital production: first, slake-moths prior to their capture are radically mysterious creatures from the Fractured Land serving no purpose in the capitalist economy; second, they are captured for their presumable transformation as raw material for commodities and military application; third, after assessing the unprofitability of these applications, they are transformed into capital by being sold to drug dealers of New Crobuzon; fourth, they are converted into the

means of production for the valued commodity and drug, ‘dream shit’, which is the source of Motley’s profit and capital. Slake-moths, in this sense, make evident the dangerous economic rationale endogenous to the very functioning of capitalism’s mode of production. These Weird manifestations thus render visible Marx’s claim that ‘production is production only for *capital*, and not the reverse, i.e. the means of production are not simply means for steadily expanding patterns of life for the *society* of producers’ (358 *Capital Vol. III*; emphasis in original). Similarly, the crisis portrayed in *Perdido Street Station* emerges from the regular functioning of the mode of production whose economic rationale even overrides its own defenders’ integrity and safety.

### **Crisis as Ontology: The Possibility of the Impossible**

The Weird, nonetheless, is not only a metaphor for capitalist crisis in the economy but, also, for the abcanny historical shifts demystifying any sense of teleological certainty in the system’s development. The Ghosthead Empire is an exemplary illustration of this historical abcanny – the alien race that arrived in Bas-Lag and ruled the world for five hundred years long before any of the narrated events of the trilogy. As Uther Doul, the personal bodyguard of the leaders of the dissident state of Armada, *The Lovers*, explains to Bellis, ‘[t]he Ghosthead broke open the world, when they arrived. They made the Fractured Land with the force of their landing, and it was more than physical damage’ (*TS* 542). The ‘Scar’ or Fractured Land is the vestige of the Ghosthead’s landing and is one of the constitutive forces shaping the Bas-Lag universe. As Doul remarks quoting an ancient author from the Ghosthead Empire:

We have scarred this mild world with prospects, wounded it massively, broken it, made our mark on its most remote land and stretching for thousands of leagues across the sea,

and what we break we may reshape, and that which fails might still succeed. We have found rich deposits of chance and we will dig them out. (*TS* 543)

This is not merely an ‘abstract crow or triumph’, but an actual explanation of the impact of their arrival: ‘They had *scarred*, they had *broken* the world. And, in doing so, they set free forces that they were able to tap’ (*TS* 543; emphasis in original). These potentials are metaphorical in the literalised sense of having concrete consequences on the Bas-Lag world. As Doul describes, the Ghosthead constantly tapped these potentials in order to expand their empire: ‘Forces which allowed them to reshape things, to fail and succeed *simultaneously* – because they mined for possibilities. A cataclysm that, shattering a world, the rupture left behind: it opens up a rich seam of potentialities (*TS* 543; emphasis in original). The Ghosthead landing prefigures Bas-Lag’s dynamic history asserting the existence of radical possibilities contained within actual states of affairs. Despite the disappearance of the Ghosthead Empire, the Scar maintains its influence over following historical events as manifested in the ‘Plague of Nightmares’ and Armada’s failed attempt to tap these potentials in *The Scar*. Miéville’s Bas-Lag trilogy makes evident that history itself is the Weird: a sublime totality constantly undermining the stability of actual states of affairs and following no teleological causality or certainty. Bas-Lag expresses Deleuze and Guattari’s idea that ‘[t]he real is not impossible; on the contrary, within the real everything is possible, everything becomes possible’ (40). The Fractured Land operates as a literalised metaphor undermining the parameters of the text’s narrative space by presenting the Weird as a historical force waiting to be tapped by political movements according to their respective agendas. Crisis, in this sense, is posited at the core of reality: a rich seam of potentialities waiting to be tapped by ‘scarring’ and shattering the world.

The Unified Field Theory is one of the most suggestive diegetic accounts of Bas-Lag's narrative logic and its link to crisis. Crisis energy is explained by Isaac in a private lecture to his friend and client Yagharek. Isaac draws a triangular diagram for didactic purposes with the aim of explaining the interrelationship between the three major fields of studies in the Bas-Lag universe: *Occult/thaumaturgical*, *Material* and *Social/sapiential* (PSS 202). The 'Unified Field Theory' is the field of studies at the centre of the triangle uniting these seemingly unrelated points (PSS 205). According to this theory, 'it's in the *nature of things* to enter crisis, as a part of what they are. Things turn themselves inside out by virtue of being themselves' (PSS 207; emphasis in original). As following events reveal, crisis proves to be a verified theory when Isaac's crisis engine manages to release vast amounts of crisis energy onto the whole city of New Crobuzon. This metaphor, like the Scar, renders visible the multiple possibilities waiting to be tapped from material conditions. As Isaac remarks, '[s]ome situations are more crisis-ridden or -prone than others, yes, but the point of crisis theory is that things are in crisis just as part of *being*. There's *loads* of sodding crisis energy flowing around all the time, but we haven't yet learnt how to tap it efficiently' (PSS 207; emphases in original). This domain of untapped potentialities simultaneously works as a fertile ground for revolutionary action and world-shattering crises. Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy develops through its narrative space and revolutionary impulse the May 1968 slogan 'Be realistic, ask the impossible'. It is this ever-changing and processual understanding of history that leads to its profound alterity, namely to the fact that the world cannot be grasped according to any static mode of understanding. As Edwards and Venezia remark, '[t]his understanding of utopia-as-process reveals Miéville's Marxist commitments' (8). History, through these literalized metaphors bringing about radical changes in the narrative space, is displayed as an ever-changing Weird totality beyond the grasp of human cognition.

The crises depicted in each Bas-Lag novel are abcanly in the sense of disrupting any discernible overarching teleological cause or progression. Even though these crises emerge from the internal dynamics of capitalism, they are not indicative of a major teleological narrative of historical progress. Bas-Lag's history is constituted by a series of abcanly shifts and events which are never fully accounted for by the narration. These inconsistencies and gaps are, in fact, the basis for revolutionary action throughout the trilogy. Unlike Marx and Engels' claim that 'the bourgeoisie ... produces, above all, its own grave diggers' and that 'the victory of the proletariat is inevitable' (20), the Bas-Lag trilogy depicts an anti-teleological vision of historicity which demands active subjects in order to tap the revolutionary potentialities contained in actual states of affairs. This positing of crisis as a metaphor for revolutionary potentials, however, does not entail that there is a clear revolutionary subject. In spite of the plethora of revolutionary events depicted in each novel, the identity of the revolutionary subject who might take over capitalism is unclear. Both crisis energy and possibility mining assert that there is no teleological certainty that Bas-Lag's global capitalist order will organically develop into a communist system due to the internal dynamics of the system. In structural terms, the Bas-Lag trilogy does not lead to any all-encompassing teleological conclusion and each novel can be read independently from the others. Each novel depicts how potentials for radical change are opened up by capitalist crises but, simultaneously, how revolutionary action depends on the active agency of individuals to organise among themselves. As the ultimate failure of these movements demonstrates, the Bas-Lag trilogy does not merely portray the tragic heroism displayed in revolutionary events but, also, the strategic dilemmas entailed in their active organisation and success.

### **The Weaver: A Revolutionary Conception of Crisis**

The Weaver is one of the most evident examples of how this sense of ontological crisis can estrange and interrogate the hegemonic and render it open to change. This interdimensional spider communicates in a Dada-esque poetic language and seamlessly transitions from spatial and temporal dimensions unknown to any character. As Sandy Rankin points out in her thorough study of the monster, the world that the Weaver inhabits, the ‘worldweave’, ‘is a patterning potential in motion that includes the past, present, and future of Bas-Lag as well as including the spiralling threads of time and space dimensions that Bas-Lag people in their (or our) mundane dimension cannot see’ (240). The Weaver expresses in both its appearance and motives a sense of radical alterity. As one of the bio-thaumaturgists of New Crobuzon explains: ‘It might pretend to be dead or reshape the stone of the floor into a statue of a lion. It might pluck out Eliza’s eyes. Whatever it took to shape the pattern in the fabric of the aether that only it could see, whatever it took to weave the tapestry into shape’ (*PSS* 406). The actions of the Weaver are described as being motivated by purely aesthetic purposes: ‘the Weavers evolved from virtually mindless predators into aestheticians of astonishing intellectual and materio-thaumaturgic power ... For a Weaver to think was to think aesthetically’ (*PSS* 406-7). In addition to this, the Weaver’s speech is distinctively marked in the narration with capital letters, lack of punctuation and cryptic poetic language: ‘FLESHSCAPE INTO THE FOLDING INTO THE FLESHSCAPE TO SPEAK A GREETING IN THIS THE SCISSORED REALM I WILL RECEIVE AND BE RECEIVED’ (*PSS* 401). While having a material presence in the perceivable world, the Weaver also stands for dimensions of reality – the worldweave – which contradict and put into question the one perceived by other characters. The anamorphic perspective evoked by the Weaver estranges and distorts, even in narrative terms, the setting and objects already presented by the text. Bas-Lag’s already

estranging universe, ostensibly different to the reader's own environment, is doubly estranged in its alterity function by the Weaver's worldweave.

Unlike the slake-moths, the Weaver's apparition is portrayed as being completely unmotivated from an economic standpoint escaping capitalist logic and axiomatic thinking. Due to its irreducibility to capitalism's logic, the Weaver, as Rankin argues, ignites an utopian drive in both *Perdido Street Station* and *Iron Council*: 'the Weaver, as an impulse to fantasy, is an ontological intimation of a world without economic injustice, a world in which individual *and* collective cognition and emotion no longer divide against one another' (243; emphasis in original). The utopian ramifications implied in the Weaver's subjectivity and the worldweave are fully expressed throughout the Bas-Lag trilogy. It is due to its lack of discernible purpose that the Weaver cannot be bribed in economic terms by the government of New Crobuzon to stop the slake-moths in *Perdido Street Station*. Unlike Demons, who are described as capitalist administrators and bureaucrats, the Weaver is deeply incomprehensible from the point of view of a capitalist rationale. As Rudgutter – the Mayor of New Crobuzon during *Perdido Street Station* – notes, 'The Hellkin were appalling and awesome, monstrous powers of which Rudgutter had the most profound respect. And yet, and yet ... he understood them. They were tortured and torturing, calculating and capricious. Shrewd. Comprehensible. They were political' (*PSS* 402). The Weaver is perceived by the Mayor of New Crobuzon as an radically incomprehensible being in political terms and motives. This does not necessarily entail that the Weaver is apolitical. In fact, the Weaver offers key contributions to destroy the slake-moths in *Perdido Street Station* and helps Isaac to unleash vast amounts of crisis energy in order to exterminate the plague. Both monsters depict distinct yet compatible conceptions of crisis. While the slake-moths represent the negative component of crisis foreclosing subjectivity and emerging from the internal dynamics of the

capitalist system, the Weaver stands for its positive conception asserting the possibility of the impossible and inflationary modes of thinking. It is from the interplay of these two conceptions of crisis that the plot of *Perdido Street Station* is developed.

The Weaver represents a utopian impulse which opens revolutionary subjectivity into new modes of thinking praxis and political organisation. In *Iron Council*, the Weaver is one of the main triggering factors in uniting the Iron Council's disjointed revolutionary factions. As Ranking remarks: 'It is as much because of the Weavers theophanic appearance as it is because of their hunger, their thirst, their aching bodies, their enslavement or near enslavement, that they become infused with class-consciousness and collective revolutionary hope' (244). As Judah Law reflects in awe after the Weaver's apparition: 'We saw a Weaver ... Most people never see that. We saw a weaver' (*IC* 255). It is after the Weaver's disruptive apparition that Ann-Hari and the other prostitutes of the Iron Council begin to defy the patriarchal order maintained by male revolutionaries, announcing with chants: 'No pay, no lay' (*IC* 255). In addition to this, the Weaver's manifestation has clear implications on the perception of Remade by other workers and revolutionaries. Before the Weaver's apparition, Remade were still being treated as slaves within different factions of the Iron Council. As Ann-Hari remarks after seeing the Weaver, the inclusion of Remade is crucial to the organisation of any revolutionary movement: 'These Remade strike for *us*, so *you* won't be broken. You strike against us and we against you, but these Remade are on *both* our damn sides... if anyone deserves service on *credit*, it's the damn Remade' (*IC* 267-8; emphases in original). The radical alterity of the Weaver opens the revolutionary consciousness for imagining the impossible and rethinking the role of marginalised subjects – women and Remade – within the Iron Council. This marks a crucial point in the organisation of the Iron Council's agenda and cohesive unity as a movement.



### **Renovating the Fantasy of Revolution**

Entities like the Weaver and forces like the Scar posit crisis at the core of reality and thus not a deviation from a prescribed historical telos. Understood as metaphors, both crisis energy and the Fractured Land perform the persuasive function of asserting the possibility and desirability of revolutionary praxis. As Vint remarks, crisis energy can also stand as Miéville's own narrative project and its stance towards mimetic realism: 'it makes visible multiplicity and tries to channel this energy into breaking down the original form, representing in a way that might change everything' (45). In this sense, there is no teleological guarantee for the success of revolutionary action. As Vint remarks, crisis energy has a persuasive effect: 'Just as crisis energy could change 'everything', so might the persuasive effect of ab-realism extend from remaking the world in its fictional representation to prompting the reader to see the world beyond the novel in a different way as well' (45). As Miéville constantly remarks in his non-fictional historical account of the Russian revolution, *October*, there has always been a degree of fantastic unpredictability in revolutionary events: 'The Petrograd police blocked the bridges. But the gods of weather showed solidarity in the form of this brutal winter' (42). The ontological uncertainty and radical alterity of the Weird is constantly articulated for this persuasive purpose throughout the Bas-Lag trilogy. Both crisis energy and possibility mining, due to their inherent open-ended and polysemic meaning, open up the space for the impossible.

The cacotopic zone is perhaps one of the most indicative metaphors of the relationship between utopia and crisis in the Bas-Lag universe. The Weird is not only limited to monsters or abject bodies but also to supernatural or magical locations where normal ontological parameters of reality collapse. Similar to the Scar, the cacotopic zone is a great example of the Weird's

estrangement performed on the mundane: a place of ‘impossible angles’ where ‘monsters go and are born’, and in which ‘when the ground is not watched it skews’ (*IC* 269; 270; 287). These Weird manifestations suggest that ‘reality’ as presented by each narrative voice can never account for the ever-shifting dynamic totality of the world or worlds contained within the Bas-Lag universe. It is not coincidental that the cacotopic zone is the location where the Iron Council decides to make their base in order to organise their plan of action and escape from the military troops of New Crobuzon: ‘The escapees gather. The tracks shift a little. North a shade, a whisper. Uzman is taking them into the cacotopic zone. They are at its edges, but closer than anyone should ever come’ (*IC* 312). Once they are at the outskirts of the cacotopic zone, Judah comments: ‘There must be a place beyond this. A place far enough ... A place where the train can stop’ (*IC* 314). According to Birns, ‘the cacotopic zone is a kind of emblem for the way what is outside systems both challenges hegemony and absorbs those selfsame challenges’ (204). As Birns adds, this location ‘also expresses in topographical, even if unmapped, terms how *Iron Council* evades the two formulas of realism and fantasy. The stain does not permit realism to foreclose or build upon it, while remaining obdurately resistant to fantasy’s potential idealizations’ (209). The cacotopic zone represents the unpredictable trajectory which all revolutionary movements must necessarily go through in order to achieve their goals.

One of the most illustrative metaphors for the utopian impulse running through the entire Bas-Lag trilogy is the Perpetual Train, which stands for both the novel’s narrative logic and its persuasive effect. The Perpetual Train uses goleometry as a source of fuel and energy; a type of magic which animates and transforms matter into elementals which embody the properties of their previous form. Judah Law, one of the leaders of the Iron Council, is capable of creating water, earth and fire elementals, but, also, more abstract ones like time elementals. Goleometry thus posits

a challenge to the distinction between the organic and the inorganic. It is due to this form of magic that the Perpetual Train can incessantly move by laying its own tracks as it moves forward. Like the Remade subsequently turned into fReemade, the Perpetual Train is also a contingent product of capitalism's mode of production which was later appropriated by revolutionary movements. Before becoming the Perpetual Train, the train was owned by the TRT – the Transcontinental Railroad Trust – a capitalist company aiming to expand the commercial network of New Crobuzon to other city-states across the Bas-Lag globe. Goleometry renders visible the strategic point that revolutionary praxis has to work by turning the social contradictions of capitalism as weapons against itself. Once captured by the Iron Council, the train serves as the home for all escapees and revolutionaries of the Bas-Lag universe. From this point onwards, the Perpetual Train constitutes a metaphor for the non-teleological trajectory of revolutionary emancipation. As Ann-Hari, one of the revolutionary leaders of the Iron Council, claims: 'We're a dream.... The dream of the commons. Everything came to this, everything came here. We got here. This is what we are. History's pushing us' (*IC* 430). By magically laying its own tracks as it advances, the Perpetual Train provides an understanding of revolution as an ever-shifting and non-teleological process. As McNeill argues, the train acts as a metaphor for the difficulties and dilemmas of revolution: 'Revolution is the product of conscious human activity and organization, and Utopia does not arrive according to some pre-ordained timetable. Political action, insurrection, involves chance, risk, and interventions that seek to change the balance of forces' (100). History becomes a process involving active revolutionary organisation requiring a constant consideration for the material contradictions of capitalism.

The open-ended conclusion of the Bas-Lag trilogy in *Iron Council* provides one of the most enigmatic and polysemic metaphors standing for the radical alterity of history and revolutionary

time. The last chapters of the third instalment of the trilogy depict the return of the Perpetual Train, along with its revolutionary troops, to a heavily militarized New Crobuzon waiting for the Iron Council's arrival. In spite of knowing the military and strategic disadvantage of their position, the Iron Council troops democratically make the decision to proceed with the assault on New Crobuzon. This conundrum further reveals the political differences between the two revolutionary leaders of the movement: Ann-Harry, who whole-heartedly supports the popular vote, and Judah Law, for whom this choice represents the death of the movement and its political suicide. Both leaders, after a heated argument, make the pact to follow Iron Council's popular will. However, once they arrive at New Crobuzon, Judah Law breaks the pact by freezing the Perpetual Train in time through golemetry by invoking the 'time golem' – the same power which, paradoxically, allowed him to give movement to the train. The time golem is described as a violent obtrusion into the ontological fabric of reality and the normal course of time: 'The time golem stood and was, ignored by the linearity around it, only was. It was a violence, a terrible intrusion in the succession of moments, a clot in diachrony, and with the dumb arrogance of its existence it paid the outrage of ontology no mind' (*IC* 591). Judah's final golem challenges the diachronic view of time as a mechanic succession of moments by rendering visible how the past coexists with the present and informs actions oriented towards the future. This is the same mode of thinking which informs revolutionary actions. *Iron Council* can be interpreted as suggesting, as Marx himself did in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that socialist revolutions rather than 'swiftly running from success to success... constantly interrupted themselves in their own course, returned to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew' (in Traverso 33).

The Perpetual Train stands as a historical monument for the revolutionary possibilities opened up by the Iron Council. However, understood as a monument, it can also be interpreted as

an ossification of the past as an antiquarian object: ‘The perpetual train. The Iron Council itself. The renegade, returned, or returning and now waiting. Absolutely still. Absolutely unmoving in the body of the time golem. The train, its moment indurate’ (*IC* 591). This tragic ending, as McNeill remarks, ‘dramatizes this sense of revolutionary time, in which time is made into a factor both in conflict as well as in a sense of historical possibility’ (100). Judah’s decision does not remain unscrutinised and is heavily questioned by Ann-Hari for whom the collective movement should not be stopped by Judah’s personal disagreements: ‘Iron Council was never yours. You don’t get to choose. You don’t decide when is the right time, when it fits your story. *This was the time we were here. We knew. We decided. And you don’t know and we don’t either*’ (*IC* 603; emphasis in original). Ann-Hari’s reaction at Judah’s action rightly points out the fact that revolutionary movements should not be appropriated by individuals and, instead, should provide a voice to the collective transcending them. The time golem demonstrates Miéville’s claim ‘that particularly because ‘reality’ is a grotesque ‘fantastic form’, it is *good to think with*’ (‘Introduction’ 46; emphasis in original). This fantastic conclusion makes the reader consider the strategic differences between the centralised politics in Judah’s decision and Ann-Hari’s collective vision of revolutionary action. This ending does not unequivocally establish Judah or Ann-Hari’s political position as the right one. Instead, Miéville’s Bas-Lag trilogy concludes with this polysemic metaphor, the time golem, which operates as an open question for the reader to ponder and assess. Judah’s betrayal of the movement’s popular decision is presented as having clear drawbacks and undesirable outcomes but, also, a valid consideration for the necessary dilemmas dealt by revolutionary action.

## **Conclusion**

Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy shows the relevance of speculative fiction tropes and elements in radical politics. Weird fiction, by standing for the shared estrangement effect shared by the spectrum of speculative fiction, also stands for its radical political potential and the epiphenomenal differences between its sub-genres. Moreover, Weird manifestations show that estrangement does not necessarily entail a mystification of social reality as understood in the Suvinian paradigm of fantasy and science fiction. The inflationary tendency of the Weird, as Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy constantly shows, can be articulated in order to suggest a domain of potentials emerging from the contradictions and crises of capitalism's mode of production. These irreducible and literalised metaphors complicate the reader's perception of 'reality' by constantly suggesting it to be richer than common sense or 'empirical' knowledge might assume. As Miéville's Marxist approach to world-building demonstrates, speculative elements can engage with capitalism as a mode of production from both a descriptive and persuasive manner. The Bas-Lag trilogy maintains a challenge to post-industrial accounts of economic crises by constantly showing that even the most insubstantial and otherworldly aspects of capitalism are irreducibly material and historical in nature. By emphasising the abscanny unpredictability of history and crises, these metaphors serve as a persuasive tool to revitalise the fantasy of revolution

**Speculating on the Afterlives of Slavery: Revisiting the Antebellum in Octavia  
Butler's *Kindred* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad***

The main thesis of this chapter is that speculative fiction tropes enable a mode of temporality that challenges antiquarian accounts of the Antebellum period. By positing historical moments within a shared temporal space, counterfactual historicity constructs a shared causality among seemingly unrelated historical events and offers critical alternatives to teleological accounts of the Antebellum period. I will address the claim, made by some critics, that speculative narrative techniques disavow the historical continuum of racial systemic violence. One of my contentions is that such criticism dismisses the longstanding use of speculative fiction tropes in neo-slave narratives. Speculative fiction tropes, as I aim to demonstrate, can render visible the historical temporality of what Christina Sharpe refers to as the afterlives of slavery/property – a fundamental concept to achieve a better understanding of the contemporary black condition in the United States. Both Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) establish the Trans-Atlantic slave trade as the paradigmatic event in the creation of the Black condition in the United States. These novels challenge post-racial ideology by rendering visible how the slave persists and co-exists with post-slavery conditions in the future.

Past-oriented forms of speculative fiction, as time travel tropes across the genre widely demonstrate, involve a disruption of the reader's expectations on the causality between historical events and linear time. The historical revisionism implied by these narrative strategies is less concerned with mimetic persuasion or fact-checking than with challenging and exploring, by the means of estrangement and alterity, historicity as such. This narrative procedure, however, has been deemed, by a considerable part of literary criticism, to have problematic consequences for

the relationship between the reader and historical memory. One of the main points of criticism directed towards this use of speculative narrative tropes is their presumed mystification of social reality. This argument is based on the ‘deceptive’ quality of this estrangement of history and the incompatibility of non-mimetic world-building with historical rigorosity. From this point of view, novels using speculative fiction tropes dealing with historical events inevitably lead to an ideological perception of social reality, that is, to a ‘false consciousness’ of historical development.

This connection between estrangement and regressive politics is one of the main arguments elaborated against past-oriented forms of speculative fiction. These points of criticism get only exacerbated with novels dealing with the Antebellum era and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. One example of this type of analysis is Linh U. Huah’s analysis of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979). Butler’s neo-slave novel depicts the time-travel journey of Dana, an African-American writer from 1970s Los Angeles, back to a nineteenth-century Antebellum Maryland plantation in the South of the United States. Speculative narrative temporality in Butler’s novel, according to Huah’s view, ‘underscores a correlation between whiteness and futurity that is secured through contractual investments in the slave trade’ (391). These financial investments, in Huah’s view, are continuously ‘sentimentalized into a historical narrative by liberal philosophy as the developmental time of the subject’ (391). This entails that, by misrepresenting its historical context, Butler’s time travel narrative promotes an idea of ethical progress that undermines the ongoing and systemic nature of racial violence. From this point of view, *Kindred* maintains a teleological vision of history complicit with white narratives of progress linked to regressive ideas concerning the historical necessity of past events. This narrative of historical progress and liberation, in Huah’s view, works ‘as a presumptive basis for antiblack and antifeminist ideology in affective politics’ (392). Due to its mystification of social reality, speculative fiction tropes,



instead of serving to portray a complex historical context, sentimentalize history in order to promote regressive politics complicit with white and antifeminist narratives. According to this view, speculative fiction disavows the ongoing consequences of the Antebellum slave trade in the United States.

Matt Dischinger's analysis of Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad* follows a similar diagnosis of speculative fiction, a term which he interchangeably uses with the one of fantasy, even when elements of the latter are rather debatable in the novel. Although conceding that fantasy elements have a politically subversive role, Dischinger only grants them this effect by connecting them to the satirical foundation of the novel. Whitehead's novel, Dischinger argues, aims 'to create a narrative space in which fantasy can work in the service of understanding rather than obscuring, peripheralized histories' (83). Similarly, for Stephanie Li, '[a]lthough Whitehead uses fantasy to elucidate history, there are significant limitations to this project, as his text blurs these two elements so intently that it can be difficult to differentiate racial violence from dramatic effect' (2). While Dischinger acknowledges the subversive power of speculative fiction tropes, it is only by repurposing them through satire that their mystifying function is surpassed. As Dischinger argues, fantasy 'works through regimes of mystification that have been tied to national identification... In the *Underground Railroad* the speculative serves as an antecedent that activates the novel's satire' (86). In this sense, speculative elements are only conferred a subsidiary role to satirical ones within Whitehead's narration. In addition to this, '[i]t is precisely because the *Underground Railroad* channels its satire through speculative narrative techniques that it seems to occupy a purely phantasmal (and potentially non-threatening space)' (87). Speculative narrative techniques, in this sense, act as a strategic ameliorating force to the novel's politically subversive message. This narrative strategy, is, as Dischinger suggests, what could explain the widespread

success of the novel in terms of sales and its rapid acclaim in mainstream circles, such as Oprah's Book Club (86). The assimilation of Whitehead's novel into mainstream culture, according to this view, is greatly indebted to the ability of SF elements to render its message inoffensive by falsifying historical events.

The relationship between narrative estrangement and historicity has been addressed by multiple areas of literary criticism. One of the main questions explored by these studies is: do past-oriented forms of speculative fiction necessarily involve an ideological mystification of historical reality? My contention is that speculative fiction's counterfactual approach to history is precisely what enables it, as a narrative genre, to contribute and pose original questions concerning topics such as the afterlives of slavery. According to Jorge Luis Borges, magic in narrative fiction, rather than aiming to persuade the reader of the text's truth-claims with regard to empirical reality 'is the summit or nightmare of causality, not its contradiction' (178). Magic in narrative fiction and certain social formations, in Borges' view, enables authors to elaborate a distinct causality between otherwise seemingly unrelated phenomena (178). Borges promoted the idea that rather than persuading the reader of its realism, narrative fiction 'must be a precise game of vigilances, echoes and affinities' (178). Likewise, speculative fiction tropes offer the possibility to play with historical causality in order to exhibit concealed affinities between distant events or reveal their underlying ramifications into future ones. This is precisely what neo-slave novels, such as *Kindred* and *The Underground Railroad*, do in their non-mimetic accounts of the Antebellum period: a historical continuum between the Antebellum slave trade and its underlying ramifications in future historical events. The implausibility of its premises is precisely what allows the genre to challenge antiquarian or teleological accounts of slavery, namely by offering readers the possibility to imagine a shared causality among distant events in time. SF tropes, in this sense, exhibit a dynamic

vision of history as a process of subterranean echoes and affinities running through events rather than a static one of teleological necessity or determinism.

Neo-slave novels have adopted estranging narrative components in order to interrogate history and challenge its potential coercive function in reproducing post-racial notions of teleological progress. This utilisation of SF tropes should not be surprising, since Black inequality, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor remarks, has been often related to the ideological claim of the United States being a ‘post-racial’ society ‘where race may once have been an obstacle to a successful life. Today, we are told, race does not matter’ (4). Speculative fiction is a narrative genre that is deeply concerned with interrogating temporality, a feature that is swiftly demonstrated by time-travel tropes, counterfactual historicity, and utopian and dystopian fiction. Past-oriented speculative fiction in its neo-slave iteration expresses the genre’s political potential to elaborate narrative causalities between historical events. These narrative causalities, of course, can reproduce both regressive or progressive visions of history. The anamorphic estrangement of speculative fiction, while having the effect of radically relativizing dominant perception, also imposes a hermeneutic perspective by which to process and assess social reality. As Beaumont remarks, ‘[o]nce internalized, the anamorphic perspective irrevocably transforms the normal’ (41). This characteristic is especially relevant in the context of post-civil rights in the United States and the persisting systemic racial violence directed towards African Americans. As Christina Sharpe remarks, the contemporary Black condition cannot be one founded by mourning or melancholy attitudes, since slavery constitutes an ongoing event exerting its influence in manifold and different ways:

That is, if museums and memorials *materialize a kind of reparation* (repair) and enact their own *pedagogies* as they position visitors to have a particular experience or set of

experience about an event that is seen to be past, how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing? Might we instead understand the absence of a National Slavery Museum in the United States as recognition of the ongoingness of the conditions of capture? Because how does one memorialize the everyday? (20; emphases in original)

Such memorialization and temporality issues are strictly connected to the prolongation of slavery's underlying logic of exploitation in different forms of institutional racial violence and capitalist commodification. The underlying reduction of Black subjects as property in post-slavery conditions is, in Sharpe's view, the basis for the contemporary subjection of Black lives and the dominant expression of the afterlives of slavery (20). Interrogating the afterlives of slavery and property involves the exercise of thinking temporally and creating strategies to memorialize a still ongoing past event (15). This memorializing exercise could be formulated as a reaction against what Jameson terms the waning of historicity, namely the postmodern condition asserting the impossibility 'of experiencing history in some active way' and forcing cultural production to 'seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach' (21, 25). Taking this into account, it is not a surprise that a genre capable of materializing causalities between past and present history has been so popular with Black authors concerned with critically estranging collective memory and exhibiting the ongoing repercussions of the slave trade. Due to its wide repertoire of narrative techniques to distort dominant perceptions of temporality and history, speculative narratives can help to materialize the ongoing nature of the afterlives of slavery and, hence, critique its antiquarian representation as an inert event disconnected from the present.

The amalgamation of speculative fiction into neo-slave narratives is far from new. As Lisa Yaszek points out, since the civil rights period, there has been an important African American literary tradition, with authors such as Ralph Ellison and Samuel R. Delany, that has ‘long used science fiction tropes, including alternate worlds, invisibility, and the ‘encounter with the alien other’, to estrange readers from dominant understandings of American history’ (1058). Estrangement is performed in these texts with the aim to challenge dominant perceptions of historical development and progress. In Lisa A. Long’s view, some of these authors could be read ‘as suggesting that all historical writing is a sort of science fiction, as they seek vainly to enter the minds and bodies of their historical subjects ... [these] novels dramatize the inherently violent nature of the pursuit of historical veracity’ (461). Within this neo-slave tradition of narrative fiction, speculative fiction has not just been used as a means to navigate through historical events, but also to exhibit the potential violence of historiography as a form of narrative actively selecting and dismissing voices and events (461). This long hybrid tradition of neo-slave novels is, hence, a testimony to the relevance of the genre in dealing with narratives which have historicity itself as its main theme. As Sami Schalk remarks, speculative tropes are especially beneficial for marginalized writers, since they can open the space to imagine new futures and ‘think about what could be if current inequalities and injustices are allowed to continue’ (2). The temporal estrangement of speculative fiction is especially attractive to writers preoccupied with conceptually questioning the givenness of history.

Neo-slave novels have explored through multiple narrative strategies what Christina Sharpe alludes to in *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) as the non-being condition of Black subjects. This condition is marked by a systemic exclusion and abjection of what is not considered part of humanity and operates, both in legal and extralegal terms, as the ongoing norm

by which black lives are exploited and murdered in the United States. Institutional racial violence demonstrates the material and historical underpinning of the afterlives of slavery:

Inhabiting here is the state of being inhabited/occupied and also being or dwelling in ... I have turned to images, poetry and literature that take up the wake as a way toward understanding how slavery's continued unfolding is constitutive of the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, and material dimensions of Black non/being as well as Black aesthetic and other modes of deformation and interruption. (20)

Exploring Black aesthetics and neo-slave narratives, therefore, requires the complementary analysis of what this condition of non/being entails and according to which mechanisms it is displayed in the texts. This, conversely, involves the task of navigating through the historical and material conditions which engender this mode of being as manifested in the text. Black aesthetics are preoccupied with memorializing the quotidian disaster constituted 'by way of the rapid, deliberate, repetitive, and wide circulation on television and social media of Black social, material, and psychic death' (21). This mode of writing has the task of registering and materializing the 'convention of antiblackness in the present and into the future' (21). In this sense, this writing follows the twofold task of memorializing the afterlives of slavery/property as a continuous event affecting the present and materializing the often-invisible ways in which institutional racism manifests itself in everyday social life.

Afro-Pessimism has been central, as a critical movement, to exhibiting the fundamental role played by the Black condition of non-being in the functioning of capitalism as a mode production. As the Afro-Pessimist theorist Saidiya Hartman points out, the devaluation of Black life is intimately related to the development and expansion of capitalism: 'Death wasn't a goal of its own but just a by-product of commerce ... Incidental death occurs when life has no normative

value, when no humans are involved, when the population, is in effect, seen as already dead' (31). Likewise, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor remarks, '*wage slavery* is the pivot around which all other inequalities and oppression turn. Capitalism used racism to justify plunder, conquest, and slavery, but as Karl Marx pointed out, it would also come to use racism to divide and rule' (206; emphasis in original). Therefore, '[t]o claim, then, as Marxists do, that racism is a product of capitalism is not to deny or diminish its centrality or impact on American society. It is simply to explain its origins and persistence' (206). Slave labour, in Marx's view, is central to achieving a better understanding of the development of national and global economies:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. (*Capital* 376)

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade was, as the historian Walter Johnson remarks, one of the founding bases of the United States' economy and its development as a nation during the nineteenth century: '[I]t was the labor of black slaves that made the dream of the speculators into the material reality of the Cotton Kingdom' (40). Slave labour, according to Marx, was essential to the development of capitalism's global economy: 'Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade' (*The Poverty of Philosophy* 49). Marx remarked that '[w]ithout slavery North America, the most progressive of countries, would be transformed into a patriarchal country' (*The Poverty of Philosophy* 49). Tracing the development of slavery and its afterlives, as Sharpe remarks, often means an encounter with 'silences and ruptures in time, space, history' and 'the accumulated erasures, projections, fabulations, and misnamings' (12). Speculative fiction tropes

can help to render visible the myriad of silences and gaps in the construction of hegemonic history and the violent legacy of slavery in present capitalist societies.

Neo-slave narratives, because they deal thematically with the Antebellum period, must unavoidably deal with the manifold social contradictions of the era. Speculative tropes can offer the means to render sensible Black non/being, a condition which is always linked to a mode of domination which, as Sharpe remarks, is 'in/visible and not/visceral' (21). In temporal terms, speculative tropes, such as time-traveling and counterfactual historicity, can help to textualize, due to their anamorphic estrangement of normal perception, 'a past not yet past' and the 'continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding' (13-14). These temporal strategies also have the benefit of integrating the novel's own context of production into its analysis. The past, in neo-slave speculative and historical narratives alike, is depicted according to what separates it from contemporary conditions, that is, the historical and social elements that make said period different from the current one. However, as Freedman argues about historical novels, this procedure also implies the representation of the 'driving historical forces that link the two eras in a concrete continuum that is social, economic, political, and cultural in nature' (44). It should be noted that this link is not established in a rational and self-aware manner as Freedman suggests, but, unconsciously, by providing a hermeneutic framework through which the text views and connects past and present history. The symbolic resolution provided by this narrative causality can be interpreted as the dominant mechanism by which the text enters into a dialogue with the historical necessity of its represented events and the implicit vision of history expressed in their connection.

My analysis of Butler's *Kindred* and Whitehead's *Underground Railroad* will follow a twofold interpretative goal: first, exploring how each novel reflects the social and ideological



contradictions of its respective historical context of production; and, second, analysing the narrative mechanisms that each novel deploys to react against these hegemonic discourses in a critical way. My main point of contention is that SF tropes play a crucial role in critically interrogating a predominant teleological vision of history. Estrangement, precisely due to its alterity function, plays a crucial role in the relativization of hegemonic perceptions of history. This anamorphic estrangement allows each novel to offer hermeneutics that critically assess the afterlives of slavery. Counterfactual historicity operates as the means by which the texts interrogate history and provide a vision of history as an ongoing process of projections and affinities, memorializing and materializing the condition of Black non/being as transversal to different moments of capitalism's history. In this sense, these speculative fiction novels, as Afro-Pessimist thinkers would argue, present slavery and its afterlives as a contingent reality to the history of capitalism as a mode of production. In this sense, both *Kindred* and *The Underground Railroad*, while overtly displaying a fictionalization of history, also construct a temporality whereby the Antebellum slave trade, as a paradigmatic event in the creation of the Black condition, coexists and persists in future conditions of systemic racial violence.

### **Remembering the 'Post-Racial' Present in *Kindred***

*Kindred* is one of the most widely acclaimed neo-slave narratives implementing speculative fiction tropes. Dana, the African American female protagonist of the novel, unwillingly and magically time-travels from the 1970s to a Southern US cotton plantation of the Antebellum period. Every time Dana is transported to the past, she is put in the predicament of saving the life of her white ancestor, Rufus, a slaveholder and owner of a Maryland cotton plantation. Rufus eventually rapes Alice – Dana's great-great-great-grandmother – and forces her to be his concubine. This premise,

as Maja Milatovic points out, ‘captures the political tensions and turbulent social changes of the post-civil rights period, which witnessed a renewed academic interest in the legacy of slavery and its representations with a specific focus on slave narratives as valuable historical testimonies’ (115). The novel not only deals with black oppression from a general standpoint, but delineates its intersectional points of struggle with patriarchal and capitalist institutional violence. These intersectional issues were a focal point to the political agendas of the multiple Black movements emerging during the 60s and 70s. The Combahee River Collective explicitly linked the oppression of Blacks and women to capitalism in their statement from 1977: ‘Although we are in essential agreement with Marx’s theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analysed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific situation as Black women’ (par. 13). Similarly, the Black Panther Party proposed a clear anti-capitalist agenda in ‘The Ten-Point Program’ with demands such as: ‘Full employment to our people’, ending ‘the robbery by the capitalists of our Black community’, and ‘decent housing for the shelter of human beings’ (par. 3; 5; 7). The premise of Butler’s novel is a narrative exploration of the same issues raised by the radical movement preceding and emerging at its time of publication.

*Kindred* represented the complex imbrication of these intersectional points of struggle through the time-travel journeys of its Black female protagonist, showing the legacy of slavery in the post-civil rights era of the United States. Time-travel in *Kindred*, as Milatovic adds, is the means by which the narrative can pose relevant questions ‘for its contemporary context such as accountability and privilege, and intersections of race, class, and gender politics’ (116). These questions were especially significant during the post-civil rights period. As Taylor notes, ‘[b]y the end of the 1970s there was little talk about institutional racism or the systemic roots of Black

oppression’, as ‘[t]he country was entering an era of post-civil rights ‘colorblindness’’ (52-3). *Kindred*’s fantastic premise, by establishing a link between the post-civil rights and Antebellum periods, can be read, in many regards, as a critical response to the politics of colourblindness – a rhetorical alibi that ‘allowed portions of the political establishment to separate Black hardship from the material conditions that activists had worked so hard to expose’ (53). The novel can be interpreted as a narrative attempt to re-ignite the discussion about institutional racism and its systemic link to capitalist and patriarchal oppression. By linking the Antebellum period with the seemingly post-racial society of the late 1970s, Butler’s text challenged the colourblind ideology affirming the irrelevance of race as a category to evaluate its historical present.

Butler’s novel also illustrates the potential of speculative fiction for interrogating the historical past in the case of Black writers. As Nadine Fligel remarks, ‘Butler’s insertion of speculative elements exempts the slave narrative from the stringent demands of documentary realism, such as chronological rigidity and a male-centred emphasis on education’ (218). Time travel is the narrative means by which Butler is able to memorialize and materialize the afterlives of slavery. Butler’s use of this trope, however, does not follow the conventions of mainstream science fiction. The novel, as Butler herself points out, challenged generic boundaries at its time of publication:

I sent it off to a number of different publishers because it was obviously not science fiction.

There’s absolutely no science in it. It was the kind of fantasy that nobody had really thought of as fantasy because after all, it doesn’t fall into the sword and sorcery or pseudo-medieval and fantasy that everyone expects with a lot of magic being practiced. (14)

This novel utilization of time travel, in Sherryl Vint’s view, is what allowed Butler to ‘fuse the fantastical with realist conventions, creating a work that is partly historical novel, partly slave

narrative, and partly the story of how a twentieth-century black woman comes to terms with slavery as her own and her nation's past' (243). Speculative fiction tropes in *Kindred* assume the role of revealing the legacy of the slave trade in the post-civil rights period and confronting the ideology of colourblindness. Butler's novel thus challenges what Friedrich Nietzsche defines as antiquarian history, namely, the selection and recollection of data and historical facts for the sake of conserving them through historiography: 'By tending with care that which has existed from of old, [the antiquarian] wants to preserve for those who shall come into existence after him the conditions under which he himself came into existence' (74). This historical vision of the past forecloses any type of critical understanding of the shared socio-economic and political continuum uniting the past and the present. As Nietzsche adds, '[a]ntiquarian history itself degenerates from the moment it is no longer animated and inspired by the fresh life of the present. Its piety withers away, the habit of scholarliness continues without it and rotates in egoistic self-satisfaction around its own axis' (75). *Kindred* challenges the post-racial idea of assuming the slave trade to be an antiquarian relic of the past whose historical significance no longer applies to the post-civil rights period. Time travel is pivotal to viscerally memorializing the ongoing significance of the slave trade in the construction Black identity in the late 1970s.

### **The Body and Institutional Racism**

The paramount scene to elucidate the cause behind Dana's time-travels is presented in both the opening and closing passages of the text. This scene is what grants *Kindred* its circular narrative structure by linking past and present in a non-chronological order. Both the beginning and ending passages of the novel describe the same enigmatic event: the attachment of Dana's left arm tissue to the wall of her home in California after returning from her last time-travel to the past. The novel

begins with Dana's perplexing statement: 'I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm. And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone' (1). The cause for Dana's incident is disclosed by the end of the narration. This incident is retroactively explained, albeit through a supernatural causality, after Rufus attempts to sexually assault and ultimately rape Dana. Confronted with Rufus's intentions, Dana decides to stab him with a knife. In spite of being able to defend herself, Rufus still manages to clamp Dana's left arm – an action which immediately transports her back to the present. This is the same spot that viscerally get attached to the wall of her flat in the present: 'From the elbow to the end of the fingers, my left arm had become part of the wall. I looked at the spot where flesh joined with plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the same spot Rufus's fingers had grasped' (292). Both beginning and end, as they are displayed in the novel's sequence of events, are circularly linked to this central event. The passage exhibits the highest degree of estrangement throughout the narration and reveals the underlying causality connecting both historical periods: the violent white-male claim to ownership over the Black female body. In spite of not presenting a rational explanation, this supernatural event establishes the narrative circularity of the text and shows that the Antebellum past coexists, in a visceral manner, with the present.

The Black body is the locus where white and patriarchal powers exert their influence and set their control mechanisms in motion. This predicament, according to Vint, is directly connected to the temporal leaps experienced by the protagonist of the novel: 'Dana's body is the mechanism of her time travel' (249). *Kindred* follows Sharpe's concept of Black non/being by showing how external historical forces inhabit Dana's body, preventing her from simply inhabiting the present in time and forcing her to relive the miseries that her Black ancestors had to endure in the past. As Vint remarks, the novel maintains the idea that knowledge must be gained through a visceral

experience of the past: 'Butler's time travel suggest that it is only through bodily experience that Dana can come truly to know slavery' (244). Wounds operate as visceral testimonies of the afterlives of slavery inhabiting the Black body. As Dana reflects, her scabs are a reminder that her trips to the past have vital repercussions on her life: 'I rubbed my back, touched the several long scabs to remind myself that I could not afford to make mistakes' (137). As Florian Bast argues, 'the theme of embodied agency remains ubiquitous until the very last page of the novel, as one of Dana's last action is to touch her empty sleeve and a scar that Rufus's father has left on her face' (156). The visceral quality conferred to time travel is indicative of the narrative's non-linear vision of Black history and its attempt of showing that the forces of the Antebellum past still exert their harmful influence on Dana's body.

Dana's non-being condition is clearly exemplified in the cause of her time travels: whenever Rufus's life is threatened Dana is transported back to the Weylin's plantation and faced with the dilemma of saving him. Conversely, whenever Dana's life is in imminent danger, she is immediately transported back into the present. Dana ultimately utilises this rule to escape the past by resolutely cutting her wrist after being beaten by Rufus (267). As Dana reflects: 'He has to leave me enough control of my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying' (246). This uneven power dynamic, as Bast points out, 'addresses the central struggle between Dana and her white, slave-holding ancestor, and it explicitly names what is at stake in this conflict: survival itself' (151). Risking her life is Dana's only option to claim agency over her body and escape the Maryland Antebellum plantation. The imbalance of this power dynamic exhibits Rufus's privileged position as a white slave-owner over Dana's condition of Black non-being. Dana's agency must be always formulated as a reactive act of resistance against Rufus's will to claim capitalist ownership of her body and property as a slave.

### **Time Travel: Time Paradox and the Afterlives of Slavery**

Dana's predicament is equivocally formulated by her according to the mainstream SF trope of time paradox. This trope involves the idea that any modification to the past while time-traveling inevitably transforms future outcomes. The underlying principle of this theory is the separateness of the past from the present and a linear understanding of time according to which time travels are intrusions on historical events. Following this premise, Dana assumes the role of saving Rufus as a historical necessity in order to preserve her own existence as well as the rest of her family lineage: 'this child needed special care. If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live. I didn't dare to test the paradox' (25). By the same token, her plan to influence Rufus's actions with her progressive views are directly linked to the time paradox theory, that is, to her belief that she can intrude and change the past: 'I would help him as best as I could. And I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come' (69-70). *Kindred* thus challenges the very conception of historical time involved in the treatment of the slave trade as an event disconnected from the post-civil rights period. Dana's time travels are not intrusions on past history since the slave trade is an ongoing component in the construction of her identity as a Black woman in the post-civil rights present. The novel's disconfirmation of Dana's time paradox theory reveals that sentimentalized family bonds, as expressed in her decision to aid Rufus whenever his life was at risk, must be understood within the material and historical continuum of the afterlives of slavery and not the other way around.

Dana's various failed attempts to become a mediator between the Antebellum and the 1970s societies illustrates the impossibility of contemplating the slave trade as a remnant of the past. Dana's reservations concerning the repercussions of her time-travels are directly associated

with her ethical considerations concerning Rufus: ‘His air of innocent confusion confused me’ (19). This ethical uncertainty quickly translates into guilt after contemplating the atrocities committed by Rufus against her and other slaves, events which quickly expose the impossibility of exerting her role as an intermediary between historical periods: ‘I was beginning to feel like a traitor... guilty for saving him... somehow, I always seem to forgive him for what he does to me’ (249). Dana’s initial distance towards Maryland’s despotic order is also displayed in her assumed stance as a spectator: ‘We weren’t really in. We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors’ (104). This mediator role between past and present involves, as the comparison between theatre and history shows, an understanding of both periods as distinct and unrelated moments in time. However, as following events in the narration gradually unfold, this historical distance proves to be untenable, collapsing along with her role as a mediator and spectator. This knowledge is violently experienced by Dana after being whipped when attempting to escape the Weylin’s plantation: ‘*See how easily slaves are made?*’ (196; emphasis in original). This breakdown of temporality is further emphasised by the diverging durations of Dana’s past and present trips: ‘eventually, I learned that it was Friday June 11, 1976. I’d gone away for nearly two months and come back yesterday – the same day I left home. Nothing was real’ (125). *Kindred* demonstrates that Dana’s antiquarian vision of the past – a period completely distinct from the present – is detrimental to the evaluation of her course of action and her relationship to the past.

Rufus’s death occupies a pivotal position within *Kindred*’s ethical order by bringing a halt to Dana’s temporal leaps. Killing Rufus implies a radical ethical shift from Dana’s first efforts to interfere with the past’s social relations. This event entails Dana’s absolute renunciation of her teleological view of the past as a space susceptible to change by progressive values. Cleanliness is



one of the metaphors used to emphasise the superficial distance between past and present. The stench of the Weylin plantation is constantly referred to as a clear indicator distinguishing both periods: ‘The day was miserably hot and muggy, full of flies, mosquitoes, and the bad smells of soapmaking, the outhouses, fish someone had caught, unwashed bodies. Everybody smelled, blacks and whites’ (104). One detail which exemplifies this ethical transition is her realization that Rufus’s cleanliness does not make him different to his father when he is about to rape her in the final scene. Cleanliness operates as a misleading indicator throughout the novel of the illusory gap between Rufus and his father: ‘He was not hurting me, would not hurt me if I remained as I was. He was not his father, old and ugly, brutal and disgusting. He smelled of soap, as though he had bathed recently – for me?’ (290). Rufus’s cleanliness superficially distinguishes him from his father’s unkempt appearance. Dana’s refusal is marked by an emphatic ‘No’ which marks a radical act of disavowing this teleological associations of cleanliness with progress. This radical negation entails the idea that slavery is not simply a sign of less civilised times but can conceal itself in seemingly progressive and modern guises.

Dana’s temporal shifts are also reflected in her views of the present as a prolongation and projection of historical tendencies from the Antebellum past. Her views on South African apartheid are a clear example of this: ‘South African whites had always struck me as people who would have been happier living in the nineteenth century, or the eighteenth. In fact, they were living in the past as far as their race relations went’ (217). This teleological vision of progress – societies being more developed than others in the historical timeline – is also manifested in her views of whiteness and oppression:

I read books about slavery, fiction and non-fiction ... Then somehow, I got caught on in one of Kevin’s World War II books – a book of excerpts from the recollections of

concentration camp survivors ... As though the Germans had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked at for nearly two hundred (126).

Both statements express an underlying conception of whiteness as an intrinsic counterpart to the historical oppression and subjection of the Other – African Americans, South African Blacks and European Jews. Racist movements, such as the Ku Klux Klan, are contemplated by Dana as projections of the Antebellum past: ‘Patrols. Groups of young white men who ostensibly maintained order among the slaves. Patrols. Forerunners of the Ku Klux Klan’ (33). These parallels and affinities are explicitly posited as ulterior projections of the paradigmatic event of Antebellum slavery and its afterlives: the concentration camp and the Apartheid system echo the underlying historical conditions of American slavery. It could be maintained that *Kindred*, in this regard, develops the Althusserian concept of social formations, that is, the idea that remnants of previous societies subsist and survive as ‘dominated modes’ in the present’s dominant mode of production (19). Likewise, the historical movements and events mentioned by Dana follow the same underlying logic of the Antebellum slavery: in its racial demarcation of the Other to a condition of non-being.

### **Life in the Plantation: Capitalist Microcosm**

The Weylin plantation operates as a capitalist microcosm displaying the underlying economic rationale of the slave trade. Dana’s condition of non-being is not only manifested in the atemporal wounds exerted and inscribed on her body, but also in her commodification by the capitalist rationale of the Antebellum plantation. Her forced labour is not only expected and solicited by Rufus and his father but also the other slaves of the plantation: ‘‘You’ve to go out to the cookhouse and get some supper!’ she told me as I got out of her way. But she made it sound as though she

were saying, ‘You’re to go straight to hell’ (72). At first, Dana acts as if she were not a property of the Weylin family: ‘I don’t belong to him’ (70). As Marc Steinberg notes, *Kindred* is an ‘inverse slave narrative since its protagonist is born into freedom but becomes enslaved in the past by traveling back into the past’ (467). It is by attempting to escape the plantation and its despotic order that Dana is exposed to her subjection and status as Black non/being and slave. However, as Dana’s historical distance collapses, she begins to be treated like a slave and commodity and to be beaten when undermining the Cotton Kingdom economy. She is reminded that she is the plantation’s property and can be used and spared at the convenience of white males like any other slave and commodity.

It should be stated, however, that *Kindred* does not support a strict or linear correlation between past and present when it comes to slavery. This refusal, however, should not be considered a denial of the afterlives of slavery/property, as the time-travel trope is specifically used to display the many points of conjunction between both periods. One instance in which this linear causality between periods is denied is when Dana describes her first encounter with Kevin in what she refers to as the ‘slave market’ – the labour centre where she used to look for minimum-wage jobs. After mentioning the term, Dana immediately adds: ‘Actually, it was just the opposite of slavery. The people who ran it couldn’t have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered. They always had more job hunters than jobs anyway’ (51). Dana’s brief clarification relates to the type of economic exploitation and underlying social conditions of slavery and the Black working-class, a comparison which is established according to economic criteria rather than ethical ones. This commentary does not refute the ongoing systemic exploitation of Black Americans or the afterlives of slavery/property, since it asserts a continuity of this fundamental non/being status as operating in different systems. Whereas Antebellum slavery is described as a

despotic disciplinary capitalist society where Black bodies are appropriated by force, the post-civil rights capitalism does not need to exploit Black social labour in such a manner. *Kindred* presents this contemporary context as one in which Black labour continues to be exploited, but without the need of commodification. In California Dana is no one's property but lives off a minimum wage and, while sharing the same career with Kevin as a writer, the latter's white-male privilege confers him better job opportunities and career prospects. In this sense, *Kindred*, as Afropessimist thinkers would argue, presents slavery and its afterlives as completely linked to the ever-changing history of capitalism as a mode of production.

Antebellum Maryland can be defined as a disciplinary and despotic society permanently regulating the movement of Black bodies according to their labour-time. The Weylin plantation is described as an enclosed space for slaves in which their movements are constantly monitored and controlled. The prescription of Black bodies' movements is acutely represented in Alice's predicament when she loses her husband after Tom decides to sell him and is forced to be Rufus's concubine against her will. When seeking Dana's help, after being told that she would be whipped if she does not speak to Rufus, the latter pragmatically tells her, 'I can't advise you. It's your body', to which Alice rightly points out: 'Not mine, his. He paid for it, didn't he?' (183). This is the more concealed type of subjection that *Kindred* displays and is the underpinning violence for the horrid disciplinary outbursts whenever boundaries are undermined. Violent outbursts are the expression of this claim to ownership over the Black body. This realization comes to Dana when being beaten by Tom after attempting to escape the plantation: 'He beat me until I tried to make myself believe he was going to kill me. He would kill me if I didn't get away, save myself, go *home!* It didn't work out. This was only punishment and I knew it... I wasn't going to die' (194; emphasis in original). Her situation is illustrated in her inability to go back to the present, since Tom's aim is

not to kill her but to exert his ownership over her body and make Dana acknowledge her condition of non-being as his property. Slaves are constantly reminded of their status as property, ready to be traded when needed and exploited for the circulation of capital within the household. Alice's predicament is a clear display of white hegemony and her Black non/being: 'You do everything they tell you... and they still treat you like an old dog. Go here, open your legs; go there, bust your back. What they care! I ain't s'pose to have no feelin's!' (201). This absolute prescription of her future is directly related to her Black non/being, that is, to being constantly managed by forces claiming ownership over her body and labour.

### **Miscegenation and Power Dynamics**

Dana's white husband, Kevin, is another character that expresses the political potential of time-travel to expose the historical genealogy of white privilege. Temporal shifts into the past function to reveal Kevin's white privilege in the Antebellum period but, also, to show the resemblance between these forms of racism and some of his problematic attitudes in the present. As Carlyle Van Thompson notes, 'Butler makes the point of foreshadowing Dana's excursions to the antebellum South by characterizing her present relationship with Kevin in terms of slavery's discourse' (111). Unlike Dana, Kevin can only travel between the two periods when being in contact with her, a position which confers an element of will to his travels to the Antebellum plantation. Once in the past, however, Kevin must be in contact with Dana in order to return to the present. This is demonstrated in Kevin's recurrent dismissive attitude towards Dana's concerns and fears about her ambiguous status in the Weylin's plantation: 'Look, your ancestors survived that era – survived it with fewer advantages than you have' (49). Kevin's similarities to Rufus are also manifested in his marriage proposal to Dana which is accompanied by a request to be his

secretary for his manuscripts, a petition whose economic connotations very much resemble Dana's role as Rufus's secretary writing his letters to run the plantation. The parallels between Kevin and the Weylins are also shown in his return back to the present: 'He had a slight accent. Nothing really noticeable, but he did sound a little like Rufus and Tom Weylin' (210). Conversely, Rufus is also compared to Kevin: '[h]is eyes went over me like a man sizing up a woman for sex, but I got no message of lust from him. His eyes, I noticed, not for the first time, were almost as pale as Kevin's' (95). All these parallels serve to display the impossibility of drawing a line separating past from present forms of racial violence.

One of the critical elements to achieve a better understanding of Dana and Kevin's power dynamic is the extent to which their respective dependency is exacerbated with the temporal shifts. Kevin is the only person who can believe and listen to her. Dana desperately needs Kevin, as her white-male alibi in the Antebellum past, to take her seriously as she comes to admit this new degree of dependence in their relationship: 'I moved closer to him, relieved, content with even such grudging acceptance. He had become my anchor, suddenly, my tie to my own world' (45). It is this new-found predicament which also serves a means to expose the otherwise latent white privilege on Kevin's behalf. The asymmetrical power dynamic of their relationship is also manifested in their respective families' points of view. While Dana's aunt accepts the idea of their marriage due to social privilege reasons ('any children we have will be light... She always said I was a little too 'highly visible)'), Kevin's sister decides to completely cut her relationship with him (118, 119). Once in Maryland the couple is forced to perform the roles of slaveholder and slave for their survival, a situation which exposes their asymmetrical dynamic with regards to the degree of historical distance which they can maintain in this social context. As Bast remarks, '[w]hat is so insidious about these influences is that they are not always obvious, as in the case of the many

parallels between Kevin and abusive white men from Dana's past' (164). In opposition to Dana, Kevin is able to maintain a certain degree of historical distance towards the past: 'This could be a great time to live in ... I keep thinking what an experience it would be to stay. I'd go West and watch the building of the country' (103). This ideological bias underlies the fact that the construction of the United of States was built upon the social exploitation of slave labour by white capitalist profiteers.

The temporal shifts are a means to explore the affinities between Antebellum Maryland and post-civil rights California. Dana's body is a constant reminder of wounds which transcend both historical eras. However, the afterlives of slavery are not only displayed throughout these violent outbursts but also, perhaps more eerily, in seemingly positive or progressive attitudes. This is clearly exhibited in ambiguous relationship between the Weylin plantation slaves and the slaveholder Rufus:

Strangely they seemed to like him, hold him in contempt, and fear him all at the same time.

This confused me because I felt just about the same mixture of emotion for him. I had thought my feelings were complicated because he and I had such a strange relationship.

But then, slavery of any kind fostered strange relationships. Only the overseer drew simple, unconflicting emotions of hatred and fear when he appeared briefly. But then, it was part of the overseer's job to be hated and feared while the master kept his hands clean (255-6).

This is the reverse of slavery as an all-encompassing system of exploitation which is concomitant with positive affects for the slaveholder. Love and affection, in this case, function as control mechanisms to manage slaves. In this sense, Dana's ambivalent feelings towards Rufus are not a singular phenomenon but a collective experience shared by all slaves. *Kindred* depicts this manipulative logic in Dana and Kevin's relationship through the latter's indignation when the

former refuses to be his secretary. It is by getting rid of her position as a mediator that she can realize the link between her own experience and that of other slaves. Before this realization she is treated with contempt by Alice, who sees her as collaborating with white slaveholders rather than an ally to slaves: ‘Do your job! Go tell him! That’s what you for – to help white folks keep niggers down. That’s why he sent you to me. They be calling you mammy in a few years. You be running the whole house when the old man dies’ (184). Alice is conscious of the link between affective bonds and slavery. It is only by accepting the complexity of her relationship with Rufus as an essential element of slavery and refusing the time paradox theory that Dana can admit the afterlives of slavery.

*Kindred* thus occupies a pivotal position within the tradition of neo-slave narratives implementing speculative fiction tropes. Time-travel works to display, through concealed affinities and parallels between periods, the afterlives of slavery in less evident forms: discursive patterns, economic mobility and power dynamics. Butler’s novel shows how Antebellum conditions of slavery are not the same as the ones of post-civil rights California. This is precisely what allows Butler to bypass a simplistic equation of the two periods in terms of institutional violence, namely by showing how the afterlives of slavery/property adapt according to the historical shifts and cultural changes. The underlying Black condition of non-being, however, is maintained throughout both periods. Speculative tropes in *Kindred*, however, are clearly used to provide a link between both periods and raise questions regarding the ongoing nature of slavery as a pervasive discourse persisting in contemporary conditions. While *Kindred* seems to reduce the afterlives of slavery to a discursive phenomenon in contemporary conditions, speculative fiction tropes are constantly used to bring about a circular temporality undermining any teleological understanding of historical progress.



### **A Collage of Institutional Racism: *The Underground Railroad***

Colson Whitehead's corpus has seamlessly transitioned between fiction and nonfiction, as well as displaying, similar to Butler, an eclectic use of tropes challenging generic conventions. As Stephanie Li points out, '[e]very novel by Colson Whitehead is an affront to genre' (1). His approach to narrative fiction, as he himself acknowledges, is directly indebted to speculative fiction and the fantastic: 'I was inspired to become a writer by horror movies and science fiction. The fantastic effects of magic realism, García Márquez, the crazy, absurd landscapes of Beckett – to me, they're just variations on the fantasy books I grew up on' ('Genre vs Literary' par. 3). This concern with crossing generic boundaries through speculative fiction elements is expressed in Whitehead's own corpus: his seminal dystopian fiction novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999); his post-apocalyptic and horror novel *Zone One* (2009); and his original neo-slave narrative *The Underground Railroad* (2016). The intersection between race and historicity has been one of the predominant themes in Whitehead's fiction. As Dischinger remarks, Whitehead has persistently challenged teleological conceptions of history as linear progress: 'nearly all his fiction, in fact, offers such an understanding of the often-too-clean divide between the past and the present' (84). This understanding of history is often connected to Whitehead's preoccupations with the mechanisms of institutional racism and their effect in the construction of Black identity in the United States. These themes are also reflected in his nonfiction corpus and political writing. Whitehead has been especially critical of post-racial ideology and the assumption that institutional racism no longer exists in the United States. His views were sarcastically exposed once Barack Obama was elected to the presidency of the United States: 'One year ago today, we officially became a postracial society. Fifty-three percent of the voters opted for the candidate who would be the first president of African descent, and in doing so eradicated racism forever' ('The Year of

Living Postracially' par. 1). Similar to Butler's narrative fiction, post-racial ideology is thoroughly thematised in Whitehead's corpus through its intersectional link to class and gender struggle.

*The Underground Railroad* addresses and develops the already existing themes in Whitehead's corpus: fantasy, historicity and race. The novel was awarded literary prizes: the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction; the 2016 National Book Award for Fiction; the science fiction 2017 Arthur C. Clarke Award; and the 2017 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence. The premise of his neo-slave narrative consists in the journey Cora – a Black teenage slave from South Carolina – across different states of the United States in the Antebellum period. The different states, as Whitehead remarks, represent different states of American possibility:

On one level, this book is about a girl born into bondage who makes a great leap of faith to escape to a better life ... On another level, it's about slavery, how it functioned and what it meant – to slaves, to their masters, to people in the South. Each state Cora goes through is a different state of American possibility: South Carolina is a benevolent, paternalistic state where slaves are given programs for racial uplift. North Carolina is a white supremacist state. So, each is a sort of island, in a *Gulliver's Travels* kind of way. ('Literally Underground' par. 3)

Whitehead's novel, while seemingly appearing to be set in the Antebellum period, integrates details and events which, from a chronological standpoint, do not belong to this historical epoch. Whitehead's novel inventively rearranges historical events taking place after the Antebellum period: 'Its depiction of nineteenth-century South Carolina includes skyscrapers, government-run eugenics and syphilis experiments' (Dischinger 83). As Madhu Dubey remarks, 'the sites linked by the railroad add up to an asynchronous or multisynchronous portrait of an 'alternate America'' (112). Each state constitutes a counterfactual collage of history whose respective narrative space,

as Dubey points out, interrogates the ‘commonplace assumptions about clearly demarcated periods, hinge moments of transition (like the Civil War, which is altogether absent from the novel), and progressive teleology’ (112). Whitehead’s counterfactual SF posits the slave trade as an event whose ramifications and consequences outreach the artificially demarcated scope of the Antebellum period. By enabling a counterfactual vision in which distant historical moments coexist within the same temporal space, *The Underground Railroad* performs an estrangement effect challenging dominant perceptions of historiography as a linear progression of events.

Whitehead’s *Underground Railroad* thematizes the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter political movement emerging after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of the African American teenager Trayvon Martin in 2013. The novel addresses the post-racial ideology at play in the Barack Obama administration by showing the functioning of institutional racism alongside seemingly liberal attitudes concerning race and multiculturalism. Similar to Butler’s *Kindred*, SF elements operate to posit slavery as the paradigmatic event in the creation of Black identity resonating through different periods in the history of the United States after the Antebellum. Whitehead’s text also explores the subordination of the legal and penal system to the economic interests of the capitalist elite, one of the most recurrent subjects treated by Black Lives Matter. The novel can be interpreted as following Taylor’s view that

[r]acism in the United States has never been just about abusing Black and Brown people just for the sake of doing so. It has always been a means by which the most powerful white men in the country have justified their rule, made their money, and kept the rest of us at bay. To that end, racism, capitalism, and class rule have always been tangled together in such a way that it is impossible to imagine one without the other. (216)

Like the countless cases of police brutality and murder exposed by the Black Lives Matter movement, this speculative fiction novel attempts to show the complicity of seemingly neutral institutions – medicine, science and law – in the perpetuation of the country’s foundational racial inequality. In this sense, Whitehead’s novel foreshadows and explores issues which will be further aggravated by the presidency of Donald Trump and the systemic impunity for cases of Black murder by enforcers and defenders of the Law. The systemic underpinning of the novel works to effectively render visible the multiple intersectional points between race, gender and class raised by the Black Live Matter movement.

While also dealing with the afterlives of slavery through speculative fiction elements, Whitehead’s neo-slave narrative follows a quite distinct narrative method to the circular time travel narrative elaborated in Butler’s *Kindred*. As Li points out, while ‘Butler’s description of antebellum life is rooted in minute historical details... Whitehead envisions a world where twentieth-century luxuries disconcertingly meet nineteenth-century political realities and key technological developments are entirely ignored’ (2). The literal underground railroad is the focal point of estrangement in Whitehead’s novel – a subterranean infrastructure of tunnels and stations crisscrossing the United States in the Antebellum period – and both materializes and memorializes the interracial network of white abolitionists and free African Americans aiming to aid Blacks escaping from slavery. As Dubey remarks: ‘[a] hallmark of Colson Whitehead’s fiction and the source of its distinctive power is its strategy of building elaborate narrative worlds based on the logic of literalizing metaphor’ (111). The underground railroad simultaneously renders visible the ongoing struggle for Black emancipation and freedom, the exploitation of slave labour and the capitalist underpinning of racial institutional violence. This counterfactual approach to the past, as Whitehead points out, is linked to a critical interrogation of history: ‘[o]nce I made the choice to

make the railroad a literal railroad, I'm already leaving the historical record. My philosophy was I'm not going to stick to the facts, but I will stick to the truth' ('A Conversation with Colson Whitehead' par. 14). Whitehead's paradoxical statement does hold truth when considering the novel's relationship towards historicity. As Dischinger notes, '[e]ven as the novel rearranges history, it hardly invents or exaggerates' (83). Even though each state reconfigures history, the novel does not invent new historical events or extrapolate them in a hyperbolic fashion. History is rearranged with the clear purpose of exhibiting the ongoing nature of Black oppression in the United States.

The underground railroad functions as a transitional space between the historical periods and American possibilities depicted by each state. As Lumbly, one of the operators of the stations, remarks, 'Every state is different ... Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things. Moving through them, you'll see the breadth of the country before you reach your final stop' (82). The underground railroad renders visible the contradictions and dilemmas in the ongoing struggle for racial emancipation in the United States. Whitehead's novel can be interpreted as composing an asynchronous collage of American history with the slave trade as its paradigmatic and central event. By inventively rearranging history, *The Underground Railroad* confers on past events a meaning surpassing their inert facticity as historical data and recontextualizes them in a wider narrative of Black struggle for freedom. The underground railroad offers an illustrative example of this narrative procedure and its critical interrogation of teleological visions of progress. As Lumbly warns Cora, the underground does not offer any sense of teleological certainty to Black runaways seeking freedom: '[t]he problem is that one destination may be more to your liking than another. Stations are discovered, lines discontinued. You won't know what waits above until you pull in' (81). This unpredictable and kaleidoscopic vision of

American history allows readers to contemplate history as an ever-shifting and unpredictable process. The underground railroad, hence, also represents a journey through the history of slavery and its afterlives but, also, the possibilities of Black liberation.

### **The Political Economy of Racism**

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade is depicted as a capitalist phenomenon throughout the entire narration thus precluding any teleological understanding of it as remnant of less civilised times. This economic underpinning is clearly illustrated in the first pages of the novel depicting the life of Ajarry, Cora's grandmother. Ajarry's chapter outlines her Trans-Atlantic voyage across the globe due to the slave trade maintained by multiple capitalist countries. Through pure deduction and observation, Ajarry eventually becomes aware of the economic underpinning of her condition as a slave: 'She went for two hundred and eighteen dollars in a hasty exchange, a drop in price occasioned by the realities of the local market' (6). It is through this realization that she becomes aware her 'value' as a commodity in terms of congealed labour and exchange-value: 'Her price fluctuated. When you are sold that many times, the world is teaching you to pay attention' (6). Her status as a commodity and property of white men absolutely determines her trajectory from one location to the other, but also expresses the economic underpinning of her condition of Black non-being constantly inhabited by external forces beyond her control. Ajarry acknowledges her objectification as a commodity and tragically accepts her condition of non-being as an inescapable reality: 'In America the quirk was that people were things ... A slave girl squeezing out pups was like a mint, money that bred money. If you were a thing – a cart or a house or a slave – your value determined your possibilities. She minded her place' (7). This tragic resignation is explicitly linked to her capitalist determination in the slave trade: 'Know your value and you know your place in

the order. To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental boundaries of your existence: impossible' (9). This chapter foregrounds and foreshadows the capitalist underpinning of the historical forces claiming ownership over Cora as a property in her attempts to escape from slavery and possibly attain her freedom.

The imagery of cotton in Whitehead's novel draws meaningful parallels to the systemic exploitation of Black slave labour. The text develops a Borgesian game of echoes and affinities linking cotton with various stages of capital production and Black slavery. Ajarry, whose life is fully determined by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, tragically concludes her life extracting cotton in a Southern plantation: 'Ajarry died in the cotton, the bolls bobbing around her like whitecaps on the brute ocean' (9). This tragic image suggestively establishes the ocean and cotton – elements referring to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade – as the triggering causes for Ajarry's ultimate fate. Cora's trajectory in the novel similarly expresses this economic rationale in the exploitation of Black slave labour. Like her mother and grandmother, Cora begins working at a Southern plantation in Georgia extracting cotton as a raw material. It is only in South Carolina, when she earns and spends her first wage on a blue dress, that Cora can observe the transformation of cotton into its commodity form. This experience evokes a feeling of uneasiness in her: '[t]he soft cotton on her skin still thrilled her' (105). This detail foreshadows the fact that Cora is unable to escape the fatal implication of the Cotton Kingdom in South Carolina: the museum exhibit where she works at is called 'Typical Day on the Plantation' in which she has to pretend to spin cotton on a spinning wheel (131). These parallels demonstrate the capitalist underpinning of the exploitation of Black social labour in the form of slavery. This is a social reality which follows Cora in her pursuit for freedom even in the 'post-racial' facade of South Carolina, a state which in spite of appearances plays a crucial role in Cotton Kingdom economy. The cotton imagery maintained by

these parallels serves to reinforce that Black identity is closely linked to the centrality of slavery in the United States' capitalist mode of production.

The construction of the underground railroad, while ultimately serving to emancipate Black slaves, is also linked to the exploitation of Black slave labour in the United States. When contemplating the underground railroad for the first time, Cora immediately thinks about the sheer amount of social labour required for its construction: 'The black mouth of the gigantic tunnel opened at either end. It must have been twenty feet tall, wall lined with dark and light colored stones in an alternating pattern. The sheer industry that had made such a project possible' (80). When she asks who constructed the underground railroad, Lumbly – the white patroller in charge of the station – sarcastically responds: 'Who builds anything in this country?' (81). Cora's recognition of the importance of Black labour in the construction of the nation does not render any sense of pride in her:

[B]ut not one of them could be prideful of their labor. It had been stolen from them. Bled from them. The tunnel, the tracks, the desperate souls who found salvation in the coordination of its stations and timetables – this was a marvel to be proud of. She wondered if those who had built this had received their proper reward. (82)

The underground railroad functions as a metaphor standing for the social exploitation of Black slave labour and its fundamental role in the development of the United States as a nation. From this perspective, there cannot be any prideful recognition at the architectonic features produced by Black stolen labour. This infrastructure thus provides a condensed formulation of the Marxist thesis that '[d]irect slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credit, etc ... Without slavery North America, the most progressive of countries, would be transformed into a patriarchal country' (Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy* 49). Cora's source of pride is the complex



network that had to be put in in order to help Black runaways escape from slavery. The trans-historical nature of the underground railroad – the location linking different periods of American history – emphasises the connection between capitalism’s social contradictions and the afterlives of slavery: it is both a product of the exploitation of slave labour and the means for Black emancipation.

The South Carolina chapter develops a historical continuum between the slave trade and post-racial ideology. Whitehead’s counterfactual and anachronistic rearrangement of history is precisely what enables this chapter to represent the afterlives of slavery/property in its ‘post-racial’ social environment. The state is depicted as an inclusive urban metropolis which, in spite of its colourblind discourse, is fully integrated into the Cotton Kingdom economy of the United States. Similar to Whitehead’s criticism of the supposed post-racial ideology promoted during the Barack Obama presidency, the chapter exposes how institutional racism can operate through seemingly progressive guises. One of the most illustrative depictions of the state’s ideological contradictions is the Griffin Building:

At twelve stories, it was one of the tallest buildings in the nation, certainly it towered over any structure in the south. The pride of the town. The bank dominated the first floor, with its vaulted ceiling and Tennessee marble. Bessie had no business there but was not a stranger to the floors above. The previous week she took the children to see their father on his birthday and got to hear the clapping of her footsteps on his beautiful lobby. The elevator, the only one for hundreds of miles, conveyed them to the eighth floor... They passed the floors of insurance agents, government offices, and export firms. Vacancies were rare; a Griffin address was a great boon to a business’s reputation. Mr. Anderson’s floor was a warren of lawyer’s offices, with rich carpets, walls of dark brown wood, and

doors inlaid with frosted glass. Mr. Anderson himself worked on contracts, primarily in the cotton trade. (102-3)

The building constitutes a symbol of pride for the citizens due to its display of technological superiority over southern states. Steampunk's retrofuturistic distortion of the nineteenth-century with modern anachronisms allows Whitehead to materially display, at the level of narrative space, the harmonic coexistence of the slave trade with the colourblind ideology of the post-civil rights period. As Mr. Anderson's job demonstrates, the technological advancement of the city is directly linked to the Cotton Kingdom economy and, hence, the slave trade. South Carolina is portrayed, in spite of its colourblind attitude towards Black people, as being completely integrated into the Cotton Kingdom economy and, moreover, one of the most prosperous southern states profiting from it. As Cora comes to realize, '[t]he land she tilled and worked had been Indian land... Stolen bodies working stolen land. It was an engine that did not stop, its hungry boiler fed with blood' (139). This underlying reality is concealed by a tolerant attitude towards the existence of Black citizens: 'No one chased her or abused her. Some of Mrs. Anderson's circle, who recognized Bessie as her girl, sometimes even smiled' (104). The state's steampunk setting, in this sense, brings about an immanent critique of teleological progress by positing the Antebellum slave trade as the state's source of prosperity, as well as displaying its affinity with seemingly post-civil rights colourblind attitudes towards race.

The steampunk narrative world-building at play in South Carolina prevents any teleological notion linking technological advancement with cultural progress or racial equality. As Max Bledstein points out, 'Whitehead imagines a South Carolina in which ostensibly benign, government-supported institutions, specifically museums and hospitals, turn out to have insidious commonalities with slavery' (130). The eugenic experiments taking place in the state are

conducted by seemingly friendly doctors with the aim of sterilizing and eradicating any potential for slave rebellion: ‘Controlled sterilization, research into communicable diseases, the perfection of new surgical techniques on the socially unfit – was it any wonder the best medical talents in the country were flocking to South Carolina?’ (146). Whitehead’s novel deals in the South Carolina chapter with the medical experimentation on Black bodies and eugenic experiments that were indeed performed by the United States health department in Macon county, Alabama in 1932. With these experiments, as Cora points out, white men were effectively attempting to prescribe the future of the Black population: ‘[W]ith the surgeries that Dr. Stevens described... the whites had begun stealing futures in earnest. Cut you open and rip them out, dripping. Because that’s what you do when you take away someone’s babies – steal their future’ (139). This prescription of Black identity is effectively foreshadowed at the beginning of the chapter when Cora and her friend Caesar are handed their identity card by the station agent. These documents, as Caesar observes, present a disturbing detail: ‘It says here we’re property of the United States Government’, to which remark the station agent carelessly replies: ‘That’s a technicality’ (110). This technicality foreshadows the colourblind ideology denying South Carolina’s institutional racism but simultaneously profiting from the exploitation and prescription Black labour as a property of the United States. South Carolina exhibits that the Black condition of non/being can be directly linked to its colourblind negation.

### **Scenes from Darkest Africa**

The museum exhibit, *Scenes from Darkest Africa*, presents a reification of the condition of Black non-being through its theatrical performance for white tourists. Cora’s most acute representation of being dehumanized as an object by white men is depicted in these passages. As Mr. Fields, the

owner of the museum, explains to Cora when introducing her to the job: ‘the focus was American history – for a young nation, there was so much to educate the public about. The untamed flora and fauna of the North American continent, the minerals and other splendors of the world beneath their feet’ (130). Mr. Field’s discourse dehumanizes Cora to the point of being put at the same level with the country’s flora and fauna. Cora’s status as a citizen of South Carolina is revealed to be a mere technicality: ‘Like a railroad, the museum permitted them to see the rest of the country... And to see its people. ‘People like you’, Mr. Fields said’ (130). Mr. Field’s paternalistic discourse dehumanizes Cora by addressing her as a museum object whose only purpose is to promote a skewed historical narrative to white tourists across the country. This point is consciously reflected by Cora when performing inaccurate slave works and task at the exhibit:

Slave work was sometimes spinning thread, yes; most of the time it was not. No slave had ever keeled over dead at a spinning wheel or been butchered for a tangle. But nobody wanted to speak on the disposition of the world. And no one wanted to hear it. Certainly not the white monsters on the other side of the exhibit at that very moment, pushing their greasy snouts against the window, sneering and hooting. Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking, alluring and ever out of reach. (138-139)

The macabre underside of South Carolina’s ideological mirage is grimly dismantled by Cora as she is exhibited as a museum object for the reifying gaze of white spectators. Cora’s exhibit, Typical Day on the Plantation, is separated from the white gaze through a glass window, which further emphasises the distance between museum object and white tourist. Cora is reduced to a passive object of contemplation who cannot even address the historical inaccuracies of the exhibit: ‘The enterprising African boy whose fine leather boots she wore would have been chained

belowdecks, swabbing his body in his own filth' (138). This convenient narrative of the slave trade exposes the dangers of disingenuous historiography and its complicit role in obscuring the afterlives of the slave trade as well as its coexistence with the present. This possibility is denied by the very epistemological conditions of the museum, silencing her voice and reducing her to an antiquarian historical object without any discerning connection to the present. Historical truth, as she remarks, is manipulated at the convenience of the white capitalist order that subjects Cora and Black people – a situation which she cannot personally change, since she is not in the privileged position to do so.

*Darkest Scenes of Africa* exposes how hegemonic memorialization practices in museums can also work to legitimise slavery in the Antebellum period. The exhibit reiterates, at a metafictional level, the historical anachronisms enacted in the South Carolina chapter. As Dubey argues, Whitehead utilises the museum space to critique 'the representational techniques (of historical framing and spatial design) used to bring slavery into public visibility, yet *Underground Railroad* also exemplifies a kind of revisionist work that novels of slavery may perform in the context of proliferating representation and commemoration' (134). This space embodies what Jameson terms the waning of historicity, that is, the postmodern condition of being unable to experience 'history in some active way' and, thus, having 'to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach' (21, 25). The museum exhibit depicts a memorial space in which, due to its antiquarian setting, history is reconfigured into a collection of ossified objects urging spectators to view slavery as an event disconnected from the present. This is a type of memorialization that is absolutely contrary to the filling of gaps and silences referred by Sharpe. South Carolina demonstrates the dangerous museumizing vision of history promoting 'post-racial' attitudes towards the present and obscuring

the afterlives of slavery/property. As Taylor remarks, ‘colourblind’ discourse was one of the main ideological mechanisms deployed by conservatives to undermine the 1960s civil rights movement: ‘they deployed the language and logic of colorblindedness in such a way as to distinguish between intentional racism and the effects of racism wherever race was not specifically mentioned’ (18). *The Underground Railroad* effectively represents the logic of colourblindness by exposing how institutional racism does not necessarily involve verbal abuse or outwards displays of violence, and can be concomitant with apparently ethical and progressive notions. Whitehead’s steampunk historical collage exhibits the underlying economic logic sustaining Black oppression by establishing a temporal space whereby all these instances of institutional racism share the same historical time. In this sense, Whitehead exposes postracial ideology by articulating its rhetorical mechanisms and developing a narrative that shows how these are actively related to the afterlives of slavery and property, that is, by showing how Black citizens are treated as a property of the United States.

The novel’s historical collage does not only involve the combination of historically unrelated architectural elements, but also the combination of distant historical events within the narration. These new forms of oppression still maintain the same underlying logic of Black non-being and are, in fact, complicit with the slave trade. As Cora remarks after her escape from South Carolina,

after all the world had taught them, not to recognize chains when they were snapped to their wrists and ankles. The South Carolina ones were of new manufacture – the keys and tumblers marked by regional design – but accomplished the purpose of chains. They had not traveled very far after all. (173)

In South Carolina, similar to Georgia, Black bodies are subjected to the requirements of the state and its related social apparatuses. These forms of institutional racism, therefore, enact the same pervasive economic rationale of slavery and the reduction of Black bodies to properties readily available for exploitation, experimentation and subjugation. The steampunk setting, in this sense, by disarticulating the chronological causality of events, illustrates in a patent way how these past events and forms of racism coexist within the same framework, a historical process that continuously takes new forms of exploitation.

The historical collage enacted by *The Underground Railroad* is not only expressed in its narrative space but also in the characters' perception of historical time and their place within American society. This historical collage is vividly depicted in Cora's nightmares after escaping South Carolina and waiting for a train in the underground railroad. All the events that have taken place by that point are provided with a common space in Cora's nightmare:

In nightmares the exhibits were more grotesque. She strolled back and forth before the glass, a customer of pain. She was locked in Life of the Slave Ship after the museum had closed, ever between ports and waiting for the wind while hundreds of kidnapped souls screamed below decks. Behind the next window, Miss Lucy cut open Cora's stomach with a letter opener and a thousand black spiders spilled from her guts. Over and over, she was transported back to the night of the smokehouse, held down by nurses from the hospital as Terrance Randall grunted and thrust above her. (172)

The scenario presented in this dream articulates the manifold historical forces constituting Cora's Black condition of non/being. The 'Life on the Slave Ship' exhibit representing the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, becomes the cause of Cora's confinement and alludes to her determination by forces beyond her control. Confinement is a recurrent metaphor not only alluding to the transitional space

of the underground railroad but, also, to her condition of non/being in the United States: ‘Whether in the fields or underground or in an attic room, America remained her warden’ (207). Miss Lucy, the seemingly benevolent English teacher in South Carolina, is the one in charge of the medical procedure of opening Cora’s stomach in this nightmare. This procedure is done with a letter opener, a metaphorical suggestion concerning the institutional forms of violence exerted by language on Black subjects. This procedure is simultaneously performed while Terrance Randall – the owner of the plantation that she escaped from in Georgia – rapes Cora, thus further emphasizing the link between slavery as the paradigmatic event and cause of her horrifying predicament. This nightmare does not merely repeat the violent events experienced by Cora at the level of unconscious thinking but, most importantly, grants them a common setting that, like the novel’s treatment of history itself, reflects their underlying resemblance and influence on Cora’s condition of non/being. In this sense, it is this convoluted historical temporality that constitutes the non/being Black condition of Cora as being determined and persecuted by the ongoing effects of slavery.

### **Spaghetti Western**

Whitehead’s steampunk narrative integrates stylistic elements from Spaghetti Western films. This is exhibited in the Wanted posters shown at the beginning of each non-biographical chapter of *The Underground Railroad*: Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana and The North. Steampunk is strategically used to reverse the regressive ideas associated and promoted by common tropes found in Spaghetti Western films set in the nineteenth century. One of these reversals is that the villain in Whitehead’s novel is not a runaway or criminal escaping from the



Law, but the slave catcher, Ridgeway. This character is described as the embodiment of the Law. As Ridgeway himself remarks:

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

Whitehead's narrative rearticulates and reverses the roles of Spaghetti Western plots by establishing the representative of Law and order as the villain, and Cora – the slave running from the hegemonic order – as its protagonist and heroine. This reversal of roles provides wider political connotations to this conflict by linking it to the history of the United States as a country built upon the exploitation of slave labour. Similar to the Black Matter movement, this depiction challenges post-racial attitudes neglecting the systemic connection between the legal system and institutional racism. The steampunk elements within the narrative, by providing a shared temporality to historical events, operate in order to show the role of the law in legitimising and normalising forms of institutional racism. The economic rationale underlying the law is portrayed in Ridgeway's behaviour when coldly killing Jasper, one of the slaves he has captured: 'Divide thirty-five dollars by, say, three weeks, minus Boseman's share, and the lost bounty was a very small price to pay for silence and restful mind' (255). The economic underpinning of systemic forms of racism is responsible for both the reversal of roles and wider historical connotations given to Spaghetti Western tropes.

Ridgeway, however, is not simply represented as some abstract embodiment of the capitalist system depicted in *The Underground Railroad*, but, also, as a result of the historical forces driving the novel. In the biographical chapter 'Ridgeway', the narrator presents the character by describing his relationship with his father. Ridgeway's father could be described as an illustration of the Yeoman Jeffersonian ideal of the United States as a nation; one which, as historian Walter Johnson remarks, relies upon the notion of hard-working independent white patriarchal American families whose own means of subsistence are independent of financial speculations (24). Ridgeway's father works as a blacksmith and is depicted as a driven man whose work ethic is deeply related to his spiritual beliefs: 'His forge was a window into the primitive energies of the world ... Working the spirit, he called it' (87). Even though Ridgeway's father found himself working for one of the wealthiest capitalists, he never respected them: 'If you weren't a little dirty at the end of the day, you weren't much of a man' (88). Ridgeway, however, opts for a different career path and separates himself from his father's Yeoman ideals: 'the man's constant talk of spirits reminded him of his own lack of purpose' (89). As a result of this discontent, he begins working as a slave catcher and realizes that both he and his father serve the same purpose: 'Let his father keep his disdain and his spirit, too. The two men were parts of the same system, serving a nation rising to its destiny' (91). Ridgeway, in this sense, is a manifest response to what he calls the 'Old World' symbolised by his father and 'his Indian talk about the Great Spirit' (266). In opposition to these ideals, Ridgeway is aligned to the historical forces driving the United States as a nation, that is, its slave-based economy and all the institutions supporting this order: 'I prefer the American spirit, the one that called us from the Old World to the New, to conquer and build and civilize. And destroy that what needs to be destroyed. To lift up the lesser races... The

American imperative' (266). This imperative is what drives Ridgeway's actions as a character and places him as an embodiment of the Law sustaining slavery and Black subjugation.

The Spaghetti Western plot is rearticulated through the novel's steampunk narrative by enforcing the structural and systemic division between agents of order and runaways, namely by asserting the historical forces driving racial and class struggle. Cora's own Wanted poster is symbolically posited in the last chapter of the novel, *The North*, after escaping from Ridgeway for the last time. However, her poster has a slightly different message to the ones presented before in the novel:

RAN AWAY

from her legal but not rightful master fifteen months past, a slave girl called CORA; of ordinary height and dark brown complexion; has a star-shape mark on her temple from an injury; possessed of a spirited nature and devious method. Possibly answering to the name of BESSIE.

Last seen in Indiana among the outlaws of John Valentine Farm.

She has stopped running.

Rewards remain unclaimed.

SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY.

*December 23. (356)*

Her physical and personal description is followed by the final clause in capital letters referring to her status as not being one of property, a statement which has been examined in many instances throughout the novel. Moreover, this poster, unlike any of the others presented during the narration, has not been signed by any authority or character of the novel; it could have been written by Ridgeway, someone from the Randall plantation or any other white authority. These enigmatic

details can be observed as indicators of the open-ended structure of the novel itself and its vision of the afterlives of slavery. The last chapter concludes with Cora back in the underground railroad escaping and running towards freedom in the darkness. There is no final resolution or victorious side in Whitehead's novel. The text significantly concludes inside the underground railroad, thus asserting a twofold message: the ongoing nature of the afterlives of slavery into yet unknown historical times and the hope for Black liberation in the future.

*The Underground Railroad* maintains an open-ended vision of history that compels readers to assess the slave trade beyond the scope of the events presented within the narrative. The novel does not provide a final resolution to Cora's journey: she is unable to settle down in any state nor is she captured by the slave patrollers. Cora remains in motion determined by the same condition of escaping from slavery and striving towards freedom. Instead, the novel concludes with Cora inside the underground railroad: a transitional space not only crisscrossing among states but, also, different historical times. Unlike Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), Whitehead's counterfactual narrative refuses to provide any sense of symbolic resolution to the condition of Black non/being. The text's open conclusion inside the underground railroad evokes the ongoing nature of the struggle for Black emancipation as an ongoing journey which extends further into the future. The steampunk historical collage is an effective narrative means to materialize and memorialize a clear continuum between otherwise chronologically distant events. This counterfactual temporality is what allows the text to exhibit the underlying logic supporting the afterlives of property and slavery. In this regard, it should be noted that the widespread success of the novel should not be taken as a clear-cut symptomatic effect of widespread regressive views on institutional racism. Speculative fiction elements render visible the capitalist underpinning of institutional racism and thus challenge conceptions of the slave trade as an antiquarian fact

belonging to the historical past. Whitehead's novel is, in this sense, a clear example of the genre's potential for interrogating the afterlives of slavery/property in contemporary capitalist conditions.

### **Conclusion**

Both *Kindred* and *The Underground Railroad* show the potential of speculative fiction's estrangement to critically interrogate American history by memorializing and materializing the afterlives of slavery. While Butler's text uses the time travel trope to promote a circular narrative in which the past viscerally communicates with the present, Whitehead's novel rearranges history in a narrative collage whereby events of Black oppression inhabit the same temporal space. These novels, in this sense, exemplify the genre's plethora of narrative strategies to articulate some of the central issues for Sharpe's conception of Black aesthetics: the condition of non-being and the afterlives of slavery. In addition to this, both novels defy prevalent post-racial ideas concerning institutional racism and the afterlives of slavery in the United States at their respective times of publication. Estrangement, within these SF neo-slave narratives, functions to challenge the antiquarian vision of history implicit in post-racial ideology. By rendering visible the underlying causality common to events, ranging from the Antebellum to the post-civil rights period, these novels allow readers to contemplate American history as an ongoing process in which the past coexists with the present. While not serving as a guideline for political action, speculative fiction provides a good model to think with the afterlives of slavery and the centrality of the slave trade for the development of global capitalism.

**Challenging Cultural Studies Through Dystopian Fiction: Catatonic  
Cultural Dominant in Noon's *Falling out of Cars* and McCormack's *Notes  
from a Coma***

What is the present cultural dominant in global capitalism? Can this be described according to clinical accounts of schizophrenia as cultural theorists of the 'postmodern' condition have argued or, perhaps, something different? These questions are at the core of Jeff Noon's *Falling out of Cars* and Mike McCormack's *Notes from a Coma* – experimental works of speculative fiction that pose several challenges to postmodern accounts of cultural schizophrenia. These speculative narratives are suggestive, both at the level of content and form, of a sensibility more akin to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of catatonia rather than postmodern models of schizophrenia. Both dystopian fiction novels render catatonia as a cultural dominant, but also, through their speculative tropes and experimental narratives, expose some of the inconsistencies found in cultural theories of schizophrenia. The anamorphic estrangement performed in these dystopian narratives, while relativizing dominant perceptions about the future, offer a hermeneutic framework by which to understand capitalism's cultural tendencies.

Schizophrenia is a term that, within the field of cultural studies, has been frequently deployed beyond its clinical meaning to describe the dominant mode of experience in global capitalism. The scholarship on this subject has appropriated this term in order to describe how capitalism's mode of production organises everyday life experience according to spatial and temporal coordinates which can be interpreted as schizophrenic. In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, by elaborating on psychoanalysis and Marxist criticism, draw attention to the mode of production's role in the

organisation of psychic energies or, in their vocabulary, desiring production. As Angela Woods (2011) remarks, by ‘capitalizing on the momentum of the antipsychiatry movement’, *Anti-Oedipus* ‘played a decisive role in promoting schizophrenia as a paradigm through which to understand subjectivity in the late capitalist era’ (146). Schizophrenia, for them, is the deterritorializing component of capitalism, that is, the force representing the ‘continual revolution of the means of production’ and generating a demystification of symbolic values – custom, beliefs and codes of behaviour – in favour of economic speculation and axiomatisation; a liberation of desire from established codes that they see embodied in schizophrenic subjectivity (Holland 80–1). This ‘nomadic’ subjectivity involves a decentred subject with no fixed identity, constantly transitioning between metastable states and consuming the intensities produced by them; a desiring production which is not delirious, but which always remains connected to material and historical reality: ‘he is not from another world: even when he is displacing himself in space, he is a journey in intensity, around the desiring-machine that is erected here and remains here’ (156). For Deleuze and Guattari ‘[o]ur society produces schizos the same way it produces Prell shampoo or Ford cars’, but, conversely, ‘he is its inherent tendency brought to fulfilment, its surplus product, its proletariat, and its exterminating angel’ (282, 49). Schizophrenia is thus simultaneously a social tendency found in capitalism as a whole – the paradigm of its deterritorializing components – and its potentially revolutionary subject – the schizo – expressing its internal logic at the level of subjectivity.

Deleuze and Guattari’s diagnosis, as Angela Woods points out, is reformulated by cultural studies of postmodernism that define schizophrenia ‘not as a rebellious, counter-cultural, transcendent, or even bizarre, but as [a] historically specific form of subjective

disintegration, a final flattening of psychic depth' (186). Jean Baudrillard's (1988) analysis of cultural schizophrenia is a clear example of this: '[w]e have entered into a new form of schizophrenia – with the emergence of an immanent promiscuity and the perpetual interconnection of all information and communication networks' ('The Ecstasy of Communication' 21). Similarly, for Fredric Jameson (1991), cultural schizophrenia, as manifested in postmodern cultural products, is indicative of the pervasive commodification and reification of all domains of social life, including even Nature and the Unconscious (49). Jameson's analysis focuses on how capitalism's economic rationale affects manifold cultural spheres: a waning of affect in art and literature; a flattening of depth and interiority models in post-structuralist theory; a waning of historicity brought about by a consumerist society 'whose own putative past is little more than a vast collection of images and dusty spectacles;' and the exhilarating consumption and production of 'the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and aleatory' (15, 18, 26). These critical readers posit schizophrenia as the cultural outcome of capitalism's financial logic and as the dominant mode of experience emerging from its organisation of social relations and productive economic forces.

The relevance of literature within this debate pertains to the relationship between cultural dominant and cultural products and, more specifically, to the way in which these latter render sensible capitalism's organisation of living conditions. Jameson's Lacanian analysis of cultural production as another component and expression of late capitalism's schizophrenic dominant mode of experience augments this point. Jameson remarks that his use of this clinical term is for 'description rather than diagnosis' as a 'suggestive aesthetic model' (26). Schizophrenic *écriture* works through the exercise of emphasising the discontinuity and heterogeneity among disjointed fragments, raw materials and aleatory impulses; a procedure



which Jameson sums up under the paradoxical slogan: ‘difference relates’ (31). The pure materiality of the sentence in isolation is highlighted to the detriment of its syntagmatic relation to the signifying chain: ‘reading proceeds by differentiation rather than unification’ and the text is ‘reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers ... a series of pure and unrelated presents in time’ (31; 27). The breakdown of the signifying chain thus entails a breakdown of temporality in which the present is released ‘from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis’ (27). William S. Burroughs’s cut-up technique is a useful example of this method: an aleatory assemblage of disjointed signifiers breaking down the syntagmatic unity of the poem. The present here, following Jacques Lacan’s clinical account of schizophrenia, becomes isolated, ‘engulf[ing] the subject with undescrivable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material – or better still, the literal – signifier in isolation’ (27). What differentiates schizophrenic writing from previous stylistic tendencies is that it is dominated by joyous and impersonal intensities, such as euphoria and hallucinatory highs, displacing the older modernist affects of anxiety and alienation (28–9). J.G. Ballard’s *Crash* (1973) offers helpful illustration of this schizophrenic subjectivity: a highly influential science fiction novel describing the car-crash sexual fetishism of a London collective. This perverse desire is pursued through both real and elaborate staged car accidents which are impassively described by the narrator. In this text, Baudrillard claims, affects reveal an absolute lack of interiority of the subject: ‘no psychology, no ambivalence or desire, no libido or death-drive’ (*Crash*’ 112).

### **Catatonia or Schizophrenia?**

*Falling out of Cars* and *Notes from a Coma* are more aptly described according to the obscurer concept of catatonia rather than schizophrenia as developed by Deleuze and Guattari. It should be noted that many postmodern authors, such as Ballard and Burroughs, have been cited as influential figures in Noon's narrative corpus (Butler 61; Wenaus 'Fractal Narrative' 262). Likewise, McCormack has cited Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity Rainbow* and Ballard's *Crash* as central to his understanding of technology and the human condition ('Experiment or Die' 94). The same influence implicitly applies to the cyberpunk writing of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. This movement emerging at the end of the 1980s is, according to Jameson, one of the primary literary examples of schizophrenic culture (320). In Jameson's view, cyberpunk embodies, through its 'orgy of language' and 'excess of representational consumption', the complete reification and 'institutional collectivisation of contemporary life' (321; 320). Cyberpunk displaces the modernist experiences of alienation and anxiety in favour of 'heightened intensit[ies]' resulting from 'a genuine pleasure and jouissance out of necessity' which 'turns resignation into excitement ... a high and an addiction' (321). Noon's narrative corpus shares with this schizophrenic canon its thematic exploration of drug addiction and hallucination – as shown in *Vurt* (1993), *Pollen* (1995) and *Nymphomation* (1997) – but also, in stylistic terms, its disjointed prose breaking down the syntagmatic unity of the signifying chain, as seen in *Automated Alice* (1996) and *Needle in the Groove* (2000). McCormack, while not showing any interest in drug addiction or ecstatic hallucinations, shares with this movement the disjointed quality of its schizophrenic prose and preoccupation with the effects of technology on human subjectivity, as is apparent in *Notes from a Coma* (2006) and *Solar Bones* (2016). However, while sharing many features with this schizophrenic canon, McCormack and Noon's bodies of work, differ from this tradition in that they reflect a

melancholy interiority – a constellation of loss and abandonment – which is completely absent in the aforementioned postmodern works. These works of speculative fiction, in opposition to classical postmodern narratives, do not reflect the elated affects or consumerist jouissance of the cultural dominant but, rather, maintain an aporetic stance expressing a subjective interiority at odds with the flattening logic of contemporary life.

McCormack and Noon's narrative corpus has been surprisingly overlooked in the field of literary studies. One possible reason for this neglect is that their corpus does not neatly fit into the scheme of postmodern aesthetics and schizophrenic subjectivity. This is a predicament which demands the creation of a different vocabulary and theoretical framework for its analysis. Catatonia, likewise, is an understudied concept within Deleuze and Guattari scholarship and cultural studies. This is mostly indebted to the fact that they themselves never dealt with this psychopathology in any systematic and thorough manner. The scattered mentions across their corpus are, nonetheless, more than enough to develop a general characterisation of catatonia as a cultural dominant. This alternative model is better suited to describe *Notes from a Coma* and *Falling out of Cars*. The novels address cultural tendencies which are not acknowledged by postmodern accounts of schizophrenia and, thus, expand their theoretical scope to social phenomena involving negative affects. Catatonia is a response to the same underlying experience of subjective deterritorialization of schizophrenia and, thus, expresses a complementary perspective to previous cultural studies. The catatonic mode of experience expresses a dynamic understanding of capitalism's cultural dominant as being comprised by sometimes contradictory social tendencies. In this sense, catatonia challenges Jameson's monolithic understanding of a cultural dominant exerting its influence on different

geographical locations across the globe. From this perspective, capitalism's cultural dominant is a dynamic one consisting of dynamic and ambivalent cultural tendencies.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, catatonia is a subcategory of schizophrenia and emerges as the most radical form reterritorialization bringing to a halt the latter's dynamic mobilization of desire, that is, as a total arrest of the schizophrenic process set in motion by the social field (161). This kind of repression entails a state of absolute immobility in which the subject silences its drives and repels its own corporality (375). While the schizophrenic adapts to this mode of temporality and transitions from one state to the other, the catatonic reaches a state of absolute stasis:

[a]s the authors of horror stories have understood so well, it is not death that serves as the model for catatonia, it is catatonic schizophrenia that gives its model to death. Zero intensity. The death model appears when the body without organs repels the organs and lays them aside: no mouth, no tongue, no teeth – to the point of self-mutilation, to the point of suicide. (375)

The reference to horror fiction here is specifically associated with zombies. As the authors claim, the 'only modern myth is the myth of zombies – mortified schizos, good for work, brought back to reason' (382). Catatonics, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, have a place in capitalism as zombified 'schizos' reincorporated into the system's economic rationale. As a subcategory of schizophrenia, catatonia also entails the breakdown of temporality: the isolation of the present from past determinations and future intentions. In opposition to schizophrenia, however, catatonic temporality does not lead to a vivid experience of the present's materiality, but to a paralysis of subjectivity culminating in temporal stasis. Positing catatonia, a negative reaction to schizophrenia's underlying experience of time and

materiality, as capitalism's cultural dominant would assume that there is a limited extent to which the subject can adapt to this fragmented mode of temporality, let alone embrace it. The underlying logic of fragmentation shared by both modes of subjectivity expresses a dynamic understanding of cultural dominant comprised by catatonic and schizophrenic social tendencies. One of the main consequences of positing catatonia as a component of capitalism's cultural dominant is that there is an integral discrepancy between the system's organisation of everyday life experience and the subject's mental abilities to cope with it.

Both McCormack and Noon's texts explore this catatonic version of the future in their dystopian universes. One of the peculiarities of Noon's novel is that its narrative structure, representing the protagonist's diary entries, is explicitly presented as a symptomatic manifestation of the social and supernatural powers shaping its fictional universe. The crew travels across an alternative version of England polluted by a plague referred to as 'the noise' that has spread across the entire globe. Similar to cultural schizophrenia, the noise deterritorializes the population's perception of the world by distorting their experience of temporality, erasing their memories and orientation towards the future. Marlene reflects on how her diary entries are influenced and threatened by the noise: 'as I flick through the book, I see only the mess I have made. Words, sentences, paragraphs, whole pages, scoured with black marks. The noise gets everywhere' (11). In similar terms, the fractured narrative structure McCormack's *Notes from a Coma* is direct expression of its dystopian universe. The novel is constituted as a polyphonic and non-chronological account of the life of its protagonist, JJ O'Malley, a teenager who has decided to partake in the government's use of coma for both punitive and economic purposes. McCormack's novel exhibits how JJ's desire to be induced in a coma is linked to the acute exhaustion resulting from his inability to mourn

his friend Owen: ‘His mind or his soul was chewing itself up, eating itself up back to its substructure’ (51). JJ’s self-induced coma becomes the cultural zeitgeist and dominant form of living in this version of the future: ‘How did we get this tired? When did this fatigue become so total?’ (95). Both novels encourage readers to understand the significance of cultural catatonia as a strategic response to widespread deterritorialization. This narrative exercise entails providing a textual form suited for the catatonic cultural dominant represented within the narrative, that is, a writing that explicitly grapples with the conflict between cultural dominant and subjectivity.

### **Dystopia as a Metaphor for the Present**

In order to analyse the texts individually, it is, however, necessary to address how they might fit into a catatonic literary canon rather than a schizophrenic one. Speculative fiction elements in *Falling out of Cars* and *Notes from a Coma* engage in a metaphorical manner with the cultural dominant of late capitalism. The anamorphic estrangement performed by these dystopian universes, although it defamiliarizes the reader’s perception of the future, does not follow any prognostic purposes. These novels posit uncertainty as the principle of both their narrative world-building and textual fabric. As in Mark Bould’s theory of fantasy, speculative elements in *Falling out of Cars* – the ‘noise’, magical mirrors, photographs that freeze their target – are ‘not only not true to the extratextual world but, by definition, do not seek or pretend to be’ (81). *Notes from a Coma* portrays a future in which comatose patients are able to communicate through televised and livestreamed REMs (82). As China Miéville remarks, it is precisely because ‘Real’ life under capitalism *is a fantasy* that fantasy fiction ‘is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible totality – constructed on

the basis that the impossible is, for this work, *true* – mimics the ‘absurdity’ of capitalist modernity’ (42; emphases in original). The internal realism of these works, nonetheless, maintains a totalizing hermeneutic by which to approach and interrogate history in the context of late capitalism. It is through their internal realism that McCormack and Noon’s novels critically interrogate capitalism’s cultural dominant.

Reading Noon and McCormack to revise Jameson and Deleuze and Guattari makes us reassess contemporary tendencies in late capitalism. Speculative elements like the noise make evident the fact that the use of clinical studies in cultural studies is inherently metaphorical. Schizophrenia, in Wood’s view, has been ‘used and abused’ as a metaphor in cultural theory to describe the everyday experience of the modern and postmodern, standing ‘for a *general* mode of Western late twentieth-century subjectivity’ (184; emphasis in original). This implementation of schizophrenia, nonetheless, does not necessarily ‘render the term virtually empty’ by redefining the ‘disorder as quotidian ... no longer pathological’ and simply serving as ‘illustrative of contemporary subjectivity per se’ (184). On the contrary, these cultural studies elaborate on clinical accounts in order to analyse the relationship between private and social phenomena from the broader scope of capitalism as a shared mode of experience. This does not necessarily imply an appropriation of serious mental illnesses to explain peripheral social tendencies, but, rather, to achieve a better understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and culture as historically contingent dimensions of global capitalism. The metaphorical use of clinical terms emphasises the commonality of these seemingly unrelated phenomena. Likewise, fantastic elements in Noon’s *Falling out of Cars* articulate a visible and substantial shared causality between subjectivity and cultural dominant: an imperceptible link which would otherwise go unnoticed by a mimetic or realist approach.

The dystopian universes depicted in *Notes from a Coma* and *Falling out of Cars* stand as metaphors to speculate on contemporary tendencies at the texts' historical moments of publication. Dystopian fiction, as Andrew Milner (2009) argues, requires for its 'political efficacy an *implied connection with the real*: the whole point of utopia or dystopia is to acquire some positive or negative leverage on the present' (221; emphasis in original). As Matthew Beaumont remarks, '[t]he social vision characteristic of utopian fiction, like that of SF, is the imaginative product of an epoch in which it is at least technically possible to conceptualise society, for all its contradictions, as a totality' (37). The same formula applies to dystopian fiction. By positing a totalizing hermeneutic from which to interpret society as a whole, McCormack and Noon's texts, in spite of not seeking or pretending to represent 'real' life, implicitly interrogate historical conditions at their time of publication. Speculative elements, along with their unreality function, offer condensed and hyperbolic formulations of what a catatonic dominant might look like. Following Beaumont's concept of anamorphosis, these are the anamorphic points from which the 'text looks at us, radically estranging our empirical, social environment and revealing its arbitrariness, its basic fungibility' (36). Positing catatonia as the dominant cultural logic of late capitalism means that there is a limited extent to which the subject can adapt to this chaotic mode of experience. These texts are preoccupied with questions concerning social practice and subjectivity as well as reflecting their connection to historical shifts and events. The anamorphic perspective maintained by these dystopian novels can be interpreted as signalling a new catatonic cultural dominant. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's *Heroes* (2015) is a historical compendium of social tendencies suggesting a new cultural dominant: the sustained erosion of time for sleep to six and a half hours; the total estimate of 350 million people worldwide suffer from depression according to the WHO; the emergence



of variants of suicide, such as the *Hikikomori* in Japan – individuals who have made the decision to sever all relations with the outside world. These phenomena are not only indicative of a departure from postmodern joyous affects but, more importantly, indicative of a fundamental incompatibility between the individual's cognitive apparatus and its ability to cope with social reality.

Catatonia might seem, at first glance, to offer an even more debilitating social perspective in comparison to postmodern accounts of schizophrenia, one asserting the solipsistic and passive resignation of the subject with regards to its own predicament. This solipsism becomes the cultural norm in the future depicted in *Notes from a Coma*: 'Our essential selves now move a couple of paces ahead of us, opening doors and switching on lights, tripping intruder alarms, motion sensors and biometric systems' (66). In similar terms, this passive resignation is what Marlene in *Falling out of Cars* describes as a pulling of events: 'I simply feel the pulling of events. The pull, the pulling. Things are happening to me, one by one, and if only I could grab hold of them, as they happen, make something of them, if only...' (98). Michel Foucault's 'Preface' to *Anti-Oedipus* can be an applicable reproach to this political stance: 'Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force' ('Preface' xiii). However, it is precisely by accounting for this fundamental gap between subjectivity and social experience that catatonia can be interpreted, at the level of political praxis, as a form of resistance against capitalism's deterritorialization logic. *Falling out of Cars* does not embrace capitalism's mode of temporality but articulates an aporetic narrative structure which is constantly at odds with it: 'We all move through the noise, bound by our limits ... scared of a

touch, a word out of place, the sudden desire we can hardly dare to trust. And yet... And yet, this connection' (99). Marlene's diary entries are a resilient yet ineffective attempt to reterritorialize her experience of the world; a situation originating from both her melancholy connection to the memory of her dead daughter and the noise's threat to efface the traces of her existence: 'The pen, the body, and all that flows between, not to murder you but to bring desire to you, Angela' (304). Catatonia is, in this sense, a refusal to fully accept social practice and the way in which experience has been pre-arranged for the subject.

### ***Falling out of Cars: Catatonic Stasis***

*Falling out of Cars* is Noon's sixth novel and, in many regards, follows the themes explored by its preceding work: marginal characters, dystopian landscapes and hallucinatory realms. The novel depicts the journey of ex-journalist Marlene Moore, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, and three other characters: Peacock, a war veteran running from a debt; Henderson, the decisive leader of the group; and Tupelo, a teenager hitchhiking across the country. The plot of Noon's novel is driven by the crew's job to retrieve the shards of a magical mirror that is to be mended by Kingsley – a collector of Victorian oddities obsessed with the metaphysics of reflections. In spite of its crucial role in the narrative, the purpose of this quest is never fully disclosed by either Kingsley or Marlene. All that is revealed is that each of the glass pieces brings strange consequences that vary with each case and owner: 'people are paying for the effect, what it might be. In pain, or in pleasure' (53). Due to the effects of the noise, all specular surfaces and mirrors have become deadly artefacts which heighten the symptoms of the disease by immediately triggering catatonia. As Jon Courtenay Grimwood points out, these mirrors are deeply connected to a collective state of loss in society: 'No sufferer from the virus

may look in a mirror, so looking glasses are painted over or turned to the wall, as though the whole country had gone into high Victorian mourning for a lost way of life' ('Behind the Mirror'). As Andrew Wenaus remarks, in *Falling out of Cars* 'the reader gets the sense that the journey is progressing through a diseased England and, at once, the stages of loss and mourning' ('The Chaotics of Memory' 261). This collective disposition towards loss is closer to that of melancholia rather than mourning. As Freud notes in his essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', whereas in mourning the subject is cognisant of the loss of the object and goes through a piecemeal process in order to accept its absence; in melancholia the loss of the object is internalized in the subject's psyche (205–06). This distinction is crucial to understand the lack of narrative motive driving the novel. Marlene's melancholic attachment to the past is expressed in her writing as a strategic response to the noise breakdown of temporality: '[w]e're losing all the traces, all the moments of the world, one by one. I have to keep writing' (24). While Marlene's narrative is motivated by her attempt to hold on to Angela's memories, this loss is never intended to be worked through a piecemeal process as in the case of mourning. Marlene remains attached to the memory of her daughter. This situation is what provides the novel with its interiority model: the noise's flattening effects on subjectivity are constantly counteracted by the influence of loss and melancholia.

Noon's speculative elements maintain a complex polysemy that overtly rejects any mimetic reference to historical events or states of affairs. Literature's potential, as Noon insists in his Post-Futurist manifesto, is based on the 'liquidity of its medium' and only a polysemic narrative can aim to represent the complexity of our 'fluid society' ('How to Make a Modern Novel'). Realist novels aiming to 'draw a single narrative thread' in this 'complex world' will inevitably fail in this representative attempt ('How to Make a Modern Novel'). The polysemy

and ‘liquidity’ of speculative elements of *Falling out of Cars* articulate the complexity of capitalism’s radical colonisation of all domains of everyday life. Metaphors, such as the ‘noise’ or Kingsley’s mirrors shards, operate in a literalised and non-figurative manner in which meaning is embedded within the totality of the text and its internal realism. Their meaning must be interpreted according to the world-building at work in its narrative space. Speculative fiction narratives, such as *Falling out of Cars*, can be interpreted as following James Briddle’s (2018) call for ‘new metaphors: a metalanguage for describing the world that complex systems have wrought’ (5). Rather than drawing a single narrative thread across this complexity, *Falling out of Cars* presents a catatonic textuality at the verge of breakdown and stasis.

Both catatonia and schizophrenia involve a breakdown of the signifying chain, leading to the isolation of the present from the past and the future. What separates these conditions is the result of this mode of temporality: while in schizophrenia the subject affirmatively embraces the breakdown of the signifying chain by constantly mobilizing her mental energies, in catatonia, the subject experiences the breakdown of the signifying chain as a threat leading to immobility and stasis. While both states involve a certain degree of passiveness, a contemplative experience of the present without any orientation towards future actions, catatonia represents a rejection rather than an affirmation of this mode of temporality. *Falling Out of Cars* similarly represents how this mode of temporality is experienced according to negative affects such as loss of reality, anxiety and solipsistic isolation. Noon’s liquid fiction, as Andrew Wenaus remarks, does not refer to ‘a unified system of knowledge’ and is ‘[m]arked by radical fragmentation of form and narrative strategies that decompose reality’ (‘Fractal Narrative’ 161). This speculative fiction novel remains faithful to the premise of

cultural studies on schizophrenia by expanding its horizon of interpretation to bleaker tendencies and possibilities.

Another contribution that the text makes to cultural studies of schizophrenia is its use of a female narrator. As Woods remarks, most cultural studies about this topic deal, either implicitly or explicitly, with schizophrenic subjectivity as a male-dominated mode of experience (149). Following novels such as Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* (1964) and Marge Pierce's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), the narrative explores how this mode of experience is connected to struggles specific to the social experience of women. The melancholy disposition of Marlene is deeply linked to her state as a grieving single mother and the loss of her only child, Angela, whom she lost due to the noise's pervasive effects and her dubious medical treatment by Lucidity – the company profiting from the noise's effects. As Wenaus argues, 'Noon's use of environmental noise as understood in information theory serves as a metaphor for the emotional state of loss' ('The Chaotics of Memory' 261). Most male characters, such as her father and ex-husband, are nameless and exert their influence through their abandonment. This is the case of the abandonment she experienced as a child caused by her father: 'My father... I do not think of him very often, and when I do it is only as an absence, an unknown object, a shape in the mist... always with his back to me' (75). As her recapitulation of the death of Angela shows, both male characters are defined by their distance and absence:

Angela's body, her lovely coffin, her hair and skin and bones and flesh, all sent to flames. The little church. My mother's face all creased with pain, beyond reach; and the space beside her where my father should have stood. And my husband across the aisle from me, distant. (103)

Noon's narrative displays how, from Marlene's melancholy standpoint, the noise's deterritorialization of time and erasure of past recollections are threatening to what she holds most dear: her memories of Angela. This simple detail is completely dismissed by theoretical accounts of schizophrenia, for whom this breakdown of temporality either entails a liberation of desire (Deleuze and Guattari) or a joyous embracement of the materiality of the present (Jameson). As Val Gough points out, Noon's work displays a 'cyberpunk feminist sensibility' by articulating how 'cyberpunk *can* begin to pursue the radical possibilities of feminist thinking' (126; emphasis in original). *Falling out of Cars* displays how patriarchal structures are integrated into the cultural dominant and are key to achieving a better understanding of Marlene's reaction to the noise's effects.

The text depicts how catatonia emerges from the interplay between capitalism's deterritorialization and reterritorialization components represented by the dominant forces shaping Marlene's narration: the plague called the noise and its corporately-prescribed remedy, Lucidity. In order to provide a minimal degree of coherence to their experience of the world, the characters must consume daily doses of Lucidity – a drug sold by a company profiting from the noise's effects: 'What would I be, without Lucidity? I would not be able to write, I would have no real understanding of words, as they are spoken. The world would fill up with noise and I would be lost, completely' (37). Lucidity combats the noise's deterritorializing symptoms by reterritorializing Marlene's perception of time, that is, by allowing her to save the past and suture the disjointed fragments of the present. However, as Henderson remarks, the company profits from this mode of temporality: 'Fucking bastard company... the money they're making from this' (26). Lucidity reconstitutes the temporality at the verge of extinction by the noise: the past determining her position in the present and the

future orienting her actions. This drug is, despite these ameliorating effects, highly addictive and, as Angela's case shows, its overdose can cause catatonia and, ultimately, death:

They said an overdose brought a veil down, between yourself and the world, a veil so black that nothing could be truly experienced; nothing touched, nothing seen or heard, nothing tasted. They said it closed up the body, sealed it. And this is what they did to Angela, towards the end. Encircled her with darkness. Is this what I now desire, for myself? (38)

In a similar manner to the account of Deleuze and Guattari, catatonia 'gives its model to death' (375). Marlene's narration exhibits how the interplay between the noise and Lucidity brings about this mode of temporality and leads to a paralysis of cognitive abilities. Due to its self-referential narrative structure, the diary operates as both a reflection and means of resistance against the pervasive effects of this mode of temporality. Marlene's diary entries are a conscious effort to reterritorialize and provide a minimal degree of order to the deterritorializing logic of the noise. Lucidity, the drug produced and consumed to counteract these pervasive effects, serves an apparently similar purpose and, rather than being depicted as a cure for the noise, it shows how individuals can reach a catatonic state through radical reterritorialization.

### **Catatonic *Écriture*: Losing the Traces of the World**

*Falling out of Cars* is, in stylistic terms, as Wenaus has noted, with the exception of *Needle in the Groove*, a much more complex and experimental novel than its predecessors ('The Chaotics of Memory' 260). The noise and Lucidity are not only speculative elements dealt with by the plot of the novel, but forces shaping its narrative and bringing about its catatonic

structure. The noise and Lucidity are forces that respectively deterritorialize and reterritorialize Marlene's narration; a stylistic feature that links catatonia's individual and social dimensions as a cultural dominant. Lucidity is what allows Marlene to articulate her narrative account of events, position herself as a person with a fixed identity and organise her temporal experience of the world: 'I have taken advantage of the needle's sweetness, *to hold the day in words*; and the pages I have just written, and the page already written, they seem to make a kind of sense now. I have knowledge of the story once more, *my own story, my place in the story*' (215; emphases in original). As Marlene succumbs to the effects of the noise, her narration becomes increasingly distorted: poetic imagery supersedes narrative purposes; her memories of past narrated events are erased; and, ultimately, she dissociates herself from narrated events: 'I have called her name. My name. My own name. We have the same name' (269). The influence of the noise, as Marlene explains, is textually manifested through mistakes and displacements: 'Mistakes... Pages are ripped, or torn out completely; some discarded, others taped into new positions ... This is the story' (11). This uncertainty between message and receiver is also expressed as a relationship among selected and discarded diary entries: 'I've decided to make a new start ... Many times before I have done this, and always each time the confusion takes over' (11). This last detail also opens the consideration of whether the text is supposed to be Marlene's final version or some of her failed attempts. *Falling out of Cars* thus moves away from schizophrenia's heightening of materiality by a twofold narrative exercise involving the disruption of the text's reliability and represented reality: on the one hand, it puts into question Marlene's account as a message intended by its author; on the other hand, it fractures the narration on a syntagmatic level as an objective sequence of events.



The impossibility of finding recursive patterns is one of the constant motifs of *Falling out of Cars* and constitutes Noon's radicalisation of Marx and Engels' formula: 'All that is solid melts into air' (6). The chaotic temporality of the noise is grappled with throughout Marlene's narration in her attempt to find patterns. This is a widespread social phenomenon in the dystopian universe of the novel. As Tupelo comments, people attempt to find patterns in the radio's static hiss and transmit them as music through Radio Lucy: 'They're just sending out signals, measuring responses. Trying to find some meaning in the chaos. Some pattern or other. That's the plan of it' (110). Likewise, diary entries abound with seemingly insignificant details following no purpose: 'The yellow flowers of the wallpaper, with their silky black centres, the green shoots that twined around each other, the spray of leaves; my fingers, tracing a pathway through the tangles' (185). These descriptions are, nevertheless, strictly aimed at the task of finding patterns in order to amend her experience of the world: 'Where did each stem lead to, from which point, which root, towards which flowers? ... I was searching for the pattern's repetition' (185). The same concern is raised by Marlene in her obsessive classification of reality: 'I have been doing things. I have been measuring. I have been counting' (263). This taxonomic activity is performed through the analysis of insignificant patterns: 'The streetlights, for example; how many along the promenade, how many back again, checking to make sure it is the same number each way' (263). Marlene's quantification of the world is strictly connected to her attempt to preserve her identity as an individual: 'And I have been looking for girls who remind me of other girls... This is called 'deciphering the code'. I have been searching for a face, one certain face hidden amongst the crowd, a woman's face' (263-4). The identity of these strangers can be assumed to be that of Marlene and Angela

respectively: an identification which is the result of an obsessive organisation of experience according to patterns counteracting the effects of the noise.

One of the most radical examples of catatonia's mode of experience is the dissociative episodes suffered by Marlene. Most of Marlene diary entries are narrated by a first-person narrator representing her voice. This narrative unity is disrupted in some passages describing Marlene's actions by a third-person narrator and signalling her dissociation from her own narration: 'I stood up. Marlene stood up. This is what happened. I watched myself standing up. Marlene watched herself standing up' (161). These passages are sometimes foreshadowed by an amnesiac effect concerning her proper name: 'I could not remember my own name. Where had it gone to?' (293). But, also, they might refer to a dissociation between narrative voice and the subject committing the action of writing: 'Words being put there, on the skin with Marlene's own hand doing the writing ... Marlene's realizing that the words, these very words, they will either enliven the girl, or kill her ... Marlene knew that she was failing in the task' (271). This dissociative disorder is experienced according to acute negative affects and, more importantly, is linked to a primordial loss of selfhood as shown in the despair at her inability to save the memories of Angela through her writing. The act of writing is Marlene's attempt to amend her present experience of the world by relating it to her past memories and future goals. In spite of her relentless pursuit, this aim is constantly undermined by the effects of the noise: 'The writing was a poison' (271). This lack of subjective unity is also experienced through her other senses: 'Music. I had not noticed before, this long stream of random notes that almost became a tune, and then becoming lost once more' (251). As her attempt to build a story shows, this predicament is related to an inability to find patterns that might enable her to provide order and relate to her experience of the world as her own.

*Falling out of Cars*, in spite of its dystopian premise, displays in its last pages hints at some form of politics emerging from this chaotic experience of the world. As Marlene reflects, '[i]n these days of chaos, possibilities abound ... These pages of smoke. They have their own conclusion. I can only hope that some other sweeter device or agency will cast its spell upon them, making them clean, and the world alongside' (344). Marlene alludes here to the autonomy of the text from herself as a positive trait: she is not capable of bringing order to her narration, but an external agency or reader perhaps will. Noon himself, in his Post-Futurist Manifesto, remarks that his 'liquid fiction' requires an active reader 'adept at riding the multiple layers of information' of a 'fluid society' ('How to Make a Modern Novel'). Chaos is deemed a fertile ground for possibilities. This final resolution is also reflected in her final diary entry as she abandons the quest to find Kingsley's mirror and, metaphorically, her attempt to draw a narrative thread among the chaos:

Only the photograph. The one thing left to me. How it blossoms in my sight. It burns. Or else clouding over, a murmur of scent arises. In scarlet and blue it cradles; in crimson and gold it may scatter and swirl, unfold, dispersing itself. Now, let these colours cascade. Let these whispers awaken; let these sparkles compose, gleam forth, froth and foam, fizzle, burst, enclose and caress themselves, speaking themselves. Now let this tongue emerge from the light that fell once on a garden, on a child's face, on chemicals. Let the picture overflow from itself, spilling itself. It spills over and spells out the word of itself, the blossom and bloom and perfume of itself. Only the photograph. This word, this word, almost known. Almost spoken. Louder now, softer. I will wait. Now let me wait. (345)

Each element from the photograph gains autonomy from the visual composition represented in it. Synaesthesia mixes visual elements with fragrances and sounds, thus making poetic language supersede any narrative purpose. In opposition to postmodern accounts of schizophrenia, this chaotic perception of the world is not described according to joyous affects nor does it lead to an embracement of the materiality of the present. The materiality of the present is undermined through synaesthesia by disintegrating the composition of Angela's picture. This last diary entry shows the melancholy attachment of Marlene to her memories of Angela in spite of not being able to recognise her face in the picture or even being able to remember her name. Marlene's appeal to wait for the name of her daughter to reveal itself in the future is indicative of this resolution. *Falling out of Cars'* inconclusive ending and its appeal to wait, in this sense, depicts how the catatonic cultural dominant might bring about unforeseeable possibilities for hope and change.

The cultural dominant is not only explored through the dynamics between noise and Lucidity, but also in the quest to find the fragments of Kingsley's magical mirror. The narration constantly alludes to the impossibility of repetition and recursive patterns: mirrors distorting the character's reflections; radios and communication devices transmitting aleatory signals; intertextual references being subverted beyond recognition; and so on. The quest serves as a metaphor standing for the population's need to articulate their experience of the world and the novel's exploration of selfhood and identity. As Kingsley explains to Marlene, in the magical mirror '[n]othing is lost. Reflections cannot make their escape [...] Can you imagine, Marlene? That every face that ever gazed into this glass is kept there, alive, seduced' (36). This living quality is explicitly associated to the Narcissus myth and human self-recognition:

Kingsley had told me a little of the history. How, by looking into a pool of water, man first became aware of himself. He spoke of the myth of Narcissus, and this strange, bittersweet love affair we have with our own image; how all mirrors are only copies of that first pool of water, gathered up, bound in glass (200).

Reflections are presumably trapped within this original mirror along with this faculty of self-recognition, namely the ability of the subject to relate to the flux of experience as her own. This dissociation between subject and mirror image stands for her inability to articulate this link between identity and experience, a predicament which is directly related to the catatonic cultural dominant presented in the text. As with Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, the assumption of the specular image is the moment in which the '*I* is precipitated in a primordial form' into 'the symbolic matrix' and constitutes the basis for following socially-determined identifications – law, morality, sexuality, and so on (76; emphasis in original). The noise's distortion of reflections acts as a literalised metaphor for the shattering of this primordial form of identification: 'the folding vanity mirror [...] The sickened glass [...] which is the one true sign and evidence of life itself' (314). Catatonia emerges as a cultural dominant also due to this impossibility of relating to her experience of the world and atomising the experience of individuals: 'It was the feeling of not being looked at, not now, not by anybody, and not for any time to come and Marlene felt a panic, a sadness' (218). The quest to find the pieces for Kingsley's broken mirror, in this sense, works as a metaphor for her ultimately impotent attempts at saving her memories, the identity related to her past and her aim restore all of this through her narration.

### **Catatonic Capitalism: Sleepwalkers and The Republic of Leisure**

Lucidity is the means by which capital manifests itself in the social landscape and profits from the catatonic mode of temporality. Despite having pervasive effects on the population's experience of the world, the catatonic temporality does not interfere with the circulation of capital and is a fundamental part in its mode of production. *Falling out of Cars* establishes an asymmetrical relation between the precarious temporality at play in the psychic sphere and the mechanical capitalist regulation of time in the social field:

Very few of the stores had proper names to them. They were called things like BUTCHER, or else BAKER, or even PRODUCT. There was more than one shop called, quite simply, SHOP ... The town hall clock was hidden behind tarpaulin... And then standing near a glass-fronted booth called DRUG, I watched an orderly queue of people having their night's supply issued to them ... The company's eye beamed down. (40)

This nonsensical Carrollian scenery is a hyperbolic representation of commodity fetishism according to which the material specificity of things is debased according to their exchange-value. As the PRODUCT, SHOP and DRUG signs show, the market does not even need to refer to the specific products and commodities it is aiming to sell to consumers. Lucidity is granted a central position among the scenery and presides over all of the other shops from above. Despite the town hall clock not being at work (like every other device capable of tracking time due to the noise's effects), the population are orderly in waiting for their nightly supply of Lucidity to carry on with their lives, representing the drug's fundamental role in the functioning of productive forces and social relations in the mode of production. The catatonic temporality experienced by individuals, as Tupelo comments, does not interfere with

capitalism's organisation of labour time: 'All these people desperate to carry on with their work, even with the noise levels rising' (98). On the contrary, *Falling out of Cars* shows how the complete disarticulation of the population's perception of time, and the despair emerging from it, does not lead to social anarchy, but to an anxious need for reterritorialization and stability. In this sense, Noon's novel follows Marx's claim that '[t]he true barrier to capitalist production is *capital itself*' and that 'production is production only for *capital*' (*Capital III* 358; emphases in original). Noon's dystopian universe is a radicalization of this proposal by showing how mental illness is profited from by Lucidity and the capitalist production: the system operates at the expense of and due to the population's cognitive instability.

*Falling out of Cars* not only represents how the catatonic temporality enacted by the noise and Lucidity fits into the dynamics of capitalist production but also how it influences the sphere of consumption. This predicament is represented in the Republic of Leisure episode, where the crew stops to fill up the tank of their car. The link between leisure and consumption is established at the entrance to the location, where a security guard informs them that the place is designed as 'a leisure complex' where 'only the finest of leisure activities take place' (127). The language deployed by the guard, his cheerful voice and good manners, resembling the corporate demeanour of advertisements, are, as Peacock explains, a result of Lucidity overdose (128). Within the leisure complex, residents consume and overdose on the cheapest variety of Lucidity (128). Rather than becoming more conscious about the world surrounding them, addicts become sleepwalkers, as Peacock refers to them: 'The cold trance; too much Lucidity. The mind just lifted up and sharpened so much, it could do nothing more than contemplate some far-off realm, and the world became a place that other people lived in' (130). Sleepwalkers follow Marx and Engels' logic of labour exploitation in which the worker

‘becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him’ (12). This complete state of dissociation is what Tupelo suspects is the future of the world: ‘Is this really the future, Marlene? Really? People doped up, all the hours of everyday of the year’ (135). This state of dissociation, in spite of its negative connotations, is actually contemplated as a tempting fate by Marlene:

I needed some time. I wanted to let the bad day grow steady, inside. And the idea came to me then. Maybe I could just walk away? Maybe I could just walk into the crowd here at this place and take all the cheap Lucy I could find. That would be good. Memories would die. Maybe I could lose myself this way, become folded and bound and lost for ever. (133)

Contrary to Deleuze and Guattari’s schizo revolutionary, the deterritorialization of desire here leads to a passive complicity with the capitalist mode of production. *Falling out of Cars* depicts a world in which laws are no longer enacted by authority figures and permissiveness has spread across the globe. Despite this seemingly emancipatory effect, leisure is completely assimilated by the mode of production to the point in which subjects, like Sleepwalkers, lose their individuality. Catatonic temporality does not only involve the contemplation of life as a sequence of unrelated moments, but, ultimately, the complete withdrawal from life, leaving the body to serve as an organ for the reproduction of capital as the guards and sleepwalkers: producing and consuming.

Sleepwalkers, similar to the zombified catatonic schizos described by Deleuze and Guattari, are crucial to the production of capital in its most marginal and precarious economic sectors. Sleepwalkers consume the cheapest variety of Lucidity and are described as contemplating ‘some far-off realm’ distanced from the world where the rest of the people live



(130). This radical social stagnation is symbolised at the beginning of the chapter by the white dove printed on the Republic of Leisure flags (129). The symbol of peace and Christianity, under this context, operates as a metaphorical reformulation of the Marxist phrase ‘religion is the opium of the masses.’ The opium in this context, however, is Lucidity and its consumption for leisure works, as in the Marxist formula, as a means to alienate the population from objective conditions of existence. Lucidity nullifies any possibility of violent revolt as is portrayed in the disaffected fight between two sleepwalkers among the market stalls: ‘A fight was going on between two middle-aged men and nobody paid it much attention. It was a tired and lazy fight without any real violence to it’ (129). Catatonic workers are detached from reality and described as absentminded and affectless, and are completely unaware of the exploitation of their labour: ‘How long have you been here?’ I asked ... ‘I don’t rightly know, madam’ (133). The catatonic mode of experience nullifies any insurrection or agency on the part of the subject, who is unable to orient her actions towards the future, let alone relate to objective conditions of existence. In spite of these symptoms, capital is circulating through all its different stages: commodities are being sold in market stalls, workers are being exploited for their social labour, leisure is integrated into the sphere of production and consumption. Catatonic workers and sleepwalking consumers are integral parts of capitalist production.

*Falling out of Cars* forces readers to reassess historical tendencies in global capitalism and poses multiple challenges to cultural studies of postmodern schizophrenia. The novel shows an alternative to postmodern accounts of cultural schizophrenia by showing how capitalism’s organisation of social practice is experienced according to negative affects – melancholy, dissociation, anxiety and disorientation. By positing catatonia as the cultural logic of late capitalism in its dystopian future, the text allows for a historical understanding of

subjectivity as a social phenomenon. This dystopian future is closely connected to material developments in the mode of production as represented in the Lucidity industry and its hyper-commodified narrative space. The centrality of Lucidity in the narrative space involves the premise that there is a fundamental incompatibility and gap between capitalist social practice and the cognitive abilities of the subject to cope with it. This catatonic future illustrates the point that capitalism can profit from widespread mental instability as presented in the transversal use of Lucidity in capital production – its reterritorialising role in social labour as exemplified by catatonic workers; its consumption as commodity for leisure by sleepwalkers; and its generation of profit in the pharmacological industry. Fantastic elements, such as the noise and the mirror shards, are also crucial and serve as metaphors rendering visible this mode of experience and its impact on subjectivity – memories, identity and desire.

While catatonia might seem to be an even more debilitating position than schizophrenia, it implies the idea that individuals cannot be assimilated into the mode of production according to joyous affects. The melancholy experienced by Marlene and expressed in the narrative fabric of the text is a manifest reflection of this aporetic struggle between subject and social reality. This catatonic disjunction between individual and social reality is explored in a productive manner throughout the narrative by showing how the subject experiences and reacts to it. Catatonia is both a reflection and reaction against this social discontent and can be the starting point for revolutionary praxis. As Marlene remarks in the last pages of the text, ‘[i]n these days of chaos, possibilities abound’ (344).

***Notes from a Coma: Comatose Future and Catatonic Zeitgeist***

Mike McCormack, like Jeff Noon, is an adamant proponent of experimental narrative fiction. As he contentiously claims to fellow Irish writers, '[w]e have to find some way of telling a story... experiment. Experiment or die' ('Experiment or Die' 98). McCormack is deeply interested in Ireland's literary tradition, whose uniqueness and singularity, according to him, does not lie in its ability for storytelling but experimentation: '[w]e have an experimental tradition here. For me there are three Olympian figures, our Holy Trinity: Joyce, Beckett, and Flann. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost' ('Experiment or Die' 95). This experimental ethos is reflected in his own narrative corpus consisting of two collections of short-stories: *Getting It in the Head* (1996) and *Forensic Songs* (2012); and three novels: *Crowe's Requiem* (1998), *Notes from a Coma* (2005) and *Solar Bones* (2016). This latter novel granted McCormack the Goldsmith Prize and the 'Novel of the Year' in the Irish Book Awards. McCormack's experimental writing is closely tied to the issues thematized in his books. The author's implementation of experimental writing techniques is often intertwined with speculative fiction tropes and topics, most predominantly, the influence of technology on human lives and their cognitive abilities ('Experiment or Die' 94). In McCormack's view, the relationship between humans and technology cannot be assessed in utilitarian terms ('Experiment or Die' 94).

*Notes from a Coma* is McCormack's second novel and is described by him as a strange hybrid of John McGahern and Philip K. Dick if 'they were commissioned to collaborate on an episode of the X-Files' ('Experiment or die' 95). Val Nolan praised the novel in the *Irish Times* and claimed that it was possibly 'the first great Irish novel of the twenty-first century' (par. 2). McCormack is, however, mostly recognised for his subsequent single-sentence novel: *Solar Bones*. Nonetheless, as Nolan claims, the origins of his 'long-term experimental

tendencies' are clearly visible in 'the prescient and intentionally fractured *Notes from a Coma*' (par. 2). The text consists in a polyphonic account of JJ O'Malley by the people who knew him before he decided to volunteer for *Somnos* – a government project considering the use of coma within the prison system in Ireland. The polyphonic format of the novel renders a kaleidoscopic portrait of JJ: a Romanian orphan adopted by Anthony O'Malley, a farmer from the small town of Louisburgh. JJ becomes a cultural icon whose active decision to partake in *Somnos* captures the imagination of a whole generation: 'Everyone has a theory about JJ, not just here in this town but throughout the whole country. You know yourself all the think pieces and editorials that have been written about him' (46). As all five narrators point out, JJ is a prodigious student tormented by his constantly ruminating mind, even to the extent of being afraid of it 'chewing itself up [and] eating itself back to its own substructure' (51). After the death of his childhood friend, Owen, JJ suffers a severe mental breakdown which triggers his decision to volunteer for *Somnos*: the ship located in Killary where the coma experiments take place. As the five volunteers for the project are transformed into viral celebrities, *Somnos* gradually becomes a global focal point of interest for capitalist nations interested in exploiting the event for their economic and political reasons.

The novel is meaningfully set in Louisburgh, a small rural town located in the North West of Ireland, where JJ O'Malley grows up and the central narrative takes place. This location is pertinent to cultural studies of postmodern schizophrenia as it introduces a rural dimension which is often neglected due to their usual focus on central points of capitalism's global mode of production. While rural Ireland is not a peripheral point of capitalist production and modernity, it nonetheless occupies a semi-peripheral position with regards to the urban locations dealt by studies on schizophrenic writing – the global scope of cyberpunk writing,

the London of Ballard's *Crash* or Europe in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. McCormack explores how capitalism's cultural dominant exerts its influence and is experienced by individuals in seemingly insular contexts detached from the system's focal points of attention. JJ's predicament, as McCormack remarks, is profoundly defined by a 'legal, political, technological, and familial complex of forces. They pull and drag at him, and they define him' (91). According to McCormack, his decision to focus on a small town of Ireland rather than one of its metropolitan areas is an effort to demystify the usual platitudes concerning rural life: 'Sure, every rural community has its *Twin Peaks* moods and moments, but by and large rural Ireland is a place where decent people live decent lives. That's the most original idea in the book really' (93). The external forces presented in the novel demonstrate the influence of capitalism in zones which are seemingly less connected to its global mode of production. *Notes from a Coma* exemplifies the all-encompassing impact of capitalism even in locations where it is less expected to have an influence as a cultural dominant.

*Notes from a Coma* is a clear representation of the author's avant-garde tendencies and admiration for the Irish experimental tradition. Like Joyce's *Ulysses*, which McCormack refers to as the great novel of social overview ('Experiment or Die' 97), *Notes from a Coma* is a polyphonic novel consisting of multiple voices reconstructing who JJ was as a person and their interpretation of the events that led him to volunteer for the *Somnos* project. JJ's initials further emphasise the link between James Joyce's disjointed prose and JJ's hyperactive and erratic mind. The novel has five narrators – Anthony O'Malley, Sarah Nevin, Frank Lally, Gerard Fallon and Kevin Barret TD – which change their respective role between chapters. Each narrator attempts to recollect their respective memories and impressions of JJ. The present context of their narration remains enigmatic for most of the novel. Nonetheless, it is

hinted at the end of the novel that each chapter might represent excerpts from interviews with each character: ‘And that’s it. I’ve said all I’ve wanted to say, I’m ready now. So if you’ll excuse me, it is getting near the time and I have to go’ (198). This hypothesis is also supported by the fact that Anthony O’Malley addresses a ‘you’ who is physically present in his space of narration: ‘he’d sit there where you’re sitting now, in that very chair’ (5). The narrative temporality of the novel is hindered by the fact that the chapters do not follow a chronological order and narrators alternate between their recollections of JJ and present experiences. However, the most singular and experimental aspect of the novel is what is referred to within the narration as the ‘Event Horizon’ – a text running parallel to the ‘main’ one in a footnote format. This parallel narration, in spite of being displayed as a footnote, follows an entirely different purpose. As McCormack himself contentiously remarks: ‘I’ll go to my grave roaring *they’re not fucking footnotes!*’ (‘Experiment or Die’ 93; emphasis in original). The omnipresent narrator of the Event Horizons does not possess a clear identity and, for the most part, reports relevant events concerning the development of the *Somnos* project in a documentary fashion.

The chronological structure of *Notes from a Coma* is fractured in several different ways. While the main text follows a mnemonic pattern depicting the narrator’s recollection of past events linked to the memory JJ O’Malley, the Event Horizon assumes an impersonal tone and omnipresent perspective dealing with the wider societal scope of the historical shifts presented in the novel. This disjunction between narrated time and time of narration produces a sense of uncertainty which is consciously thematised by the characters in their attempt to reconstruct JJ as a person: ‘that someone’s life was such a fragile weave of connections and interlocking stories was news to me... I was not telling him his story but mine also’ (139).

The fractured mnemonic structure is further emphasised by the polyphonic quality of the novel. The characters' recollections are not organised according to a chronological order and, in many instances, are disrupted by considerable back-and-forth time leaps within the same chapter. *Notes from a Coma* maintains a fractured temporal structure including multiple narrators, time leaps and non-linear chronology. The Event Horizon is, nonetheless, the central element providing a form to the catatonic *écriture* of the novel. Like the polyphonic narration developed by the characters, the Event Horizon does not follow a chronological order and, due to its wider historical scope, encompasses a timeline extending beyond the past and present presented in the regular text. In addition to this, in spite of running parallel to the main narration, the Event Horizon does not position itself in the same temporal space as the main narrative and deals, for the most part, with completely unrelated topics. This disjunction and dissonance between both narrations is what constitutes the chaotic temporal structure of *Notes from a Coma*. The text provides a narrative form to the widespread exhaustion and disorientation experienced by the population as a cultural dominant.

### **Catatonic Narrative Structure**

How is the novel's narrative structure more aptly described according to the concept of catatonia rather than schizophrenia? In which way does *Notes from a Coma* relate this experience of time to the conditions at play in the late capitalist landscape represented in it? McCormack's novel, similar to *Falling out of Cars*, follows a catatonic temporal structure comprising a negative reaction to an underlying schizophrenic experience of time. In the case of McCormack's text, catatonic writing is presented as a state of disorientation caused by indistinct temporal layers and manifold time leaps. The novel expresses a similar reaction to

what Deleuze and Guattari describe as an inability to impose order, at the level of thinking, on a chaotic experience of the world:

We require just a little order to protect us from chaos. Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into others that we no longer master. There are infinite *variabilities*, the appearing and disappearing of which coincide. They are infinite speeds that blend into the immobility of the colorless and silent nothingness they traverse, without nature or thought. (*What is Philosophy?* 201)

This could be interpreted as the basis for JJ's predicament and the widespread social desire for coma in the future portrayed by McCormack's text. Like Deleuze and Guattari's concept of catatonia, coma also stands as a model for death which expresses itself as a force repelling the subject's own desire and drives. From the perspective of a cultural dominant, coma expresses the same underlying logic of catatonia as negative reaction to an overwhelming and fractured experience of the world. Coma is the expression of an underlying state of disorientation and disorientation that becomes the cultural zeitgeist of McCormack's dystopian novel. In a similar way to Jeff Noon's *Falling out of Cars*, *Notes from a Coma* does not only deploy these narrative techniques on a purely aesthetic basis, but explicitly links them to the objective conditions of the world they aim to represent. This inability to articulate a minimal degree of order over chaos is not exclusive to JJ as an individual, but becomes the cultural zeitgeist of the novel. Both novels seem to hint at catatonia as the dominant logic leading to capitalism's terminal stage. In spite of these similarities, McCormack's catatonic temporality does not implement the same narrative mechanisms and strategies as Noon's text: the cultural coma depicted in the novel is expressed through polyphony, overlapped timelines



and overlaid narrations. In addition to this, McCormack's novel reaches different conclusions concerning the place of individuals within late capitalism as a mode of production and social life. In opposition to Noon's novel, *Notes from a Coma*'s dystopian future is predominantly predicated on technological advances which bringing about a fusion between man and machinery. The catatonic temporality of the novel emerges as the cultural logic underlying this transformation, namely, as the passive assimilation of the individual to the system's economic rationale whose proper functioning no longer requires active human agency.

McCormack's novel is temporally fractured through the chaotic arrangement of its chapters and the layering of simultaneous narrations. This technique does not lead to an intense appreciation of the present's materiality, as in the case of Jameson's description of schizophrenic *écriture*, but to a catatonic state of disorientation caused by indistinct and scrambled timelines. This procedure is at play from the very outset of the novel, signalled by an isolated Event Horizon entry describing the ultimate fate of, presumably, JJ O'Malley: '... because he is now both stimulus and qualia. His name, blurring through the nation's print and electronic media, is also one of those synapses at which the nation's consciousness forms itself' (1). The first sentence of the novel begins with an ellipsis followed by a subordinating conjunction (because) lacking its main clause. Moreover, the identity of the character the text is alluding to remains a mystery throughout the entire chapter, thus further stressing the sense of uncertainty expressed both at the level of narrative form and narrated events. This fractured narrative structure is maintained throughout the rest of the novel. For instance, Chapters 2 and 3, narrated by Frank Lally and Anthony O'Malley respectively, present radical temporal shifts: first, a regressive time leap to the time before JJ was born and, secondly, to the events

after Owen's death. In addition to this, the text does not offer any guiding contextualization to indicate any type of connection between these events.

Each chapter is internally and temporally fractured into the past time of recollected event and the present space of narration. Frank Lally's narration is a clear example of this fractured temporality. Frank comments to, presumably, an interviewer that he 'drives out once a week to the Killary to look out at that ship [the *Somnos*]' and tries 'to picture JJ out there on that ship' (33). After this transition into his present context of narration, Lally immediately jumps back into the narrated time of his memories. This mnemonic disjunction is not merely a formal exercise but also a central theme to the memorialization of JJ as a person through the view of others. This is explicitly thematized by Sarah Nevin, JJ's girlfriend, alluding to her boyfriend's amnesia after his mental collapse before deciding to partake in the *Somnos* project: 'And that's how it was with us during these days, how we put him back together, piece by piece' (138-9). JJ's amnesia foreshadows his desire for coma but also reflects the catatonic writing displayed in the narrative fabric of the novel.

Like Noon's *Falling out of Cars*, McCormack's text is both presented as a reflection and means of resistance against the culture industry aiming to convert JJ into a cultural icon in order to popularise the *Somnos* project: 'In spite of his presence all over the place people have forgotten JJ – the flesh-and-blood person has disappeared ... But he's not some T-shirt slogan or discussion topic' (196). In this sense, *Notes from a Coma* shares with *Falling Out of Cars* its melancholy disposition – a relentless attachment to a loss – informing its narrative structure and displaying an interiority of affects which is absent in schizophrenic writing. Not only is the narrative structured around this loss but JJ's decision to partake in the *Somnos* is itself a reaction to the traumatic event of Owen's death: 'If you ask me JJ's coma began after

Owen died, over three years ago now; not three months as everyone thinks' (87). Owen's death occurs immediately after being rejected by his ex-girlfriend and seeking JJ's advice. JJ's reaction is, however, is another unproductive 'mindrot' which further frustrates Owen; a situation in which he decides to keep drinking on his own until passing out and dying from an ethylic coma. JJ's decision is a consequence of the internalisation of this loss due to his feelings of guilt associated with this best friend's death: 'He'd argued his best friend to death, that's how he saw it ... This was an idea which struck to the very core of JJ' (81). Memorialization is the narrative response to oppose JJ's assimilation into the culture industry but, also, a reflection of the impossibility of bringing him back to life and fully accounting for his life as a person. Reconstructing JJ the person as opposed to his media persona through the recollection of his memories is a collective effort in which the five narrators partake. JJ's coma is, in this sense, combated throughout the text by providing a kaleidoscopic account of him as a flesh-and-blood person: multiple views of him are laid out in the novel to combat the silence represented in his coma and absent voice during the novel.

The main contributing factor to the catatonic temporality of the novel is the Event Horizon and represents the main source of estrangement in McCormack's speculative fiction text. This parallel narrative runs throughout the whole novel and is narrated by an omnipresent narrator whose presumably non-human identity is never disclosed by the text. The language deployed by the Event Horizon maintains an impassive tone which reports and documents the effects of the *Somnos* from a wider social and cultural perspective. One of the entries of the Event Horizon provides some hints concerning the purpose of this parallel narrative and its relation to the *Somnos* project:

Too narrowly conceived as a notional boundary beyond which it is impossible to speak or relay information, the Event Horizon is more fully understood as a structure determined within and without the nature of the *Somnos* project itself, a structure which functions as an endo- and exoskeletal support which upholds and inscribes the project as a site within which identities as ongoing processes morph and shift through spatio-temporal planes. And while it is itself both speculative and conjectural and its arrhythmic moods are ever likely to falter and decay, it is an interweaving of shards and fragments linked by suggestive coherence we are compelled to reason with. (25-26; emphasis in original)

The Event Horizon is explicitly described as being an intrinsic component and expression of the *Somnos* project, determining its underlying structure and registering its development. In spite of the obscure language used by the narrator, the Event Horizon does seem to elucidate and mirror the overall narrative structure of the novel. Similar to the novel's narrative structure, the Event Horizon is described as a polyphonic site where identities shift through spatial and temporal coordinates. However, the Event Horizon clearly states that its narrative does not offer an entirely reliable socially-encompassing perspective on historical events: 'as an attempt to describe a definitive circumference around any singularity it will always fall short as a final statement of containment' (26). Likewise, the arrhythmic nature of the Event Horizon is linked to its overall arrangement: a non-chronological structure maintaining no discernible underlying principle or coherent unity. Instead of offering a distinct social explanation or cause for the events taking place in the main narrative, the Event Horizon further deterritorializes the temporality of the novel. The catatonic temporality of the novel could be characterised according to similar criteria to the one enumerated here: it relativizes

the identity of the characters by adding multiple perspectives and temporal layers following no apparent chronological order.

What is the relationship between the *Somnos* project and the novel's catatonic temporality? *Notes from a Coma* establishes a link between the aims of the *Somnos* project and the catatonic mode of temporality emerging from the sum of its narrative lines: the conventional chapters and the Event Horizon. The intricate intertwinement of narrative timelines developed in the text, as the Event Horizon hints, could be an attempt to exhaust all possible perspectives from which to interpret the *Somnos*:

These screens and monitors, these imaging technologies and recursive information loops – what's aspired to here is a God's-eye view of the phenomena, from within and without, with all space-time dimensions comprehended in its view. Cupped in this hold, past, present and future, with all their shadings, have vectored here from all angles, stressing the ongoing present beyond its narrow linearity. The present continuous is unable to encompass the exact parameters of the phenomena. What's needed here, among other things, is a new tense. (83)

This passage could be interpreted as a metafictional exposition of the novel's treatment of narrative temporality. The novel's temporal structure follows a similar aim and purpose to the monitoring devices of the passage: they both aspire to achieve a complete and non-reductive view of the *Somnos* project. Likewise, the multi-layered temporality of *Notes from a Coma* attempts to coalesce past, present and future simultaneously through the fractured combination of the Event Horizon and the main narration. This is the reason why the temporal structure must take recourse to a presumably non-human narrator, the Event Horizon, since human perception of time is deemed insufficient for the task. The narration, however, does not render

a pristine depiction or causality to the *Somnos* project, but, rather, the impossibility of the task itself: a new tense does not emerge, only a sense of disorientation. The catatonic temporality of the novel emerges as the unsuccessful outcome of this radical metafictional task, culminating in an unclear temporal structure, which only exposes the insufficiency of human perception to interpret the complexity of the narrated events.

The catatonic character of the narration is also linked to the logic leading to JJ O' Malley's coma. *Notes from a Coma* exposes a radical self-reflexive logic from the very start of the novel by establishing a link between JJ's coma and the nation's consciousness: 'his suspended mind is one of those loci at which the nation's consciousness knows itself and knows itself knowing itself' (1). This parallel is developed by the narrative fabric of the novel, since JJ's mental breakdown follows a similar self-reflexive and destructive logic to the monitoring devices of the *Somnos*. As Gerard Fallon – one of JJ's high-school teachers – points out, his problem was this self-reflexive tendency to demarcate and try to know his place in the universe:

JJ's problem was that he saw signs everywhere, he made too many connections, this was his difficulty ... He saw himself free in the universe... in the negative [sense] of being cast out without love or grace ... There was this want in him, this hunger... I've never come across someone with such a coherent sense of himself in the universe ... But if that's confusion then it's the most reasoned and clear-sighted confusion I've ever come across. (46-7)

This issue is formulated by JJ himself as an internal exhaustion resulting from being in his own mind: 'These thoughts... these dreams, this constant mind-racing and mindrot... now this ghost. It just wears me down. A break from myself, that's what I need. Just take myself

off somewhere and forget myself for a while' (165). This destructive self-reflexivity is what triggers his mental breakdown and culminates in the conforming psychopathological states of amnesia, coma and catatonia. As Sarah remarks alluding to JJ's latter convalescence period: 'This stillness came over him, he barely moved' (151). Such exhaustion from his own self-reflexive mind is what he himself manifests in his application letter to the *Somnos* project: '*I need to take my mind off my mind*' (151; emphasis in original). As in Deleuze and Guattari's notion of catatonia, the rapid connections of the mind and transitions between states do not lead to any productive outcome but to exhaustion and stasis: a total paralysis of the mind's cognitive abilities. In this sense, the narrative line consisting in JJ's life exposes the cultural logic behind the temporal structure of the novel. Both of these elements emerge as self-reflexive failed attempts to encompass all possible aspects of their own conditions of existence.

The drug-induced coma experienced by the volunteers of the *Somnos* is the focal point of a cultural zeitgeist shaping its social and political landscape. This governmental experiment has implications beyond its initial scope as a new method of incarceration. As the Event Horizon reveals, the *Somnos*, due to its widespread cultural impact, consolidates itself along with the Twin Towers collapse 'amid the gathering iconography of twenty-first-century anxiety' (31). McCormack's novel exhibits how the five volunteers for the project become assimilated as viral celebrities into the spectacle and entertainment industries: JJ's interviews are sampled in techno tracks; the hair of the Swedish metalhead volunteer is sold for £1000 on eBay; and each of the coma patients' images is broadcasted and monitored to the public through the Internet (195, 175, 37). Not only is the project commodified through multiple mechanisms, but it also embodies and gives expression to genuine emotions in the population:

‘There is real concern, a genuine anxiety beyond the compassion flash fires of the latest crisis de jour’ (1). *Notes from a Coma* depicts how the *Somnos* patients desperately aim to communicate the acute anxiety of their predicament: ‘But there is an anxiety about them, something imploring in the way they just stand there. It is as if they want to tell us something but are unable to cross the divide between potentiality and action’ (82). As the narration unfolds, the *Somnos* becomes a pivotal cultural event expressing the genuine concerns of a generation, which are subsequently exploited by the entertainment industry.

*Notes from a Coma* reveals how the coma Zeitgeist is also the triggering factors of a new catatonic mode of experience in which human agency is completely obliterated by the mode of production it has created. This bleak image of the future is represented in one of the entries of the Event Horizon:

One of the places where we’ve got ahead of ourselves, taken leave of our senses. Our essential selves now move a couple of paces ahead of us, opening doors and switching on lights, tripping intruder alarms, motion sensors and biometric systems... our souls clearing a path through the technosphere for the trailing golem of ourselves. This is how we’ve become attenuated, how the borders of our identities are drawn out, vitiating our core selves; this is how we’ve found ourselves besides ourselves. One day we might come completely unhinged. Somewhere beyond arm’s reach our soul will turn around and wave goodbye to us before moving off and pulling the door behind it, leaving us here, under the fluorescent lights, with nothing to lean on save these vigilant machines with their unnerving testimonies. (66-7)

This enigmatic Even Horizon is presumably chronologically posited further ahead than the events taking place in the main narrative timeline. Cultural catatonia, as expressed in the



comatose population, appears to be the dominant mode of experience in this version of the future. In this dystopian realm, the technology supporting the operation of the system has completely supplanted any sense of human agency. The passage constantly insists on a dissociated experience of time in which subjects have completely lost the capacity to orient their actions towards the future or act in any autonomous way. This catatonic experience of time involves the passive contemplation of actions as they are manipulated by an external agency which is, presumably, central to the operation of the mode of production. This catatonic dissociation, as the Event Horizon suggests, implies the absolute assimilation of the subject as an operational and functional component in the mode of production. Catatonia in *Notes from a Coma*, as a temporal structure, is depicted as the final and terminal stage of late capitalism: a situation in which the system no longer depends on the somewhat autonomous activity of individuals in order to function.

In spite of being a focal point of *Notes from a Coma*, JJ O'Malley's personal afflictions are not exclusive to his upbringing or mental disposition. The narration constantly alludes to the wider societal and cultural connotation of JJ's coma and the *Somnos* project. This cultural fascination with coma is signalled by the unprecedented displacement of sex as the most browsed term in the Web: 'Only once before this has ever happened – during the second Iraqi conflict when 'war' became the dominant search tag' (152). At the same time, JJ's iconic phrase used for his application to the *Somnos* project becomes a viral sensation: 'Only yesterday I saw someone wearing *I Want To Take My Mind Off My Mind* on a cheap knock-off. It was only a matter of time I suppose before wilful mindlessness became the season's Zeitgeist' (195). However, despite the ironic and dismissive character of these remarks, they put emphasis on the wider cultural logic generated by the comas and their respective

fascination causing fervour in the public. In the dystopian future depicted in the Event Horizon, coma has become the dominant form of living and expression of an underlying assimilation of individuals into the system's axiomatic rationale: 'There's this downturn across the land, all indicators flatlining across charts and screens, a blank refusal to respond to old stimuli. Somehow the coma has leaked out though the security parameter, found its way into the ambience of the nation and once more become the national idiom' (184). McCormack's text does not only posit coma as a cultural zeitgeist which initially expressing the anxieties of a whole generation but, also, as the underlying logic of the system's axiomatic rationale flattening the affects of the entire nation. *Notes from a Coma* depicts how the comatose patients desperately aim to communicate the acute anxiety of their predicament through broadcasted REMs: 'But there is an anxiety about them, something imploring in the way they just stand there. It is as if they want to tell us something but are unable to cross the divide between potentiality and action' (82). This flattening of subjectivity, in opposition to postmodern accounts of cultural schizophrenia, is thus experienced according to negative affects which are anxiously grappled by the comatose patients. The novel's narrative fabric is itself a manifestation of this catatonic cultural dominant: an ultimately failed attempt to render understandable the individual's experience of the world through a fractured narrative structure.

In spite of its final repercussions, the *Somnos* is initiated as a practical affair following a purely economic rationale. This is a point constantly reiterated by Kevin Barret TD, the mastermind behind the project, who declares after reading through the outline of the project: 'It's all politics, a job of work to be done and the sooner you get over your astonishment the sooner you can do something about it' (61). To this statement he adds, '[a] penal experiment

in a county with the lowest crime figures in the country and the country itself with the lowest crime figures in the EU – this was the paradox which had to be sold to the electorate’ (61). The motivation sustaining his drive of ‘getting things done’ at any cost is purely economic. As the Event Horizon reveals,

[s]omewhere there’s a formula justifying all this... fixed as part of the greater national index in some ideational realm within the here and now, a place where abstracts like guilt and atonement are assigned certain values and reckoned as a percentage of all public spending ... And this being an age of numeracy we’ve watched coefficients become serial offenders, outstripping the population growth and available resources, gaining on that siren-ringing cut-off where cost analysis has drawn a line and said this far and no further ... The conclusions are obvious: the old options are exhausted. (161)

This economic imperative is developed through the axiomatic rationale assigning quantitative values to concepts such as guilt and atonement. These are some of the pivotal concepts in the ethical implications of the *Somnos* application, according to the total of economic spending and utmost productivity. Any chance of a political debate surrounding the ethical implications of the project are denied from the outset by this axiomatic rationale reducing qualitative values to quantitative ones in the sphere of economic production. Even the apparent political adversaries of the project are secretly part of it: ‘Appealing to the nation’s scruples was a smokescreen, covering the fact that they themselves are largely in agreement with the project’ (189). In this sense, *Notes from a Coma* represents a narrative space completely governed and colonised by an economic rationale, in which politics is only a means to sustain and facilitate the functioning of the system, namely through quantitative values fostering the mode of production.

*Notes from a Coma* also displays how the axiomatic rationale driving the *Somnos* project is related to the complex meaning of coma developed in its narrative. Besides being a cultural Zeitgeist representing the anxieties of a generation, the coma also embodies and represents the human implication and collateral result of this deterritorialising axiomatic rationale reducing every type of value to quantitative axioms. The widespread cultural desire for catatonia is explicitly linked, in the Event Horizon, to this mode of thinking society and the individual's place in it. Despite being publicised as a 'heroic scientific enterprise' in the domain of neurological sciences, the project 'had in fact its origins in an economic imperative. Fearing the rising cost of neurological diseases, degenerative disorders ... The whole project was predicated on the suspicion of the individual as a potential economic liability' (156). This point entails that the catatonic temporal structure of the novel, as well as its representation of catatonia or coma as desired states by the population, is predicated on this reduction of individuals according to economic criteria and reaching the conclusion of their liability for this mode of production. McCormack's novel, thus, represents how this widespread desire for mindlessness and coma is an outcome of this treatment of individuals according to quantitative and economic criteria. This is a point made by JJ at the beginning of the novel when taunting his father for adopting him and buying him from an orphanage: 'And what was the asking price, Anthony, what was the reserve? Was it stamped across my forehead or was there a little tag dangling from my toe?' (6). He mockingly and bitterly adds, 'a seller's market isn't it? They couldn't keep up with the demand. All of us there up on top of another in our slatted house' (7). This is a point persistently made by JJ to his father; the fact that he was bought as a commodity with a quantifiable value dependent on the market's constraints.

*Notes from a Coma* presents the ultimate fate of humanity after the application of this axiomatic rationale: the complex symbiosis of human and machine according to the demands of the mode of production. This dystopian scenario is achieved through the use of coma:

As good as any place a place where dissent festers. Here in the sacral quietness of the ICU, the architectonics of man-machine symbiosis is reaching its apotheosis. With pain and systolic drudgery already contracted out to these machines, leaving these subject/object hybrids in their wake, the machines continue dreaming their machine dreams: a world without obsolescence or wear and tear, a place where optimum functioning is a way of being – dreams of redemption, what else? (138)

McCormack's novel depicts, in this dystopian future, a non-utilitarian view of the relationship of humanity and technology, in which there is no clear boundary or delimitation setting them apart as subject and object respectively. The passage portrays this amalgamation as a subject-object hybrid achieved through the use of coma by 'systolic drudgery'. This new subject-object entity, similar to Deleuze and Guattari's zombified catatonic schizo, only serves the purpose of maintaining the optimal functioning of the system that deems it an economic liability. *Notes from a Coma* thus distinguishes itself from *Falling out of Cars* in that, despite reaching the same conclusion concerning catatonia as the terminal stage of late capitalism, it seems to point at the possibility of reaching a new type of subjectivity, albeit an undead and catatonic one adapted to the mode of production. Rather than succumbing to the catatonic temporality, subjects assimilate to it by adopting its axiomatic rational and becoming part of it through the ultimate symbiosis of human and machine whose only purpose is the functioning of this mode of production.

*Notes from a Coma* presents a catatonic mode of temporality in which the effect of disorientation is mainly achieved through the layering of manifold time lines, time leaps and a fractured narrative structure. McCormack's implementation of experimental techniques is not merely a stylistic choice, but deeply aligned with the political and material conditions which they aim to represent. The axiomatic logic of the late capitalist landscape is one of the main triggering components of the catatonic mode of experience. Catatonia in McCormack's novel is the result of the treatment of individuals according to economic criteria that reduce humans to passive agents whose only aim is to sustain the system bewildering them. This bleak image of the future is represented through the symbiosis between human and machine whose only purpose is to maintain the efficiency of the mode of production. The self-referential and multi-layered narrative structure is a reflection both of the logic leading to JJ's coma and of the cultural fatigue at play in the mindlessness *Zeitgeist*. The exhaustive attempt of the novel to provide an omnipresent view of all phenomena does not culminate in a novel understanding of time but in disorientation. This failed attempt mirrors JJ's exhaustion and negative reactions to his own mind signalled by the slogan 'I Need To Take My Mind Off My Mind.' In this sense, *Notes from a Coma* displays how the axiomatic rationale of the system, according to which individuals – defined as somewhat autonomous and active agents – are deemed liabilities, can lead to cultural catatonia as the dominant mode of subjectivity: a symbiosis with the technological landscape supporting the mode of production.

## **Conclusion**

The estrangement performed by Noon's *Falling out of Cars* and McCormack's *Notes from a Coma* productively interrogates the cultural dominant in present conditions of existence.

While not performing any prognostic exercise concerning the future, both dystopian fiction novels render visible the underlying logic of a cultural dominant which no longer depends on the subject's ecstatic acceptance of social practice. Catatonia entails a negative response to capitalism's radical deterritorialization of social experience and subjectivity. These novels offer a complementary perspective to accounts of postmodern schizophrenia by showing the existence of different cultural tendencies. By estranging the reader's perception of historical development, the novels fashion their own hermeneutic by which to assess social and cultural tendencies in the present. These novels can be studied as offering an alternative and complementary canon to the schizophrenic writing outlined by postmodern cultural studies. In this sense, these literary texts posit real challenges to cultural studies by exhibiting and problematizing, both at the level of form and content, the incompatibility between the system's organization of social practice and the subject's cognitive abilities to cope with it.

## **Extrapolation and Social Reproduction: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Anne Charnock's *Dreams Before the Start of Time***

In this chapter I will explore the role of social reproduction as the basis for world-building in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Anne Charnock's *Dreams Before the Start of Time* (2017). Extrapolation is a narrative technique traditionally associated with a rigorous scientific-based approach to world-building in speculative fiction. The sense of plausibility generated by extrapolation narratives, as I aim to argue, is not a guarantee of its prognostic capabilities but a textual effect resulting from the hermeneutic framework by which it interprets historical development. Extrapolation has been used many times in feminist speculative fiction with the aim of exploring the historical causality of the exploitation of social reproduction in specific social formations. By assigning specific historical tendencies as the basis for their extrapolated futures, these novels use plausibility as a rhetorical effect to persuade readers of a certain narrative concerning historical development. My main point of contention is that, while both Atwood and Charnock's extrapolation narratives posit social reproduction as the basis for their narrative world-building, their approaches to historical development reflect different views concerning the historical causality of patriarchal structures. While Atwood's text identifies religious fundamentalism and totalitarian ideology as the main causes leading to the patriarchal order depicted in its dystopian future, Charnock's narrative maintains a socialist feminist critique of social reproduction as the basis of women's oppression in the context of global capitalism.

Extrapolation is one of the most characteristic narrative techniques in speculative fiction. Speculation and extrapolation have been traditionally opposed in literary criticism as distinct narrative modes to approach the future. Most of the studies distinguishing these terms have focused



on the degree of plausibility of the futures depicted in their respective narratives. As Brooks Landon claims, extrapolation and speculation have been ‘understood as means to a crucial end: science fiction, in whatever fashion, must somehow go beyond what is currently known and must represent the unknown through some rhetoric of plausibility’ (23). The narrative and rhetorical methods through which the text approaches this unknown is what distinguishes both strategies. According to Stanley Schmidt, for instance, extrapolation is a subtype of speculation ‘based on extensions, developments, and applications of well-established knowledge’ (30). This conception of extrapolation implies the idea that ‘it can be said with a fair degree of assurance that these speculations are things that we know are possible’ (30). Likewise, for Robert A. Heinlein, the tropes are distinguished according to the prognostic facticity of each narrative method:

‘Extrapolation’ means much the same in science fiction writing as it does in mathematics: exploring a trend. It means continuing a curve, a path, a trend into the future, by extending its present direction and continuing the *shape* it has displayed in its past performance... ‘Speculation’ has far more elbowroom than extrapolation; it starts with a ‘What if?’ – and the new factor thrown in by the what-if may be both wildly improbable and so revolutionary in effect as to throw a sine-curve trend (or a yeast-growth trend, or any trend) into something unrecognizably different. (238-39; emphasis in original)

In both the Heinlein and Schmidt models, extrapolation and speculation are distinguished according to the degree of prognostic plausibility assigned to each narrative mode of approaching the future. These models, however, do not exhaust the distinction between these modes. As Landon remarks, most traditional literary criticism views extrapolation as ‘suggesting the fidelity to known and possibly even existing science and technology’ and speculation as ‘suggesting the more sociologically focused and less plausible narratives’ (25). The division is thus closely tied to a

rhetoric of plausibility elaborated in narrative works and literary criticism on science fiction. While extrapolative fiction aims to conceal the fictional quality of its prognosis through a rhetoric of plausibility, speculative fiction openly exposes the impossibility of its hypotheticals.

The notion of scientific plausibility discussed in traditional literary studies on extrapolation has been complicit in reproducing the more general notions of scientific rationality promoted by capitalist ideology. As China Miéville points out, the notion of scientific rationality promoted by science fiction studies, including Darko Suvin's paradigm of cognitive estrangement, is 'based on capitalist modernity's ideologically projected self-justification; not some abstract/ideal 'science', but capitalist science's bullshit about itself' (240). In economic terms, this orientation towards the future in conditions of uncertainty, as Jens Beckert argues, is one of the essential aspects of the capitalist mode of production:

The assumption that decision in economic contexts may be understood as rational calculations based on full knowledge of all (available) information has been broadly criticized. One chief objection to this assumption is the issue of uncertainty: future states of the world are not predictable because of the complexity of situations in which decisions are made ... Particularly in situations of rapid economic change or crises ... which are characteristic of modern capitalism, uncertainty prevails. (8)

Beckert remarks that the capitalist economy is driven by 'fictional expectations', namely 'the imaginaries of future states of the world and of causal relations that inform actors' decisions' (62). Capitalism, Beckert claims, 'is a socioeconomic system oriented towards the future' (269). However, as Beckert adds, '[u]nder conditions of fundamental uncertainty ... expectations can never be actual forecasts of the future, but merely projections, whose truth can be verified only once the future has become the present' (62). Traditional extrapolation models reproduce this same

instrumental rationale at the level of narrative logic. Like financial instruments and economic actors, extrapolation narratives aim to render understandable and predict future history as if it were a readily describable and calculable object. According to Becker, capitalism operates through this same logic: ‘Expectations under conditions of uncertainty and ascribed symbolic meanings may be seen as a kind of *pretending*, which creates confidence and provokes actors to act *as if* the imaginary were the ‘future present’, or a good’s material quality’ (10; emphases in original). Likewise, through their supposedly prognostic and rational methodology, extrapolation narratives construct imaginaries of the future which are closely linked to fictional and societal expectations. As David N. Samuelson notes, extrapolation narratives attempt to offer a ‘model of something not yet known, theoretically possible, but beyond human experience ... SF makes plausible models of beings, places, and times nobody has yet encountered’ (192). This narrative mode of approaching the future thus follows capitalism’s same ideological rationale of creating and promoting fictional expectation about the future.

Feminist speculative fiction was essential to demystifying the instrumental notion of scientific plausibility in traditional models of extrapolation. In spite of its initial connection to ‘hard’ science fiction, women writers of the New Wave of SF in the 1960s introduced a plethora of sociological and political themes into the traditional repertoire of extrapolative fiction. As Stef Lewicki points out, it was not until the 1960s, with the New Wave of SF, that science fiction ‘began to win ... some literary recognition and acclaim, as well as bringing sexuality into a genre that had long ignored it or refused to treat it seriously’ (48). This entailed the paradigmatic shift from ‘hard’ science to a ‘soft’ sociology as the more appropriate instrument to assess historical development. As Joanna Russ argued in her influential essay ‘SF and Technology as Mystification’ (1979), technology – either in its technophobic or technophilic version – operates as a mystification device

used by those in privileged positions of power – predominantly white male authors – in order to conceal the economic and social components underlying political issues: ‘Those who believe themselves powerless (and are so) – women, non-whites, the poor – do not become technophobes ... The technology-obsessed must give up talking about technology when it is economics and politics that are at issue’ (37, 39). As Russ adds,

hiding greyly behind that sexy rockstar, technology, is a much more sinister and powerful figure. It is the entire social system that surrounds us; hence the sense of being at the mercy of an all-encompassing autonomous process that we cannot control ... It is because technology is a mystification for something else that it becomes a kind of autonomous deity, one that can promise both salvation and damnation ... Both technophobes and technophiles demonstrate, to my mind, a kind of megalomania: the imperial nature of capitalism, the desire to own and control everything, whether in its ascendant or disappointed phase. The technophiles certainly embody the fallacy that more is better and the thingification of people and social relations. (37; 38)

This fetishization of science is implicit in the narrative world-building of a great part of traditional science fiction. As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay points out, a ‘technocratic world-state run by enlightened scientists and engineers dominated much of social thought on the Left before the 1930s’ (114). The New Wave of SF expanded the use of extrapolation beyond the teleological notions of scientific progress promoted by previous literary criticism. Joanna Russ’s study of the socio-political dynamics at play in female subjectivity in *The Female Man* (1975) and Marge Piercy’s utopian narrative vision in *Woman at the Edge of Time* (1976) offer illustrative examples of an alternative sociological approach to the future. As Lewicki points out, ‘[f]eminist writers have concentrated on people and the ‘soft’ or human sciences, the appropriate use of technology,

and the importance of communication, rather than the ‘hard’ technological fiction of many male writers’ (49). Feminist writers played a decisive role in exhibiting the inherent speculative basis in extrapolation narratives. From this point of view, extrapolation is not a genre distinct from speculative fiction but, rather, a sub-genre deploying a rhetorical use of plausibility – either in its scientific or sociological version – in its narrative world-building and approach towards the future. The estrangement produced by the science-fictional future is linked to a rhetoric of plausibility which, like fictional expectations in the financial economy, is fully dependent on imaginaries about historical development whose effectiveness relies on readers reading *as if* its claims to reality were truth.

One of the main implications of the New Wave sociological approach is the idea that extrapolation is a subtype of speculative fiction rather than a rigorous world-building method opposed to it. Rather than conceiving extrapolation as a scientific method to approach the future, feminist novels used this narrative technique in order to explore the historical underpinning of patriarchal structures in the present. As Russ claimed in ‘SF and Technology’, narrative prognosis implies an extremely unfavourable position for writers: ‘[e]xtrapolation assumes that science fiction writers work under the extraordinary handicap of reporting events that haven’t happened’ (17). Science fiction, in Sarah Lefanu’s view, rather than providing a rigorous methodology to explore the future, offers a ‘freedom ... from the constraints of realism ... [as] the means of exploring myriad ways in which we are constructed as women’ (4-5). Disregarding previous distinctions between speculation and extrapolation, Lewicki argues that one of the main benefits of speculative fiction for women writers is its prognostic potential: ‘speculative fiction uses invention, by making a plausible extrapolation of current trends and events, thereby illuminating potential futures’ (48). In opposition to previous extrapolation models, feminist novels speculated

on the future in order to assert the importance of socio-political factors in historical development as opposed to the traditional focus on scientific progress. Novels such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) displayed the ambiguous divide between speculation and extrapolation by combining rigorous economic and social narrative-world building with highly implausible elements. Le Guin's text offers an elaborate vision of the relationship between capitalism's mode of production and patriarchal structures through the contrast between two planets with distinct social and economic systems. Similarly, Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* makes a productive historical contrast between the egalitarian and utopian society of Mattapoiset and the 1970s United States period from which the protagonist time-travels. As these feminist works of speculative fiction show, extrapolation can offer a vast repertoire of narrative strategies to exhibit the role of patriarchal structures in contemporary capitalism but, also, articulate the revolutionary potentials contained in the present.

### **Plausibility as Rhetorical Effect: Towards a Diachronic View of Extrapolation**

Literary critics and writers have used science as a rhetorical tool to evoke a sense of plausibility in their future narrative worlds. As Samuelson notes, a plethora of science fiction novels use science for the purpose of verisimilitude by 'enlisting naturalistic details and mimetic techniques in the service of fantasies' (195). Likewise, 'hard' extrapolation narratives 'require hypotheticals defying contemporary theory: faster-than-light travel, breathable atmospheres and edible foodstuffs on other worlds, not to mention easy communication with alien intelligences' (193). As these questionable hypotheticals illustrate along with their inventive use of the scientific method, plausibility is a textual rhetorical effect and not a category ensuring its prognostic potentials. Even presumably 'rigorous' extrapolation narratives, as Samuelson remarks, 'distort realism' in 'a

process uniting science, realism and fantasy in highly specific ways' (193). As Miéville remarks, science fiction writers do not see their 'job as *convincing* anyone of a spurious claim but of helping 'domesticate' an 'impossibility'' (236; emphases in original). The cognition effect, he adds, 'may be derived from empirical reality and rigorous and rational science: but it is vital to insist... on the potentially absolute discontinuity between the two' (236). According to Miéville, 'the effect is the result of a strategy, or *game*, played by writer and, often, reader, based not on reality-claims but plausibility-claims that hold purely within the text' (236; emphasis in original). From this point of view, the use of the scientific method in extrapolation narratives is a rhetorical effect rather than a proof of its prognostic value. Extrapolative fiction, in this sense, should not be defined by its questionable prognostic faculties but, rather, according to its rhetorical use of plausibility.

In order to depart from this traditional literary model of extrapolation it is necessary to develop an approach whose criteria does not depend on some claim to historical truth. According to Landon, a diachronic framework is the only method that can overcome the synchronic teleological vision of historical progress maintained by traditional extrapolation models (25). A diachronic perspective involves the 'interrogation of extrapolation as [a] tool of scientific thinking [that] must be understood diachronically, as emerging from the specific historical conditions and taking shape and changing over time' (25). From this diachronic standpoint, the futures presented by extrapolation narratives do not necessarily involve a historical prognosis according to some skewed idea of 'hard' or 'soft' plausibility. As Landon adds, '[a]gainst the well-entrenched tradition of SF critical discourse that constructs extrapolation and speculation as static terms closely tied to scientific plausibility is the contemporary view that these terms and indeed SF itself should not be thought of as fixed categories or classifications' (31). Science fiction texts, as Roger Luckhurst points out, should be understood 'as part of a constantly shifting network that ties

together science, technology, social history and cultural expression with different emphases at different times' (6). A diachronic approach does not render the distinction between speculation and extrapolation obsolete but, rather, integrates it into a historical continuum of ever-shifting ideas concerning the role of science and plausibility in science fiction. The shift from traditional models of extrapolation to feminist speculative fiction during the late 1960s and 1970s is a clear example of the historical determination of ideas concerning science. From this point of view, extrapolation is a subgenre of speculative fiction based on a rhetorical use of plausibility in future-oriented narrative world-building. According to Freedman, the estrangement produced by the science-fictional future is not valuable due to its accuracy but 'for its role in establishing the historicity of the present – in the sense of denaturalizing the present by showing it to be neither arbitrary nor inevitable but the conjunctural result of complex, knowable material processes' (55). As Gwyneth Jones remarks, science fiction does not depend on accurate prognosis but on the 'appearance of command over the *language* of science' (16; emphasis in original). This diachronic point of view thus takes into consideration how and why plausibility is generated by extrapolation narratives in relation to the ever-shifting paradigms of technology and ideology.

Due to their future orientation and rhetorical claims to plausibility, extrapolation narratives necessarily establish a historical causality or vision of historicity linking the periods represented in them. This historical causality inevitably promotes a certain idea concerning historical progress. The study of extrapolation narratives must thus focus on interrogating the hermeneutic framework – its vision of historicity and social development – through which the text interprets historicity. Plausibility is a result of the imposition of this framework by which the text interprets history. As Anne Gilarek points out, speculative fiction in general involves 'a temporal displacement technique which is intended to break with the linear perception of time and, consequently, to



challenge accepted modes of thinking' (35). In the case of novels preoccupied with feminist issues, this type of fiction, Gilarek adds, 'make[s] frequent use of the utopian and dystopian in order to enter into dialogue with feminist philosophy and make a comment on the situation of women in contemporary society' (34). The temporal displacement enacted by extrapolation must necessarily refer to specific historical tendencies in the present to project its utopian or dystopian future. The rhetorical use of plausibility is thus closely linked to the vision of historicity promoted by the text, that is, in the form of causality connecting the periods alluded to by the text. Unlike the unapologetic alterity of fantasy, this narrative technique requires for its effectiveness an allusion to particular social elements in the present in order to develop its historical causality. As Gilarek points out, the 'temporal displacement in feminist utopian fiction is meant to develop a consciousness of the present' (43). From this perspective, feminist writers do not necessarily implement extrapolation with the aim of social prognosis but, rather, to persuade readers of a vision of historicity implicit in their future world-building to evaluate present conditions of existence.

### **Speculative Fiction and Socialist Feminism: Social Reproduction**

The gap between the historical periods alluded to in future-oriented narratives contains an implicit vision of historical development. Domestic labour, the nuclear family and the reproduction of social labour are among the most common themes explored by feminist extrapolative fiction. These themes have been the basis for narrative world-building in some of the most celebrated feminist works of extrapolative fiction. Due to this concern for historical contextualisation, extrapolation narratives must describe the social components which make up their future. This narrative world-building exercise is crucial to achieving a plausibility effect over the future presented in the text. Extrapolation novels preoccupied with feminist issues have to deal with the

complex relationship between social formations, patriarchal structures and modes of production. Due to this preoccupation with material and historical conditions, feminist extrapolation narratives maintain multiple points of intersection with Marxist criticism. As Csicsery-Ronay points out, in spite of these shared theoretical interests, there have only been a few intersectional studies on the connections between Marxist and feminist criticism on science fiction:

The distance of this line of theory from feminism is striking. Although their critical canon includes a few feminist works... critical utopian theorists have shown relatively little interest in feminist theory, which has actually become a science fiction-like enterprise in some of its manifestations. Feminist thought, in turn, has increasingly turned away from the Marxist analytic to which it once owed its progressive historical model. (122)

Both feminist and Marxist literary criticism on science fiction have remained distanced from each other despite the multiple points of intersection between both critical approaches. Only a few literary critics and authors – Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ and, more recently, Donna Haraway – have been interested in exploring the parallels between both areas of study. Extrapolation is a narrative mode that explicitly deals with the material and historical dimensions of sexual and gender differences in feminist speculative fiction. Narrative works of fiction such as Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Russ’s *The Female Man* explicitly explore hypotheticals involving the role of capitalism’s mode of production in the reproduction of patriarchal structures. While some extrapolative narratives posit patriarchal violence as the remnant of previous social formations, other novels posit capitalism as essential to achieve a better understanding of the conditions of women in the present. Hypotheses concerning the role of social formations in the reproduction of patriarchal violence are always implicitly or explicitly expressed in the world-building of extrapolated narrative spaces.

Socialist feminism provides an extremely helpful theoretical framework to assess the different methodological approaches implicit in the world-building of extrapolation narratives. This is a type of feminism which incorporates Marxist analytical tools to examine the historical and material dimensions in the division of sex and gender. It should be noted that Marxist criticism has been historically inattentive to issues concerning sex and gender. As Pat and Hugh Armstrong point out in 'Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex', '[t]here can be little doubt that Marxism has been and continues to be ... sex-blind' and that '[s]ex differences were hardly a central concern for the 'fathers' of political economy' (7). In spite of this lack of theoretical interest, socialist feminism acknowledges that 'the analytical tools developed by Marx and Engels can help us explore the social construction of the fundamental divisions between men and women' (7). This Marxist feminism, they add, 'posits the existence of a real material world, one which conditions the social, political and intellectual processes in general' but, at the same time, 'seek[s] to distance [itself] from the economic determinism that pervades so much of orthodox Marxism' (9). Peggy Morton, in her 1970 article, 'Women's Work is Never Done', was one of the first to argue that it is necessary to 'see the family as a unit whose function is the maintenance of the reproduction of labour power', and that 'this conception of the family allows us to look at women's public (work in the labour force ) and private (work in the family) roles in an integrated way' (53, 51). Similarly, feminist extrapolation narratives, such as Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Charnock's *Dreams Before the Start of Time*, utilise the family as a key world-building component for the futures presented in their narratives. Both domestic labour and the reproduction of labour power are among the most recurrent world-building components projected into the future by feminist speculative fiction.

Socialist feminism aims to articulate an integrative analysis of class and sexual struggle as reciprocal effects of capital accumulation and its inherent social contradiction. As Judith A. Little claims, '[s]ocialist feminist theory attempts to synthesize components of Marxist and radical feminist theories into a unified political theory that emphasizes the elimination of the sexual division of labor in all areas of life' (29). As Susan Ferguson remarks, a mode of production does not only involve the organisation of economic forces and means of production but, also, complex social relations comprising sex, class and gender:

[a]lthough the capitalist economy is intimately connected with — if not absolutely determinative of — the social relations of daily and generational reproduction, the capital/labor relation is not the most important or fundamental axis of struggle; rather ... class relations are, like gender, race, age and ability, an inescapable condition of people's lives. As such, they are reciprocally implicated: class is constituted in and through the experience of gender and race, and vice versa. (12)

This entails the idea that the analysis of either class or sex can never be accurate without integrating one aspect into the other. As Pat and Hugh Armstrong point out, socialist feminism presented the necessity of going 'beyond sexless class and classless sex' (12). Socialist feminists, since the movement's inception in the 1960s, have been opposed to any understanding of 'women's oppression ... in terms of the ideas in their heads or the hormones in their bodies' and, instead, have 'concentrated on women's work and its usefulness to capitalism' (13). Socialist feminism, in Lewicki's view, 'sees both men *and* the system as together creating [women's] oppression and seeks solutions in a contemporaneous transformation of social organization and male consciousness' (46). In this sense, socialist feminism aims to develop a theoretical framework

which integrates the oppression of women with the traditional Marxist conceptualisation of sexless class.

Social reproduction, according to many socialist feminist accounts, is the main category to achieve a historical and material understanding of women's oppression in the context of capitalism. Like class struggle in traditional Marxist theory, social reproduction represents for these theorists one of capitalism's social contradictions. In Ferguson's view, '[n]ot only are capital and labour in constant conflict, but in the process of attempting to cope with this conflict, new contradictions are constantly being created, combatted and partially resolved, generating even more contradictions' (10-11). Capitalism's social contradictions, according to Ferguson, are also maintained in the case of gender and sexual struggle:

the overall dynamic of social reproduction is tied to the ability of people to meet certain physiological and historical needs ... [and] those needs will be thwarted so long as one fundamental means of reproducing ourselves – the production of subsistence goods – is commandeered by the forces of capital accumulation in an effort to generate profit, not goods ... [T]he formal economy plays a decisive role and capital accumulation is clearly a powerful social force. It asserts its mandate over the whole process of social reproduction precisely because people's lives (meeting subsistence needs) are dependent upon its modus operandi, the market. These insights... suggest that the goal of democratic control of the process of social reproduction must involve confronting the power of capital. (11-12)

Social reproduction does not imply the idea that the oppression of women can be reduced to a determination of economic factors or that it is singular to capitalism's mode of production. Rather, it implies that the longstanding history of patriarchal violence in previous social formations has been rearticulated according to the needs and requirements particular to the capitalist mode of

production. In Pat and Hugh Armstrong's view, women's oppression within the context of capitalism is not primarily connected to domestic labour but to 'the reproduction of labour power, a commodity which is essential to the production of surplus value' (19). According to them, '[t]he specific form of exploitation that this domestic work represents demands a corresponding specific form of struggle – namely the women's struggle – within the family' (19). The family, for them, 'is at the core of the capitalist organization of work' (19). This entails that the nuclear family, in the context of capitalism, is organised in order to exploit social labour and accelerate the accumulation of surplus-value. From the perspective of socialist feminism, this economic rationale is what gives capitalism its specific historical iteration of patriarchal violence. This approach, in this sense, does not subsume sex under class or vice-versa but, rather, contextualises the ongoing history of patriarchal violence within capitalism as a mode of production.

Feminist works of extrapolative fiction have been preoccupied with the same issues discussed by socialist feminism. Due to their shared focus on social reproduction and the nuclear family, socialist feminism can serve to elucidate the visions of history implicitly promoted in the world-building method at work in texts of feminist extrapolative fiction. Conversely, feminist speculative fiction can contribute to generate new perspectives on the historical and material analysis of the sexual division of labour. The estrangement produced by extrapolative narratives always implies the imposition of an anamorphic perspective or hermeneutic framework by which the text interprets history. Extrapolation, in these narrative works, invariably articulates a historical causality shared by past, present and future concerning the oppression of women. The future is the anamorphic point by which the text estranges its historical context and shows, as Beaumont points out, that the 'dominant perception of reality is not natural but cultural; and this, potentially, is politically enabling, because it reveals that reality can be altered' (34). As Beaumont remarks,

science fiction 'is the imaginative product of an epoch in which it is at least technically possible to conceptualise society, for all its contradictions, as a totality' (37). Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Anne Charnock's *Dreams Before the Start of Time* are clear examples of non-integrative and integrative approaches to narrative world-building, that is, hermeneutic perspectives which respectively integrate and disconnect sexual and gender struggle into capitalism's social contradictions. Both novels posit social reproduction of social labour as a key component of world-building in the future depicted in their narratives.

In spite of their similarities, Atwood and Charnock's texts are markedly opposed in the methodological approach to narrative world-building. Margaret Atwood's dystopian Gilead Republic depicts patriarchal violence and women's oppression as a predominantly associated with totalitarian remnants of past social formations. Gilead is a Christian theocratic republic with overt allegorical parallels to various totalitarian systems throughout the twentieth century – Nazi Germany and Soviet Stalinism as the most recurrent ones. In this sense, Atwood's extrapolation narrative, while acknowledging patriarchal discursive patterns shared by totalitarian regimes, precludes any integrated perspective concerning the relationship between capitalism and women's oppression. The pre-Gilead capitalist society has no discernible influence or mention in the future represented in the text. The rise of Gilead Republic instead emerges due to the rise of infertility rates among men and, to a lesser degree, women, an enigmatic phenomenon that leads to the extreme confinement and marginalisation of women for the purpose of social reproduction. Anne Charnock's *Dreams Before the Start of Time*, on the other hand, does not depict a dystopian society. Rather, through a historical and materialist method of world-building, this novel aims to elucidate sex and class oppression as integrated phenomena within the context of capitalism and technological development. As Anne Charnock remarks,

Whereas Atwood's novel is labelled as a dystopia, I constructed *Dreams Before the Start of Time* within familiar, everyday settings to reveal how each generation might navigate their way to starting a family, given that new opportunities will arise thanks to advances in biomechanics and genetic engineering. (1)

Technological advances in Charnock's text are directly imbricated in supporting the class and sexual differences developed in each respective generation, thus showing both their historical singularity and similarity as different iterations of capitalism's oppressive exploitation of women and workers. Charnock's text, in this sense, does not suggest that patriarchal power structures are an exclusively capitalist phenomenon or a remnant of previous social formations. On the contrary, like socialist feminist accounts, this extrapolation narrative suggests that women's oppression and male privilege are rearticulated according to historical and material shifts in the mode of production.

### **Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Nostalgia for the Present**

The exhaustive and taxonomic description of social practices is one of the main narrative strategies to evoke a sense of plausibility over the conditions of existence depicted in the Republic of Gilead. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts the life of women in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian regime organised by Christian fundamentalists in a dystopian version of the United States. The Gilead regime emerges as a regressive reaction to a mysterious wave of infertility affecting both men and women across the entire United States. In this dystopian future, women are segregated from society and classified according to patriarchal gender roles: Aunts, Wives, Guardians and Handmaids. As with Judith Butler's theory of gender, Atwood's challenges the notion of women as a stable identity and shows that 'gender is not always constituted coherently



or consistently in different historical contexts, and... intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities' (3). Atwood's novel shows how identities are classified according to the patriarchal that produces them, a selection of women is separated from their families and forced to work as 'handmaids', that is, surrogate mothers for the sterile Wives of the governing Commanders – the patriarchal rulers of the household in which most women's everyday lives take place. Handmaids are given a patronymic name based on the Commander with whom they currently live. This is the case of Offred – the narrator and protagonist of the novel – who is forced to cohabit the same household with Fred – the patriarchal ruler and Commander of the house.

*The Handmaid's Tale* estranges its historical context of production by depicting a dystopia constructed on the basis of complex patriarchal power structures. Atwood's Gilead explores and extrapolates, at the level of narrative world-building, Simone de Beauvoir's claim that '[o]ne is not born, but becomes a woman' (293). Woman is a notion that is constantly exposed as a cultural and malleable identity working to serve the interests of the patriarchal elite. This power structure is linked to the social and material imposition of female identity as serving the sole purpose of social reproduction. Handmaids have to undergo 'ceremonies' in which they are raped in a highly ritualized and normalized manner by the Commander in order to conceive children. Atwood's novel exposes the ideological mechanism by which sexual abuse of all kinds is normalised and legitimised across all sectors of society. The Republic of Gilead is a socially complex world composed by an intricate legal system which operates to legitimise its patriarchal and heteronormative rule: women are not allowed to own property, are prohibited to learn how to read and must follow a strict dress code. The same level of intricacy is applied to Gilead's taboos, such as speaking about the pre-Gilead past or showing signs of social discontent, and symbolic rites,

such as hanging traitors in public and chanting fascist hymns. As this plethora of details demonstrate, the text meticulously describes how social mechanisms and ideological apparatuses construct women as an identity in order to legitimise the exploitation of social reproduction by the heteronormative patriarchy.

*The Handmaid's Tale* has had a vast cultural impact on both mainstream culture and speculative fiction. This relevance has not only been manifested in the positive acclaim towards the novel as demonstrated in the prestigious prizes it was awarded in the 1980s – the Arthur C. Clarke Award and Governor General's Award – but also its enduring legacy as shown in the release of a television series version of the text in 2017 by the streaming service Hulu. The series has been continually renewed since its premiere with two following seasons and a fourth one based on Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019), the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood's text has also been influential in the development of dystopian narrative fiction by including the perspective of marginalised characters within the form's traditionally masculinist focus. As many literary critics have noted, *The Handmaid's Tale* shares many themes with George Orwell's *1984* (1949), perhaps along with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), one of the most influential texts in the development of the subgenre of dystopian fiction. Even Atwood herself acknowledged that Orwell's text worked as 'a direct model' for her novel (*In Other Worlds* 45). In spite of these similarities, the choice of a female narrator, as Coral Ann Howells points out, had a crucial role in overturning the traditional masculine focus of dystopian fiction:

[i]nstead of Orwell's analysis of the public policies and institutions of state oppression, Atwood gives us a dissident account by a Handmaid who has been relegated to the margins of political power. This narrative strategy reverses the structural relations between public and private worlds of the dystopia, allowing Atwood to reclaim a feminine space of

personal emotions and individual identity, which is highlighted by her first-person narrative. (164)

By presenting a female rather than a male protagonist, Atwood presents the perspective of marginalized characters who have no active agency in the functioning of the political powers that subject them. Another point of comparison is that both dystopian narratives include a metatextual historical analysis of their own presented social reality. This preoccupation with historicity, as Faye Hamill remarks, is expressed in similar ways in both texts: ‘*Nineteen Eighty-Four* concludes not with Winston coming to love Big Brother but with a historical note on Newspeak, demonstrating that it has become a thing of the past. This provides a precedent for the ‘Historical Notes’ section at the end of *The Handmaid’s Tale*’ (523). The ‘Historical Notes’ depicts a conference held by a group of academics in the post-Gilead future sharing and discussing their papers concerning the Gilead period. As these sections demonstrate, both texts are preoccupied with questions concerning the malleability of historical truth and the role of the State apparatus in legitimizing and delegitimizing certain narratives over others. Both Orwell and Atwood’s narratives are, in Theo Finigan’s view, ‘centrally concerned with dominating their subjects through the control of their experience of time, memory and history’ (435). However, as Hamill points out, in opposition to Winston in Orwell’s text, whose fate ‘still seems doomed ... Atwood permits a greater measure of optimism by leaving open the possibility that Offred will escape’ (523). In this sense, Atwood’s narrative challenges the view that patriarchal and totalitarian systems are a historical necessity by signalling the possibility of emancipation.

In spite of its literary influence and cultural impact, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not devoid of problematic aspects with regards to its approach to narrative extrapolation and implicit views on historicity and women’s oppression. Perhaps one of the most contentious claims concerning the

novel is the one held by Slavoj Žižek in the article polemically titled ‘Margaret Atwood’s Work Illustrates our Need to Enjoy the Suffering of Others’. In this brief article published in 2019, Žižek does not analyse *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Testaments* or the television series but, rather, addresses the ideology sustaining the public’s widespread fascination with the Republic of Gilead. According to Žižek, ‘our fascination with the dark world of the Republic of Gilead is motivated by the joy procured by the ‘sight of the other’s suffering’, which effectively works as a means to sustain the happiness of our consumerist heaven’ (par. 2, 3). This perplexing argument revolves around the idea that Atwood’s unexplained narrative universe (the social transformation of the United States into the Gilead Republic is never accounted for) is complicit in disavowing the actuality of class struggle and women’s oppression:

the entire story is an exercise in what American literary critic Fredric Jameson called ‘nostalgia for the present’ – it is permeated by the sentimental admiration for our liberal-permissive present ruined by the new Christian-fundamentalist rule, and it never even approaches the question of what is wrong in this present so that it gave birth to the nightmarish Republic of Gilead. ‘Nostalgia for the present’ falls into the trap of ideology.  
(par. 4)

Considering the lack of a historical causality connecting the Pre-Gilead and Gilead periods, Žižek finishes by claiming that Atwood’s novel reflects ‘ideology in the simple and brutal sense of legitimising the existing order and obfuscating its antagonisms. In exactly the same way, liberal critics of Trump and [the] alt-right never seriously ask how our liberal society could give birth to Trump’ (par. 12). Due to its polemic nature and lack of references, Žižek’s argument has not been thoroughly addressed by any literary critics examining Atwood’s dystopian narrative. In order to

fully assess the political ideas promoted by the text, however, it is mandatory to examine the use of extrapolation in its narrative world-building method.

The narrative means by which the plausibility effect takes place in the novel is crucial in achieving a better understanding of the ideological mechanisms at play in Atwood's narrative. One of the key methods by which this effect is achieved is the recurrence of allegorical parallels between narrated events and real historical states of affairs. The Republic of Gilead is extrapolated from a plethora of historical details of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes and the fundamentalist-conservative sectors of the United States. These allegorical parallels do not only work to create a historical continuity between the text and real history but, also, to establish a causality linking the present with its dystopian future. As Maria Christou points out, the 'classification of the Giladeans thus renders the regime's theocratic totalitarianism obvious' but also associates Gilead, through its allegorical references, 'with two specific historical manifestations of totalitarianism: (Stalinist) communism and Nazism' (412). These similarities are explicitly referenced by the academic speaker presented in the 'Historical Notes': 'the sociobiological theory of natural polygamy was used as scientific justification for some of the odder practices of the regime, just as Darwinism was used by earlier ideologies' (314-315). As the academic adds, even the Handmaids' dressing code is borrowed from totalitarian regimes of the twentieth-century: '[the Republic of Gilead] seems to have borrowed from the uniforms of German prisoners of war in Canadian 'P.O.W.' camps of the Second World War era' (315). These external allegorical allusions establish a link to the historical past and thus show that the events presented in the narrative are not merely plausible but have actually taken place in recent history. The plausibility effect is, in this sense, directly involved in maintaining the historical causality presented by the text. By assigning totalitarian excess and fundamentalism as the paradigm for its

narrative world-building, Atwood's text establishes remnants of past social formations as the cause of patriarchal structures maintained in the present. This historical causality, however, avoids the material and historical dimensions of capitalism's agency in the perpetuation of patriarchal ideology and posits these structures as belonging to totalitarian social formations.

The reproduction of social labour works as the material basis and cause from which the Gilead world is extrapolated. In spite of its crucial role, the historical events or social components leading to the Gilead period are never elucidated throughout the text. The only cause provided by Offred's account or the 'Historical Notes' is the fall of birth rates previous to this period. As the academic speaker states, '[m]en highly placed in the regime were... able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness ... a desirable characteristic in an age of plummeting Caucasian birth rates, a phenomenon observable not only in Gilead but in most northern Caucasian societies of the time' (312). The material cause for this phenomenon, however, remains an enigma for the entire novel and precludes any systemic considerations concerning the role of contemporary capitalism in the reproduction of patriarchal structures and ideology. As the academic speaker remarks, none of the postulated hypotheses – the rise in sexual diseases, the decrease in sexually active people or the widespread environmental hazard – has been positively proved (313). *The Handmaid's Tale* grapples with the ramifications and consequences of this event from the skewed perspective of Offred, a handmaid with limited access to any type of reliable historical source. Instead, the text shows how this historical causality is concealed and manipulated by the patriarchal order. This is helpfully illustrated in the taboo on questioning the possible rise of infertility in male individuals rather than blaming women exclusively for this widespread phenomenon. In spite of being a decisive factor in the emergence of the regime, the speaker admits that the causes for the rise of infertility are unknown yet: '[t]he reasons for this decline are not

altogether clear to us' (312). This omission, while asserting the exploitation of social reproduction in past social formations, precludes any historical understanding of the contingency of this phenomenon in capitalist societies.

*The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on how historical events are experienced by marginalised individuals whose knowledge of the world is limited due to their circumstances. The estrangement produced by its dystopian universe establishes an anamorphic view of sexual and gender struggle through Offred's extremely limited historical perspective. This lack of historical perspective is persistently thematised by Atwood's narrative:

What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface. Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions. Otherwise you live with your face squashed against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details, close-ups, hairs, the weave of the bedsheet, the molecules of the face. Your own skin like a map, a diagram of futility, crisscrossed with tiny roads that lead nowhere. Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be. (149)

Atwood's narrative thus manages to represent the fragmented perspective of women living in a totalitarian patriarchal society: 'We lived in the gaps between the stories' (63). Offred herself acknowledges the fragmented nature of her historical account: 'we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now. We lived as usual by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it' (62). The lack of historical basis for Atwood's narrative world-building is thus strictly correlative to its focus on private experience of women living under a totalitarian and patriarchal regime. The anamorphic perspective gained by Atwood's dystopian universe radically relativizes the historical underpinning of women's oppression. History is articulated as the result of competing and often

incomplete narratives circulating beyond the control of oppressed individuals and manipulated by hegemonic powers.

The extrapolation methodology at play in *The Handmaid's Tale* follows a discursive approach to narrative world-building. Atwood's text is primarily preoccupied with the role of language and discourse in the legitimization and delegitimization of views and ideas on gender and sexual roles. As in Michel Foucault's statement in the 'Preface' to *Anti-Oedipus*, the novel is preoccupied with 'the tracking down of all varieties of fascism, from the enormous ones that surround and crush us to the petty ones that constitute the tyrannical bitterness of our everyday lives' (xiv). This hegemonic discourse is, of course, the one that reproduces and reinforces the patriarchal order maintained by the ruling elite. In this sense, this dystopian narrative can be grouped along with other previous novels, such as Doris Lessing's *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* (1980) and Suzette Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984), as part of an extrapolative fiction canon implementing a predominantly linguistic approach to narrative world-building method. Lucie Armit's argument in her essay 'Your Word is my Command' offers a clear illustration about this vision of society and historical development:

Language is of paramount importance with regard to how we structure reality (providing a cognitive framework for compartmentalising objects and sensations into linguistic units of meaning). Indeed it has been argued that: 'reality construction is probably to be regarded as the primary function of human language', a claim which emphasises the need for women to challenge the patriarchal bases of language if we are also to challenge the patriarchal linguistic and social framework ... [I]t is not enough merely to challenge surface manifestations (with revisions of words such as 'chairman', 'mastery'...) but we must also analyse and subvert the deep structural principles of language ... An essential starting point



for any critique of language as a power base *of or for* society is to demystify this ability to shape and control our thoughts, perceptions and behaviour ('Your Word is my Command' 123-124; emphasis in original).

This vision of women's oppression is thus mainly centred on the role of language in the construction of femaleness as a socially arranged identity. Extrapolative fiction which implements this approach to narrative world-building is thus preoccupied with rendering visible these discursive patterns and the role they serve in reproducing the patriarchal order. As Offred remarks, Gilead is internalised within each individual living under its regime: 'The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you' (29). Atwood's novel thus insists on the malleability of historical truth through complex ideological mechanisms. As Offred remarks, Gilead is the result of these manipulative mechanisms and, for this reason, has no inherent historical or political boundaries but the ones established by the ruling patriarchal elite: 'This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks, but this is the centre, where nothing moves' (29). This dystopian narrative is primarily concerned with how language is utilised as a control tool to maintain the hegemonic patriarchal power.

Due to the radical contrast between both periods, the Pre-Gilead past is comparatively constructed as a liberal period standing for sexual equality and privileged rights. This is the main ideological mechanism performed by the text's narrative extrapolation and precludes any systemic consideration concerning contemporary patriarchy and heteronormative practices. In spite of Žižek's questionable claims concerning the liberal permissiveness of contemporary capitalism, Atwood's text does indeed reflect a nostalgic idealization of the present. Nostalgia constructs the present as an idyllic place in which sexual differences and oppression have been resolved through

liberal reforms and concessions. The lack of economic and political foregrounding to Atwood's narrative world-building, while showing the marginalization of Offred from the hegemonic order that oppresses her, is also indicative of this ideological perception of the present. This nostalgic narrative is thematized throughout many passages in Atwood's text. Offred lived a considerable part of her adult life with her husband and daughter in the United States before it became the Republic of Gilead. Offred's recollection of the Pre-Gilead period, due to its obvious favourable comparison to the Gilead Republic in terms of patriarchal violence, are narrated with an acute sense of nostalgia. Similar to Winston in Orwell's *1984*, who believes that collecting antique objects itself constitutes an act of resistance, Offred also maintains a nostalgic attachment towards the Pre-Gilead past which is signalled in her collection of capitalist commodities. This nostalgic view is expressed in her melancholy attachment to trivial details such as arguing over household duties: 'An argument, about who should put the dishes in the dishwasher .... We could even have a fight about that, about *unimportant, important*. What a luxury would it be (206; emphases in original). This sense of estrangement towards the present is what constitutes Offred's identity as a character as never belonging to any historical period: 'You'll have to forgive me. I'm a refugee from the past, and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I've left or been forced to leave behind me, and it all seems just as quaint, from here, and I am just as obsessive about it' (235). Offred's historical perspective is not only skewed but profoundly ideological in its appreciation of the past as a locus standing for equal rights and liberal permissiveness. Of course, the pre-Gilead past is obviously better than Gilead in terms of sexual and gender equality. The point is that this favourable comparison to the United States' past is fictionally created by the text and precludes any understanding of the historical underpinning of capitalist patriarchal structures and how they developed into the Republic Gilead. In addition to this, the tendentious extrapolation

of totalitarian systems rather than capitalist ones further serves to disavow the actual agency of capitalism in the exploitation of social reproduction.

The narrative extrapolation performed by Atwood's text renders visible how Gilead's patriarchal system is – both as a social formation and mode of production – radically opposed to the liberal United States. This dystopian universe exemplifies the manipulative role of the State in reproducing ideological ideas concerning the role of women in society. This is clearly illustrated in Offred's attachment to her Pre-Gilead name as a sign of resistance against the present: 'This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past' (90). Offred's nostalgia, however, is not only related to her past identity but also reflective of a more general vision of historicity by which the exploitation of social reproduction in the present goes unacknowledged. This brutal patriarchal order evokes, through a tendentious comparison with the Pre-Gilead past, an ideological longing concerning the condition of women in contemporary capitalism and pushes forward a mystification of the past. This point is explicitly made by Offred's mother – a radical feminist who reproaches her daughter and husband for not appreciating their privileged situation in the present: 'You young people don't appreciate things, she'd say. You don't know what we had to go through, just to get to where you are. Look at him slicing up the carrots. Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?' (127; emphasis in original). This retroactive view does not only put into perspective the frailty of rights earned by feminist activists throughout the twentieth century, but also establishes the present as a privileged position in comparison to both past and future. The radical otherness of the Gilead period along with its radical and unexplained disjunction with the present is also emphasised in Offred's language. This sense of otherness is shown in her depiction of Gilead soldiers as 'Martians' intruding into an otherwise liberal nation:

‘There was a dreamlike quality to them; they were too vivid, too at odds with their surroundings’ (182). Atwood’s novel, by depicting both past and future as radically worse periods to the Pre-Gilead period enhances a nostalgic valorisation towards the historical present. As Asami Nakamura points out, in dystopian narratives, such as *The Handmaid’s Tale*, ‘the past serves as a place for hope’ (112). This nostalgic view of the present thus promotes the idea that female oppression is a result of remnants of previous social formations, religious fundamentalism and totalitarian excesses. All these elements effectively elude the exploitation of social reproduction within the context of capitalism.

The absence of capitalist patriarchal ideology is crucial to evoke a nostalgia towards the historical present. In spite of the plethora of details provided about the fascist rituals performed in the Gilead Republic, there is barely any mention concerning the economic sustainability of the regime or its international relationships. Moreover, the scarce details provided concerning the material and economic conditions of the regime point towards a pre-capitalist mode of production. This point is made by Offred when reminiscing about her life in Pre-Gilead times:

All these women having jobs; hard to imagine, now, but thousands of them had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing. Now it’s like remembering the paper money, when they had that. My mother kept some of it ... It was obsolete by then, you couldn’t buy anything with it. (178)

This characterisation of Gilead’s economic system – its abolition of private property and cash money – resembles aspects of fascist and communist totalitarian regimes rather than a capitalist mode of production. The lack of paper money and access to commodities – fashion magazines, adverts objectifying women, pornography, and so on – further emphasises the separation between the liberal capitalist United States from the totalitarian Republic of Gilead. This historical gap is

also reflected in Gilead's official discourse concerning social reproduction and its associations to the ideology in the form of social Darwinism. As the Commander in Offred's house remarks: 'Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they're protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace' (227). Similar to fascist regimes in the twentieth century, Gilead considers social reproduction as a social duty for women and naturalises their prevalent position in the political order through ideological allusions to biological reality. In this sense, the novel promotes a nostalgia towards the present through a twofold narrative strategy: exclusively extrapolating on the social tendencies of totalitarian systems and, consequently, effacing the role of the Pre-Gilead capitalist present as having any type of agency in the creation of Gilead. The lack of information provided concerning the historical gap between both periods is what effectively evokes a nostalgic view of the present as a time standing for liberal equal rights for women.

Due to the lack of material and historical scope involved in its narrative world-building, Atwood's text must opt for the discursive focus which emphasises the use of language as a power tool to manipulate the masses. Offred's predicament is a clear illustration of how her marginalised position as a woman makes her an easier target for misinformation and discursive manipulation. Gilead is not merely depicted as a state apparatus composed of borders and various institutions but, also, as a discursive entity internalised within each individual. This linguistic focus on interiority is also evoked in the meetings between Offred and the Commander. When expecting the Commander to speak to her, Offred remarks: 'He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once' (95). Male privilege is expressed in the Commander's ability to freely voice his thoughts as an active participant of the hegemonic order. Women, on the other hand, are depicted as passive agents in this discursive power. The linguistic focus of the novel is

further emphasised by the prohibition on reading imposed on all women living in the Republic of Gilead. As these details demonstrate, Atwood's novel depicts a world in which women have no discernible agency over the patriarchal power that subjects them. The effectiveness of this totalitarian regime is depicted through the internalisation of Gilead as a discursive phenomenon forcing women to even think according to patriarchal rules. From a socialist feminist point of view, this also entails a non-integrative approach to social reproduction as it does not consider the material and historical context of capitalism as a relevant aspect in the ongoing nature of sexual and gender oppression. In these non-integrative narratives, the role of capitalism as a social formation and mode of production is never fully addressed since patriarchal structures are primarily constructed through the reproduction of a discursive order.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a detailed depiction of material and discursive patriarchal violence shared by all types of fascist ideology. The anamorphic estrangement performed by the text alludes to the plausibility of its dystopian future by establishing multiple allegorical parallels to real historical events. Gilead, however, is not simply an extrapolation of totalitarian social formations from the past. One of the main targets of the novel is rendering visible the link between fascist views on social reproduction and the most familiar types of sexist beliefs reproduced in the present. Atwood's extrapolation method, however, does not account for the contemporary exploitation of social reproduction in the capitalist United States. The Pre-Gilead United States is contrasted with the Republic of Gilead as a period beyond the social contradictions of sex and gender inequality maintained in capitalism. These contradictions are projected as remnants of Christian fundamentalism and fascist ideology but never acknowledged as part of capitalism itself. From a socialist feminist point of view, Atwood's text provides a non-integrative approach to social reproduction as it does not consider the material and historical underpinning of

capitalism as a relevant aspect in the ongoing nature of sexual oppression. Nostalgia is one of the main narrative strategies by which the historical present is mystified as a liberal period in opposition to the patriarchal horrors experienced in both past and future. While Atwood's narrative offers a complex portrait of the discursive and material means by which women are subjected through fundamentalist and totalitarian ideology, it presents a non-integrative approach to narrative world-building and the question concerning the role of social reproduction in capitalist societies. On the contrary, through its nostalgic valorisation of the Pre-Gilead period, capitalism is paradoxically constructed as a locus of liberalism and progressive values in which most feminist issues have been addressed.

***Dreams Before the Start of Time: An Integrative Approach to Social Reproduction***

Anne Charnock's *Dreams Before the Start of Time* is a multigenerational saga depicting how technological advances in bioengineering will make infertility an outdated concern in parenthood. In this future, children can be conceived through the aid of artificial wombs which have put an end to the physical limitations of pregnancy. Charnock's novel depicts how these new possibilities lead to crucial shifts parenting: the popularisation of single parenthood, co-parenting in a non-sexual relationship and, ultimately, genetic customization before birth. The novel is preoccupied with how these options generate cultural shifts over heteronormative conceptions of the nuclear family as a parenting unit composed by a mother, a father and a child. Charnock's text can be analysed as replicating Donna Haraway's effort 'to remove women from the category of nature and to place them in culture as constructed and self-constructing social subjects in history' (134). Charnock's text is divided into three sections depicting the consequences of these bioengineering advances in the lives of three generations of families from England: in 2034, 2084-85 and 2120. Extrapolation

is thus not performed once but several times throughout the text, projecting how these bioengineering advances will be experienced from their moment of inception up until they are widely assimilated and accepted by society. The novel begins from the moment in which artificial insemination still presents an ethical dilemma concerning family and parenthood in England. This first section deals with two main characters and families: Millie Dack's decision to sign up for artificial insemination as a single mother and Toni Munroe's considerations over co-parenting a child with a stranger. Both characters are friends and have to confront societal and cultural expectations concerning the use of this new system. This situation is clearly illustrated in Betty's perplexed response when confronted with the news that her son's girlfriend, Millie, decided to raise a child as a single parent without him: 'Donor sperm? Why didn't she *use yours*? Why does she want a baby with a stranger? (6; emphasis in original). The second section depicts the upbringing of Toni and Millie's respective children – Rudy and Marco – and explores the ways in which they have to cope with their status as co-parented kids born through artificial insemination. This is manifested in Rudy Dack's unconscious prejudice against birth clinics: 'Don't say bottle babies, Rudy Dack tells himself, though he fears the slang is already imprinted' (77). Finally, the third section portrays the following generation of children but also adds an external narrative voice, Freya Liddicoat, who comes from a working-class background that is in noticeable opposition to the privileged upbringing of previously presented characters. This character gets rejected in her application to a birth clinic programme due to her poor financial circumstances, thus showing the capitalist rationale underlying these technological advances.

*Dreams Before the Start of Time* maintains an ostensibly different approach to narrative extrapolation to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In spite of being the winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2018, the novel has not been studied by literary criticism due to its recent year of



publication. Charnock's extrapolative narrative, in opposition to other works within this genre of speculative fiction, depicts a future which is neither experienced or presented as being a dystopian or utopian version of the present. Similar to Atwood's revision of Orwell's *1984*, Charnock has explicitly pointed out the influence of *The Handmaid's Tale* in her text. One of the main differences between her novel and Atwood's dystopian narrative is her focus on the familiar aspects shared by the future and the present. As a result, while both novels use extrapolation for the purpose of narrative world-building, the methods by which plausibility is achieved in each text are markedly different. As Charnock points out when explaining her decision to focus on a mundane setting rather than a dystopian one: '[b]y situating my novel in this way, I hoped my various storylines would achieve plausibility' (72). This is also a point Charnock has expressed when commenting on the retroactive plausibility of Atwood's dystopian universe: 'a new generation of readers... will find the premise of *The Handmaid's Tale* essentially plausible given the lurch towards right-wing populism in the USA and many parts of Europe' (72). In addition to this, Charnock's novel shares with Atwood's dystopian text its prognostic goals: 'I did sense while writing this novel, that the artificial womb will be a game-changer in terms of our future path as a species' (72). In spite of these similarities, Charnock's extrapolation narrative aims to generate plausibility by focusing on the mundane dimensions in which societal changes are experienced by individuals. While Atwood's totalitarian future is presented, both in social and cultural terms, as being a strikingly distinct version of the present, Charnock's narrative focuses on the similarities shared between periods by focusing on mundane private dilemmas: forming a family, finding a partner and raising children. Plausibility and social prognosis are a fundamental component in the narrative world-building at play in Charnock's text. However, the use of these narrative strategies and their relation to the question of social reproduction, as demonstrated in the novel's focus on

everyday experience, presents a distinct approach to both the mystification of technology in traditional extrapolation models and the dystopian tone popularised by Atwood's *Handmaids Tale*.

Charnock's narrative follows the traditional notion of plausibility by prioritising technological advances to explore historical tendencies. However, in opposition to the mystification of technology in traditional models, Charnock's text, due to its lack of dystopian or utopian impulse, cannot be labelled as presenting either a technophilic or technophobic vision of society. The emphasis on private experience posits Charnock's extrapolation narrative in a conjunction point between scientific plausibility and the sociological approach of the New Wave. While the text explores the impact of bioengineering on social reproduction, it explores technology as one among many other contributing factors to the development of the historical forces of its narrative world. As Charnock remarks, 'I imagine the repercussions, the unintended consequences, when wealthier sectors of society become early adopters of artificial wombs. The technology is not as yet ubiquitous in my novel; there is controversy still over this new path to parenthood' (73). This preoccupation with other criteria to assess historical development is reflected in Charnock's allusion to potentially negative and positive repercussions of these technological advances. Millie's decision to apply to an artificial insemination programme is ambivalently viewed as both ethically problematic and economically emancipatory by her parents: 'To Millie, it seems they've rewritten the narrative they present to the world concerning their younger daughter: *now* she's a capable, independent woman with a guaranteed pension' (17; emphasis in original). Economic independence is assessed as a determinant factor to the construction of motherhood and the acceptance of Millie's status as a single mother by her parents. Technology is, in this sense, analysed and extrapolated in order to explore the wider historical and material dimensions at play in capitalism's exploitation of social reproduction.

Charnock's extrapolation shows how seemingly emancipatory scientific advances in social reproduction are fully assimilated into the capitalist mode of production. The text explores the implicit fictional expectations in capitalism's imaginaries about the future through the commodification of parenting and bioengineering services. This is the case in Toni's consideration of co-parenting her child instead of raising it with its biological father. The capitalist agenda supporting this new era of social reproduction is clear in the commodification of parenting presented in the advertisements placed at artificial birth clinics:

YES, YOU CAN HAVE A CHILD WITHOUT A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP,  
 IF YOU ARE SINGLE, IF YOU ARE GAY, IF ARE GENDER FLUID, SIGN UP  
 FOR OUR CO-PARENTING INTRODUCTION SERVICE!  
 CHOOSE YOU CO-PARENT FROM OUR DATABASE – A SPECIAL FOREVER  
 FRIEND WHO IS EQUALLY KEEN TO BE A LOVING PARENT!  
 THOUSANDS OF HAPPY CHILDREN ARE NOW BEING RAISED BY PLATONIC  
 CO-PRENTS WHO DON'T LIVE UNDER THE SAME ROOF! SHARE THE JOY,  
 SHARE THE WORK. (23)

This advertisement does not only reproduce the idea of co-parenting as a paid service or commodity but, more importantly, maintains an economic rationale in all dimensions of the act of parenting: finding a suitable partner, domestic labour and raising a child. As Toni's case demonstrates, this commodification of social reproduction is also expressed in her difficulties with considering Atticus, her current boyfriend, as a suitable parent for her child. Once Toni reveals her thoughts on co-parenting her child, Atticus frustratedly points out the capitalist agenda underlying her consideration for this option: 'You're being sold a lie, Toni ... It's a business opportunity... Demand. Supply. That's all it is' (38-39). However, Charnock's feminist perspective is expressed

in Toni's reply to this reproach: 'But it's a legal contract ... You're a guy! You like the idea of having your baby. But if you decide you don't like me enough, you'll leave ... I won't be left high and dry. I'd make you sign *something*. And the baby wouldn't take your surname' (38, 39, 40; emphasis in original). Toni's argument exhibits the implicit sexism in Atticus's economic reductionism by pointing at how patriarchal structures are fully integrated into the mode of production, that is, the material and economic sexual inequality at play in society. The novel, in this sense, promotes the idea of social reproduction as both a feminist and capitalist issue which has to be addressed from an integrative point of view.

The plausibility effect generated by Charnock's text is crucial to integrate the private and public roles imposed on women by societal expectations. By focusing on the mundane consequences of bioengineering advances – forming a family, raising a child and finding a partner – the novel is capable of depicting how wider historical shifts are expressed in the normalized areas in which social reproduction is exploited: the private domain of domestic labour and the public one of social labour. The plausibility effect serves to conflate the quotidian with the historical by constantly emphasising the link between both dimensions of social reality. Besides the estrangement produced by the alterity of the future, there are no exceptional events presented in the narrative. The anamorphic perspective generated by this estranging future, while being limited to the individual scope of its narrators, constantly historicizes their private affairs by showing the social and economic forces at play in their lives. In this sense, the polyphonic structure of the novel contributes to a varied perspective of bioengineering advances and their use according to class, sexual and gender differences. The novel's polyphony is thus crucial to achieve an integrative and historical vision of sexual reproduction in capitalist systems.

Family is one of the main subjects through which Charnock's narrative deals with the theme of social reproduction. This conflict is most explicitly thematised in the eugenics issue in the novel's third section through Amelie and Nathen's family vignette concerning their two sons: one naturally gestated and the other genetically manipulated. While anxious about the possibility that their first and naturally gestated son, Seb, might have 'developmental problems' since 'at the age of two and a half, Seb still spoke in single words', they were convinced to genetically modify their second child, Theo (179, 180). As Amelie points out: 'Even though all their relatives told them not to worry about Seb's speech, that every child was different, the clinicians preyed on their guilty feelings. Why take the risk of having two children with learning difficulties?' (180). However, a few months later they realise that Seb had 'skipped the *ba-ba-ba-ba* baby phase; his first utterance was a complete sentence' (180; emphasis in original). As this passage demonstrates, clinicians are not concerned with improving birth conditions for women but increasing their capital by profiting from parenting anxieties. Theo's birth is heavily manipulated through multiple paid services since both parents not only 'paid for the standard germ line modifications to delete the mutation load' but also 'aesthetic tweaks' (180). The eugenic consequences of their decision are blatant in Theo's development as a child: he does not even resemble his family in physical terms and is described as being superior to Seb in almost every way: 'his persistent cherubic looks were overstated, at odds somehow with his intelligence. With that realization, Amelie suffered a panic attack' (180). In spite of dealing with this estranging topic, the text explores eugenics in a familiar environment by connecting it to mundane but relevant issues such as parenting anxieties and fears. As in socialist feminist accounts, Charnock's extrapolation narrative explores the exploitation of social reproduction as a struggle that connects the private domain of family with the public one of capitalism's mode of production. Amelie Munroe's family conflict renders visible how

technological advances are not developed to facilitate parenting struggles but, rather, to economically exploit social reproduction.

Charnock's text explores women's oppression through social reproduction as a historically contingent phenomenon to capitalism as a mode of production and effectively demystifies the role of technology as the primary factor to assess historical development. In spite of dealing with bioengineering advances that should facilitate pregnancy and parenting issues, the novel constantly complicates these assumptions by asserting the intersection between social labour exploitation and women's oppression. Social reproduction is still maintained as the basis for the material oppression of women in Charnock's extrapolated future. This relationship is clearly established in the introduction of Nancy's brief vignette – a character with no congenital relationship to the Dack or Munroe families – in the second section of the novel. The chapter shows Nancy's struggles with her family's criticism of her choice to opt for artificial insemination due to her working environment and career. When confronted by her disapproving sister Nicol – a gym trainer who opted for natural pregnancy – Nancy eventually collapses and points out:

All that pushing, and now she complains I'm a workalcoholic. She's convinced I didn't carry Timmy because I was chasing a promotion. It's not true. It bloody awful being pregnant in my job. I'm on my feet in class for six hours some days. Then I'm walking between the teaching blocks. (119)

The exploitation of her labour as a biology teacher is presented as being directly involved in her choice to gestate her son in a birth clinic. However, this choice, as Nancy explains to her sister, is far from being accepted in her working environment. The coercive nature of this labour dynamic against women is declared by referencing the case of one of her working colleagues, who in spite of deciding to carry her pregnancy is not conceded any economic allowances: 'She carried her

pregnancy and then had horrible complications with haemorrhoids... She was exhausted when she came back from maternity leave, but no one, absolutely *no one*, made any special allowances for her' (120; emphasis in original). The chapter opposes Nancy's material understanding of her predicament as a woman with Nicol's ideological discourse sustaining the exploitation of social reproduction in the capitalist mode of production. As Haraway remarks, a 'regulatory fiction basic to Western concepts of gender insists that motherhood is natural and fatherhood is cultural' (135). While Nancy asserts how women are physically and economically exploited in every possible path in which they decide to conceive a child, Nicol asserts the idealistic bond between a mother and her 'natural' child: 'You've got so little maternity leave, Nancy, because you chose clinic gestation. I'd hate that. Didn't you want more time at home with Timmy before going back to work?' (121). As these differences demonstrate, Charnock's text demystifies the role of technology in social reproduction by pointing out how these advances are immediately assimilated into the exploitation of social labour and foster prejudices against women in the working environment. The accumulation of capital is what dictates social reproduction as experienced by women in their working environment.

One of the most illustrative examples of how the relationship between labour exploitation and social reproduction is extrapolated in the text is Freya Liddicoat's struggles as a working-class single mother. Her vignette takes place in the third section of the text and encapsulates many of the social themes developed in Charnock's novel. Freya is a working-class single mother and waitress who decides to conceive her child through natural pregnancy. Her child is the result of a one-night stand affair with Gerard, who comes from a privileged social background. After finding out that Freya is ten years older than him, Gerard decides to block Freya from all his social media and possible connections. Freya explains that, even though it was not a premeditated plan, her

reasons for keeping the child, Skye, are directly linked to Gerard's economic situation: 'He had all the charm you'd expect from a fancy upbringing... That's why she kept the baby, kept Skye. It wasn't part of one premeditated plan. Given that she found herself pregnant, she knew the kid would have a good start – excellent stock and so on' (190). Freya's economic rationale is directly linked to the increasing class gap due to the legitimisation of eugenics: she keeps Skye due to his genetic association to someone from a privileged upbringing. The same economic rationale is expressed in Freya's obsession with business entrepreneurship books and her desperate attempts to fund her enterprise as a street food vendor. Freya is an illustrative example of capitalism's orientation towards the future as an economic agent acting upon fictional expectations. In Freya's view, Gerard's tuition represents a great opportunity to propel her business enterprise and fund the lease required for it: 'Gerard's money – what the books call *seed capital* – will activate her business plan, and with a bit of luck she'll be trading before the high season' (188; emphasis in original). As Gerard points out, Freya's decision to gestate the child through regular pregnancy is a consequence of her working-class background:

she *carried* the pregnancy. No intervention at all, a raw birth, and an unprivileged upbringing, from what he's gathered. She isn't a fundamentalist or some weirdo; she just doesn't have money. She's poor and she's come knocking, asking for help with the kid's education, saying he can't reach his full potential. (152; emphasis in original)

The novel extrapolates how bioengineering advances might serve to further increase the exploitation of working-class women in the future. As Freya's vignette shows, the class gap is rendered even more visible through the introduction of paid services to help women with the physical struggles of pregnancy. Her obsession with funding her business idea is a representation of the social gap that she is desperately trying to surmount through raising a child who will inherit



supposedly bourgeois superior genes. However, as Gerard notes when comparing his two sons, these genes are not inherited but manipulated through the paid service offered at clinics: ‘And even though Freya’s boy is bound to be physically bigger, Louis’s mental dexterity would be apparent to everyone’ (153-4). This passage also retroactively contextualises Seb and Theo’s passages by illustrating how genetic manipulation are not just a consequence of a capitalisation of their parents’ anxieties but also a result of their class privilege. The stark genetic contrast between families, in this sense, is indicative of the sexual division of labour at play in the eugenics of class struggle. As in socialist feminist accounts, Freya’s attempts to fund her business through Skye’s tuition show how class is constituted through the experience of sexual and gender differences. Charnock’s extrapolation narrative exhibits how Freya’s predicament is the result of the more general exploitation of social reproduction by capitalist enterprises; a process which serves to further increase the gap between classes through eugenics.

Freya’s life also reflects the financial logic at play in the emergence of birth clinics and the profitability of social reproduction. As Beckert argues, capitalism does not only entail a specific historical organisation of social relations and productive forces, but also a ‘temporal order’ according to which ‘actors – be they firms, entrepreneurs, investors, employees, or consumers – orient their activities towards a future they perceive as open and uncertain, containing unforeseeable opportunities as well as incalculable risks’ (1-2). Charnock’s extrapolation narrative offers a clear illustration of capitalism’s speculative tendency as expressed in the technological shifts in the domain of social reproduction. This is clearly stated at the moment in which Gerard and Freya begin to discuss tuition arrangements for Skye:

Each seems hesitant to make the first move, to make the first indication of a ballpark figure. It’s all about trade. Gerard reckons – this much effort, this much risk, for this much reward.

He imagines times past, the dock jammed with ships, under repair after long sea journeys.

Iron pots to Africa, slaves to the New World, sugar to Bristol. (157)

Skye's tuition is crudely compared by Gerard to the slave trade taking place in Bristol during the eighteenth century. This comparison not only reveals the financial logic at play in both historical events but, more importantly, serves to elucidate the ongoing capitalist violence exerted on marginalised subjects – working-class, women and racial minorities – which sustains capital accumulation. Gerard's crude parallel further emphasises the text's ongoing attempt to contemplate class, sex and race from an integrative perspective. This social inequality is manifested in the contrast between Gerard's privileged life and his child working-class upbringing: 'In those eleven years, Gerard has relocated three times, married, won his promotions, taken holidays to France, Italy, South Africa, New York... like the lucky bastard he is. And the boy has probably never travelled outside England' (158). Capitalism's speculative tendency towards the future is accurately represented in Freya's characters as a person. Freya continuously orients her actions towards unpredictable futures in favour of risk-taking as advised by the entrepreneurial literature she obsessively reads and follows: books such as *Everyday Psychology for Entrepreneurs* or *How to Build a Business Empire on One Good Idea* (188). This is also expressed in her extremely calculated decisions concerning Skye's future: 'Two good presents a year, and a mother who works hard, plus funny stories about the customers. He'll remember all that, she hopes, rather than the shabby state of their accommodation' (184). As these details demonstrate, Charnock's novel extrapolates historical tendencies in order to assert the speculative basis at play in technological shifts in the domain of social reproduction. The novel's focus on the private shows how even mundane everyday life choices, such as looking for a partner or giving a present to a son, are permeated by capitalist dynamics.

One of the recurrent themes explored by the text is the one of finding a suitable partner after these historical shifts in bioengineering and reproduction. Charnock's novel shows how bioengineering advances are also linked to a new dating culture. The text shows the widespread popularisation of dating services helping users find their most suitable partner. These dating services operate according to algorithms that assess psychological traits and compatibility between individuals: 'I spent an eight-hour day taking part in psychological assessment, followed by thrice-weekly therapy sessions for two months ... It's the sensitivities that constitute the make or break in most relationships' (168). In addition to this, once they pay for these dating services, individuals are passively told by their 'virtual assistants' when and where they should meet their ideal partners: 'In line with your aspirations for 2120, Julia, I've requested a revised search for a romantic interest from your new agency. You ought to maintain a permanent state of preparedness. I've now requested one hundred percent similar' (163). This commodification of dating through paid services also entails an implicit division between working-class and bourgeois individuals in the domain of social reproduction. Julia's options for parenting and dating are starkly opposed to Freya's limited possibilities due to their economic situations. Similar to Freya's entrepreneurial approach to the future, Julia's work in the financial sector also depends on fictional expectation on the future. However, in opposition to Freya, Julia's job discusses the exploitation of the working class through sessions addressing questions such as: 'What are the obstacles, political and educational, in creating gainful employment for an underskilled underclass?' (164). Class struggle is expressed in their social reproduction options: while Julia can afford all the benefits of reproduction advances and has her dates arranged by a virtual assistant, Freya's romantic interests are intimately linked to her active planning and calculations. In this sense, while social reproduction is linked to the consumption of paid services in Julia's bourgeois class, for Freya's

working-class, it is actively pursued in the domain of social labour. Charnock's text thus exposes, through mundane details and familiar issues, how the exploitation of social reproduction is experienced in distinct ways according to class differences.

Charnock's extrapolative narrative productively uses its plausibility effect to render visible and explore the fictional expectations driving economic actors pursuing imagined futures. The polyphonic structure of the novel shows how social reproduction is distinctly experienced according to class, sexual and gender differences. In this sense, the novel maintains a narrative method which is deeply akin to socialist feminism's idea of social reproduction as one of the main driving factors in the exploitation of women in the context of capitalism. Moreover, this theme is explored from a perspective according to which class, gender and sexual differences are constitutively integrated in the actualisation of women's oppression. The narrative method at play in Charnock's novel effectively uses extrapolation to maintain a political critique of the capitalist underpinning of social reproduction. Instead of extrapolating the present tendencies according to a mystified notion of technology or science, the text constantly shows how the mode of production informs historical shifts in the realm of social reproduction. In this sense, while showing how technological advances might conduce to considerable changes in birthing alternatives and cultural paradigms concerning parenthood and the family, the text is primarily concerned with how these historical shifts are primarily determined and constituted by the social and historical reality of sexual and class struggle.

## **Conclusion**

Extrapolation narratives, as demonstrated in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Charnock's *Dreams Before the Birth of Time*, have been crucial to the development of feminist speculative

fiction. While both novels exhibit critiques of patriarchal structures through the exercise of extrapolating and projecting historical tendencies in the present, they also deploy markedly different narrative world-building methods which lead to distinct political results. In the case of Atwood's novel, extrapolation has a twofold effect which enacts its nostalgic view of the present: while projecting totalitarian tendencies into a dystopian future in the form of religious fundamentalism and remnants of fascist ideology, it conversely conveys an idyllic image of contemporary capitalist conditions. The lack of historical and material foregrounding in Atwood's dystopian novel promotes a nostalgic view of the historical present. Plausibility is a rhetorical effect enacted through overt allegorical parallels to fascist social formations and implicitly disavows the contemporary exploitation of social reproduction in the capitalist United States. In the case of Charnock's narrative, extrapolation maintains a highly aporetic structure that reproduces fictional expectations at the level of narrative logic through a traditional use of scientific plausibility that effectively deals with the subject of social reproduction as a historically contingent phenomenon within the context of capitalism. This novel deploys a narrative world-building method that integrates sexual and class differences in a reciprocal relationship by showing how social reproduction is experienced according to these different domains of social struggle.

## Conclusion

Speculative fiction provides a suitable mode for thinking capitalist social reality. With the commodification of culture and the development of financial markets, fantasy has become a crucial component in arranging capitalist relations and concealing the social contradiction of the mode of production, which cannot be assessed from the standpoint of empirical realism. Marx acknowledged the relevance of the fantastic in his critique of political economy, not only in his Gothic vocabulary – spectres and vampires – but, most importantly, as a component that effectively dictates social practice. The first volume of *Capital* begins with the assertion that capitalism presents itself as a monstrous (*ungenheure*) accumulation of commodities – not an enormous one as has been traditionally translated in English. This analytical view is developed in Marx’s thesis of commodity fetishism as social practice. Commodity fetishism, according to Marx, is a ‘definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things’ (*Capital I* 43). Fantasy – the non-real or impossible – creates the conditions by which individuals interact in everyday social life, that is, through abstract exchange-values deposited in commodities rather than their immediate use-values: ‘Use-values are only produced by capitalists, because, and in so far as, they are the material substratum, the depositories of exchange-value’ (*Capital I* 120-1). As Marx points out, ‘[t]here is nothing left of [the products of labour] in each case but the same phantom-like objectivity’ (*Capital I* 15). This is what leads Walter Benjamin to claim that the social phenomenology of capitalism corresponds to ‘the singular debasement of things through their price as commodities’ (22). The fantastic, as Mark Fisher points out, represents capitalism’s ability to ‘transform matter into commodity, commodity into value, and value into capital’ (27). It is precisely because of its alterity function that speculative fiction can provide a useful model to materialize the fantasies shaping social life.

The financial economy is an even more explicit demonstration of the symbiotic relationship between the fantastic and the material in capitalism's mode of production. Marx elaborates this argument in *Capital Vol. III* by characterising capitalism's immanent development and endogenous tendency towards crises as being determined by promissory claims on future fictitious value (*Capital III* 358). As Marx remarks, '[i]n interest-bearing capital, the capital relationship reaches its most superficial and fetishized form' (*Capital Vol. III* 515). Interest-bearing capital demonstrates that fantasies shape the temporal disposition of capitalism. The credit system, for Marx, is not based on rational calculations and probabilities but, rather, '*develops the motive of capitalist production, enrichment by the exploitation of others' labour, into the purest and most colossal system of gambling and swindling*' (*Capital Vol. III* 572; emphases in original). Fictitious value, as Annie McClanahn points out, 'is a false value whose origins and effects are nonetheless intractably material' (90). What distinguishes fictitious from real capital 'is simply that 'real' capital produces surplus value, whereas interest-bearing 'fictitious' capital is the buying and selling of claims on surplus value produced elsewhere or in the future' (90). As Beckert claims, '[u]nder conditions of uncertainty, assessments of how the future will look share important characteristics with literary fiction: most importantly, they create a reality of their own by making assertions that go beyond the reporting of empirical facts' (60). More than any type of realist fiction, speculative fiction produces imaginaries of the future which, with their internal realism and logic, reproduce capitalism's financial rationale.

To understand capitalist dynamics, it is essential to consider the role of fantasies in dictating the network of social relations, concealing the material realities of social labour exploitation and the formation of financial imaginaries. Capitalism estranges its own material conditions of existence and social contradictions. It is precisely due to its estrangement-as-alterity

function that speculative fiction can potentially materialize these capitalist fantasies, revealing their commanding role in the mode of production. The genre's anti-mimetic impulse is what renders speculative fiction closer to the monstrous fantastic form which constitutes the phenomenology of capitalism's social-material world. Teratology, such as the Remade and slake-moths in China Miéville's *New Weird* fiction, can function to render visible capital's transformative power on the material world and reveal the network of social relations embodied in its fantastic form. The crude materialism promoted by some sectors of Marxist criticism, however, completely misses this point. Vladimir Lenin's observations concerning the rift between dreams and reality are a succinct formulation of this traditional understanding of the fantastic: 'The rift between dreams and reality causes no harm only if the person dreaming believes seriously in his dream' (110). Lenin's observations underlie the claim that fantasy can be harmful if it is disconnected from reality. As Miéville points out with regards to Lenin's view of the fantastic: 'There is *always* some connection between dreams and life, and it is our job to tease out those connections, whatever the dream – or fantasy – is about' (47; emphasis in original). In Mark Bould's view, 'it is the very *fantasy* of fantasy as a mode that, at least potentially, gives it space for a hard-headed critical consciousness of capitalist subjectivity' (83). Speculative fiction offers multiple narrative strategies to render visible the link between reality and fantasy in the context of global capitalism.

Speculative fiction can open new modes of thinking historicity precisely because reality under capitalist conditions is an ideological construct. The Lacanian distinction between the Real and reality articulates the necessity of developing a theory of speculative fiction. Capitalist realism is the naturalized ideological version of reality functioning as the symbolic matrix to which subjects have to adhere in order to be integrated into the social order. Following Lacanian theory,



Bould maintains that ‘taking one’s place in the Symbolic Order means living in a paranoid system that is currently sanctioned’ (79). The elusive Real, on the other hand, avoids signification but only manifests itself through inconsistencies found in capitalist ‘reality’. This fractured understanding of reality provides a suitable model to understand the estrangement produced by speculative fiction: a narrative device that effectively defamiliarizes ‘reality’ through its alterity function. Even though fantasies are not the equivalent to the material world, they nonetheless are the only means by which the subject can approach the Real. However, fantasies, as Žižek points out, can strategically operate to reveal the Real repressed by reality:

Usually we say that we should not mistake fiction for reality – remember the postmodern doxa according to which ‘reality’ is a discursive product, a symbolic fiction which we misperceive as a substantial autonomous entity. The lesson of psychoanalysis here is the opposite one: *we should not mistake reality for fiction* – we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it. (*Welcome* 19; emphasis in original)

Elaborating on this Lacanian perspective, Slavoj Žižek maintains that ‘[t]he difference between Lacan and ‘naïve realism’ is that for Lacan the only point at which we approach this hard kernel of the Real is indeed the [ideological] dream [structuring] social reality’ (*Sublime Object*. 48). Speculative fiction operates in a similar manner way by implicitly acknowledging the impossibility of reality. This overt mimetic disavowal is what enables the genre to potentially account for the ‘hard kernel of the Real’ which can only be approached through its fantastic form. Speculative fiction can potentially render visible the fantasies that individuals mistake for fiction in capitalist social practice.

This distinction between reality and the Real articulates the potential of speculative fiction as a suitable mode to grasp the fantastic form both precluding and shaping social reality. Speculative fiction works enable new modes of thinking the fantastic form already influencing historical affairs in the context of capitalism. Interrogating history is an exercise that involves more than the impassive reporting of empirical facts or re-presenting the inert factuality of the past. Speculative fiction, through the estrangement performed in its narrative world-building, provides anamorphic perspectives via which to potentially grasp the specific historical forces involved in the reproduction of the capitalist order. Speculative fiction demonstrates literature's potential to conceptualise society as a totality. This does not entail the ridiculous claim that speculative fiction is a consistently historically self-conscious narrative genre. Observing the vast corpus within the genre offers a swift counter-argument to this claim: the conflation of politics into an ethics of Good and Evil in staples of the genre such as C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and J.K. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a clear demonstration of this regressive potential. However, either implicitly or not, speculative fiction always promotes a conceptualisation of society as a totality that both relativizes dominant perceptions of history and offers alternative ways of thinking historical development. The point is not to claim that the hermeneutic systems by which the genre interprets history are inherently progressive or regressive, but, rather, to simply assert the genre's approach to social reality as a totality.

The anamorphic estrangement performed by works of speculative fiction has the potential to interrogate history in varyingly mediated ways. Extrapolation, as observed in future-oriented works of science fiction, is not the only means by which the genre can interrogate history in a productive manner. Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy is an illustrative example of the potential of alternative universes – which openly do not seek to represent empirical reality – to materialize the

monstrous form of capitalism's mode of production. Capitalism's tendency towards crises is complexly thematised in Bas-Lag socio-political narrative space but, also, acutely represented in the estrangement performed by Miéville's Weird teratology. The Weird is metaphorically articulated in order to outline and reveal capitalism's endogenous tendency towards crises. Monsters displaying a radical alterity function, within the internal realism of the Bas-Lag universe, as indicative markers of capitalism's crises. By using Marxism as its world-building methodology, the whole Bas-Lag universe operates as a persuasive metaphor for the possibility of revolutionary praxis in these inevitable moments of crises. Similar to its implementation in art, the anamorphic narrative space is composed in a way that expresses a Marxist view of history. Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy, in this sense, promotes a Marxist understanding of historical development through its conceptualization of crises as being endogenous to the mode of production. This understanding of history is linked to the persuasive aim of reinvigorating the fantasy of revolution and raise relevant questions concerning its strategic dilemmas.

Past-oriented forms of speculative fiction can potentially reveal the ways in which capitalism manipulates history as a narrative form. This thorough interrogation of history is not a feature exclusive to Miéville's New Weird fiction but constitutes a significant tendency in a vast corpus of speculative fiction. The anamorphic estrangement of speculative fiction has been used to interrogate dominant and ideological perceptions of history. The genre's relativization of perspective allows marginalised writers to put into question and challenge 'reality' as an ideological construct serving to reproduce the hegemonic order. This ability to interrogate history is one of the reasons why the genre has been privileged by Black writers in the United States. Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) offer clear attempts to render visible the legacy of the Antebellum slave trade in post-slavery conditions

in the United States. Time-traveling and counterfactual historicity are focal points of estrangement distorting the realism depicted in each novel – the anamorphic points by which the text interrogates the perceived reality as an ideological construct. These novels combine neo-slave realism with speculative fiction tropes in order to estrange the reader’s dominant perception of the Antebellum period. This past-oriented type of speculative fiction enables new modes of materializing – through ghosts and time-travel – the afterlives of slavery in the United States. Speculative fiction, however, has not only been deployed to interrogate the legacy of the past. Afrofuturism is an artistic and philosophical movement that has been preoccupied with the ‘intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation’ (Wormack 9). Afrofuturists attempted to ‘redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future’ and combine ‘element[s] of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs’ (Wormack 9). Speculative fiction has been crucial to Black African writers such as Dambudzo Marechera and, most recently, Tade Thompson, Peter Kalu and Namwali Serpell among many others.

The same situation has been true in the case of women writers using speculative fiction as a device to interrogate the historical underpinning of patriarchal structures. Women and Black writers have been pivotal in the development of the genre beyond the technological and extrapolatory narratives of traditional science fiction. The sociological approach of these writers during the New Wave of speculative fiction in the 1960s challenged the prevalent use of science as a rational device to explain historical development. The anamorphic estrangement of speculative fiction, in its most ‘progressive’ and social version, was critically developed in this historical period by the works of feminist and Black writers. Novels such as Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975) implemented speculative fiction

elements to critically engage with their historical context of production. In addition to this, both novels analyse the specificity of patriarchal structures within the material and historical context of capitalism as a mode of production. Anne Charnock's *Dreams Before the Start of Time* (2017), by positing social reproduction as the basis for its world-building method, explores the same intersectional issues – sex, gender and class – treated by previous feminist speculative fiction. This tradition demonstrates the potential of the genre for interrogating patriarchal conceptions of history and its ability to produce hermeneutics aiming to historicize such power structures. The anamorphic estrangement performed by speculative fiction allows these writers to imagine society as a totality and thus propose novel ways of thinking the historical underpinning of patriarchal structures in capitalist societies. As these literary examples demonstrate, speculative fiction is a productive device to think the intersectional points between sex, gender and class within the historical context of global capitalism.

### **Future Research**

The thesis that estrangement is what unites the multiple genres within speculative fiction raises several questions. One of the most relevant issues pertains to the origin and division of the genre into its current subcategories: why does speculative fiction become a dominant narrative form in the context of late capitalism? For what reasons has the label of speculative fiction only recently been recently marketized and deemed an object of study for literary criticism? What do the ideologies at play in generic determinations reflect about capitalism's cultural logic? The estrangement produced by speculative fiction inevitably relativizes dominant perceptions of reality but, simultaneously, imposes totalising perspective on society that can reproduce both regressive and progressive visions of history. Speculative fiction reflects the monstrous social reality of

capitalism as theorised by Marxist criticism; however, this ability to reproduce the system's fantastic form is not a guarantee of the political ideas expressed in particular texts within the genre.

Another area of enquiry for future research is the analysis of mainstream speculative fiction literature according to the notion of anamorphic estrangement. While my research has been predominantly concerned with the political potential of estrangement in canonized works within the genre, it should be noted that speculative fiction is one of the most widely consumed forms of narrative fiction. This phenomenon raises several relevant questions concerning the analysis of this genre for any type of Marxist criticism preoccupied with capitalism and the culture industry. Since the genre reproduces the monstrous form of capitalist social reality, it is also relevant to investigate how the speculative fiction grapples with capitalist ideology in its most commodified versions and, possibly, elucidate the reasons for its popularity. The study of evidently 'progressive' canonical works of speculative fiction leaves out some of the most popular works within the genre: J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series; George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*; Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*; Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*; and many more. Suvinian Marxist criticism on speculative fiction has traditionally dismissed the analysis of mainstream narrative works, such as Gothic and fantasy literature, due to their assumed regressive political value. Beginning from the premise that mainstream speculative fiction is inevitably regressive in political terms can lead to the erroneous assessment of particular texts within its literary production. This conception of mainstream literary production can be observed as following Theodor Adorno's idea of the culture industry as a control mechanism aiming to deceive and submit the masses into the system that dominates them: 'Everyone must show that he wholly identifies himself with the power which is belabouring him' (155). From Adorno's point of view, the culture industry is essentially homogeneous and 'impresses the same stamp on everything' (123). Speculative fiction, however,

while reproducing the monstrous form of capitalist social world, does not possess an inherent political tendency. In addition to this, if the subgenres of speculative fiction have been divided according to epiphenomenal and ideological criteria, there is a possible opening for an ideological critique of such divides through textual analysis of the most popular works within the genre. These areas of enquiry raise several questions: Why is speculative fiction so widely consumed in the late capitalist historical context? What is the relationship between popular SF works and capitalist ideology? According to which mechanisms and textual devices is capitalist ideology grappled with or reproduced in these narrative works? The study of these popular forms of speculative fiction can lead to possibly productive and surprising conclusions for cultural studies of late capitalism.

One of the most interesting areas of criticism for future research is the notion of the speculative maintained by the genre and its relationship to capitalism, particularly the underlying logic of financial markets. This connection has been secondarily developed within the scope of this research – the social-material world reproduced by capitalism seems to be akin to the overt fantastic form of speculative fiction. The paranoid ontologies of fantasy, as Bould claims, provide a ‘space for a hard-headed critical consciousness of capitalist subjectivity’ (84). However, the opposite claim is also a relevant thesis, namely, that speculative fiction provides an apt space to reproduce and promote capitalist ideology. The financial economy is dominated and driven by fictional expectations constituting imaginaries about the future. These imaginaries, as Beckert points out, ‘are not free-floating fantasies’ (60). These fantasies have material consequences in the development of the mode of production: ‘outlooks on the future and the courses of action that are based on them are socially constrained through the distribution of wealth and power, through cognitive frames, through networks, through formal and informal institutions, and through normative obligation’ (60). It would be fruitful to enquire how fictional imaginaries about the

future in the economy establish a dialogue with the future-oriented forms of speculative fiction. As Beckert argues, '[c]apitalism is a socioeconomic system oriented towards the future' (269). Speculative fiction is also a genre which is primarily oriented towards the future. In this sense, the parallels and disjunction between the fictional futures depicted by both areas of criticism could be investigated through a critique of ideology. This could also be explored through the analysis of speculative fiction's most commodified and popular forms, that is, through narrative works which might reflect capitalist ideology in a more straightforward manner.

The understanding of speculative fiction as promoting anamorphic perspectives by which to grasp history implicitly opens areas for consideration of the notion that postmodern culture asserts 'an incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard xxiv). While the visions of history proposed by the genre are seldom taken seriously by its readers, they do express a widespread fascination for grasping history in a totalizing manner. Assessed from its cultural production standpoint, speculative fiction produces multiple metanarratives concerning history by which texts conceptualise society as a whole. The tropes repeated ad nauseam by the genre in its most commodified forms, such as the metaphysics of Good and Evil in fantasy fiction, testify to capitalism's production and consumption of metanarratives concerning teleological progress. It could, of course, be pointed out that this commodification of this specific type of metanarrative is a by-product of the current postmodern condition and the waning of historicity that defines it. The imposition of these narratives concerning historical development, nonetheless, is a crucial aspect to achieve a better understanding of the genre, a feature which could possibly be linked to its widespread consumption in current capitalist societies. Metanarratives, from this point of view, have not been neglected in postmodern culture but are actively reproduced and consumed through their commodification in speculative fiction. This cultural phenomenon can also raise awareness



concerning the visions of history promoted by these particular novels. In this sense, Marxist cultural studies can explore this cultural production – Marvel films and comics, Japanese anime and manga, best-seller fantasy novels – in order to elucidate the link between these metanarratives and capitalist culture.

These areas of enquiry demonstrate the need for analysing the most commodified areas of cultural production. Speculative fiction, even in its most mainstream forms, maintains totalising perspectives on social reality that can be assessed from multiple points of view. The genre effectively mimics the monstrous fantastic form of capitalism's social reality and, for this reason, can serve to promote a plethora of visions of historical reality. Marxist criticism can serve to extract the implicit methods and associated metanarratives at play in the narrative world-building of speculative fiction. This exercise can lead to a productive focus on how history is rearranged in franchised and non-franchised works within the genre. Capitalism itself constantly rearranges history through imaginaries of the future that effectively dictate the actions of individuals in the financial economy. Likewise, capitalist social practice estranges its material and historical conditions of existence – the exploitation of social labour, class, race and gender struggle – and serves to conceal the social network embodied in commodities and money. Speculative fiction, through its own anamorphic estrangement, can offer a multiplicity of narrative devices to either materialize the fantasies structuring social reality or further conceal the material and historical dimensions obscured by them. In either case, the study of speculative fiction can be a productive task for any literary criticism preoccupied with the analysis of capitalism's fantastic form.

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