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Subtexts of Subversion:

Counter-Hegemonic Discourses in Contemporary Fiction under Neoliberalism

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Modern Languages

Bangor University, School of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

The past forty years have witnessed the progressive shift of neoliberalism from economic and political doctrine to ontological imperative (Huehls and Greenwald Smith, 2017). So pervasively has neoliberal ideology bled into previously non-economic areas of social life that it is now perceived as a natural, inevitable and unquestionable brand of Gramscian 'common sense'. This inescapability of the neoliberal hegemony has led critics such as Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson to affirm that it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the breakdown of late capitalism.

Through an analysis of literary representations of what has effectively been the neoliberalisation of work, space and leisure, this thesis explores the ways in which contemporary literature challenges the indisputability of the neoliberal discourse and rejects the unimaginability of any alternative to the status quo. In so doing, this thesis reasserts the committed character of contemporary literature and its role in exposing the socially constructed nature of the neoliberal consensus. By means of a comparative analysis of novels published from the 1980s to the 2010s in Britain, the United States and Italy, this work brings into dialogue the literary traditions of the more prototypically neoliberal British and American economies with that of a country where the process of neoliberalisation was more recent and arguably only half-hearted.

In order to decode the authors' portrayal of the existential condition under neoliberalism, this thesis avails itself of the conceptual framework of 'liminality' in its recent applications to advanced, industrialised societies (Turner, 1974; Szakolczai, 2014; Thomassen, 2014). This research recognises in liminality a recurring feature of contemporary society and it interprets it as both symptomatic of an increasing precarisation of existence and, by virtue of its associations with transitional and transformational states that render it a fertile terrain for the emergence of counter-hegemonic discourses, as an instrument of systemic critique.

DECLARATION

Yr wyf drwy hyn yn datgan mai canlyniad fy ymchwil fy hun yw'r thesis hwn, ac eithrio lle nodir yn wahanol. Caiff ffynonellau eraill eu cydnabod gan droednodiadau yn rhoi cyfeiriadau eglur. Nid yw sylwedd y gwaith hwn wedi cael ei dderbyn o'r blaen ar gyfer unrhyw radd, ac nid yw'n cael ei gyflwyno ar yr un pryd mewn ymgeisiaeth am unrhyw radd oni bai ei fod, fel y cytunwyd gan y Brifysgol, am gymwysterau deuol cymeradwy.

I hereby declare that this thesis is the results of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. All other sources are acknowledged by bibliographic references. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree unless, as agreed by the University, for approved dual awards.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis deals with the literary representation of neoliberalism in British, American and Italian prose fiction published between the 1980s and the 2010s. By closely analysing a selected corpus of novels, this project aims to compare and contrast the transformative effects that the adoption of neoliberal ideology at economic, political, social and ontological levels had on Italian society, with those identifiable in more prototypically neoliberal countries such as Britain and the United States of America. Secondly, this thesis attempts to offer an explanation for possible commonalities and discrepancies in the portrayal of neoliberalism in different literary traditions by reason of the socioeconomic context in which the works analysed were produced or that they depict. Finally, this research seeks to reassess and reaffirm the engagement of contemporary literature with the present and to evaluate its success in propositioning itself as a form of resistance against the ubiquitous neoliberal logic.

1. Neoliberal "common sense": terms and scope of the project

A preliminary clarification is needed here regarding the scope of the term 'neoliberalism' as it is employed throughout this thesis. According to the scholars Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro, 'neoliberalism', 'a standard keyword [used] to categorise the present regime of accumulation',[1] is variously understood in the academic debate as a set of economic policies, a development model, an ideology, an academic paradigm and a historical era.[2] The economic geographer David Harvey, in his widely read 2005 work *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, defines it as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'.[3] Harvey argues that neoliberalism's success in replacing the Keynesian form of controlled capitalism that had prevailed in Western countries in the post-war period, and its triumph in establishing itself as the new dominant economic paradigm, were in no small part due to the appeal that the ideals of human dignity and individual freedom had on society as a whole, in their being at the heart not only of neoliberal ideology, but also of anti-systemic

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[1] Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro, *World Literature, Neoliberalism, and the Culture of Discontent* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 1.
[2] Ibid., p. 2.
[3] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

movements such as the 1968 student protests. Contrary to the ambitions of these dissident groups, however, neoliberalism revealed itself to be what the cultural critic Henry Giroux defines as ‘a more virulent and brutal form of market capitalism’ that, in its positing of the market as ‘the organising principle for all political, social and economic decisions’, waged ‘an incessant attack on democracy, public goods, and non-commodified values’.[4]

Indeed, aside from its more recognisable economic and political characteristics, such as its drive for the deregulation of markets and financial capital, its outspoken support for the privatisation of previously state-owned industries and sectors, its attempt to undermine labour power and to dismantle the social safety nets guaranteed by the welfare state, neoliberalism represented, in the words of the scholar Lisa Duggan, ‘a new vision of national and world order, a vision of competition, inequality, market “discipline”, public austerity, and “law and order”’.[5] As pointed out by the political theorist Wendy Brown, the impact of neoliberalism reaches much further than the economic sphere, as it ‘involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action’.[6] With neoliberal thought securing its hegemony as a mode of discourse thanks to calculated political choices and ‘everything either [being] for sale or […] plundered for profit’,[7] areas of life that were previously considered as non market-oriented, such as education, health, leisure and even art, have been infected by capitalist for-profit rationality.

This thesis is specifically concerned with the literary representations of these wider effects of neoliberal ideology. This project looks at the social consequences of neoliberal policies on a now “liminal” individual whose life is fragmented by job precarity and by the constant imperative of flexibility, and whose need for community is frustrated by widespread hyper-individualism and by the calculative attitudes that now lie at the base of most social interactions, with practices such as “networking” exemplifying well this distinct blend of sociality and convenience. This work explores the impact of neoliberalism on an individual whose right to “downtime” is only justified by the extrinsic motivation that a period of rest will guarantee that sufficiently high levels of productivity are maintained once back at work; whose free time has been appropriated and commodified by the leisure industry; and finally, an

[4] Henry Giroux, ‘The Terror of Neoliberalism: Rethinking the Significance of Cultural Politics’, *College Literature*, 32.1 (2005), p. 2.
[5] Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), p. X.
[6] Wendy Brown, ‘Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy’, in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 40.
[7] Henry Giroux, ‘The Terror of Neoliberalism: Rethinking the Significance of Cultural Politics’, p. 2.

individual whose relationship with space has been reshaped as a result of neoliberalism's privatising impulses.

So pervasive is the neoliberal grip on all aspects of social life that critics such as Fredric Jameson[8] and Slavoj Žižek[9] have come to the conclusion that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of late capitalism as we know it. As a matter of fact, for all neoliberalism's strenuous defence of the inviolability of individual freedom (when this is threatened, for example, by state interference in economic matters), the freedom to "opt out" of the system is not contemplated. The neoliberal Weltanschauung, or *épistémè*, in Foucauldian terms, becomes the only possible one – since, as famously pronounced by Margaret Thatcher, "There is no alternative"[10] – and the principles of competition, the primacy of the market, and a new form of social Darwinism, which ascribes the faults of the system to individuals, become internalised. In this sense, neoliberalism functions as a form of governmentality,[11] to borrow once again from Foucault's terminology, where the individuals-subjects self-discipline according to an accepted worldview that is perceived as natural and thus is less susceptible to scrutiny.

Historically, the dissemination of neoliberal ideology across all aspects of social life can be seen as a gradual process that, from its economic dawn in the 1970s with the American president Richard Nixon's unpegging of the dollar from the gold standard, over the course of the following decades began to inform political decisions, effected change in noneconomic areas of social activity and finally took root as the new consensus, thus emerging as a hermeneutic instrument to understand reality. The scholars Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith convincingly identify four phases or modes through which neoliberalism has advanced to this stage. Firstly, a mainly "economic phase" in the 1970s, when, with the undoing of the Bretton Woods monetary agreement that had stipulated that fixed exchange rates would be maintained between other countries' currencies and the dollar, it became easier for capital to move across borders thus paving the way for the 'accelerated rise of speculative financial capitalism'.[12] The second phase is the "political" one of the 1980s, when neoliberal economic doctrines were implemented in Britain and in the US through the respective policies of

[8] Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. XII: 'it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism'.
[9] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 334: 'it is easier to imagine a total catastrophe which ends all life on earth than it is to imagine a real change in capitalist relations'.
[10] Thatcher employed this slogan in several speeches during her time as Prime Minister.
[11] See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
[12] Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), p. 6.

Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, which effectively pushed for the privatisation of public services and the weakening of labour. However, it is only with the third stage, which Huehls and Greenwald Smith term the "sociocultural phase" of the 1990s, that we see a 'more granular extension of the neoliberal ideology to previously noneconomic domains of human life'.[13] According to the scholars, it is during the Clinton-Blair years that 'literature and other forms of art, alongside community, education, romance, entertainment, health, technology, law and nature [become] subjected to a rigorous economic calculus committed to efficient profit maximisation' and that 'neoliberalism shifts from political ideology'[14] to what Antonio Gramsci calls 'common sense'.[15] The last mode of neoliberalism, finally, would be the "ontological phase" of the 2000s, when the new market rationality transitioned from a way of *thinking* to a way of *being*, 'a mode of existence defined by individual self-responsibility, entrepreneurial action, and the maximisation of human capital'.[16]

In keeping with the above reading of the evolution of neoliberalism, the choice of case studies for this project has been temporally limited to literary texts published after the 1980s, as it was during this decade that, as Huehls and Greenwald Smith explain, 'the representational content of literature [began] to address neoliberalism as both economic innovation and political ideology'.[17] Moreover, during the sociocultural and ontological phases of the 1990s and the 2000s whereby neoliberalism penetrated 'the very structures and forms that writers use to make sense of the realities they represent, construct and imagine',[18] the effects of the neoliberal dogma on literary theory and form (such as the return to realism and the success of the memoir genre) became more tangible.

If neoliberalism's historical progression from economic doctrine to ontological imperative provides justification for the adoption of a temporal framework that spans from the 1980s to the 2010s, the decision concerning the geographical scope of this analysis is also historically motivated. Whilst Britain and the United States are amongst the first countries whose leaders translated the economic doctrines of neoliberalism into precise political ideologies in the 1980s, thus helping garner widespread consent around them, for a variety of reasons Italy's embracement of neoliberalism came later and was not as whole-hearted. After the end of the

[13] Ibid., p. 7.
[14] Ibid., p. 8.
[15] Gramsci discusses the concept of "common sense" in several parts of his *Prison Notebooks*, where the term indicates a set of practices that are held in common by the people of a country or region, such as cultural and traditional values, beliefs, fears etc. See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975; 1992).
[16] Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, p. 9.
[17] Ibid., p. 7.
[18] Ibid., p. 3.

Second World War, most Western countries had social democratic, Christian democratic or dirigiste governments, and the consensus was that, in line with Keynesian economics, state intervention in economic matters was necessary to achieve the objectives of full employment and widespread social welfare. In some countries, including Britain and Italy, a number of key industries like coal, steel and automobiles were state-owned. With high rates of unemployment and rising inflation towards the end of the 1960s and with the lasting stagflation of the 1970s, however, the effectiveness of Keynesian liberalism was brought into question and a debate arose between the proponents of social democracy and state planning and those who, espousing the theories of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, called for the re-establishment of greater market freedom. If, as mentioned above, the demise of the gold standard in 1971 cleared the path for the liberation of capital across borders, at a political level, it was with the election of Margaret Thatcher in Britain in May 1979 and of Ronald Reagan in the United States in 1981 that neoliberalism entered politics for all intents and purposes.

Following public discontent towards the trade unions, whose power the mainstream media decried as responsible for the disruptions of frequent strikes during the seventies, Thatcher's victory carried with it a clear mandate for their curbing. In the stagnant economy of that decade, moreover, the nationalised industries were seen as a drain on the state's finances, which provided a convincing rationale for their subsequent privatisation. The state's responsibility was also scaled down with regards to welfare provision, which was supported by a rhetoric that replaced the talk of social solidarity with that of personal responsibility. Competition, individualism and private property became the new catchwords, and within the ten years of Thatcher's government, Britain was transformed into a country of 'relatively low wages' and 'a largely compliant labour force'[19] by comparison with the rest of Europe.

In the United States, it was in October 1979, under the Carter administration, that Paul Volcker, chairman of the US Federal Reserve Bank, first devised a plan for an American monetary policy that rejected Keynesianism and full employment in an attempt to keep inflation in check and to recover from the stagflation that had characterised the global economy of the 1970s. Harvey defines the "Volcker shock" as 'a necessary but not sufficient condition for neoliberalisation',[20] which was significantly advanced by Reagan's policies of deregulation, tax and budget cuts, and attacks on trade unions. A highly symbolic episode in this sense was the decertification of the PATCO, a white-collar trade union of air traffic

[19] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 59.
[20] Ibid., p. 24.

controllers, by the Federal Labor Relations Authority following an "illegal" strike in 1981. The deregulation abetted by Reagan was wide-reaching and 'opened up new zones of untrammelled market freedoms for powerful corporate interests'.[21] The process of deindustrialisation within federal borders was accompanied by transferring production to foreign markets with cheaper labour, and the independence of the market became an expedient to restore the economic power of the upper class. Whilst, when compared to the US, Britain had a stronger welfare state and nationalised industries in key sectors, in both countries, according to Harvey, the introduction of neoliberalisation relied on changes to labour relations and the fight against inflation.[22]

To some extent, Italy's post-war history paralleled that of Britain and the USA. At the end of the hostilities in 1945 and with the general election of 1946, the Italian political scene was marked by the hegemony of the centre Christian Democratic Party (DC). The DC governed undisputed until 1994, overseeing the economic "miracle" of the 1960s, which witnessed the industrialisation and modernisation of a country whose economy had, until then, been largely agricultural. Along with the American aid provided by the Marshall Plan, the state's interventionism served to facilitate unprecedented economic growth by encouraging investment through favourable taxation, aiding in the development of national infrastructure, and keeping interest rates low. This repentine transformation of the Italian economy, however, was highly inhomogeneous, and the economic boom only benefitted the north-west and parts of the north-east and Centre, which experienced a revolution in living standards. The southern regions, on the other hand, did not undergo any real development and mostly relied on the financial help provided by the "Cassa del Mezzogiorno" state fund, 'a powerful pacifying tool that consisted of subsidies that were more effective in creating clientelistic networks than economic growth'.[23] In the wealthier north, though, an appetite for consumerism emerged, which, as noted by the historian Christopher Duggan, helped integrate the nation by giving Italians 'a new set of unifying symbols'.[24] This desire for consumer goods and for the capitalist way of life, according to Duggan, contributed to confining the Italian Communist Party (PCI) to a permanent position at the opposition, since 'whilst the PCI struggled to promote the image of the Soviet Union, and with it an austere morality of self-sacrifice in the interests of the collectivity, cinema, television, glossy weekly magazines, and a variety of other new media

[21] Ibid., p. 26.

[22] For a more complete overview of neoliberalisation in Britain and in the United States, see the above-mentioned text by David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

[23] Marco Briziarelli, 'Neoliberalism as a State-Centric Class Project: the Italian Case', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 25.1 (2011), p. 10.

[24] Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 274.

poured out a much more seductive message of private consumption' so that 'the dreams of most ordinary Italians in the 1950s were made in Hollywood, not Moscow'.[25]

This ascendancy of capitalism did not go unchallenged in Italy or in other European countries though, and, under the allure of Marxist thought and of Mao's China, the rejection of consumerism – paired with a disavowal of the family as a sacred unit and of authority in general – materialised in the protest movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Compared to their European equivalent, the militant opposition to the state and the culture of protest in Italy survived far longer and mobilised bigger and more vital groups such as Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua, and eventually evolved into the trail of terror attacks that shook the country for over a decade during the seventies (the so-called Years of Lead).

Similar to other economies, the 1970s saw a major recession and a surge in the rates of unemployment in Italy, and the government was forced to devalue the currency to promote exports, but this resulted in increased prices at home. The recession only came to an end in 1984 and, in the years that followed, Italy experienced almost a second economic boom, with a drop in inflation and a significant growth in its GDP, to the extent that in 1987 the Italian government declared that Italy was now ahead of Britain as the world's fifth industrial power.

By the end of the 1980s, this second economic "miracle" had exhausted itself and Italy's economy began to stagnate once again. Moreover, within a few years, the political configuration that had characterised the previous fifty years, with the DC in charge and the PCI at the opposition or in a coalition with it, was turned upside-down by the scandal of *tangentopoli* ("Bribesville") in 1993. This scandal saw thousands of prominent Italian businessmen and politicians being jailed or investigated for corruption crimes, thus sanctioning the end of the "First Republic".[26]

The Italian experience differed from the earlier neoliberalisation of Britain and the US, where neoliberal policies had been fully embraced in the 1980s and carried forward by the New Labour government of Tony Blair and by the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton in the 1990s. Until the late eighties, Italy had followed a neocorporatist model with 'a centralised form of ruling in which state, capital and labour negotiate[d] every economic and social aspect of the country'.[27] With the exception of Britain, other member states of the European Union had resisted neoliberal reforms, also in light of the economic difficulties exhibited by those

[25] Ibid., pp. 251–52.
[26] For a more detailed account of the history of post-war Italy, see Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*.
[27] Marco Briziarelli, 'Neoliberalism as a State-Centric Class Project: the Italian case', p. 11.

countries that had embarked more committedly on the neoliberal journey. It was only with the Maastricht agreement of 1991 that, as a result of the pressure exerted by more neoliberalised countries such as Britain, 'a broadly neoliberal framework' was set for 'the internal organisation of the European Union',[28] and with the Washington Consensus of the mid 1990s, the British and American models were recognised as the most suitable to resolve the problems faced by the economy in that period.

In Italy, it was at the dawn of the "Second Republic" with the victory of businessman Silvio Berlusconi in the 1994 general election, that neoliberalism properly entered the political and social discourse. Despite traceable associations with disgraced politicians from the *tangentopoli* scandal, Berlusconi presented himself as a "new man", and his entrance into politics and candidature for the premiership as constituting his "discesa in campo" ("entering the field"). By emphasising his business background and entrepreneurial spirit, Berlusconi explicitly sought to distance himself from a political landscape with which the electorate had become disillusioned. Berlusconi's vision for Italy was that of a country run like a business and thus his policy 'espoused dogmatic free market principles and talked of creating [another] economic miracle by freeing Italy's entrepreneurs from the shackles of the state bureaucracy'.[29] Letizia Moratti in particular, one of Berlusconi's ministers in his successive 2001 government, pushed strongly for privatisation and for the creation of a flexible labour market.[30]

According to the scholar Noelle Molè, the neoliberal policies implemented over the 1990s and 2000s 'eroded a core aspect of Italian life',[31] namely full and protected labour. These policies included the abolishment of the wage-indexation system in 1992, the 1997 Treu policy and even more so the controversial Biagi law of 2003, which legitimised a variety of atypical or temporary contracts. To this end, the weakened position of the trade unions, whose political influence has significantly declined over the course of the past two decades,[32] meant that the battle against the neoliberalisation of employment was lost. Ugo Marani, a professor of economic policy, points out how, in addition to the retreat of the unions on key issues pertaining to labour, unemployed or disenfranchised workers – unlike their counterparts from previous generations – now tend not to join together nor to make demands of the government or the

[28] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 89.
[29] Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, p. 297 (updated edition).
[30] See Marco Briziarelli, 'Neoliberalism as a State-Centric Class Project: the Italian Case', p. 11.
[31] Noelle J. Molè, 'Anticipating Neoliberalism in Northern Italy's Workplace', *American Anthropologist, New Series*, 112.1 (2010), p. 42.
[32] Ugo Marani, 'Italian Neoliberalism and the Decline of the Labor Movement', *New Labor Forum*, 26.3 (2017), p. 71.

institutions to improve their conditions.[33] In Marani's view, the most destructive effects of neoliberalism in Italy were set out as Italy prepared for and joined the European Monetary Union in the early 1990s, with the result that 'deregulation and privatisation, a fiscal policy of austerity, an unwillingness to seek remedies for lagging growth in southern Italy, and the constraints of monetary union all combine[d] to create a melancholy social environment, aggravated by subtle insinuations that individuals are personally responsible for their fates'.[34] Moreover, as noted by the scholars Colin Hay and Ben Rosamond, if in Britain European integration was flaunted as an economic opportunity for the country, in Italy it was virtually imposed as 'a non-negotiable external economic constraint'.[35]

Given the dissimilarities between the earlier neoliberalisation of Britain and the USA on the one hand, and the later one of Italy – which was dictated as a condition of European integration and therefore of survival – on the other, discrepancies may be expected in the public perception, acceptance of, or resistance to the new world order between these three countries. These reactions to the progressive dominance of the neoliberal model are one of the aspects that, through an analysis of the fictional representations of neoliberal society, this thesis seeks to explore.

2. Surveying the field: realisms, representation and resistance in neoliberal fiction

A number of scholarly works dealing with literature and literary production under neoliberalism have been published over the course of the last six years, a proliferation that bears witness to the recent interest in the effects of the current economic and ontological condition on the literary form, as well as an interest in the role that literature, and culture more generally, play in deciphering, shaping and resisting the realities in which they are enmeshed. It is perhaps telling that among the vast body of studies surveyed, where anglophone publications explicitly reference the term "neoliberalism" in their titles and keywords, the Italian ones do not. They tend typically to refrain from making immediate mention of "neoliberalism", even in those cases where the analysis focuses on obvious by-products of neoliberal supremacy such as increased work flexibility and precarity (to which a considerable

[33] Ibid., p. 73.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Colin Hay and Ben Rosamond, 'Globalization, European Integration and the Discursive Construction of Economic Imperatives', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 9.2 (2002), p. 161.

amount of scholarship has been dedicated).[36] This absence of the neoliberal "label" from academic works can possibly be accounted for by a general aversion for labels by Italian scholars – as was the case with the rejection of the term 'postmodernism' – or by the slower infiltration of the neoliberal paradigm as a result of the later neoliberalisation of Italy in comparison with the earlier adoption of neoliberal policies and ideologies in Britain and the United States.

In general, scholars investigating neoliberal fiction agree on a series of trends, features or contentious aspects of contemporary literature. Firstly, they identify a shift beginning in the 1990s from the postmodern tendencies of the previous decade to a renewed form of literary realism whose suitability to scrutinise the present is often contested on account of its implication in capitalist discourse and markets. In their 2017 volume *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, for instance, authors Huehls and Greenwald Smith link the return to realism to neoliberalism's penetration of cultural practices, and connect changes in literary form (such as the shifts in characterisation and point of view, the innovations in the lyric and, especially, the rise of the memoir) to the 'neoliberal commitment to entrepreneurialism, individualism and pragmatism'.[37] American scholars Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, in their 2014 work *Reading Capitalist Realism*, examine literary realism by drawing on Mark Fisher's concept of "capitalist realism". This term is typically understood to refer to the prevailing resignation to the inescapability of neoliberalism as the only realistic horizon for our imaginaries: the aesthetic counterpart of which would be embodied by the realistic mode, the one 'most intimate to capitalism'.[38] However, if, in the political and economic sphere, realism has now become 'part of the ideological enforcement process of neoliberalism',[39] the authors believe that capitalist realism can still 'operate theoretically and critically to describe the relationship between accumulation and representation in the present' as it offers 'a powerful means to connect the transformation of [...] modes of accumulation to changes in the effort to interpret and historicise that transformation'.[40]

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[36] See, for example, the following works on the so-called "letteratura aziendale": Silvia Contarini, *Letteratura e azienda: Rappresentazioni letterarie dell'economia e del lavoro nell'Italia degli anni 2000*, *Narrativa, nuova serie*, 31/32 (2010); Paolo Chirumbolo, *Letteratura e lavoro, conversazioni critiche* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2013); Alessandro Ceteroni, *La letteratura aziendale: Gli scrittori che raccontano il precariato le multinazionali e il nuovo mondo del lavoro* (Novate Milanese: Calibano Editore, 2018).
[37] Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, p. 13.
[38] Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, *Reading Capitalist Realism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), p. 1.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., p. 7.

Similarly, in the Italian context, already in the blurb for Vito Santoro's *Notizie dalla post-realtà: Caratteri e figure della narrativa italiana degli anni Zero*, the 2000s are described as being characterised by 'l'indubbio primato del romanzo realista tradizionale' ['the undeniable primacy of the traditional realist novel'], which writers see as 'lo strumento più efficace per narrare il proprio tempo' ['the most effective tool to narrate their time'] and 'per recuperare una funzione civile ormai smarrita' ['to recover a now lost civil function'].[41] In their edited volume *Encounters with the Real in Contemporary Italian Literature and Cinema* (2017), Loredana di Martino and Pasquale Verdicchio specify that, according to the literary critic Alberto Casadei and the writing collective Wu Ming, the realism that characterises contemporary Italian fiction is of the 'allegorical' or 'connotative' type and thus differs from its traditional counterpart. This allegorical version of realism abstains from claiming to provide an objective representation of reality and rather 'uses narrativization as a way to decolonize the imaginary from hegemonic perspectives and open reality to the possibility of new critical reassessments, thus also reenergizing the reader's own ability to imagine ethical alternatives'.[42]

The apparent alliance identified by American scholars between the realist aesthetic mode, and the particular brand of neoliberal resignation that constitutes "capitalist realism", though, is not unproblematic for any project that seeks to investigate the ability of literary fiction to portray and even critique the economic and social present. If the neoliberal discourse is so pervasive that it contaminates all domains of human life, then there is reason to believe that the literary form too has been appropriated by the new neoliberal rationality. In the tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer, this has led some scholars to cast a doubt on the reliability and effectiveness of representation in neoliberalised societies. In Huehls's view, as a result of 'neoliberalism's capacious grasp',[43] representation itself, understood as 'the use of language and other sign systems to make meaningful, referential claims about the world', may already be 'too compromised for politics'.[44] An observation which would, in accordance to this logic, compel writers to produce literary value ontologically rather than representationally.

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[41] Vito Santoro, *Notizie dalla post-realtà: Caratteri e figure della narrativa italiana degli anni Zero* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2010). All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

[42] *Encounters with the Real in Contemporary Italian Literature and Cinema*, eds. Loredana di Martino and Pasquale Verdicchio (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), p. X.
Other scholarly works in Italian Studies have identified a return to realism by Italian writers. See, among others, 'Ritorno alla realtà? Narrativa e cinema alla fine del postmoderno', eds. Raffaele Donnarumma, Gilda Policastro, Giovanna Taviani, *Allegoria 57* (2008) and Raffaello Palumbo Mosca, *L'invenzione del vero: romanzi ibridi e discorso etico nell'Italia contemporanea* (Rome: Gaffi, 2014).

[43] Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. X.

[44] Ibid., p. XI.

Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro raise a similar point in their 2019 book *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature* when they wonder 'what remains of the critical capacities of literature – to imagine, map, or challenge neoliberal ideology, beyond the consolations of literary form'[45] when representation has to operate within the limits of "capitalist realism".

The problematic position of representation is not an inconsequential issue when assessing the role of art and culture in sustaining or resisting the present. Indeed, several scholars recognise a supposed failure of literature to question the status quo. For the scholar Jeffrey J. Williams, for example, the neoliberal novel is marked by a 'resigned realism',[46] whilst the critic Walter Benn Michaels argues that contemporary novels, in failing to critique class inequities, 'naturalize the unimaginability of any alternative to neoliberalism and so make […] it easier to accept the inequality neoliberalism has produced'.[47] Kennedy and Shapiro analogously contend that the ubiquity of the neoliberal *épistémè* is thought to 'subsume our capacities to imagine alternatives and render cultural production a site for the reproduction and naturalisation of competitive market values'.[48]

Other scholars, despite acknowledging literature's apparent reluctance to critique the neoliberal present, perhaps more optimistically refrain from interpreting this reluctance as a symptom of literature's ultimate capitulation to it. Huehls, for example, believes that so many contemporary authors shying away from outlining the shortcomings of neoliberalism belies a conscious operation on the part of these writers who, 'rather than pointing to and revealing what's wrong with neoliberalism (that would be the critical approach that relies on representation to show us the world in a specific way)' prefer to 'inhabit the world neoliberalism has produced in an effort to reconfigure the positions, relations and connections that it establishes among the beings and objects of the world', thus adopting 'an ontological approach that still produces value, but only as a function of being and relation'.[49] In this sense, reducing literature's relationship with the neoliberal present to a dichotomy between models of resistance and forms of capitulation would be an oversimplification, as warned by Emily Johansen and Alissa Karl in their 2017 publication *Neoliberalism and the Novel*. Here, the scholars identify instead an unresolved tension between the 'contestatory, political

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[45] Liam Kennedy and Stephen A. Shapiro, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2019), p. 13.
[46] Quoted in Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, *Reading Capitalist Realism*, p. 13.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Liam Kennedy and Stephen A. Shapiro, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature*, p. 1.
[49] Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age*, p. XII.

possibilities' of the novel and its 'aestheticization of the twenty-first century bourgeois's political apathy'.[50]

On the Italian front, the issue of literature's engagement with the present (*impegno*) has historically occupied a central position within the critical debate. The notion of *impegno*, traditionally associated with the "committed" realistic forms of writing that characterised post-war literary production in Italy, was often made to coincide with what the scholar Jennifer Burns defined as 'a monolithic notion of commitment to a usually communist agenda'.[51] Recently, a vibrant academic discussion has concentrated on postmodern literature (therefore not ascribing to the conventions of literary realism) with the aim of restating its engagement in the critique of society against those claims that depicted postmodernism as an 'uncritical, cynical or nihilistic endorsement of uncontrolled capitalism'.[52] Scholars in the field of Italian Studies, such as Pierpaolo Antonello, Monica Jansen, Florian Mussgnug and Jennifer Burns, among others, suggested the category of "postmodern impegno" against the assertions made in works such as Christopher Norris's *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (1990)[53] and Terry Eagleton's *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996),[54] which had argued that there was no place in the mannerisms of postmodernism for a committed kind of writing. In contrast to this view, in *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture* (2009), these scholars claim that 'postmodernist anxieties about political legitimation can prompt new forms of political action and help us reformulate the goals of emancipatory struggle'.[55] From this perspective, postmodernist and realistic tendencies – the latter, as we identified in the previous pages, seeming to be the prevailing paradigm in both Italian and anglophone contemporary fiction – cannot be reduced to 'una distinzione binaria del tipo ludico/impegnato, consolatorio/critico' ['a binary opposition between ludic/engaged, and consolatory/critical'].[56] On the contrary, postmodernism and realism can work parallelly and even coexist simultaneously within the same novel to generate complementary modes of critique.

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[50] Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl, *Neoliberalism and the Novel* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 5.
[51] Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980–2000* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2001), p. I.
[52] *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, eds. Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 2.
[53] Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).
[54] Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
[55] *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, eds. Pierpaolo Antonello, Florian Mussgnug, p. 3.
[56] Pierpaolo Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini: Intellettuali e impegno nell'Italia contemporanea* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2012), p. 156.

In evaluating the success of contemporary fiction to challenge the neoliberal common sense and to propose alternative discourses, this project will take into account all the considerations above and include an analysis of less overt or nonmimetic forms of resistance that may initially risk being discarded as symptomatic of a fundamental resignation to the status quo.

3. Originality, relevance and contribution of the project

A review of the existing scholarly work on neoliberal literature immediately evinces the stark prevalence of studies dedicated to American fiction.[57] Publications on British literature appear to address the relationship between literature and neoliberalism more tangentially, but still acknowledge the magnitude of the transformations brought about by extensive neoliberalisation, in particular in relation to specific policies carried out by Margaret Thatcher.[58] On the contrary, scholars in Italian Studies, despite publishing widely on the precarisation of the human condition as a correlative of economic volatility, do not seem to mention the "neoliberal turn" as explicitly when discussing contemporary fiction.[59] Albeit with the caveat that the omission could be of a mere terminological nature, the absence of the otherwise ubiquitous "neoliberal" and "neoliberalism" words is somewhat peculiar.[60] To this end, this study proposes to confront the issue of the literary portrayal and contestation of what has effectively been the neoliberalisation of Italian society over the past three decades more directly, and to bring it into dialogue with that of Britain and the United States. By highlighting commonalities of themes, language, and literary devices, and by fundamentally recognising that neoliberalism is a globalised phenomenon (granted the undeniable differences between central and peripheral areas of the neoliberal continuum), this thesis aims to add a comparative

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[57] See among others: Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, *Reading Capitalist Realism* (2014); Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (2016); John Marx and Nancy Armstrong, 'Introduction: How Do Novels Think about Neoliberalism?', *Novel*, 51.2 (2018), pp. 157–165; Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature* (2019).

[58] See: Kim Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space: After Thatcher* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Chris Butler, 'Inhabiting the Ruins of Neoliberalism: Space, Catastrophe and Utopia', *Law and Critique*, 30 (2019), pp. 225– 242; Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene, *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000: Accelerated Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[59] See for example: *Trends in Contemporary Italian Narrative 1980–2007* eds. Gillian Ania and Ann Hallamore Caesar (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007); Vito Santoro, *Notizie dalla post-realtà: Caratteri e figure della narrativa italiana degli anni Zero* (2010); *Narrazioni della crisi: Proposte italiane per il nuovo millennio*, eds. Natalie Dupré, Monica Jansen, Srecko Jurisic and Inge Lanslots (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 2016).

[60] It is interesting to note that the term "postmodernism" (which constitutes, for Jameson, 'the cultural logic of late capitalism') has had a similar fate in Italian studies, where it did not enjoy the popularity it had in anglophone contexts.

perspective to a scholarship in contemporary Italian literature that has generally limited its analysis of neoliberalism in fiction to the Italian context in isolation.

Conversely, of the very recent comparative publications on neoliberal literature, none of the chapters and essays included seem to comment on Italian fiction. Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkin's 'Genres of Neoliberalism' (2013) promises a discussion on texts from countries as diverse as Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Hong Kong, Kenya, Mali and the Philippines, as well as on more canonical anglophone fiction from England and the United States. Johansen and Karl's aforementioned volume *Neoliberalism and the Novel* (2017) focuses on Canadian and anglophone African literature, whilst Huehls and Greenwald Smith's *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (2017) remains within the boundaries of British and American texts. Finally, Deckard and Shapiro's book *World Literature, Neoliberalism, and the Culture of Discontent* (2019) adopts a global perspective that combines traditional Anglo-American scholarship with postcolonial studies in its investigation of literary and cultural production from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Brazil, the United States, Canada, South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, India and even Italy, although no *literary* case study from the Italian context is analysed in the chapters that make up this study. In addressing this gap in the research, the present project hopes to make a contribution to the field of literary studies by shedding light on the perception, representation and critique of the neoliberal world-system by Italian authors in comparison with their British and American counterparts.

On a more ambitious level, this thesis will attempt to argue for literature's role in laying bare the socially-constructed nature of neoliberal ideology, which, as discussed earlier, has entered the collective consciousness and has established itself with the fashion of a Gramscian "common sense". The hegemony of neoliberalism has remained largely undisputed even after the global financial crisis of 2008, when the expectation that it would have been brought into question due to its evident systemic faults was superseded by the recognition that the neoliberal consensus – disguised as a natural fact of life – would continue to exert its dominance undisturbed.[61]

If literature, as Marx would have it, reflects a society's economic base, then it can on the one hand, as pointed out by Deckard and Shapiro, play 'a constitutive role in generating and stabilising the socioeconomic relations on which neoliberal hegemony depends'.[62] Crucially,

[61] Mark Fisher refers to the bank bail-outs of 2008 as 'a massive re-assertion of the capitalist realist insistence that there is no alternative'. Whilst, in his view, the bail-outs caused neoliberalism to be discredited, 'its assumptions continue to dominate political economy […] as inertial, undead defaults'. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 78.
[62] Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro, *World Literature, Neoliberalism, and the Culture of Discontent*, p. 3.

however, and on the other hand, it can also be argued that, by fictionalising naturalised norms and hegemonic discourses, it can expose their contingent and constructed character and help to move beyond neoliberalism's own claims to inevitability. By means of both diegetic and extra-diegetic strategies, and by dwelling upon the contradictions and systemic violence inherent to neoliberalism which are then exerted on the individual at a microcosmic level (for example, on one or more characters in a novel), literature can draw attention to the often-overlooked economic power structures that exist at the macrocosmic scale.

This discussion is premised on the cultural materialist assumption that literature can have a diagnostic function with regards to society in that, as claimed by the scholar Eileen Pollard, '[it] appears more intimately attuned than contemporary historiography or critical theory to the zeitgeist'.[63] The novel, in particular, has been found by critics such as Emily Johansen and Alissa Karl as particularly suited to act as a venue 'for the interrogation of […] "our condition"'[64] because of its historical connection with the rise of liberal capitalism. If this stands true for the neoliberal novel, literature can become 'a vehicle for experiencing, processing and shaping the contemporary'.[65] Far from simply mirroring the historical conditions that presuppose its production, literature can be revolutionary, since it can bring to the fore emergent ideologies (to employ Raymond Williams' terminology) that run counter to dominant ones. By imagining possible alternatives to the status quo, literary works become a window through which one might see what a different world could look like and thus reveal that the perpetuation *ad infinitum* of the neoliberal model does not necessarily have to be humanity's ineluctable destiny.

4. Research questions and Methodology

This thesis aims to answer the following research questions:

1) How are the social and psychological effects of neoliberal hegemony reflected in contemporary fiction at both an individual and collective level?

2) Are there discrepancies in the ways in which these effects are portrayed in different texts or in the authors' attitudes towards neoliberalism and, if so, are these differences country-specific?

[63] Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene, *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000: Accelerated Times,* p. 1.
[64] Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl, *Neoliberalism and the Novel*, p. 2.
[65] Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene, *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000, Accelerated Times*, p. 7.

3) Is there any evidence in the literary texts analysed of an attempt, on the part of literature, to challenge the supremacy of neoliberal ideology as an economic and cultural imperative and, if this is the case, through which means? What, if any, alternatives to neoliberalism are presented in these novels? And what do these alternatives suggest for human futures?

In order to fulfil its aims, this research adopts a sociological approach to the study of literature that integrates a close reading of primary sources with Cultural Materialist and New Historicist perspectives, and with the overall questioning of normative systems typical of Poststructuralist criticism. From this standpoint, this project draws concepts from disciplines outside of literary studies such as sociology, anthropology, work and organisational studies, economics, geography, leisure studies and cultural criminology. The reason for this disciplinary approach is twofold. On the one hand, these fields supply the critical instruments and the language to understand and interpret the phenomena depicted in the literary texts studied. On the other hand – taking after Marxist literary theory – the texts themselves can be regarded as valuable pieces of evidence about our society, and which are capable of integrating existing knowledge on neoliberalism and its systems gained in the field of social theory.

One core concept, underpinning many of the points made throughout this thesis, is that of "liminality". "Liminality" helps provide a theoretical basis to the perceived in-between nature of the contemporary human condition. In its original formulation by the ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep in his influential work *Les rites de passage* (1909),[66] "liminal" denotes the intermediate phase of a rite of passage in which the individual, having been detached from the position he/she occupied within the social structure (segregation), finds him/herself in a transitional limbo – or liminal phase – before re-entering society and reacquiring the rights and obligations pertaining to his/her new position (aggregation or incorporation). Whilst Van Gennep's conception of liminality was limited to traditional, non-industrial societies, where rites of passage accompanied key changes in place, social position, age, and state (such as birth, death, puberty, marriage, initiation etc.), the British anthropologist Victor Turner re-discovered the concept of liminality in 1963 and later extended its application to modern industrialised social formations. In his work *Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology* (1974),[67] Turner argued that his newly-coined term "liminoid" could capture the re-emergence of liminality in modern consumer societies via art, theatre and the leisure culture industry. After Turner, two scholars have more recently returned to liminality,

[66] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).
[67] Victor Turner, *Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1974).

the sociologist Árpád Szakolczai and the anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen, who reclaimed the aptness of liminality to 'lend[…] itself to a wider application, as the term captures something essential about the imprecise and unsettled situation of transitoriness'.[68]

The present study extends the theoretical system of liminality to late capitalist societies in order to uncover the hidden workings of neoliberal ideology and the possibilities for its revelation. Liminality's suitability to this role is predicated on two recognitions. Firstly, instability and temporariness are characteristics that liminal states share with the precariousness of existence under neoliberalism, to the point that Szakolczai refers to the human condition after modernity as a state of "permanent liminality".[69] This is a state then, where, in the words of Thomassen (who draws on Szakolczai's analysis) 'the human sentiments of fear, anxiety, scepticism and doubt were established as anthropological foundations'.[70] Secondly, liminality's association with transformation and change makes it a privileged place for the experimentation with and emergence of new ideas. Thomassen defines liminality in modernity as an 'unordered, chaotic element of creativity and freedom in a modern world that was drowning with too much rationality'.[71] Indeed, already in Turner's work, if liminal phenomena in traditional societies tended to be eufunctional (i.e. integrated within and supporting the existing social structure), liminoid ones are 'often parts of social critiques or revolutionary manifestos […] exposing the injustices, inefficiencies and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organisations'.[72] In this sense, the *Occupy Wall Street* demonstrations of 2011, which saw the temporary occupation of key economic spots in the US to protest the inequalities and corruption of the neoliberal order, could be considered as an example of a "liminoid" phenomenon.

In short, the advantages of employing the conceptual framework of liminality lie in both its duplicity (the compresence of elements of uncertainty, fear, doubt, deviance and violence and those of creativity, innovation and critique of the status quo) and in its universality, that is its wide applicability to diverse research areas such as politics, economics, psychology, geography, leisure studies and many more. In particular, liminality appears to be very well suited to interpret our era of loss of certainties and references, which was rendered ever more unstable by the working and existential conditions set out by neoliberalism. Liminality's

[68] Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 2.
[69] Arpad Szakolczai, 'Living Permanent Liminality: The Recent Transition Experience in Ireland', *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 22.1 (2014), pp. 28–50.
[70] Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*, p. 14.
[71] Ibid., p. 227.
[72] Victor Turner, *Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology*, p. 86.

strength ultimately rests in its promise of subversion, in its potential 'to push social and political theory in new directions' by virtue of the fact that in liminal moments 'the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction'.[73]

Over the course of this thesis, the concept of liminality is used both to describe the symptoms of widespread neoliberalisation and as a resource for systemic critique, in recognition of the fact that emergent ideologies can develop in in-between or peripheral realms. In particular, liminality is identified as a recurrent aspect in all three areas of human existence that this project identifies as having been significantly affected by neoliberal policy or infiltrated by neoliberal discourse: work, space and leisure. The focus on and analysis of these distinct and interrelated arenas proceeds as follows: In the first instance, the analysis concentrates on work practices under neoliberalism and identifies liminal features in the permanent temporariness of jobs for workers who can no longer plan for the future as they submit to the current requirements of adaptability and flexibility. Secondly, as regards space, special attention is paid to those spaces of globalisation (famously termed "non-places" by the French anthropologist Marc Augé) that are emblematic of 'a world surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and the ephemeral'.[74] As well as bearing the obvious traces of neoliberal organisation, liminal spaces carry the possibility to expose the normalised, systemic violence of capitalism and, thereby, to become seed beds for resistance. Finally, this work identifies liminal aspects in the search for extreme experiences typical of the leisure practices of consumer society (such as violent forms of entertainment and engagement in risk-taking activities), but also discerns the resourcefulness of play and playful modes of expression (such as those found in contemporary manifestations of the carnivalesque) in undermining hegemonic discourses.

These three areas of work, space and leisure under neoliberal conditions are explored through a comparative analysis of British, American and Italian works of prose fiction written by both canonical and non-canonical authors. This also entails that, whilst some of the authors selected for this analysis have received considerable scholarly attention (e.g. DeLillo, Ballard and Sinclair), several have remained largely unstudied (e.g. Levison, Caldwell, Rugarli). If, for more canonical authors, my analysis attempts to establish a dialogue with the existing literary scholarship, this has not necessarily been the case for works where little or no secondary

[73] Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*, p. 1.
[74] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (New York: Verso Books, 1995), p. 78.

literature has been found. The criterion for the selection of primary materials has been, in the first place, the texts' more or less explicit address of the human condition under neoliberalism in relation to the three themes presented above. The decision to include works by both well-known and outside-of-the-canon writers, instead, is underpinned by the observation proper of Marxist criticism that if the dominant hegemony controls tradition, then it virtually decides what makes it into the literary canon and what is not deserving of it. If the objective of the present analysis is that of uncovering both the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses that surround neoliberalism, then it needs to take into consideration the perspectives of both established authors as well as those who, by market standards, could be judged as less successful. If, as argued earlier, emergent ideologies often develop in the peripheries, there is good reason to believe that the same consideration can be applied to what lies at the periphery of mainstream or bestselling literature.

5. Layout of the thesis and main findings

This thesis comprises three analytical chapters, each dedicated to the effects, manifestations and rejection of neoliberal hegemony in one of the three life macro-areas identified above, namely work, space and leisure.

The first chapter, which I have called "'The future is unwritten': liminal workers between precarity and possibility", looks at the sphere where the impact of neoliberal policies is perhaps most predictable: work practices. This chapter commences with the observation that the predictions that imagined the post-industrial world as a future leisure society gave way to the realisation that ours has turned out rather to be a work-centric society; one where work takes over the best part of our day, resources and sense of self. Through a comparative analysis of Eugenio Raspi's *Inox* (2017), D.D. Johnston's *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs* (2011), Iain Levison's *A Working Stiff's Manifesto* (2002) and *Since the Layoffs* (2003), Allegra Goodman's *Intuition* (2006), the "office novels" *Then We Came to the End* by Joshua Ferris (2007) and *Personal Days* by Ed Park (2008), and Claudio Morici's *L'uomo d'argento* (2012), the chapter focuses on four aspects of the relation between the individual and work under neoliberalism. Firstly, the analysis concentrates on the feelings of boredom, meaninglessness and illness that the novels' characters associate with their work lives and that are symptomatic of a new brand of alienation in post-industrial economies which affects each of the traditional working class, the service class and the cultural jobs of Richard Florida's so-called "creative

class" (Florida 2002). The second section comments on the transitoriness of the communities formed at work, whose nature is grounded in instrumentality and merely reflects the neoliberal take on the ultimate purpose of sociality as something that furthers the enhancement of the self and in turn benefits the economy. Whilst, in the novels, social contact is at times cherished as the highlight of the workday, these new communities of convenience easily dissolve once the job contract comes to an end and their ephemeral character is exposed. The third part of the chapter features a discussion about those aspects of contemporary work that reveal the underlying structural violence at the heart of neoliberalism, in particular as concerns the panoptical surveillance of workers, which has reached unprecedented levels thanks to the advancements of digital technology. Finally, the chapter turns its attention to the peaceful, but also illegal and violent forms of resistance performed by the novels' characters in opposition to the neoliberal organisation of work, which they perceive as inherently violent or unjust. This latter is possibly the most fecund section for our quest of a more explicit and direct challenge to the neoliberal order by literature.

The second chapter, entitled "Sous les pavés, la plage!': the subversion and reappropriation of liminal landscapes", examines the fictional representations of those in-between spaces that have been variously termed non-places (Augé), heterotopic spaces (Foucault), or liminal spaces (Shields) in Giuseppe Culicchia's *Bla bla bla* (1997), Paolo Teobaldi's *La discarica* (1998), Iain Sinclair's *Dining on Stones* (2004), and Edmond Caldwell's *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant* (2012). The spaces considered (consumerscapes, spaces of accelerated travel, touristy coastal areas, wastelands) typify in the novels one or both of the characteristics of liminal spaces: either they are associated with hegemonic discourses, social control and surveillance and, therefore, are merely a symptom of widespread neoliberalisation, or, they present an opportunity for the subversion of the dominant order as their liminality warrants the suspension of the social norms that regulate "normal" social structure. The four sections that constitute this chapter make a number of points that articulate the proposition above in more detail. In the first part, the portrayal in the texts of urban, domestic and travel spaces as being placeless and anonymous problematises the issue of the authenticity of place and suggests a fundamental unease with a commodification that renders space impersonal and that profoundly alters the latter's relation with the individual. The second section traces the convergences between in-between spaces and the in-between identities of those who lie at the periphery of neoliberal success, such as those who find themselves at the margins of the job market (Teobaldi), asylum seekers and urban unfortunates (Sinclair) and the ethnically "other" (Caldwell). The third section identifies a desire on the part of the characters to reinstate

historical value into places that have been de-historicised by deliberate neglect, devaluation or disneyfication in accordance with market considerations and an unbridled consumerism that erases history in a frantic search for the always-new. Finally, the last part of this chapter looks at spatial practices that subvert the normal social order such as the intentional pursuit of homelessness (Culicchia), occupation (Caldwell), an appreciation of waste (Teobaldi), walking and dowsing (Sinclair), interpreting these as attempts to reclaim places usurped by all-encompassing neoliberal reorganisation.

The final chapter, "'A craving for terrible things': deviance and liminality as "second life" in contemporary leisure", focuses on leisure as work's counterpart. This chapter reads contemporary incarnations of deviant leisure as a mode of escape from neoliberal rationality. In the novels that form the object of this discussion, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), J.G. Ballard's *Cocaine Nights* (1996), and Giampaolo Rugarli's *Manuale di solitudine* (2015), sheer violence is often presented as a form of entertainment to be enjoyed by eager audiences. After a preliminary contextualisation of the loss of meaning in contemporary consumer culture, the first section argues that in all the three literary texts, thrill seeking and the quest for liminal experiences are depicted as a cure for boredom and as suggestive of a need to divert from a society that effectively has become panoptical. The experience of being on the edge provides the characters with a distraction from their routines, allowing them to experience a truer, better, "second life". The second section contends that violence has undergone a process of spectacularisation and mediatisation as a result of neoliberalism's commodification of all aspects of human life, which has aestheticised the violent event into a consumable, profit-bearing work of art. In the third section of this chapter, it is maintained that the novels seem to point the finger at a routinisation of extreme experiences in consumer society, where even death is trivialised to the extent that it registers as an ordinary, mundane event. The death of hundreds of people in a natural disaster is just another item on the news (DeLillo); violence, rape and death are one of the performance arts (Ballard); and murder is just another way to accelerate a destiny that is ineluctable anyway (Rugarli). The final section analyses the thematisation of carnival (understood as the liminal moment where unrestricted play is traditionally permitted) in Ballard's and Rugarli's novels. Here, I argue that carnival constitutes an ambivalent concept as it represents both a symptom of neoliberal hegemony and an instrument of its overturning. If images of carnival in the novels are correlated with moments of gratuitous violence and transgression – thus exemplifying the connection made by cultural criminologists such as Mike Presdee between carnival, crime and consumer culture – the potential that the carnivalesque mode holds to subvert existing structures by virtue of its being historically associated with

counter-hegemonic discourses and a critique of the status quo is also present in Rugarli's playful destruction of the logic of language and therefore of the ultimate instrument of rationality.

CHAPTER ONE

'The future is unwritten': liminal workers between precarity and possibility

1. Introduction

This chapter looks at the portrayal of work practices under neoliberal conditions and their effects on the individuals and the collective body of workers in eight novels published between 2002 and 2017. The novels selected for analysis deal with working conditions in working-class contexts (Eugenio Raspi's *Inox*,[75] Iain Levison's *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*[76] and *Since the Layoffs*),[77] "service" class contexts (D. D. Johnston's *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*[78] and, again, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*) and finally with the experience of that collection of people which the scholar Richard Florida named the 'creative class', hereby understood as the ever-growing social class made up of those working in education, business, law, data, arts and in all those professions where "creativity" is a distinctive element of the job[79] (Allegra Goodman's *Intuition*,[80] Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End*[81] and Ed Park's *Personal Days*).[82] The

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[75] Eugenio Raspi, born in Narni in 1967, was a skilled technician in the Acciai Speciali steelworks in Terni, in Umbria, for over twenty years, before turning to writing after being made redundant. His first novel, *Inox* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 2017), although not an autobiography, is largely inspired by the author's own experience in the factory. His second novel, *Tuttofumo*, was published in 2019.

[76] Iain Levison is a Scottish-American writer born in 1963. Like the protagonist of his debut novel *A Working Stiff's Manifesto: A Memoir* (New York: Soho Press, 2002), he holds a degree in English. His subsequent novels, amongst which *Since the Layoffs* (2003), *Dog Eats Dog* (2008) and *How to Rob an Armored Car* (2009), mainly deal with issues such as social inequality, alienation and workers' rights.

[77] Iain Levison, *Since the Layoffs* (New York: Soho Press, 2003).

[78] Michael Darren David Johnston is a senior lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Gloucestershire. *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011), both a bildungsroman and a work of political fiction which marked Johnston's debut as a novelist, was a Sunday Herald book of the year for 2011. It was published by the independent publisher AK Press, which specialises in "anarchist" literature. His second novel, *The Deconstruction of Professor Thrub*, was published in 2013 and it also belongs to the genre of political fiction.

[79] Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[80] Allegra Goodman is an American writer born in 1967. Raised as a Conservative Jew, her work often centres on Jewish characters (see *Total Immersion* (1989), *The Family Markowitz* (1996) and *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998)). Although *Intuition* (New York: The Dial Press, 2006) also features characters of Jewish origin (Sandy Glass and Marion Mendelssohn), the main focus of this novel is the life of a research institute, the pressures exerted on researchers to produce tangible results and the issue of academic fraud.

[81] The American author Joshua Ferris was born in 1974. His critically acclaimed first novel, *Then We Came to the End* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), satirises the American workplace by narrating the story of a Chicago advertising agency struggling with downsizing and dismissals at the end of the 1990s. As well as a series of short stories, Ferris published two more novels, *The Unnamed* (2010) and *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* (2014), both positively received by critics.

[82] Ed Park, born in 1970, is an American writer and journalist. *Personal Days* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008) is his only fictional novel to date.

final novel considered here, Claudio Morici's *L'uomo d'argento*,[83] does not concern itself with work, but rather with non-work in a post-capitalist society where paid employment is no longer a constant of human life.

Over half of the novels selected for this discussion are by American authors (Levison, Goodman, Ferris and Park). This weighting here in favour of American fiction in no way suggests that Italian and British authors fail disproportionately in their writing to address the changes that work practices have undergone under neoliberalism. In the Italian context, for example, several writers have narrated the struggle of temporary workers in occupations that are typical of the gig economy, with the so-called 'letteratura del lavoro' experiencing almost a "boom" in publications.[84] The novels above, however, were chosen as they most consistently showcase the physical and psychological effects that the current reorganisation of work has had on individuals; the alienation and anxiety that characterise working life and the resistive practices that are deployed by the workers to oppose the status quo. These eight novels also display commonalities in themes that lend themselves well to an analysis that attempts to identify recurring patterns in the reaction and resistance against highly neoliberalised work environments. The fact that the search for such themes has resulted in an imbalance favouring American authors is perhaps telling in itself, and could be partially accounted for by the longer and harsher history of neoliberalisation in the US, where the lack of a tradition of strong labour unions and social welfare state comparable to those of Britain and Italy meant that neoliberalism infiltrated the imagination of everyday life earlier and more aggressively.

Work is possibly the sphere where the impact of neoliberalism has been most tangible, as certain prophecies surrounding the future of work in the second half of the twentieth century did not come true. More specifically, the predictions that forecast the imminent advent of a post-work society, where technological advancements would eliminate the need for human labour and increase the amount of free time available to the individual (a line of thought which became more prominent in the wake of the economic boom of the 1950s),[85] were not actualised

[83] Claudio Morici was born in Rome in 1972. He has a degree in psychology and his first novel, *Matti slegati* (2003), was influenced by his experience working with psychiatric patients. His interest in the world of work is already visible in *Actarus, la vera storia di un pilota di robot* (2007), which deals with the boredom of work routine. His latest novels are *La terra vista dalla luna* (2009) and *L'uomo d'argento* (Rome: edizioni e/o, 2012), both written during a period of travelling, and *Confessioni di uno spammer*, published in 2015.
[84] Authors such as Aldo Nove, Andrea Bajani, Mario Desiati, Francesco Dezio, Giorgio Falco, Angelo Ferracuti and Michela Murgia have published on the new forms of flexible and precarious employment in novelistic and autofiction works.
[85] In 1956, Daniel Bell, in a work called *Work and its Discontents*, hypothesised that industrial society had reached a stage where the hopes that technology would liberate mankind from the burden of toil could finally be realised.

over the course of the following decades. The 1960s did not bring the anticipated reductions in working hours, nor the leisure society, that had been promised. The technological improvements, in fact, have only made it possible for more regulated and intense working days to be implemented, and the capitalist system, by promoting consumerism, has prevented any reduction in labour time as 'for the individual, the central dilemma of consumer society is the fact that the more one spends on prestigious goods, both to save time and to ensure one's status, the more one must work, and the less time one has to enjoy them, and indeed life itself'.[86]

Moreover, the prevision that in the post-industrial society the ills of industrial labour would disappear to make space for a radically changed ethics of work favoured by digital technology did not materialise in the new post-industrial forms of work. The shift to a post-industrial economy has meant that the majority of jobs no longer require the manufacturing of goods but rather the performance of services and the manipulation of information. Far from dying with industrial labour, alienation in post-industrial economies has reached new extremes with the intensification of work and its monitoring. Despite advances in technologies, workers still focus on small, repetitive and menial tasks, they are regularly timed, and digital technology has made it easier for employers to keep them under constant surveillance and ensure maximum productivity in a new and more terrifying version of Taylorism that would have been unimaginable in the industrial era. As pointed out by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams in their 2015 work *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*:

Corroborated by the prediction that technology was about to replace a consistent proportion of workers in the carrying out of productive activities, the claims about the possibility of a three-day weekend and of increased leisure time began to look well-founded.
In addition to this, in 1958 *Mass Leisure* was published by the American sociologists Eric Larrabee and Rolf Meyersohn giving voice to the worries that started to spread about the possibility of a future society characterised by an excessive amount of free time.
The decline of work was also prognosticated by futurists Herman Kahn and Anthony Wiener in their 1967 'The Year 2000', a non-Marxist commentary on the future of work where they claimed that work was naturally destined to recede. Kahn and Wiener forecasted a decrease in annual working hours from 2000 to 1700-1900 by the year 2000 and a reduction in the cultural significance of work.
In the 1970s the idea started to circulate, in the field of sociological theory, that those years would see the advent of a post-industrial society where an increasingly higher number of industrial jobs would be eliminated and the labour time necessary in those occupations would be drastically reduced. Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* in 1974, together with later works such as Jenkins and Sherman's *The Collapse of Work* (1979), Barry Jones' *Sleepers, Wake!* (1982), Charles Handy's *The Future of Work* (1984), and James Robertson's *Future Work* (1985), all reiterated the idea of an impending post-industrial society where work would be reduced both in quantitative terms and in terms of its importance.
For a complete chronological excursus on the theories about the "end of work" see Edward Granter, *Critical Social Theory and the End of Work* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).
[86] Edward Granter, *Critical Social Theory and the End of Work*, p. 98.

> for all the glossy sheen of our technological era, we remain bound by an old and obsolete set of social relations. We continue to work long hours, commuting further, to perform tasks that feel increasingly meaningless. Our jobs have become more insecure, our pay has stagnated, and our debt has become overwhelming. We struggle to make ends meet, to put food on the table, to pay the rent or mortgage, and as we shuffle from job to job, we reminisce about pensions and struggle to find affordable childcare.[87]

Contrary to the expectations of a future leisure society, therefore, we currently live in what the scholars Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming have defined as a 'worker's society',[88] where even children are socialised to plan for their future working life. Work under capitalism is an 'inescapable totality'[89] where a culture of overworking in many professions coexists with the increasingly ubiquitous insecurity of employment, the temporariness of jobs or the lack of employment *tout court*. Despite this precarity of work, the widespread perception of it as being the main provider of self-worth for the individual, together with a complementary understanding of unemployment as a somehow deficient state, have led to what scholars such as David Frayne have defined as a fundamental failure of our society to question the centrality of work and the real necessity of it.[90]

From the perspective of social theory, a long line of social critics and thinkers have questioned this centrality of work and advocated for a reduction of working hours and for an expansion of free time. As evidenced by Edward Granter's book *Critical Social Theory and the End of Work*, the idea that a reduction or elimination of work is possible was already present in the early utopias of Thomas More,[91] Charles Fourier,[92] John Etzler,[93] Edward Bellamy[94] and William Morris.[95] In the nineteenth century, the issue of liberation from work was discussed

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[87] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, p. 13.
[88] Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming, *Dead Man Working* (Arlesford: Zero Books, 2009), p. 2.
[89] Ibid., p. 4.
[90] David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work* (London: Zed Books, 2015).
[91] Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Dent, 1516; 1962).
[92] Charles Fourier, *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972).
[93] John Etzler, *The Paradise Within the Reach of All Men, Without Labour, by Powers of Nature and Machinery: An Address to All Intelligent Men* (London: J Cleave, 1842).
[94] Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (London: Penguin, 1888; 1986).
[95] William Morris, 'Useful Work Versus Useless Toil', in *Signs of Change; Lectures on Socialism* (London: Longmans, 1885; 1915), pp. 98–120; *News from Nowhere or an Epoch of Rest* (London: RKP, 1890; 1979). According to Granter, if in More's 1516 *Utopia* everybody would work, but nobody would work more than six hours per day, in Fourier's utopian society of 'Harmony' the workers would have been able to choose their work freely and thus work would have filled them with passion and joy. In the nineteenth century, Etzler proposed that technology had reached a sufficiently advanced stage to replace humans in many productive activities, thus liberating them from the burden of work. Bellamy's 1888 work *Looking Backward*, unlike Fourier's and Etzler's

by Marx's son-in-law and revolutionary Marxist Paul Lafargue in *The Right to Be Lazy* (1883),[96] wherein he criticised the conservative but also socialist dogma of the 'right to work' by suggesting that this actually concealed the enslavement of humankind. To the 'right to work', he opposed the 'right to be lazy', claiming that laziness, together with creativity, would be the real source of human progress. In 1932, Bertrand Russell's *In Praise of Idleness* also advocated for a reduction of working hours through a redistribution of labour amongst workers, with the resulting positive effects being the reduction of unemployment and an increase in happiness and satisfaction.[97]

The most significant discussion about work in the nineteenth century, however, is to be found in the thought and work of Karl Marx. Whilst Marx did not call for an eradication or radical reduction of work, he contrasted what he viewed as true, authentic work – which he understood as the highest form of self-expression of human beings – with the alienated and degraded forms of labour typical of capitalism. This idea, that it is alienated work and not work per se that needs to be eliminated, was also shared by the German philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse. In Marcuse's view, the abolition of labour (a term that he used to describe alienated work under capitalism) was necessary for the expression and fulfilment of human needs and potentialities. Marcuse argued that the capitalist system is an unjust and irrational one that dictates that, without there being a real necessity for it, we surrender a considerable part of our lives to work. As it was for Marx, for Marcuse the unprecedented advancements in technology could play a key role in the elimination of labour, provided that this was not halted by capitalism's constant and clever manufacturing of new, but false needs that can only be satisfied through work.[98] In his 1955 work *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*,[99] Marcuse conceptualises what is perhaps his most important contribution to the end of work debate. Here, he proposed the idea that real freedom could be attained by transforming work into a pleasurable, creative activity more akin to play than toil.[100] Albeit in different

treatises, is constructed as a novel, although, due to its didactic tone, it can almost be read as a work of social theory. In Bellamy's vision of the future (the year 2000), a more rational centralised system has replaced the irrational capitalist one: workers are all paid the same and each worker's specialisation is freely chosen after a period of education that terminates at the age of 21. William Morris, finally, supported the idea that, rather than a reduction of work, what was necessary was a reduction of the unpleasantness of work, and therefore he argued that work should be based on creativity and pleasure.

[96] Paul Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 1883; 2012).

[97] Bertrand Russell, 'In Praise of Idleness', in *Why Work?*, ed. by V. Richards (London: Freedom Press, 1932; 1990), pp. 25–34.

[98] Herbert Marcuse, 'On Hedonism', in *Negations* (London: Penguin, 1938; 1972), p. 183.

[99] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London: Ark, 1955; 1987).

[100] See Chapter 10 of Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*.

terms, this point continued, however, Marx's idea of a freedom *in* work, rather than a freedom *from* work and, therefore, did not call into question the legitimacy of work itself.

As we saw earlier, between the 1950s and the 1970s a series of critics proposed the idea that a future society where work would have been eliminated or significantly reduced thanks to technological advancements was imminent, which testified to a widespread culture that foresaw a reduction of work in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

In the 1980s, one of the most vocal theorists of the end of work debate was the Austrian social philosopher André Gorz. Work was at the centre of Gorz's writing since the publication of *Farewell to the Working Class* (1982), wherein he argued that capitalism was responsible for alienating the worker's creativity and that the priority of the left should be the fight for a reduction in working time.[101] Gorz called for a movement that promoted a resistance to work and postulated that free time was a time for the individual to develop culturally and socially. In calling for more free time, therefore, he moved away from Marcuse's idea of freedom *in* work towards a freedom *from* work. Some of the more contemporary end of work theorists have followed Gorz in the idea that a reduction in work time is achievable through the provision of a guaranteed minimum income or universal basic income (UBI), as it is known today. The scholars Srnicek and Williams, for example, call for work to be voluntary, rather than coerced, and claim that eliminating the reliance on wage labour would empower workers as they would be able to decide freely how much labour to supply. Precarity and unemployment, from a state of insecurity, would then become a form of voluntary flexibility.[102] Frayne, in the previously mentioned *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*, also explores the possibility of providing every citizen with a basic form of income regardless of their employment status in order to render waged labour redundant.

The Marxist theorist Franco Berardi, in his volume The *Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (2009), takes a similar stance when he argues that 'the idea that income should be the reward for a performance is a dogma we must absolutely get rid of. Every person has the right to receive the amount of money that is needed for survival'.[103] Whilst in a capitalist system even ideas like 'the right to life', to which Berardi seems to allude, cannot be taken for granted and need to be supported economically, finding ways to fund the Universal Basic Income is a difficult but not an impossible task. Srnicek and Williams, for example, point out

[101] André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class* (London: Pluto, 1982).
[102] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work.*
[103] Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), pp. 213–14.

how research suggests that this could be achieved through ‘a combination of reducing duplicate programmes, raising taxes on the rich, inheritance taxes, consumption taxes, carbon taxes, cutting spending on the military, cutting industry and agriculture subsidies, and cracking down on tax evasion’.[104] Yet the real obstacle appears to be of a cultural and political nature, with theorists pointing out the need for a cultural revolution that overcomes the work ethic engrained in Western society and that shows how a meaningful life outside work is possible.

This chapter focuses on four aspects of the relationship between humans and work in the neoliberal era and that are a recurring feature of the novels considered. The first section, ‘Working in permanent liminality’, embraces the sociologist Árpád Szakolczai’s idea that modernity ‘involves an infinite period of transition, in which the stable elements of social life, representing not just rigid external constraints on individual freedom, but also the condition of possibility of meaningful life, are one by one liquidated’, thus ‘resulting in an anguishing state of permanent liminality’.[105] In my analysis, Szakolczai’s notion is integrated with recent studies on liminality in organisation- and work-related studies, such as Christina Garsten’s 1999 work, *Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations*, Manos Spyridakis’ 2013 study, *The Liminal Worker* or Ingo Winkler and Mustafa Mahmood’s 2015 article, ‘The Liminality of Temporary Agency Work’. The analysis is undertaken in this way in order to provide a reading of the boredom, meaninglessness and array of physical and mental illnesses experienced by those workers who are trapped in a condition of liminality whether due to prolonged unemployment, discontinuity of employment or to being on the verge of unemployment.[106]

In the second section, entitled ‘As substantial as meetings on a bus’, I explore the ways in which the workers’ liminality described in the previous section appears to lack the collective dimension of Victor Turner’s liminal phase (embodied by his concept of *communitas*) and instead produces a series of ‘transient and episodic imagined communities of the workplace’.[107] Here, I will show how the temporary nature of jobs and the workers’ own perceptions of the

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[104] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, p. 218.
[105] Arpad Szakolczai, ‘Living Permanent Liminality: The Recent Transition Experience in Ireland’, p. 46.
[106] Christina Garsten, ‘Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations’, *Organization Studies*, 20.4 (1999), pp. 601–617; Manos Spyridakis, *The Liminal Worker, An Ethnography of Work, Unemployment and Precariousness in Contemporary Greece* (London: Routledge, 2013); Ingo Winkler and Mustafa Mahmood, ‘The Liminality of Temporary Agency Work: Exploring the Dimensions of Danish Temporary Agency Workers’ Liminal Experience’, *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 5.1 (2015), pp. 51–68.
[107] Christina Garsten, ‘Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations’, p. 601.

bonds formed at work as meaningless,[108] or simply instrumental to one's career, create a paradoxical situation where, whilst work today constitutes for most the main source of sociality and human contact, it is unable to foster the development of meaningful and durable communities based on unselfish friendship bonds.

The third part of this chapter, '"A world without rules": systemic violence and the new discipline', examines the precise shape, in the novels analysed, of the violence at the heart of the capitalist system, which the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung in his 1969 essay 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research' defines as that 'structural violence' which prevents human beings from realising their full potential as a consequence of the monopolisation of resources by a group or class.[109] From capitalism's constant quest for the maximum possible surplus value to be extracted from labour to the open repression of workers' protests and dissent, the novels considered offer a wide assortment of examples of how the neoliberal system exercises dominance over its workers through either subtle or explicit strategies.[110] One of such strategies that deserves a special mention, and to which the final part of this section is dedicated, is the new control societies'[111] version of Michel Foucault's *panopticon*, as the 'flattening of pyramidal hierarchies'[112] typical of neoliberal organisation appears to entail an even greater level of surveillance for the workers than that imposed on them in the disciplinary societies described by Foucault. In the works studied, the *panopticon* manifests itself in practices such as tracking, videotaping, the imposition of work rhythms and the generalised monitoring of the worker's day in ways that would have been unimaginable under Fordism.

The fourth section of this chapter, '"F**k the economy, the world is ours!": practices of resistance and the end of work', looks at the ways in which, in the context of a generalised passive acceptance of the inevitability of paid employment, work can be resisted at an individual or collective level. Acts such as employee theft, strikes, violence (but also peaceful forms of resistance such as ambling) and, finally, visions of a workless future are but some examples of rebellion against the current system that can be found in the novels analysed.

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[108] See for example Simon Winlow and Steve Hall, 'Living for the Weekend: Youth Identities in Northeast England', *Ethnography*, 1.10 (2009), pp. 91–113.

[109] Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', in *Journal of Peace Research*, 6.3 (1969), pp. 167–191.

[110] See David Harvey's work on the state's monopoly of institutionalised violence and surveillance in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

[111] For the use of this term, see the distinction made between Foucault's 'disciplinary societies' characteristic of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, and the new 'societies of control', which have replaced the disciplinary societies in the 20th century, by Gilles Deleuze in his 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', in *October*, 59 (1992), pp. 3–7.

[112] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, p. 40.

Finally, in the conclusion entitled 'Maybe we can jump off the train?', I will attempt to provide an interpretation of the overall views offered by the various novels on whether resisting capitalism is ultimately possible or whether the widespread assumption that there is no real alternative to the current economic system is in itself powerful enough to inhibit any move towards change.

2. Working in permanent liminality

Over the past twenty years, Victor Turner's concept of liminality has captured the attention of those scholars[113] in the field of organisation and work-related studies who have looked at the ways in which casual and insecure forms of employment (such as temporary agency work, but also including more "stable" contracts) increasingly resemble a liminal state.

According to this perspective, temporary employees can be viewed as '"betwixt and between" organisational structures, in transit between the relatively fixed positions of full-time, regular employment'.[114] Oftentimes, then, what is meant to be a temporary state develops into a permanent condition and we see the 'emergence of liminal forms of work, located in-between the poles of shrinking full time employment and increasing unemployment',[115] which for many workers constitute the only mode of work they are likely to experience. Occasional employment has become the norm, paralleled by the end of the expectation of a "job for life", with temporariness establishing itself as 'an inherent trait of our times'[116] and 'the hallmark of postmodern living'.[117] As Pierre Bourdieu stated in a 1997 speech,[118] 'la précarité est aujourd'hui partout';[119] however, the drawbacks of this precarity are often absorbed in a "flexibility discourse" that evokes 'positive images of versatile organisations employing

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[113] See for example the works mentioned in the introduction to this chapter by Christina Garsten, Manos Spyridakis and Ingo Winkler and Mustafa Mahmood.
[114] Christina Garsten, 'Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations', p. 601.
[115] Manos Spyridakis, *The Liminal Worker, An Ethnography of Work, Unemployment and Precariousness in Contemporary Greece*, p. 20.
[116] Christina Garsten, 'Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations', p. 607.
[117] Manos Spyridakis, *The Liminal Worker, An Ethnography of Work, Unemployment and Precariousness in Contemporary Greece*, p. 11.
For the idea of temporariness as typifying postmodern culture see also, among others, Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) and Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character* (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011).
[118] This was subsequently published in *Contre-feux* (Paris: Liber-Raisons d'agir, 1998), pp. 95–101.
[119] Ibid.

likewise versatile employees'.[120] For all the apparent advantages brought about by increased job flexibility for workers (such as not needing to commit to a job or to a place for life, thus implying less routine and less boredom) flexibility is ultimately the 'catchword of the day', one that 'augurs jobs without in-built security, firm commitments or future entitlements, offering no more than fixed-term or rolling contracts, dismissal without notice and no right to compensation'.[121]

The advantages are far greater for those companies that can rely on an army of disposable workers since, as explained by Joan Benach and Carles Muntaner, 'increasing labour flexibility means reducing the constraints on the movement of workers into and out of jobs previously constrained by labour laws, union agreements, training systems or labour markets that protect workers' income and job security' with the consequent emergence of non-standard forms of employment such as 'contingent, part-time contract, unregulated underground work or home-based work' characterised by 'variable work schedules, reduced job security, lower wages, hazards at the workplace and stressful psychosocial working conditions'.[122] The flip side of this flexibility is, therefore, the fact that insecure and precarious employment 'renders large segments of the workforce a vulnerable, exploited and defenceless new proletariat or […] precariat'[123] due to that 'lack of regulations that support the standard employment relationship'.[124] The 'awareness of substitutability'[125] generated by the flexibility discourse discussed above also makes workers submit to the demands of that ubiquitous but underhanded requirement that is *employability*, which commands that they constantly train and retrain in an effort to gain 'skills, experiences and qualifications'[126] to remain employable, but also 'to retain a "sellable self" […] associated with the constant expectation to perform, manage-impression, self-promote and "sell" oneself as an attractive product'.[127]

As pointed out by Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism*, the workers' in-betweenness – inherent to their jobs – ends up stretching into their private lives: they 'must learn to live in

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[120] Christina Garsten, 'Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations', p. 601.
[121] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 286.
[122] Joan Benach and Carles Muntaner, 'Precarious Employment and Health: Developing a Research Agenda', in *J Epidemiol Community Health*, 61 (2007), p. 276.
[123] Manos Spyridakis, *The Liminal Worker, An Ethnography of Work, Unemployment and Precariousness in Contemporary Greece*, p. 9.
[124] Joan Benach and Carles Muntaner, 'Precarious Employment and Health: Developing a Research Agenda', p. 276.
[125] Christina Garsten, 'Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations', p. 601.
[126] Hadar Elraz, 'The 'Sellable Semblance': Employability in the Context of Mental-Illness', *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, 13.4 (2013), p. 809.
[127] Ibid., p. 810.

conditions of total instability' where 'periods of work alternate with periods of unemployment' and, by finding themselves in a 'series of short-term jobs, [they are] unable to plan for the future'.[128] It is in this way that the workers' condition of liminality (by definition 'temporary, transitory, transient, a moment of passage between two stable states')[129] deepens to the extent that it evolves into a permanent state. Permanent liminality, in itself a paradox, can be said to have become the reality of the majority of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century workers.

Spyridakis identifies three categories of workers who can be considered as finding themselves in a condition of liminality: '[1] former workers experiencing long-term unemployment, [2] workers who are employed occasionally and [3] full-time employees who are on the verge of being out of work or downgrading'.[130] Both the Italian novel *L'uomo d'argento* and the American *Since the Layoffs* present us with characters who belong to the first category of the long-unemployed workers. Claudio Morici's *L'uomo d'argento*, published only a few years after the 2008 economic crisis, imagines a future where a global financial crash has cancelled the possibility of work across the world, and a group of young people have founded a city of leisure where the only daily activities left consist of drinking, partying and using drugs. Levison's *Since the Layoffs* also shows the consequences of prolonged unemployment for its protagonist, and for the community he is part of, after a profitable factory closes down and makes most in town redundant. The protagonist of the other Levison novel, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, on the other hand, is an "itinerant worker", occasionally employed in a series of short-term positions in the service sector, and therefore belongs to the second category of liminal workers identified by Spyridakis. The same can be said about the main character of the British *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs* and about his colleagues in the fast-food restaurant 'Benny's Burgers', where staff are interchangeable, and turnover is high. In the third group (that of the permanent workers on the brink of redundancy) we find the factory workers of Eugenio Raspi's *Inox*, whose steel plant's management has decided to downsize the number of workers who operate the machinery, thus leaving its employees waiting to be notified of the upcoming redundancy. However, we also find workers of the 'creative' class depicted in Ferris's *Then We Came to the End*, Park's *Personal Days* and Goodman's *Intuition*. *Then We Came to the End* and *Personal Days* are similar in terms of plot, both dealing with the boredom of office life and the threat of redundancies that, one by one, materialise in as

[128] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, p. 33.
[129] Arpad Szakolczai, 'Living Permanent Liminality: The Recent Transition Experience in Ireland', p. 34.
[130] Manos Spyridakis, *The Liminal Worker, An Ethnography of Work, Unemployment and Precariousness in Contemporary Greece*, p. 22.

many dismissals. *Intuition*, instead, traces a picture of the lives of a fairly typical team of researchers in a medical laboratory as they fight with the challenges of low salaries and work contracts that are subject to the achievement of research targets.

In all of the aforementioned cases, despite the apparent security of stable employment, the workers' awareness of the precarious nature of their working arrangements makes them liminal subjects suspended between work and looming non-work. In the following discussion, I will focus on two aspects, or rather two corollaries of this condition of liminality: the feeling of alienation experienced by the workers as a result of their in-betweenness, and the physical and psychological ailments they are prone to develop and that are, in the novels, attributed to their jobs.

2.1 Post-industrial alienation: meaninglessness and boredom

The concept of alienation was at the centre of Karl Marx's critique of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, mainly with reference to the classical industrial labour 'characterized by boredom and pain'[131] as a result of the atomizing and estranging experience of the assembly line. Marx (and later Robert Blauner[132] and Harry Braverman)[133] in fact blamed alienation on the division of labour that found its 'ultimate expression in Taylorism'[134] in the late nineteenth century, since this fragmentation of production in capitalist society contributed to stripping the worker's job of any creative element and to alter his relationship with his product.

As a broader sociological concept, alienation comprises five aspects or rather different understandings of the term, as summarised by the American social psychologist Melvin Seeman in a 1959 article entitled 'On the Meaning of Alienation'. These five facets of alienation are powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement. Seeman refers to powerlessness as 'the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks',[135] meaning that the individual feels that nothing he or she does has any influence or power to shape the reality that surrounds him or her. Meaninglessness relates to the individual

[131] Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, p. 84.
[132] Robert Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom: The Factory Worker and His Industry* (London: Pluto Press, 1964).
[133] Henry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1974).
[134] David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work. The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*, p. 48.
[135] Melvin Seeman, 'On the Meaning of Alienation', *American Sociological Review*, 24.6 (1959), p. 784.

being 'unclear as to what he ought to believe — when the individual's minimal standards for clarity in decision-making are not met',[136] that is the individual does not participate in the same meanings shared by the collectivity. Normlessness, then, indicates the 'high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviors are required to achieve given goals'[137] and it is linked with situations of anomie (the breakdown of social norms and values). With regards to social isolation, 'the alienated in the isolation sense are those who, like the intellectual, assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society':[138] the individual, therefore, feels that he or she does not share commonly accepted values and beliefs and therefore feels a lack of connection with the society of which he or she is part. Finally, self-estrangement designates 'alienation as the degree of dependence of the given behavior upon anticipated future rewards, that is, upon rewards that lie outside the activity itself'.[139] As examples of self-estrangement, Seeman offers those of 'the worker who works merely for his salary, the housewife who cooks simply to get it over with, or the other-directed type who acts "only for its effect on others"'.[140] Self-estrangement can be described as that unrewarding experience of sacrificing the self in order to satisfy somebody else's demands and interests.

The characteristics outlined above provide a multifaceted view of how alienation was defined by Marx as that state produced by working conditions under industrial capitalism, but the emotional, physical and psychological traumas of alienation have been found to be just as fitting for the contemporary post-industrial era. If both Marx and Marcuse were convinced that technology held the key to the eradication of labour (with 'labour' being understood as that form of alienated work under capitalism that does not allow for the expression and fulfilment of human needs and possibilities), the shift from a largely industrial society to the current post-industrial one did not bring about the long hoped-for end of alienated work. On the contrary, as pointed out by Frayne in *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*, repetition and separation from the means of production grew, and 'those who serenaded the coming era of post-industrial labour radically underestimated the extent to which computer technologies would be harnessed to standardise work in the digital age'.[141] In fact, according to Frayne, these technologies are now directly instrumental to the pursuit of increased levels of productivity and to a more extensive control of workers, who are still timed, monitored and

[136] Ibid., p. 786.
[137] Ibid., p. 788.
[138] Ibid., p. 788–89.
[139] Ibid., p. 790.
[140] Ibid.
[141] David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*, p. 50.

who continue to perform small and repetitive tasks. This persistence of alienation in post-industrial societies is certainly reflected in many of the novels analysed, and it appears to affect manual workers, the service sector, and also the more creativity-based professions of the intellectual class. In the following pages, I will identify and analyse key examples of situations in the novels that can be interpreted as being symptomatic of this new brand of alienation under neoliberalism.

In the factory of Eugenio Raspi's *Inox* – which is modelled on the Terni steelworks where the author worked for over twenty years – the workers' feelings of meaninglessness essentially stem from automation, which has put machines rather than humans in charge of the work. This means that fewer workers are needed to perform fewer tasks, as stated by the novel's narrating "we":

> Se oggi allunghiamo le gambe e poggiamo i piedi sullo sgabello è perché ormai è tutto automatizzato, dove prima lavoravano in tre ora si lavora in uno.
>
> [If today we are able to stretch our legs out and rest our feet on the stool it is because everything by now has been automated, and a task that once required three people to do now only requires one.][142]

In this sense, automation is also a reminder to the workers of their substitutability, for, as the narrator reminds the reader, 'nessuno è insostituibile' ['nobody is irreplaceable'].[143] With the reduction in the number of workers needed made possible by the arrival of machines in the workplace, impending unemployment is indeed an evident collateral damage of automation, and factory work can no longer be considered a job for life around which to build one's existence and a strong sense of community:

> È inutile girarci attorno, oggi chi lavora in acciaieria è diverso da chi fino a vent'anni fa ci si è costruita una vita, una famiglia. Siamo cambiati, o forse sarebbe meglio dire che non siamo più gli stessi, basta buttare uno sguardo nel quarto d'ora a cavallo del cambio turno, nell'incrocio dei montanti e degli smontanti. Ciò che si è stravolto non è all'interno della fabbrica ma è ciò che avviene fuori.

[142] Eugenio Raspi, *Inox*, p. 94.
[143] Ibid., p. 75.

> [There is no point skirting around it: those working in the steel factory today are different from those who, until twenty years ago, had built their livelihoods and families around it. We've changed, or maybe it would be better to say that we're no longer the same people. All you need to do is to see us in the fifteen minutes during the shift change, during the handover between those clocking in and those clocking out. The thing that has dramatically changed is not what happens inside the factory, but what happens outside of it.][144]

The workers of Raspi's *Inox* also appear to be aware of the position they occupy within the system, where the factory's massive profits are hoarded by the employer whilst the employees are left with mere 'crumbs':

> Stare qui è come stare sui binari di una ferrovia dismessa in attesa di un treno che non passa mai; […] Noi della Squadra C siamo una cacatina di operai fra i tremila che si avvantaggiano del benessere creato da una fabbrica che fattura oltre il miliardo di euro l'anno. Cifre enormi, e noi a spartirci le briciole.
>
> [Being here is like being on the tracks of an abandoned railway waiting for a train that never comes; […] We, the workers of Team C, are an insignificant bunch of labourers among the three-thousand workers who benefit from the wealth created by a factory that has a revenue of over one billion euros per year. Huge figures, whilst we're here sharing the scraps.][145]

As well as automation and substitutability, we can see here how other factors contribute to the feeling of alienation among the workers. Firstly, the labourers are grouped into 'teams', which are then distinguished by a different letter of the alphabet. If the positive term 'team' suggests togetherness and belonging (we will later comment on the role that language embellishment plays in serving the capitalist machine), the reduction of human individualities to a label certainly plays a part in further depersonalising the workers and increasing their sense of alienation. Moreover, the pejorative 'cacatina', which belongs to the semantic field of excrements and is used in the Italian original to qualify the group of workers, reinforces this feeling of depersonalisation. Secondly, the workers' sense of 'insignificance' is intensified by the inequality emerging from the discrepancy between their salaries ('le briciole' ['the scraps']) and the wealth generated by the ownership of the means of production, a gap that has widened

[144] Ibid., p. 93.
[145] Ibid., p. 111.

considerably since the advent of neoliberal capitalism.[146] Finally, this sense of meaninglessness is embodied in the image of the abandoned railway, which seems to allude to an earlier era of industrial capitalism that is now over, but whose alienating traits still persist, albeit in mutated form, in post-industrial work practices.

One of the consequences of these liminal workers' alienation is their eventual disengagement from the job that they were hired to do, as they pass through the entrance 'senza voglia' ['listlessly'] and 'assonnati' ['sleepily'] and 'non [gli] importa niente del compito che [gli] spetta' ['they don't care in the slightest about the task assigned to [them]'.[147] Just as they are passive actants in the enjoyment of the wealth generated by the capitalist system of production, the factory workers '[si] lascia[n]o trasportare dal flusso, un galleggiamento in morte apparente e arriv[ano] in fondo alle otto ore senza accorger[s]ene' ['they let [themselves] be carried along by the flow, floating corpse-like, and [they] get to the end of the eight hours without realising it'].[148] Despite displaying utter disinterest in what they do, Raspi's workers pray 'di non perdere il posto di lavoro […] mentre si sbandiera la voglia di mollare e salutare l'intera brigata per un'occupazione che dia maggiori soddisfazioni' ['not to lose their job […] whilst at the same time openly boasting about how much [they] want to quit and to wave goodbye to the whole lot for a more rewarding occupation'].[149] Raspi's depersonalised and dispossessed workers, who have internalised the notion that they are ultimately meaningless, inevitably transpose this meaninglessness onto their job, which to them represents no more than a source of income.

In Levison's *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, meaninglessness is again intrinsic to the work task, although this time not as a result of automation but of centralised control. In this, at times, amusing work memoir, among the thirty professions tried by the protagonist, there is a short experience in a moving company. The narrator-protagonist, with a university degree in English and a long list of failed work experiences under his belt, comments on the unrealistic, but above all, arbitrary nature of the schedules drawn up by the company's management for the various moves. Nevertheless, his boss has bought into the rhetoric of the job constituting a series of targets to meet, something that a strong-willed employee can "easily" accomplish:

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[146] See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* for a view of neoliberalisation as a project for the restoration of class power.
[147] Ibid., p. 94.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid., p. 111.

> ‘The people who made up the schedule are sitting in an office in Beaumont, Texas. It was just an idea they came up with. Why don’t you just call them tomorrow and tell them we’re running late because we lost a tire.’ ‘We have to keep to the schedule.’ ‘Then call the customer and tell them we’ll be late.’ ‘The schedule says to be there at seven. We’ll be there at seven.’ Damn if we’re not there at seven. ‘You can achieve it if you put your mind to it,’ Jim tells me, guru-like, as we pull up at the house. He thinks I lack desire, that burning in the gut that makes you want to accomplish goals. I do. I think the goals are meaningless.[150]

As well as being characteristic of manual labour (the memoir also mentions the ‘tedious’ and ‘repetitive’[151] nature of the author’s job packing mackerel in Alaska), meaninglessness also affects the occupations experienced by Levison in the service sector, such as restaurant work, with the difference that here the management attempts to disguise the true essence of the work by embellishing the language used to describe the various aspects of the job:

> I’ve worked in actual factories, and the workers are happier than the people here. The people here are not allowed to admit that they are involved in a production line, and the managers are in charge of the collective denial. We read weekly bulletins sent to us from corporate headquarters that tell us how well we are doing, how we are pleasing “guests” (the new word for customers).[152]

The purpose of such rhetoric, which attempts to mask the most commodified and demeaning sides of work with a supposedly more meaningful terminology, ultimately helps perpetuate a hierarchy that, in seemingly “flat” organisations, often remains invisible. In spite of these strategies used by management, ‘there’s an unspoken understanding among the employees that their jobs are not real, partly because they were so easy to get and partly because restaurant work doesn’t command respect. So employees are always on the lookout for something better, no matter how much money they’re making.’[153] The self-estrangement of the restaurant employees from their jobs is evident in this description, as they go through the workday simply to survive, without deriving any satisfaction or pride in what they do. As part of their duties, they are also asked to ‘keep smiling, even in the kitchen where the guests can’t see [them]. Scowls are picked up by the waitstaff, who then scowl at the guests, who leave and don’t come

[150] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff’s Manifesto*, p. 65.
[151] Ibid., p. 109.
[152] Ibid., p. 52, parenthesis in the original text.
[153] Ibid., pp. 50–51.

back; and then the restaurant is closed and [they]'re all looking for jobs. So if [they] like being employed, [they]'d better smile'.[154]

This type of employer-directed, coerced smile is openly compared and contrasted, in the British novel *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, to the proud smile worn by those Irish diggers who found work in Scotland after the potato famine struck their country:

> 'Many of these "navvies" were Irish men who came to Scotland to contribute to industrial development after the failure of the Irish potato crop. The work was hard and dangerous and many men died before the project was completed.' But in the photographs, they are holding up their picks and smiling – not forced Pan American smiles because there's a camera pointing at them; they are smiling genuine, involuntary Duchennes. They are smiling with crinkled eyes and upturned mouths, with pride and a sense of achievement, as if to say 'In spite of everything, we have built this and it will endure for a thousand years.' 'In spite of everything, we have carved the future out of rock.' Now, run through to the 'Age of Enterprise' exhibits, and see how much has changed. Look at the mannequins, in their shirts and ties, with their no-hands headsets and painted grimaces.[155]

Unlike the fake smile of the restaurant employees, which betrays the emotional paucity of individualism, the navvies' smile arises from the awareness that their achievement will outlast their individual selves, and that their contribution will transcend their time and, as Raymond Williams put it, be 'written into the land'.[156] The recent requirement to smile, and to feign a seemingly authentic smile, on the other hand, is part of what Cederström and Fleming call 'exposure capitalism', where 'everything about us is suddenly on display – to be seen, to be judged'[157] and the individual's personality becomes part of their job persona. From this perspective, the workers' 'personalities, countenance and self-presentations'[158] constantly need to be carefully managed in order to meet the expectations of the employer. Whilst smiling is unlikely to feature in the official list of job requirements, it is still demanded of the employees, also as part of a typically twenty-first century 'liberation management'[159] style that aims to convince workers that work is a pleasurable activity in order to get the most out of them, whilst

[154] Ibid., p. 52.
[155] D. D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 123.
[156] Raymond Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary' in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso: 1989).
[157] Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming, *Dead Man Working*, p. 38.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid., p. 4.

at the same time exploiting every minute of their lives. As Cederström and Fleming colourfully put it:

> At least in the good old days of Fordism everybody – including managers and owners – knew that work was shit and any sensible person ought to flee from it. Nobody would have the audacity to persuade you to like it or feel 'at one' with yourself while there.[160]

Cederström and Fleming's point would seem to suggest a desire on the part of these companies to oust this 'sensible' self – the self that is in touch with the senses and that finds pleasure beyond itself and beyond the confines of discourse dominated individualism – and to make employees feel 'at one' with themselves, thus interiorising and confining meaning to the corporate language regime.

Among the service class described by Levison there are also the market employees, who are regularly reminded to wish their customers a nice day when they leave, and whose attire is also surveilled by the management (the protagonist, for example, is expected to wear – and pay for – an Oxford shirt to work), but who are also 'paid a different wage for the same job'[161] without justification. Corporations such as the one in which Levison's character works, though, cannot be held accountable for these behaviours. In truth, any attempt to confront them about it is futile, as fierce competition for jobs precludes the possibility for the workers to fuss over "minor" issues such as the monitoring of their appearances or equality of pay.

Feelings of meaninglessness and lack of self-worth, though, are not only a prerogative of the service class, they also affect those belonging to the so-called 'creative class', that is those involved in professions that include a creative element. Joshua Ferris's 2007 novel, *Then We Came to the End*, takes its title from the first line of Don DeLillo's *Americana* (1971) and satirises the daily "adventures" of the workers of an advertising agency in Chicago as they deal with downsizing within their company at the end of the 1990s. In the novel, Carl Garbedian is the character who most explicitly addresses the issue of meaninglessness in the workplace. Carl compares his job in advertising with his wife's daily struggles as an oncologist at Northwestern Memorial hospital where she saves lives:

> She had people calling about patients who were dying. Let's face it, there was zero chance one of us would call Carl with a question of mortal urgency. Whatever question we might have for

[160] Ibid., p. 39.
[161] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, p. 23.

> Carl, it could wait until we ran into him in the hall the next day. That made Carl feel that his wife's job was more meaningful than his own; and, because of his particular way of thinking at the time, that *she* was therefore more meaningful.[162]

Carl's alienation here stems from the recognition that, whilst he sells his knowledge and expertise to fill the pockets of a faceless corporation, his wife's profession, because of its connection with the more elementary aspects of life and death, is perceived as more worthy, and therefore – in a society that attaches a person's worth to their job – her life acquires a higher purpose than his. As pointed out by Liam Connell in his analysis of the novel, the critique of contemporary work that emerges in *Then We Came to the End* is 'partly driven by the perception that much contemporary labour is either pointless or lacking in social worth'.[163] At a later point in the novel, as he watches workers power-spray the asphalt, Carl comments once again on the meaninglessness of work, which he denotes with the expression 'polishing turds':

> Was work so meaningless? Was *life* so meaningless? It reminded him of when an ad got watered down by a client, and watered down, until everything interesting about the ad disappeared. Carl still had to write the copy for it. The art director still had to put the drop shadow where the drop shadow belonged and the logo in its proper place. That was the process known as polishing the turd. Those two poor saps hosing down the alleyway were just doing the same thing. All over America, in fact, people were up and out of their beds today in a continuing effort to polish turds. Sure, for the sake of survival, but more immediately, for the sake of some sadistic manager or shit-brained client whose small imagination and numbingly dumb ideas were bleaching the world of all relevancy.[164]

There is a recurrence of terms here that denote dilution and sanitation ('watered down', 'polishing', 'hosing', 'bleaching'). 'Polishing turds', which is the shared destiny of both manual and 'creative' workers, denounces the 'monetization'[165] of creativity in Carl's advertising company and in the market economy more in general, where it is ultimately at the

[162] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End*, p. 60.
[163] Liam Connell, 'Dying to Work: American Nationalism and the End of Productive Labour', in *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 96.
[164] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End*, p. 237.
[165] Aliki Varvogli, 'The Death of the Self? Narrative Form, Intertextuality, and Autonomy in Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 65.4 (2019), p. 707.

service of capital.[166] Corporations exploit divergent thinking only in so far as it boosts profits, whilst, in reality, 'creatives' and 'artists' are now merely empty terms for cultural workers, as capitalism's need for conformism means the erasure (or the 'bleaching') of any unanticipated distinction, dissonance and otherness.

This meaninglessness identified by Carl Garbedian extends also to temporal experience, and in the office of Ed Park's *Personal Days*, the workers' sense of time is moulded by their alienation, to the point that the seasons follow one another without being noticed, in a paradoxical situation where time simultaneously stretches and shrinks. Lizzie, one of the female colleagues, significantly asks 'where does the time go?' and 'where does the life go?',[167] to which her colleagues are said to not have an answer: 'I can't believe it's already October, she said, sharpening a pencil for the Sprout. Pru waited as long as humanly possible. It's November. Sorry? said Lizzie. December was a week away'.[168] Yet the workers there seem to have an antidote to compensate the meaninglessness of their day jobs in that they all have some sort of more meaningful activity on the side, real or alleged:

> We all have our little side projects that we don't like talking about. Jack II takes blurry Polaroids of urban detritus and unusual pavement cracks. Lizzie goes to Central Park or the Met most Saturdays and sketches. Laars has lead-guitar ambitions. Sometimes when he doesn't know you're there you can see his left hand squeezing out imaginary notes as his head nods to a secret beat. Pru knits more than she cares to admit, sweaters and scarves and baby socks for distant nieces. When Crease took over Jason's desk, he found a hundred poems sealed in an envelope. And surely the aloof Jonah has an alternate life – weekend woodworking, novel in drawer, libretto in its fifteenth draft.[169]

In *Then We Came to the End*, this distorted experience of time is associated with boredom – in itself a consequence of the sense of meaninglessness described above. In Ferris's novel, the plural narrator declares that their 'mornings lacked promise', engulfed by an 'ongoing', 'collective' boredom that 'would never die because [they] would never die'.[170] Connell, in attempting to provide an interpretation of this passage, argues that the statement could point to

[166] Berardi calls this post-Fordist mode of production that 'takes the mind, language and creativity as its primary tools for the production of value' Semiocapitalism. See: Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, p. 21.
[167] Ed Park, *Personal Days*, p. 162.
[168] Ibid., pp. 162–63.
[169] Ibid., p. 56.
[170] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End*, p. 4.

'the assumption that a long line of other workers stretch out into the future, forever entering into the same bargain to trade boredom for wages', or that 'it may be the product of a self-regarding over confidence born of economic prosperity'.[171] My interpretation, on the other hand, originates from the observations on this never-ending work for a never-dying worker made in the already-mentioned and significantly titled book *Dead Man Working* by Cederström and Fleming. Here, the authors claim that:

> From the daily tedium of the office, to the humiliating team building exercise, to the alienating rituals of the service economy, to the petty mind games of a passive-aggressive boss: the experience is not one of dying … but neither of living. It is a living death.[172]

Indeed, increased life expectancy (coupled with an ever-delayed pension age) and the awareness of substitutability mean that larger population segments will have to surrender an increasingly prolonged portion of their existence to paid employment. Another example of this "living death" is the equation, in Ferris's novel, of the workplace to a prison (in Foucauldian fashion), with every object surrounding the employees an unpleasant memento of their "jail" time:

> How we hated our coffee mugs! our mouse pads, our desk clocks, our daily calendars, the contents of our desk drawers. Even the photos of our loved ones taped to our computer monitors for uplift and support turned into cloying reminders of time served.[173]

These hated objects are stimulants (the mugs used for productivity-enhancing coffee) and timekeepers (desk clocks and calendars) associated not with an organic and natural time, but with the mechanical time of work. In Ferris's novel, time is monetised, and office time, as noted by Varvogli, is 'dehumanizing'.[174] Even despite the more personal objects that populate the offices of Ferris's employees in an attempt to personalise an impersonal space (the family photos) – which are perceived as nauseating – the workers' alienation is without redemption, since time spent at work is regarded as 'time served', somewhere where they are mentally and spatially separated from the outside world.

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[171] Liam Connell, 'Dying to Work: American Nationalism and the End of Productive Labour', p. 123.
[172] Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming, *Dead Man Working*, p. 4.
[173] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End*, p. 7.
[174] Aliki Varvogli, 'The Death of the Self? Narrative Form, Intertextuality, and Autonomy in Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End*', p. 711.

One further consideration to be made here is that, in some cases, the workers do not seem to have any expectations with regards to their jobs. Since life itself is 'all just a series of compromises',[175] the protagonist of *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*[176] advocates for a 'blinders-on approach to work'[177] that guarantees survival:

> Just go to work, work, and go home; and it doesn't matter what you spend the day doing, as long as you're moving up in the company. Making cars, selling beeswax, gassing Jews. A job's a job. That's how you move up in the world.[178]

Equating the supposedly harmless activities of making cars and selling beeswax to the genocide perpetrated in concentration camps also seems to allude to the collateral nature of the unseen consequences of capitalism's pursuit of profit (be they environmental damage, exploitation or atrocities), which should not deflect the individual from their main mission: advancing their career. The unquestioning approach to work, implicit in the expression 'a job's a job' as the key to progress in the corporate world, suggests once again neoliberalism's reliance on an uncritically accepted ideology that has infiltrated everyday discourse and is now perceived as natural or as inevitable.

In order to inhibit possible complaints by workers about any aspect of the job, employers can always resort to what Frayne defines as the 'Could Be Worse' argument, which dismisses the workers' calls for better working conditions as unnecessary tantrums when such conditions are compared, for example, with those of people on lower incomes or without a job or, worse, with those of a captive prisoner of war. Frayne argues that 'by providing suggestive examples of situations that are worse than the insurgent's', the message being pushed is that 'it is individuals and their sense of entitlement that are at fault'.[179] Levison offers an example of this attitude when he compares his own situation of itinerant worker moving from one dissatisfying job to the next to the "supposedly" worse condition of a peasant in Senegal:

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[175] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, p. 137: 'I look around at the people at the bar, a mixed crew. How many of them are happy in their work? How many of them are happy with their mates, for that matter or their apartments, or their pets? Is it all just a series of compromises, finding the best possible alternative at the time?'
[176] The reference to the working corpse (the stiff) in the title is significant in itself, in its mirroring of Cederström and Fleming's 'dead man working'.
[177] Ibid., p. 138.
[178] Ibid.
[179] David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*, p. 103.

> There are plenty of ways to look at it. It's not so bad. I'm in the richest country in the world; even being broke here is better than being middle class in Peru or Angola. I could be a peasant in Senegal. That's it, that's the phrase they should tell you when they hand you an English degree at commencement, or a limp paycheck for pouring your energy into a meaningless, unsatisfying job for a faceless corporation. "Here you go. Congratulations. Hey, you could be a peasant in Senegal".[180]

By comparing 'First World problems' such as disputes over wages or employment rights with situations of extreme poverty or conflict, the 'Could Be Worse' argument de facto annihilates the legitimacy of the workers' fight for better conditions, in a race to the bottom where the onus of survival and success is on the individual alone, whilst the system is released from any responsibility.

2.2 Consumed by work: liminality and illness

In this section, I look at the relation between the workers' condition of liminality and the incidence of physical and psychological illnesses amongst them. In some of the novels analysed, a precarious work environment is presented as being responsible for a wide array of ailments ranging from head and back aches to depression and anxiety. In Park's *Personal Days*, the office workers 'talked about physical ailments, recurring nightmares, psychosomatic afflictions, all of it blamed on the job'[181] whilst proposing the theory that 'everyone looks better once they leave the office forever'.[182] The workers of the advertising company in *Then We Came to the End* are said to have 'fought with depression':

> [They] took showers sitting down and couldn't get out of bed on weekends. Finally [they] consulted HR about the details of seeing a specialist, and the specialist prescribed medication. […] Yet for all the depression no one ever quit. When someone quit, [they] couldn't believe it. […] Where had they found the derring-do? What would they do about car payments?[183]

The futility of quitting, even in the face of long-term depression, is embodied by the humorous expression 'derring-do', which suggests that, for all the quitters' hopes for a better life, what

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[180] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, p. 163.
[181] Ed Park, *Personal Days*, p. 116.
[182] Ibid., p. 70.
[183] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End*, pp. 56–57.

awaits them beyond the job they left is possibly a similarly soul-destroying one, which they will need to accept as there will always be bills to pay. The colleagues' derision betrays a bitter resignation to the inevitability of suffering under the current working conditions, which can only be soothed by medication but not overcome.

Later in the novel, it is made explicit that the series of illnesses experienced by the colleagues at the firm are the result of a work climate characterised by the imminence of redundancies and by widespread uncertainty for the future:

> We suffered all sorts of ailments – heart conditions, nervous tics, thrown-out backs. We had the mother of all headaches. We were affected by changes in weather conditions, by mood swings and by lingering high school insecurities. We were deeply concerned about who was next, and what criteria for dismissal the partners were operating under.[184]

Whilst the employees' disorderly bodies threaten to disrupt the orderly functioning of the office with their array of afflictions and thus beget firings, they constitute the most tangible manifestation of the structural violence underlying the company's operations. In this sense, the ill body acts almost as the material expression, or vehicle, for making a generally undetected, systemic violence visible. The irrationality of the rational capitalist system is hard to grasp since, whilst the only logic behind the redundancies is the desire on the part of the company to cut expenses in order to maximise profits, the individuals involved still feel somehow "responsible" for their own dismissal. Indeed, in Ferris's novel, the colleagues often wonder which aspects of their personality or which of their specific behaviours could justify the management's decision to terminate their contract rather than somebody else's, so that, once again, the individual is asked to bear the responsibility of faults that are systemic and outside of their control.

As claimed by Benach and Muntaner in their article mentioned in the introductory paragraphs of this section, there appears to be a link between precarity and ill health, with evidence pointing towards the fact that the new precarious forms of employment can be 'as dangerous as traditional forms of unemployment for workers' health'.[185] According to the evidence gathered by Benach and Muntaner from previous studies, 'self-reported morbidity was higher among workers reporting insecurity in their jobs', prompting them to hypothesize

[184] Ibid., pp. 90–91.
[185] Joan Benach and Carles Muntaner, 'Precarious Employment and Health: Developing a Research Agenda', p. 276.

that 'job insecurity might act as a chronic stressor'.[186] Srnicek and Williams reach a similar conclusion in their book *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, where they link precarity to a 'rise in depression, anxiety and suicides'.[187] In certain work contexts, such as the cancer research laboratory at the Philpott Institute in Allegra Goodman's novel *Intuition*, mental health illness is embraced as an integral part of the researcher's job. Demoralisation and depression are said to be 'emotions entirely accepted, even expected, in the lab'[188] and mood swings[189] are a daily occurrence for the postdocs who spend a large part of their lives locked away with their mice, completely removed from the outside world:

> People did crack in the sterile, claustrophobic quarters of the lab. The researchers were like miners or submariners, and inevitably some foundered. It was a confining life. He'd known someone in grad school who'd had a nervous breakdown and been hospitalized. He'd known others whose marriages broke apart – one friend in particular had had a disastrous affair with a professor. It was hard to tell how much trouble came into the lab with people and how much was caused by the work.[190]

In a way, the researchers are just like the mice they work with, who are made ill by their environment, suffer from being in the lab, have no privacy, and have nowhere to hide.[191] The postdocs and their advisors allow themselves to be consumed by work, pressurised by a system that forces quick publications and high-impact research in order to maintain funding and preserve jobs. The insecurity of the academic profession, moreover, causes extreme competition among the researchers with 'all the type As killing their postdocs and ignoring their wives for the sake of science; fighting tooth and nail to get ahead'.[192] As was the case with Levison's novel, vertical mobility ('getting ahead' is just another version of Levison's 'moving up') is a necessary condition for survival.

Goodman draws a worryingly accurate picture of what academia has become in the age of unbridled capitalism. In Britain, for example, education tops the charts among the job sectors with the highest incidence of mental health disease.[193] In this respect, Mark Fisher, in the

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[186] Ibid.
[187] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, p. 168.
[188] Allegra Goodman, *Intuition*, p. 11.
[189] Ibid., p. 48.
[190] Ibid., p. 208.
[191] Ibid., p. 189.
[192] Ibid., p. 254.
[193] See, for example, the official statistics for Great Britain on work-related stress, depression and anxiety for the year 2019: http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf, [accessed 13 July 2020].

previously mentioned *Capitalist Realism*, talks about a 'mental health plague' in capitalist societies, suggesting that capitalism is 'inherently dysfunctional' and citing the psychologist Oliver James' book *The Selfish Capitalist*, where James 'convincingly posit[s] a correlation between rising rates of mental distress and the neoliberal mode of capitalism practiced in countries like Britain, the USA and Australia'.[194] Among the novels analysed in this chapter, work-related illness is discussed explicitly only in the American texts. Whether this is contingent upon the selection of primary sources or whether it is suggestive of a particular brand of American neoliberalism (for example, as concerns the delicate relationship between employment and healthcare provision in the USA) remains open to question. What is interesting for our discussion of precarity, which is the central theme of this section, is summarised by Berardi's observation that, among the 'social effects of neoliberal deregulation' we find the 'psychopathogenic effects that the precariousness of social relations produces on the individual and the collective soul'.[195] A tentative connection can, therefore, be established between the liminal condition of the worker and those feelings of meaninglessness and illness described in the previous pages.

3. 'As substantial as meetings on a bus': isolation and the imagined communities of the workplace

This section examines the effects that the new labour precarity has on the formation of a communitarian spirit among workers and it seeks to explain, through the use of recent sociological studies, the changes that ideas of community have undergone in the passage from pre-modern to modern and finally to postmodern society.[196]

Community is an intrinsically difficult concept to define, one of those words that, according to the British social anthropologist Anthony Cohen, 'like "culture", "myth", "ritual", "symbol" – [are] bandied around in ordinary, everyday speech, apparently readily intelligible to speaker and listener, [but] which, when imported into the discourse of social science […] causes immense difficulty.'[197] The sociologist Tony Blackshaw, in his comment on George Hillery's

[194] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There no Alternative?*, p. 19.
[195] Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, p. 186.
[196] Whilst acknowledging that these terms do not indicate clearly discrete periods and that there are overlaps between them, the term 'postmodernity' is here made to coincide with late capitalism (Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991). I therefore refer to postmodernity as the post-industrial era characterised by an acceleration in global exchanges of capital and information, and by a move towards more 'liquid' relationships (Bauman: 2000) which, as discussed in the following pages, causes a shift in the understanding of what constitutes community.
[197] Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1985; 2001), p. 11.

article, ‘Definitions of Community, Areas of Agreement’ (1955), observes that ‘there is no accord about the precise meaning of the word’ other than the fact that all definitions deal with ‘social relations connecting people’[198]. The British sociologist Gerard Delanty, in his work *Community* (2003), identifies four existing theoretical approaches to community, all of which indicate that the idea of community ultimately concerns belonging. The first approach is the one typically adopted in community studies, which sees community as a spatialised concept and focuses on disadvantaged urban locales and regeneration projects. The second approach is typical of cultural sociology and anthropology: it interprets community as the search for belonging and it concentrates on the cultural construction of identity. The third approach, which takes inspiration from postmodern politics, understands community as a ‘political consciousness’, as a collective formation that can challenge injustice. Finally, the last approach, characteristic of studies looking at global communications and transnational movements, views community in its globalised form, as it is being shaped by digital technology ‘beyond the traditional categories of place’.[199]

If we consider work as one of the primary social relations that connect people, then we might ask how the idea of community plays out in situations where work is rendered increasingly unstable. Considering the average amount of hours that many people spend at work in a typical day, work and the workplace represent for workers the main – if not the only – occasion for social contact and community formation. In the selection of novels examined, the theme of sociality and social contact emerges on a few occasions in the context of both manual and intellectual professions. In Johnston’s *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, for example, the ‘teenage camaraderie’ among the fast-food workers and ‘the craic you could have with your colleagues’ are said to be ‘the only good thing about Benny’s [the burger chain they work for]’.[200] Here, the term ‘craic’ points to a kind of sociality that is outside of work, based on enjoyment, fun and light-hearted conversation, and therefore possibly more meaningful. Similarly, in the factory of Raspi’s *Inox*, the communal moment of having lunch with colleagues is seen as what breaks the labourers out of their state of alienation and restores their human side:

> Le volte in cui si mangia tutti insieme è il momento più rilassante, in cui ridiventiamo umani. Ci lasciamo da parte le beghe lavorative, si chiacchiera di quanto accade fuori.

[198] Tony Blackshaw, *Key Concepts in Community Studies* (London: Sage, 2010), p. 20.
[199] Gerard Delanty, *Community* (London: Routledge, 2003; 2010), pp. XII–XIII.
[200] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 19.

> [The times when we eat all together are the most relaxing ones, when we go back to being human. We leave aside our work squabbles and we chat about what is happening in the outside world.][201]

As was the case with Johnston's 'craic', Raspi identifies the chat about something 'external' to work as the most intimately human aspect of the workday, and as something more fundamental in terms of human interrelations. Similar remarks are made about life in an office in Park's *Personal Days*, where, again, the human factor is regarded as the best part of an otherwise meaningless job:

> As the afternoon dragged on, Laars craved contact, gossip, pointless chat. Wasn't that the one good thing about being in an office? The human connection. It almost always beat being alone.[202]

Laars' longing for sociality is 'pointless'; it is not extrinsically motivated, as is often the case with relationships forged at work, where forms of socialisation such as 'networking' and 'team-building' are sought and encouraged for their usefulness to the company. The desire to connect, to relate – in other words to be part of a community, evidenced by the passages quoted above, can be interpreted as a symptom of a more general craving for belonging that sociologists such as Blackshaw have identified as being typical of a society where traditional forms of community have progressively disappeared.

According to Zygmunt Bauman's reconstruction of the history of community in his work *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, the advent of the Industrial Revolution was responsible for the progressive disintegration of what had once been regarded as a natural attribute of social life. This disintegration is articulated by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in terms of a shift from *Gemeinschaft*, a 'unity based on personal and intimate social relations of family and kinship', to *Gesellschaft*, a term designating a form of society dominated by those 'impersonal and contractual relations of a more calculating kind'[203] that are said to now constitute the very nature of everyday interactions.[204] In effect, according to Barbara Ehrenreich, the triumph in capitalist societies of an individualistic logic has rendered

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[201] Eugenio Raspi, *Inox*, p. 126.
[202] Ed Park, *Personal Days*, p. 189.
[203] Tony Blackshaw, *Key Concepts in Community Studies*, p. 5.
[204] As explained in *The Anthem Companion to Ferdinand Tönnies*, ed. by Christopher Adair-Toteff (London: Anthem Press, 2016), p. 60: '*Gemeinschaft* constitutes an "original" or "natural" condition of social life in which people are organically connected to each other through a "perfect unity of human wills". […] Social order based on *Gemeinschaft* reflects compassion for others, cohesiveness and "affective solidarity", whereas *Gesellschaft* constitutes "a social peace dependent upon a balance of interests among the self-serving"'.

the existence of an innate sociality ‘out of place, naïve and anachronistic’,[205] since the encounter with the Other can constitute another inconvenience in our already busy lives:

> Other people have become an obstacle to our individual pursuits. They impede our progress on urban streets and highways; they compete for parking spots and jobs; they drive up the price of housing and “ruin” our favourite vacation spots with their crass enjoyment and noisy presence.[206]

With job shortages dramatically increasing competition among applicants in several sectors, the Other often represents a hindrance, in a battle of everyone against everyone where the ultimate aim is survival. Despite mankind’s natural thirst for fellowship, it is difficult to imagine how genuinely non-opportunistic forms of sociality can develop in such a context. This is borne out by sociologists who suggest that the only forms of community available to the contemporary individual are temporary communities, communities ‘until further notice’[207] that demand only limited commitment from their members. Such communities have also been called ‘aesthetic communities’, ‘liquid communities’, ‘pop up communities’[208], ‘cloakroom communities’[209] and even ‘floating communities’[210], but, despite the apparent variability in the nomenclature, these epithets all share the idea of a certain degree of disposability.

With regards to the communities formed among temporary agency workers, Christina Garsten argues that these are at best ‘imagined’, ‘transient’ and ‘episodic’ in nature, as a result of the temporary character of the jobs that ‘undermines the development of community’.[211] The latter, in fact, would require a degree of ‘collective responsibility’, ‘co-operation’, ‘reciprocity’ and ‘mutual aid in social relations’[212] unthinkable in individualistic and self-interested endeavours such as a temporary contract. Garsten’s claims that temporary workers, ‘due to their mobility, tend not to invest too much of their emotions in particular workmates or places of work’,[213] can be also predicated more generally about all those workers who find themselves in conditions of precarity and permanent liminality. Garsten’s claim definitely holds true for

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[205] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets. A History of Collective Joy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), p. 248.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Tony Blackshaw, *Key Concepts in Community Studies*, p. 14.
[208] Ibid., p. 19.
[209] Ibid., p. 36: with this term, Blackshaw refers to the ‘throw-away nature’ of Bauman’s aesthetic communities.
[210] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets. A History of Collective Joy*, p. 221.
[211] Christina Garsten, ‘Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations’, p. 604.
[212] Tony Veal, Chris Rojek and Susan M. Shaw, *A Handbook of Leisure Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 524.
[213] Christina Garsten, ‘Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations’, p. 611.

the relationships established by Levison's protagonist in *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, who during his temporary position on a few fishing boats in Alaska, remarks that these "relationships" are 'as substantial as meetings on a bus':[214]

> You meet, bullshit them, then, when your contract is up, you go back to the world where you take up your life, most likely a different life from the one you have been describing to your Alaskan coworkers for the past five months.[215]

The Alaskan experience is described as a world apart, a parenthesis in the life continuum that takes place "back home", and – by virtue of its short-lived character – it is deemed unworthy of emotional investment. 'Bullshitting' the colleagues with fabricated stories about one's life is also unlikely to elicit any consequences, as those contacts will not be maintained beyond Alaska. Similarly, in the two 'office novels' *Then We Came to the End* and *Personal Days*, relations between colleagues – who have worked side by side for far longer than the temporary summer position of Levison's protagonist – are also fleeting and insubstantial. Employees who quit or get dismissed are quickly forgotten. In Ferris's novel, we are told that:

> Some people would never forget certain people, a few people would remember everyone, and most of us would mostly be forgotten. […] But did anyone want to be forgotten about completely? We had dedicated years to that place, we labored under the notion we were making names for ourselves, we had to believe in our hearts that each one of us was memorable.[216]

The deliberate accumulation of indefinite adjectives (*some*, *certain*, *a few*, *most*) and pronouns (*everyone*, *anyone*) further conveys the facelessness and namelessness of Ferris's characters, who are no more than an anonymous and easily replaceable labour force. Regardless of their efforts, the workers are just pawns whose value is that accorded to them by the company at a specific moment in time, and who can be discarded (and forgotten) as soon as their usefulness has run its course.

A similar fate befalls the characters of *Personal Days*, where the reader is informed that, despite spending a considerable amount of time in the company of their colleagues, 'people

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[214] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, p. 90.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End*, pp. 368–9.

drop off the radar once they leave the office'[217] and their relationship does not perdure beyond that moment:

> Week after week, you form these intense bonds without quite realizing it. All that time together adds up: muttering at the fax machine, making coffee runs. The elevator rides. The bitching about the speed of the elevator. The endlessly reprised joke, as it hits every floor: Making local stops. You see co-workers more than you see your so-called friends, even more than you see your significant others, your spouses if you have them. […] We know each other well but only to a point.[218]

The reciprocal knowledge between the colleagues is deemed as superficial, therefore nobody is interested in preserving the ties with those employees who have left, as it happened with the Original Jack, who 'was let go during the Firings a year ago and no one's stayed in touch',[219] or with Jason, about whom '[they] can't remember a thing'.[220] As argued by Colleen Lye, the precarity of employment is one of the factors that, in spite of the 'relatively flat hierarchies' of today's corporations prevent the office workers of Ferris's and Park's novels from developing a reciprocal 'sustained solidarity'.[221]

The issue of community is further rendered problematic, in *Then We Came to the End* and in *Personal Days*, by the uncommon formal device that they both employ: the use of a first-person plural narrator. In the 2007 Back Bay paperback edition of the novel, Ferris himself explains the reason for his choice of a 'we' narration:

> Companies tend to refer to themselves in the first-person plural in annual reports, corporate brochures, within meetings and internal memos, and, in particular, in advertising. […] It's not just a company's way of showing unity and strength; it's also a way of making everyone feel as if they're a member of the club. […] In *Then We Came to the End*, you see who this 'we' really is – a collection of messy human beings – stripped of their glossy finish and eternal corporate optimism. It returns the 'we' to the individuals who embody it.[222]

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[217] Ed Park, *Personal Days*, p. 14.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid., p. 41.
[221] Colleen Lye, 'Unmarked Character and the "Rise of Asia": Ed Park's *Personal Days*', *Studies in Global Asias*, 1.1 (2015), p. 240.
[222] Quoted in Ralph Clare, *Fictions Inc: The Corporation in Postmodern Fiction, Film, and Popular Culture* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2014), p. 191.

Several scholars have concentrated their attention on this peculiar stylistic choice, with Lye identifying in it ‘a vehicle for the critique of corporate rhetoric’ and as conveying formally a sense of ‘missing solidarity’.[223] Ruth Maxey, similarly, postulates that ‘*Then We Came to the End* exposes as a pretense the official language of togetherness and certainty in corporate America because, as the reader learns early in the novel, staff may be laid off at any moment’.[224] Against the conclusions put forward by scholars such as Alison Russell, who maintains that, ‘for all its negative associations’, the workplace ‘still gives people a sense of belonging’,[225] the communal we – due to the fleeting and contractual nature of these types of community – does not appear to have a ‘basis outside the bonds of capital’.[226]

Not only are work relationships the result of contingency, but exploitation and competition typical of work environments today are also possibly to blame for the widespread perception that building true friendships at work is impossible. In the 2009 ethnographic study conducted by Simon Winlow and Steve Hall, ‘Living for the Weekend: Youth Identities in Northeast England’, the majority of the interviewees regarded relationships forged at work as ‘unavoidable but ephemeral and completely unimportant’[227] in contrast with the “true” bonds formed with friends outside work. Winlow and Hall attributed this to the fact that the interviewees were clearly ‘alienated from their work, and all displayed calculative attitudes towards their involvement in these highly exploitative work settings’.[228]

According to Garsten, companies are aware of the way in which temporary contracts and precarious employment affect the level of commitment of the staff they oversee and of the fact that the concept of a strong “workplace community” is a goal unlikely to be achieved. They are therefore actively involved in the organisation of social events and parties in order to promote a sense of community among their employees. In Garsten’s words:

> To counteract the lack of stability and loyalty that follows loose contracts, spatial dispersion and transitory assignments, organizational leaders play on notions of inclusiveness and

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[223] Colleen Lye, ‘Unmarked Character and the “Rise of Asia”: Ed Park’s *Personal Days*’, p. 239.
[224] Ruth Maxey, ‘National Stories and Narrative Voice in the Fiction of Joshua Ferris’, *Critique-Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 57.2 (2016), p. 210.
[225] Alison Russell, ‘The One and the Many: Joshua Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End*’, *Critique-Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59.3 (2018), p. 330.
[226] Ralph Clare, *Fictions Inc: The Corporation in Postmodern Fiction, Film, and Popular Culture*, p. 191.
[227] Simon Winlow and Steve Hall, 'Living for the Weekend: Youth Identities in Northeast England', p. 100.
[228] Ibid., p. 101.

communitarian strivings to enhance effective commitment and to draw temporaries more closely into the normative organizational order.[229]

The protagonist of the other Levison novel, *Since the Layoffs*, discovers that his company employed this strategy only after he has been made redundant from the profitable factory he worked for:

> Me and the guys I worked with weren't there for them, or even for our paychecks. We were there for ourselves, for the knowledge that we could work as a team and get things accomplished. And that was the worst part of getting laid off, the sudden realization that the team was a mirage, conjured up by management to get more work out of us for less pay.[230]

The community of Levison's factory proves to be illusory, a careful construction that exploits the natural human desire for social contact to maximise production. In this regard, the type of community spirit promoted by managers such as the one described by Levison could be seen to belong to what some sociologists have identified as the rise of a *narrative* of community that has paralleled the disappearance of community as a way of life. According to Blackshaw, community has undergone a process of 'branding'[231] and the word itself is now ubiquitous in political agendas, local events and council initiatives, a fact that also shows how the nostalgic desire for belonging has not been successfully annihilated by the 'compensatory pleasures of consumerism'.[232] Indeed, such a desire for community could well stem from the existential void left by its very demise as 'it was only when we were no longer sure of community's existence that it became absolutely necessary to believe in it'.[233] In this sense, community has become a 'hermeneutical exercise, […] a task of interpretation',[234] as it was transformed from an unconscious way of living into a conscious act of interpretation and a construction, from a pre-modern 'unaware alignment'[235] to a modern 'active commitment'.[236]

The branding of community, however, as well as attempting to satisfy the individuals' longing for a lost togetherness, also helps serve the neoliberal cause in its conservative 'quest

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[229] Christina Garsten, 'Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations', p. 612.
[230] Iain Levison, *Since the Layoffs*, p. 29.
[231] Tony Blackshaw, *Key Concepts in Community Studies*, p. 8.
[232] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets. A History of Collective Joy*, p. 255.
[233] Tony Blackshaw, *Key Concepts in Community Studies*, p. 8.
[234] Ibid., p. 27.
[235] Ibid., p. 28.
[236] Ibid.

for social order based on market principles'.[237] In this way, community today can be seen as a symbolic construction at the service of a "greater good"; that of profit-making. Anthony Cohen defines community as a 'boundary expressing symbol',[238] as a tool needed in order to gather very different individuals under a pretextual commonality of intents:

> As a symbol, it is held in common by its members; but its meaning varies with its members' unique orientations to it. In the face of this variability of meaning, the consciousness of community has to be kept alive through manipulation of its symbols. The reality and efficacy of the community's boundary – and therefore, of the community itself – depends upon its symbolic construction and embellishment.[239]

Similarly to the strategies employed during the creation of nation-states, whose political aims envisaged the reunification of disparate citizens within a 'cohesive entity that provide[d] its adherents with a common history, a shared culture and an apparent sense of purpose',[240] the postmodern communities of the workplace described above can only be conceived as useful imaginary constructions, as a clever engineering of symbols that the community of individuals can identify with and that can be exploited by the system to maintain the "structure".

As part of this "structure preservation" effort, in some cases employers set out to closely monitor and regulate the interactions that take place between their subordinates, such as in the case of the office of *Personal Days*, where:

> You should never date anyone in the office, ever. You should also be extremely careful about what you say to someone of the opposite or indeed the same sex. Many seemingly harmless sentences, phrases, even words, and actually individual letters can be construed as harassing. Never say anything about what somebody's wearing. Also, just to be safe, don't wear anything too revealing.[241]

As a result of these guidelines for appropriate behaviour at the workplace, any kind of spontaneous relationships are curbed from the beginning, with workers being forced to perform self-surveillance and self-monitor everything they say and do, effectively keeping their distance from their colleagues.

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[237] Ibid., p. 9.
[238] Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, p. 15.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Tony Blackshaw, *Key Concepts in Community Studies*, p. 120.
[241] Ed Park, *Personal Days*, p. 9.

At other times, as noted by Winlow and Hall in the study mentioned earlier, the relationships formed and cultivated at work are seen as merely instrumental to the advancement of one's career or to the obtainment of some other external reward, in that 'the working personas of the interviewees [were] grounded in hard-edged instrumentalism, which appear[ed] to be at once indicative of the hyper-individualized nature of contemporary culture and the transitory and alienating nature of their work'.[242] In Goodman's *Intuition*, the lab director, Doctor Sandy Glass, organises free tickets for his team to go to the theatre, where he has also invited the research institute director and his wife in the hope of securing further funding for his lab:

> In addition to his love of music and pride in Aidan [his son], Sandy had a political motive for the evening. The lab had fourteen tickets to the Passion, and Sandy had invited the Philpott's director and his wife along. Sandy needed support just now from the institute: publicity and as much internal money as the director could spare.[243]

Sandy Glass's evening "networking", an activity very dear to the academic community, is essentially, according to Garsten, a combination of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, that is 'a social formation characterised by organic unity, sense of belonging, and direct and closely intertwined relations' combined with a 'mechanistic constellation of separate individuals with rational motives for group formation'.[244]

The fragile nature of workplace communities that are, on many occasions, based on instrumentalism and personal interest is exposed and exacerbated by the inevitable advent of unemployment and by the fierce competition among the workers to stay afloat. In *Inox*'s factory, the imminence of a downsizing operation and subsequent redundancies causes the initial solidarity and team spirit – symbolised in the act of eating together described above – to wane. The protagonist observes that:

> Si rischia sul serio di chiudere bottega. Per la prima volta sentiamo come sia distante il concetto di squadra nella sala controllo che ci ha visto uniti nel lavoro, nei problemi, nelle discussioni, in disaccordo o tutti insieme, compatti. La Squadra C si sente retrocessa a un gruppo di persone che condividono lo stesso luogo di lavoro e nulla più.

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[242] Simon Winlow and Steve Hall, 'Living for the Weekend: Youth Identities in Northeast England', p. 101.
[243] Allegra Goodman, *Intuition*, p. 107.
[244] Christina Garsten, 'Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations', p. 614.

[This time we're seriously risking shutting up shop. For the first time we can feel how the concept of a 'team' is a distant memory in the engine room that saw us united in our work, in our problems and discussions, in disagreement with each other or all together, as one. Team C feels as if it's been reduced to a group of people who share their workplace and nothing more].[245]

For these people who believed they were part of a "team", the prospect of unemployment dissipates the illusion of community and sheds light on the fact that working in the factory is the only thing that they have in common. Towards the end of the novel, following the death of the team leader's elderly father, which – almost prophetically – is the result of the injuries received whilst taking to the streets to protest the redundancies, the narrator comments that:

Io e Sergio sappiamo che qualche giorno addietro, per una macabra coincidenza, insieme a suo padre abbiamo seppellito per sempre l'idea di un'identità di squadra, un'identità fittizia in fase di smantellamento. A breve non saremo più gli operai dell'acciaieria – come ci si appellava un tempo – ma ognuno di noi si tramuterà nel singolo dipendente dell'Acciai Speciali.

[Sergio and I know that, as if by some macabre coincidence, when we buried his dad a few days ago we also buried forever the idea of a team identity, a fake identity that is now being dismantled. Soon we'll no longer be the workmen of the steel plant – as we once used to call ourselves – but each one of us will turn into the single employee of the 'Acciai Speciali' factory].[246]

If in some instances, employers are effectively engaged in the promotion of community spirit among their employees in order to maximise productivity, encourage commitment and boost loyalty, in other circumstances managers actually profit from the isolation and individualisation of the workers. In the case of *Inox*, the management is likely to benefit from the divisions among the factory labourers:

La strategia dell'azienda è uscita allo scoperto, tende a spaccare il fronte dei manifestanti, sta minando l'unità che si esprime nello slogan della prima ora: 'l'acciaieria non si tocca'.

[245] Eugenio Raspi, *Inox*, p. 212.
[246] Ibid., pp. 236–37.

> [The company's strategy has come out: it aims to split the front of the protesters and it is undermining the workers' unity expressed in the early slogan 'Hands off our steelworks'][247]

This tactics of alienating workers from one another by forcing them to compete for the fewer available jobs (instigating the logic of the 'every man for himself')[248] can also serve the purpose of effectively hindering their ability to develop or retain a class consciousness and to organise any form of resistance.[249] Here, Raspi stages the erosion and dismantling of a working class identity that had been traditionally strong in Italy, as a result of individualisation. The latter, in this sense, prevents the development of a collective action in a vicious circle in which the 'awareness of substitutability and value in adapting' typical of today's jobs 'contribute to this individualised experience',[250] but the individualisation itself acts as a tool to preserve the status quo that caused it in the first place.

As acutely pointed out by Garsten, the experience of liminality in the case of precarious employment is an individualised one, in sharp contrast with the collective character of the liminal phase described by Victor Turner where, from the reality of being 'betwixt and between', there would arise 'spontaneous', 'immediate' and 'concrete'[251] *communitas*. *Communitas* refers to an unstructured state in which all its members are equal, 'it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalised relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency'.[252] An example of *communitas* could be that of war soldiers who are prepared to die for each other. In today's fleeting "narrative" communities of the workplace this would be unimaginable, as the individualised experience of the employee fighting to get ahead and "be chosen" is 'more strongly felt than the notion of sharing and belonging'.[253] The group formations made up of workers from all of the social contexts described in the novels considered do not appear to share the characteristics of

[247] Ibid., pp. 242–43.
[248] Ibid., p. 235.
[249] In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey attributes the individualisation and consequent powerlessness of the worker under neoliberal conditions to neoliberalism's general attack on labour. This included operations such as curbing the powers of trade unions, creating flexible labour markets characterised by short-term contracts (and, therefore, insecurity of employment), and exonerating the state from the provision of social welfare. All of these measures ultimately resulted in 'the domination of capital over labour in the marketplace', (p. 177).
[250] Christina Garsten, 'Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations', p. 615.
[251] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 127.
[252] Ibid, p. 128.
[253] Christina Garsten, 'Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations', p. 615.

Turner's *communitas*, instead they are comprised of workers who are isolated, atomised and whose interpersonal relationships are marked by superficiality.

4. 'A world without rules': systemic violence and the new discipline

In this section, I will examine the ways in which the novels considered present the neoliberal system as an inherently violent one, where the self-realisation of the individual is secondary to the accumulation of capital. By highlighting the ills of work under capitalism, this section also aims to suggest a possible cause for the feelings of meaninglessness, the illnesses and the 'mental health plague' – increasingly more frequent among workers – that were identified in the first part of this chapter as being typical symptoms of working in permanent liminality.

When defining capitalism as 'inherently violent', a preliminary clarification is necessary as to what is here understood by 'violence'. My analysis is based on the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung's distinction between 'personal' or 'direct' violence, which is apparent and has an identifiable actor that commits the violent act, and a 'structural' or 'indirect' violence, which is often invisible and where there is no obvious actor that commits the violence. According to Galtung's definition, 'violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations',[254] which means that, when the individual is prevented in any way from realising their full potential, violence is present in the system. Galtung argues that this can occur when 'insight or resources are monopolised by a group or class or are used for other purposes',[255] which results in a situation where individuals have 'unequal power' and 'unequal life chances'.[256] Structural violence is therefore associated more generally with social injustice and it often goes undetected as it may be perceived as natural.

In his 2008 work *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek also looks at a structural type of violence, which he terms as 'systemic' or 'objective' violence – an expression with which he indicates the 'often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems'.[257] Just as Galtung's structural violence, objective violence is perceived as normal and, therefore, it is invisible, since 'it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent'.[258] Žižek

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[254] Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', p. 168.
[255] Ibid., p. 169.
[256] Ibid., p. 171.
[257] Slavoj Žižek, *Violence, Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), p. 1.
[258] Ibid., p. 2.

explicitly qualifies systemic violence as an attribute of capitalism, and defines it as 'much more uncanny than any direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence' because of its 'purely objective, systemic [and] anonymous'[259] character that makes it unattributable to any concrete individuals or their intentions. Žižek also quotes the French philosopher Étienne Balibar in his idea that the 'ultra-objective or systemic violence that is inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism […] involve the automatic creation of excluded and dispensable individuals from the homeless to the unemployed'.[260]

In the novels analysed, there are a plethora of examples in which late capitalism and work in neoliberal society are portrayed as deserving of Galtung and Žižek's definitions of structural or systemic violence. These instances of systemic violence, rendered visible by the illnesses and anxiety discussed in the previous sections, far exceed in number the amount of violent occurrences of the direct or subjective type. In effect, there are only two incidents involving the latter type of violence, both dealing with the police repressing demonstrations. In the first case, the factory workers of *Inox* join a march to protest against the closure of the steelworks and are beaten by the agents, causing the injury and subsequent death of the team leader's father among the indifference of the community:

> Siamo incazzati a morte, possibile che nessuno dica chiaramente che non si può prendere le randellate solo perché si è scesi in piazza in difesa del posto di lavoro?
>
> [We are madly pissed off: how is it possible that nobody is saying loud and clear that you shouldn't be cudgelled just because you've taken to the streets to defend your job?][261]

The second example, on the other hand, comes from the British *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, where the characters discuss some video footage of the violent clashes between police and anti-globalisation protesters during the Genoa 2001 G8 summit. After the TV shows an image of the Italian police shooting tear gases from a helicopter, one of the characters comments that 'they'll still only talk about the anarchists' violence'.[262] Johnston here exposes the dichotomy operating in contemporary society between the police repression of the protests – which corresponds to what Max Weber defines as 'the legitimate use of physical force within a given

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[259] Ibid., p. 11.
[260] Ibid., p. 12.
[261] Eugenio Raspi, *Inox*, p. 186.
[262] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 113.

territory'[263] and which is the monopoly of the state – and the anarchists' violence, which is regarded as disorderly, deviant and unlawful. This dichotomy, and the visibility of somatic violence compared to the invisibility of systemic violence, serve to facilitate the preservation of this more subtle, structural violence which upholds the neoliberal governmental system.

With the exception of the two cases highlighted above, the novels are pervaded by this less visible type of structural violence exerted by the system. In *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, the character of Spocky, a politically engaged fast-food worker, provides a lengthy and visually interesting description of capitalism that presents it as an essentially violent economic system, where resources are unequally distributed to the advantage of the capitalist class and the detriment of a growing global proletariat that is destined to become poorer and poorer. Spocky explains capitalism to his colleagues by creating an analogy between wealth and chocolate flakes. Two of his colleagues are to represent the global proletariat, whilst Spocky himself represents the capitalist class and therefore owns all the raw materials and the machinery necessary to transform these materials into commodities. Spocky then "employs" the two colleagues to work in his factory, but the power imbalance between employer and employee is immediately evident:

> Spocky said he would pay me to work in his factory, and so, at his instruction, I put a chocolate flake between the blades of the tomato slicer and cut the flake into five chunks. Lucy also needed a job, and Spocky agreed to employ her in the accounts department of his office […]. At Spocky's instruction, Lucy gave ten pence to me and twelve pence to herself. This is where it got tricky. Spocky agreed to sell us the chocolate for twelve pence a morsel, and when I complained that I only had ten pence, he said I could buy the chocolate on my credit card. So while Lucy and I each ate a morsel of chocolate, Spocky reclaimed his twenty-two pence, ate two morsels, and told us to chop another flake. Same thing happened. Lucy gave me ten pence, she and I each ate a chunk of chocolate, and Spocky, after eating two chunks, reminded me that my debt was now four pence, plus one penny interest. You can see where this is going: by the time we'd chopped another five flakes, Spocky, representing the entire capitalist class, had acquired a reserve of seven morsels of chocolate. He also had all the money he'd started with and was owed an additional thirty-two pence that the global proletariat had incurred in debt. […] Soon, with each round of chocolate cutting, Lucy and I could afford only crumbs of the chunks we were producing.[264]

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[263] Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation' in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. Hans Gerth and Charles Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 78.
[264] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, pp. 97–98.

When the capitalist class monopolises all the resources, it is apparent that the waged labourers do not have any real possibility of emancipation from their condition of poverty. Spocky argues that the capitalist system is based on the requirement that the economy grows every year, as otherwise 'businesses […] will be unable to repay their investors, workers will be made redundant, and bankers will transfer funds to other economies. If some workers are made redundant then all workers are affected. The unemployed workers have less money to spend, so more businesses go bust'.[265] Spocky continues by remarking that this insistence on economic growth is at odds with the current population explosion, which means that more people are competing for fewer jobs and thus it is necessary to create new occupations continuously, regardless of their usefulness, as 'it doesn't matter whether we need or want more jobs doing; all that matters is that we find new ways of making money out of each other'[266] (with consequences for the workers' sense of self-worth such as the meaninglessness described in the first section). Spocky notes how in the United Kingdom, despite all the technological advances that have occurred, the current system forces people to work longer hours than forty years ago, doing jobs that ultimately add to what are already ecologically unsustainable levels of production; an argument that resonates well with Harvey's definition of the neoliberal system as a 'regime of endless capital accumulation and economic growth no matter what the social, ecological, or political consequences'.[267]

If Johnston's novel offers a fairly ominous picture of the inequalities embedded in the system, Levison's *A Working Stiff's Manifesto* identifies a cognitive dissonance at work that prevents those at the top from even recognising that their wealth originates precisely from social injustice. They instead tend to attribute their success to personal wits and qualities that distinguished them from those who sit at the bottom of the social ladder. As Levison's protagonist wonders:

> Where do the rich come from? Do all these houses belong to geniuses, inventors of rocket engines and cures for diseases? Did they have one great idea, like Post-it notes, and capitalize on it? Is there some fascinating story behind this great surplus of money, or have they simply inherited a factory that makes toenail clippers for the armed forces? One thing's for sure; they believe they deserve it. I don't know many rich people, but I've met enough to know that even the ones who

[265] Ibid., p. 99.
[266] Ibid.
[267] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 181.

were handed a trust fund think of themselves as special, not lucky. They reinvent the past to include details of their own forbearance and fortitude to anyone who'll listen.[268]

The rich's reinvention of the past contributes to building a narrative that relieves the neoliberal system from its part in creating ever-growing inequality. Conversely, when somebody does not 'make it' they are made to bear the responsibility for it, as poverty is blamed on lack of talent, skills or foresight:

> If you ask the rich why you're not capable of supporting yourself, they'll tell you it is your fault. The ones who make it to the lifeboats always think the ones still in the water are to blame. Weren't quick enough, sharp enough, weren't on the ball. Didn't see the economic shipwreck in time. Should've invested in computers. Should've started learning about computers when you were eight. Should've taken computer classes instead of baseball elective in seventh period, then you'd be where I am now.[269]

Such a narrative that exalts the rich and scapegoats the poor shares the traits of the 'invention of tradition' theorised by Eric Hobsbawm in 1983. According to Hobsbawm, an invented tradition consists of 'a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past'.[270] By reinventing their personal history to emphasise their key role in shaping their fortunes, the rich help perpetuate the discourse of personal responsibility on which neoliberalism relies. Vice versa, it could be argued that Levison's novel, by exposing this kind of mythologising narrative, attempts to disrupt its coherence and renders visible the structural violence at the heart of the system.

The idea of personal responsibility can also be discerned behind the ever-present 'self-evaluation forms' handed out by management as they put on a caring facade and feign concern for their employees' wellbeing, whilst essentially reaffirming that any ills or grievances about the job are to be attributed to the subjective perceptions or faults of the individual, rather than to the objective violence built into the system. In Park's *Personal Days*, the company's boss distributes among his staff self-evaluation forms that read 'help me help you' and that are to

[268] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, p. 40.
[269] Ibid., p. 46.
[270] *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 1.

remain anonymous. Despite the apparently innocent nature of this exercise, which asks the workers to be honest about their feelings and to express themselves freely, the statements in the forms are described as having ‘a North Korean vibe, affectless yet intense’.[271] Although the employees are immersed in the positivist lie of the caring corporation, the author’s description of the statements as ‘affectless’ exposes the companies’ veiled but widely enacted practices of monitoring and disciplining their workers, which they carry out whilst hiding behind a compassionate and informal front.

These forms of control can be seen as further examples of structural violence and can be explained by recurring to the social philosopher André Gorz’s assertion that the true objective of work is ‘to keep people occupied, and thereby to preserve the relations of subordination, competition and discipline upon which the workings of the dominant system are based’.[272] In this respect, the protagonist of *Since the Layoffs* also realises that the ‘rules of conduct’ by which he has lived his entire life are merely ‘a carefully designed system to keep [him] in line, to keep [him] from asking for more, like Oliver Twist’.[273] The point made here, once again, contrasts with the widespread assumption that sees the era of the free and unregulated market as one where the individual is also free to live and express himself unrestrained by old fashioned sets of rules and behaviours. On the contrary, the world described by Levison and labelled ‘a world without rules’ is precisely so by an excess of violence and control, rather than a lack of it:

> There are people whose job it is to drug test convenience store clerks. There are people whose job it is to make sure other people don’t bring guns to work. There are people in office buildings right now trying to figure out if laying off seven hundred people will save them money. […] The economy is pain, lies, fear and silliness.[274]

If ‘pain’, ‘lies’ and ‘fear’ are attributes that are typical of violent settings, the term ‘silliness’ rather seems to point to the absurdity of an economic system that is commonly accepted as inevitable and irreplaceable and, almost mockingly, formally undermines its hegemony. In addition, the passage above paints a picture in which the purpose of some professions seems to lie less in their usefulness to society and rather in their contribution to a system that aims to control every aspect of its citizens’ lives. In particular, the only goal of drug testing is said to

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[271] Ed Park, *Personal Days*, p. 23.
[272] Quoted in Edward Granter, *Critical Social Theory and the End of Work*, p. 133.
[273] Iain Levison, *Since the Layoffs*, p, 50.
[274] Ibid., p. 76.

be ‘to strike fear into the hearts of bank tellers, meat packers, assembly line workers, desk clerks, football players, and fish processors’.[275] As regards gun regulation, it is perhaps ironic that, whilst at a local, individual level, corporations engage in a passionate battle against the carrying of guns to work, on a global scale they are themselves often implicated in the profitable arms trade. The military industrial complex, in fact, is essential to the generation of surplus and markets on which the persistence of neoliberalism now relies. The wide circulation of guns, and the subsequent need to regulate their use, are the product of the same system, which means that the somatic, visible violence of guns is but the tangible expression of the structural violence of the defence industry.

The control structure highlighted so far also extends to the intellectual professions of *Intuition*’s academia, where ‘people get sacrificed quite often’ within a ‘feudal’ system that favours those occupying the highest positions (the ‘lords’ and ‘ladies’), whilst leaving the postdocs to play the part of the ‘vassals paying tribute every year in the form of publications, blood, sweat, tears, et cetera’.[276] A lab assistant goes as far as claiming that ‘academics are all tangled up with corporations’ and that Dr Sandy Glass is, or wants to be, ‘in the pocket of a drug company’ as ‘there’s big bucks out there, and where there’s money like that there is no such thing as academic freedom, or independent inquiry’.[277] In this view, disinterested scientific research converges with business interest, whether to guarantee its own survival or to secure a profit, and thus becomes integrated into the money-making scheme of capitalism.

If, generically, the examples previously presented portray the world of work as structurally violent, in the following discussion I will focus on more specific cases of systemic violence that emerge in the novels analysed and that relate to the context of work under late capitalism. These cases have been divided into six categories for purposes of clarity.

In the first category we find that particular type of structural violence that is the deskilling of workers when they are made to perform tasks that are below their qualifications, abilities or job specification. It is not difficult to discern the structural violence behind this common practice on the basis of Galtung’s definition of structural violence as a discrepancy between somebody’s potential and its concrete realisation, which is, in effect, what characterises deskilling. In *Personal Days*, following a string of dismissals, Pru is assigned the new role of personal assistant to the boss (the ‘Sprout’), where she finds herself with an increased workload for no extra compensation and a series of novel and more menial jobs to

[275] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff’s Manifesto*, p. 76.
[276] Allegra Goodman, *Intuition*, p. 211.
[277] Ibid., p. 212.

do, 'some of [which] involved what she called manual labor, such as sharpening the Sprout's pencils and printing out mailing labels' and thus 'she felt herself slipping down some job-description sinkhole'.[278]

On the opposite side of the spectrum, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto* offers a glimpse of the second category of structural violence identified, that of those employers who set unrealistic goals for workers under the pretext of pushing them to achieve their best potential. As these objectives are indeed unachievable, the workers' potential once again cannot be realised. The example given in Levison's memoir is that of the paradox of lorry drivers:

> The public likes a professional moving company. They also like having their stores stocked with everything they need. Then they like the idea that trucks driving on the road are regulated by some kind of governing body, making sure the vehicles are safe and the drivers aren't all falling asleep at the wheel. It's just not possible.[279]

The situation at Levison's moving company broadly mirrors that of most of the road transport and logistics sectors, where the drivers are instructed to take appropriate breaks to ensure safety whilst simultaneously being pressured to meet unworkable targets, thus trapping them in a paradoxical situation. The potentially fatal tiredness of the lorry drivers starkly contrasts with the repetition of the word 'like', which grotesquely emphasises the discrepancy between two things that are often treated as equally important when, in fact, they should not be: the drivers' right to personal safety and the consumers' right to have their desires immediately satisfied.

The third way in which systemic violence is articulated in the novels analysed is through what Galtung identifies as a manipulation of the individual via 'stick and carrot' strategies,[280] that is when benefits and rewards are given in combination with more or less concealed threats of punishment. In *Personal Days*, for example, the employees are allowed casual wear to work such as 'loose pants, canvas sneakers, clogs' and 'flip-flops' so that 'every day is potentially casual Friday'.[281] This makes the working environment look 'relaxed', at least 'on the surface',[282] despite the constant danger of redundancies. More explicitly, the game of softball is said to be employed as a 'morale-boosting *carrot* [my emphasis] that the Sprout most likely has read about in a handbook or learned at that seminar he goes to every March' to

[278] Ed Park, *Personal Days*, p. 155.
[279] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, p. 63.
[280] See Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', p. 170.
[281] Ed Park, *Personal Days*, p. 3.
[282] Ibid.

counteract the low morale of his workers since 'the Firings' began a year before. By providing a pleasant distraction, the management is able to channel the workers' attention elsewhere and to continue with their process of randomised dismissals and downsizing. Diversion, which also includes the widespread use of recreational drugs described by Levison, and which for the French philosopher Blaise Pascal was 'the only thing which consoles us for our miseries',[283] prevents the individual from both confronting the meaninglessness of their existence and from questioning the cause of such meaninglessness, therefore guaranteeing the preservation of the status quo.

The fourth type of structural violence imposed on the workers is that which occurs when the employers' main concern becomes the maximisation of profits, which comes before and even at the expense of the workers. In *Since the Layoffs*, the protagonist points out how making money to a profit is no longer enough for many companies, for whom hypothetical capital gains or imaginary targets bear far more importance than the hard work and sacrifices made by their employees. The convenience store where the novel's protagonist works for a while, for example, successfully sells the goods it is supposed to, but this does not satisfy the management anymore:

> The store makes money, but since the layoffs I've learned that's hardly the point. Making money is neither here nor there. What matters is, are you making as much money as is humanly possible, and if not, why not. And the people who determine the limits of human possibility with regards to money-making, using totally theoretical ideas they've dreamed up over glasses of wine or latenight poker games, will determine whether Tommy is doing a good job solely on the criteria of their imaginary profit margins. So the fact that Tommy works over seventy hours a week, cleaning, counting, ordering, worrying, means nothing. If there isn't a large enough display from the most profitable soda company visible from the street, and the profits are not being maximized, then Tommy has to be criticized, even punished, in the form of a bad review.[284]

The gap between the upper class and the worker – the anonymous 'people who determine the limits of human possibility' and the named 'Tommy' – is embodied in the distance between the decision-makers' leisurely life of wine and poker and the material struggles of Tommy's cleaning, counting and ordering. Tommy's individual experience is insignificant as, to the company, he is only an instrument to achieve hypothetical profit targets.

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[283] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. by Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 10.

[284] Iain Levison, *Since the Layoffs*, pp. 44–45.

In *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, Benny's fast-food restaurant chain was able to boost their earnings by replacing skilled 'chefs and waiters with children, college students, single mothers, and first-generation immigrants', buying the cheapest ingredients and 'undercut[ting] every greasy spoon in New York'.[285] Dignified work and quality of the products offered are sacrificed in a McDonaldized system that submits to 'the logic of capitalist production, investors' demands for profit and the resultant urge to maximise the extraction of surplus value from labour'.[286] Forfeiting dignified work in the interest of profit actually signals that the surreptitious violence of the neoliberal system stems from a fundamental disregard for dignity, as defined by the UN as a human right. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, dignity includes the entitlement to 'realisation […] of the economic, social and cultural rights' (Article 22) and the rights to 'equal pay for equal work' (Article 23.2) and to 'favourable remuneration ensuring […] an existence worthy of human dignity and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection' (Article 23.3).[287] The categories of people who are said to work for Benny's Burgers are likely to be paid a wage that does not guarantee that all primary needs are met, work in a context that prevents the individual's self-actualisation, and, therefore, their dignity as a human right is not assured.

If this previous type of violence put the wellbeing and the needs of the workers behind that of accumulating capital, the next examples expose an even worse scenario (our fifth type of systemic violence), in which sections of the population actually profit from the injustices at the heart of the neoliberal system. In Raspi's *Inox*, the narrator predicts that the closing of the steelworks and the lay-off of workers now 'destined to poverty' will benefit somebody else who will 'get rich thanks to the misfortunes of others',[288] as '*mors tua vita mea*'[289] (your loss is my gain) becomes the motto of the last few days of fighting. Among those who will take advantage of the redundancies are those who will be able to 'abbassa[re] i salari o fa[re] lavorare in nero gli operai licenziati o in mobilità che si arrangeranno su un tornio o su una fresa nelle officine che realizzano i ricambi per le fabbriche del Nord' ['lower the wages or illegally hir[e] the labourers who have been laid off or the redundancy workers who will have to make do with the lathe or the milling machine in the workshops that make spare parts for the factories in the North'], but also:

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[285] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 12.
[286] Ibid., p. 13.
[287] The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/ [accessed 30 May 2020].
[288] Eugenio Raspi, *Inox*, p. 222.
[289] Ibid., p. 246.

> Gli avvocati o i responsabili delle agenzie interinali, i poliziotti antisommossa e i funzionari della Prefettura, i marocchini o i rumeni che aprono le ortofrutticole a zero settantacinque centesimi il chilo, raccogliendo clientela fra chi da adesso in poi comprerà a fatica la frutta e verdura al supermarket. Perfino per i sindacalisti di professione il lavoro non mancherà. Per gli stessi manager che stanno contrattando la vendita che gli garantirà un bonus a tanti zeri. Avvantaggiati dalla disputa saranno i proprietari delle PMI, sotto o sopra i quindici dipendenti, che sbavano per il jobs act e ora potranno imporre con facilità le condizioni più restrittive, ricattando con una certa compiacenza e con il ragionamento: «Non vorrete anche voi fare la fine degli operai dell'acciaieria? Quelli dicono sempre no e ora rischiano di ritrovarsi con un pugno di mosche in mano».
>
> [The lawyers or the people in charge of temping agencies, the riot police and the prefecture's officials, the Moroccans or Romanians who open 0.75 cents-per-kilo greengrocers by picking up customers among those who, from now on, will struggle to buy fruit and vegetables at the supermarket. Even the trade unionists by profession won't be short of work nor will those managers who are now negotiating the sale that will grant them a bonus with so many zeros. Also the owners of SMEs with more or less than fifteen employees and who drool over the 'Jobs Act' will benefit from the dispute, as they will be able to impose more restrictive conditions more easily by blackmailing their workers with a certain satisfaction and with the reasoning that 'You don't want to end up like the labourers from the steelworks, do you? They constantly said no and now they risk finding themselves empty-handed'.][290]

A similar point is made in Levison's *Since the Layoffs*, when the protagonist argues that the 'destruction of [his] life, [his] town, represents a business opportunity to someone else'.[291] In *Personal Days*, on the other hand, the dismissal of a worker is carried out 'without any malice' for the evidently futile and cruel reason that 'sometimes a sharp shock is just what's needed, a major disorientating episode that triggers the adrenaline'.[292]

In all of the cases above it is manifest that the current system relegates the workers to a position of inferiority, with virtually no negotiating power as the number of applicants for each position far exceeds the number of jobs available and, therefore, everyone is always easily replaceable. In Levison's *A Working Stiff's Manifesto* we are told that 'it's a tough business, […] a lot of competition. You gotta push. Gotta work hard. You gotta kill yourself to

[290] Ibid., p. 204.
[291] Iain Levison, *Since the Layoffs*, p. 21.
[292] Ed Park, *Personal Days*, p. 208.

survive',[293] with the latter paradox highlighting for the reader the absurdity of the state of affairs to which the only possible response, though, is a bitter resignation as 'there's no dream job out there. It's the same for everyone. You've got to do something or you starve'.[294] The narrator of Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* reminds the reader that 'work was everything': 'at two in the afternoon with bills to pay and layoffs hovering over [them]' all that matters is work, not 'family, […] God, […] football on Sundays, […] shopping with the girls or a strong drink on Saturday night, […] love, […] sex, […] keeping our eye on retirement'.[295] Here, the workers appear to regard their jobs and work in general as a necessary but undesirable activity, which the above distractions attempt to counterbalance. They long for the day when they will be free to choose more pleasurable activities but fear unemployment far more. In a way, they are trapped in a miserable, displaced present, nostalgic for a past that was stable and secure and looking towards a future that is uncertain.

In a context such as this, in order not to lose their livelihoods, the workers have no choice but to submit and adapt to any requirements and conditions put in place by their employers. In Ferris's novel, as austerity measures start being implemented by the management, the office employees quickly adapt to a progressively worse working environment as they know that protesting is pointless:

> The austerity measures began in the lobby, with the flowers and bowls of candy. Benny liked to smell the flowers. 'I miss the nice flowers', he said. Then we got an officewide memo taking away our summer days. 'I miss my summer days even more than the flowers', he remarked. At an all-agency meeting, the following month, they announced a hiring freeze. Next thing we knew, no one was receiving a bonus. "I couldn't give a damn about summer days," he said, "but my bonus now, too?" Finally, layoffs began. "Flowers, summer days, bonuses — fine by me," said Benny. "Just leave me my job".[296]

The passage above, where cuts affect increasingly vital aspects of the job (eventually including the job itself) but are not actively resisted by the staff, can be viewed as symptomatic of a generalised attitude of resignation among workers in an era when trade unions are weaker, globalised labour cheaper, people replaceable, and bargaining power is firmly held in the hands of the capitalist class.

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[293] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, p. 152.
[294] Ibid., p. 156.
[295] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End*, p. 178.
[296] Ibid., p. 35.

4.1 ‘Does fear make one a more loyal employee?’: the violence of the panopticon

The sixth and final type of structural violence embedded in the neoliberal economic model that will be discussed here is that pervasive network of control of the individual at work that is, oxymoronically, at odds with the supposedly free, unregulated nature of neoliberalism. Whilst the latter advocates for minimal interference from national governments in economic matters as the market is presumably “self-regulating”, the structures laid out by public and private bodies for the purpose of controlling and disciplining individuals point in the opposite direction.

In his article ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze contrasts the contemporary ‘societies of control’ with the disciplinary societies described by Michel Foucault, where ‘the individual never cease[d] passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws’ (such as the family, the school, the barracks, the factory and, at times, the hospital or the prison) and whose objectives were ‘to concentrate; to distribute in space; to order in time; to compose a productive force within the dimension of space-time whose effect [would] be greater than the sum of its component forces’.[297] In the new societies of control, according to Deleuze, the factory has been replaced by the corporation, which ‘works more deeply to impose a modulation of each salary, in states of perpetual metastability that operate through challenges, contests, and highly comic group sessions’.[298] Unlike the factory, which ‘constituted individuals as a single body’,[299] the corporation promotes competition and rivalry among the workers as motivational forces, but thus simultaneously divides the workers’ body and renders mass mobilisation and resistance impossible. As for the other enclosed spaces analysed by Foucault, Deleuze argues that the school has been replaced by *perpetual training* and the examination by *continuous control*. Panoptical surveillance, it appears, does not end with the death of the disciplinary society, but is alive and well in the times of the dispersed corporation. According to thinkers such as Mark Fisher and Bob Black, the new discipline, intended as the ‘totality of totalitarian controls at the workplace’, includes common practices such as ‘surveillance, rotework, imposed work tempos, production quotas [and] punching in and out’,[300] several examples of which can be found in the novels selected.

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[297] Gilles Deleuze, ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’, p. 3.
[298] Ibid., p. 4.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Bob Black, *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* (Port Townsend: Loompanics Unlimited, 1986), p. 20.

The first way in which the workers are monitored in the novels considered is through the use of omnipresent technological devices such as surveillance cameras and tracking equipment. In *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, when the protagonist finds himself working for a moving company, an 'Omnitrax' device is installed in the lorry and it transmits its exact location to the company headquarters by satellite. Whilst the Omnitrax is 'ostensibly […] for emergencies, in case [they] ever break down in a snowbank somewhere', its main purpose is 'to stop the drivers from lying about their exact location in an effort to procure time off'.[301] This also shows a certain degree of distrust on the part of the company towards their employees' effective commitment, which seems to prompt the need for surveillance.

In *Since the Layoffs* and the British *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, control over the workers is achieved through the more obvious CCTV surveillance. In Levison's novel, the employees of the convenience store earn 'seven bucks an hour' and are watched on 'fucking video' like 'lab rats',[302] whilst Johnston's protagonist, Wayne, has a recurring nightmare in which, although he does not recall breaking the law in any way, he is being filmed by surveillance systems across London and chased by police:

> A description of me statics over a police radio, and I start to power-walk, head down. In Piccadilly Circus, above the Coca-Cola sign, below the golden arches, there is a giant picture of my face. It starts to flash. I jump on a bus, but as soon as I sit down, I can see the driver watching me in the mirror. The bus stops and he won't tell me why. We're waiting at the side of the road and he won't open the doors. When I force them, he shouts at me and I run and keep running until I'm at the train station. It's not King's Cross. It could be Waterloo, or maybe Liverpool Street. It's filled with people, so many it makes me dizzy. I'm no longer watching from inside myself but can see the scene as though I'm in a film. I can see myself through CCTV cameras. I can see different angles. I can see distant shots where I look lost amidst all the people in the concourse. I can see zoom shots, where my face is so big that I can see every eyelash. I can see all of this on the monitors in policebusy security rooms.[303]

Wayne sees his face refracted on myriad screens like an external onlooker to his own life, to the point that he feels almost disembodied, his identity reduced to a mosaic of CCTV images. This focus on the face, and on the face as the subject of surveillance by digital technology has been analysed in detail by Jenny Edkins in her work *Face Politics* (2015), where she argues,

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[301] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, pp. 70–71.
[302] Iain Levison, *Since the Layoffs*, p. 60.
[303] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, pp. 161–62.

with reference to the London Riots of 2011, that face monitoring was actually employed as a form of social control and as part of the apparatus of power that was at the disposal of government and police. In this book, Edkins refers to Kelly Gates's argument that the development of facial recognition technology is correlated with the dependence of neoliberalism on 'mass individuation, social differentiation, and intensified security' as it provides 'a means of tying individuals into circuits of inclusion and exclusion, determining their status as legitimate, self-governing citizens or more problematic identities deemed to fall outside the realm of legal rights who can therefore be subjected to a range of repressive strategies'.[304] In Johnston's passage, the experience of being watched on CCTV automatically casts Wayne as an outsider, both from society and even from his own body.

Johnston's character is so used to being monitored at work that he suddenly seems to feel that his entire life is being controlled. At Benny's Burgers fast-food restaurant, a neoliberal version of the panopticon is at play, as employees are instructed to take responsibility for the actions of those below them in a chain of control that results in the workers suppressing any behaviour that is not in line with the company's policies:

> The business functions because everybody is held responsible for those below him. If it's your second week and a new starter is sweeping the floor with her apron on, you have to correct her. If you don't then the store manager will complain to the shift runner, the shift runner will take it out on the floor manager, the floor manager will shout at the team leader, and the team leader will bitch at you. Belatedly, you'll ask the new start to take off her apron. "Sorry," you'll say, "it's just that if you keep it on then I'm going to get in shit." "Why?" "Dinnae ken. It's just the procedure." The next time she has to sweep the floor, she'll anticipate rebuke from even her lowliest colleagues. She'll self-censor. In this way, the surveillance becomes panoptical.[305]

In a way that closely mirrors Foucault's description of the panoptical prison,[306] Benny's workers come to internalise the company's policies and enact a form of self-discipline that turns them into conforming docile bodies.[307]

Personal Days, on the other hand, offers an example of panoptical strategies in an office setting, where a new system is introduced that forces the employees to swipe in and out 'like a

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[304] Jenny Edkins, *Face Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 99.
[305] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, pp. 41–42.
[306] This indicates a construction designed by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century that would have allowed the prisoners to be observed by the prison guard at any given time without knowing it, thus forcing them to be constantly on their best behaviour.
[307] See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1975; 1995).

bunch of assembly-line workers'[308] every time that they start or stop working. Each worker receives on their desk a piece of black plastic, similar to a credit card but with 'no name or number' and 'no markings', 'its power entirely invisible',[309] such as that of the panopticon. Simultaneously, a 'thin metal box as blank and unyielding as their new cards'[310] appears on each floor, its purpose to take a digital time stamp of the workers' movements. Because of the new system, the office employees stay longer at work, 'in thrall to the new swipe box, the heartless new regime' as 'minutes, seconds, were being counted by the Californians'.[311] In the end, however, it turns out that the machine does not actually register the workers' moves and that they were 'swiping just to swipe':[312] the control does not need to actually take place to ensure compliance since it suffices for people to believe that they may be watched for them to act as if they were, effectively, under surveillance.

Control strategies, as evidenced by the examples above, are a non-negligible aspect of many of today's workplaces and an integral part of the quest for productivity and conformity. Finally, as shown in Levison's *Since the Layoffs*, at times the wish to control overrides that of providing and guaranteeing the people's wellbeing. In a town where the closure of a factory has consigned a large proportion of the local population to a life of poverty and meaninglessness, the only institutions still in operation in the novel are the police stations, as a result of the fact that, according to the narrator, 'the need to punish the local populace for their misdeeds is obviously more important than the need to heal, feed and clothe them.'[313] By drawing attention to the illogicality of circumstances where control and discipline come before the provision of essential aspects of human life (aspects that, again, constitute the most basic human rights), the bitterly ironical remark effectively exposes the systemic violence at the core of American society.

Structural or systemic violence permeates the late capitalist workplace and society, manifesting itself in the form of workers being deskilled, forced to chase unrealistic objectives, manipulated through carrot and stick strategies, having their needs subordinated to profit-making, having to subject themselves to any conditions in order to survive and being the object of panoptical surveillance. Moreover, this systemic violence, which – as we have seen at the beginning of this section – is generally invisible and regarded as natural, is often actively

[308] Ed Park, *Personal Days*, p. 172.
[309] Ibid., p. 166.
[310] Ibid.
[311] Ibid., p. 167.
[312] Ibid., p. 235.
[313] Iain Levison, *Since the Layoffs*, p. 91.

concealed through a number of strategies. In the office of *Personal Days*, for instance, dismissed employees are escorted out of the building by security guards, but 'none of [the colleagues] has ever witnessed the actual exits of any of [their] former co-workers, as if the removals were precisely timed to minimize visibility'.[314] In Raspi's *Inox*, instead, the company 'se ne è pulita le mani' ['washed their hands of the matter']: it relieves itself of the issue of workers losing their jobs thanks to 'un giochetto di fine eleganza, di gran classe' ['a game of fine elegance and great class'][315] that pushes labourers to accept voluntary redundancies instead of firing them.

Despite the violent nature of neoliberal organisation, the widespread perception is that no alternative economic model can succeed in replacing it and that any attempt at proposing a different vision of the future is dismissed as mere utopia.[316] As cleverly put by Levison's narrator in *A Working Stiff's Manifesto* after the protagonist fails to obtain the reimbursement he was promised for his flight to Alaska, the failed social experiment of the communist USSR is brandished around as a justification for why one must accept the evils of the wealthy neoliberal society:

> So I got fucked, but it happens. It happens a lot. There's nobody there to stick up for you […] When you're fucked, you're fucked, and if you complain you're a crybaby. […] Look at the Soviet Union, a country founded on the notion that people who work for a living should be respected, cared about. It didn't do well. Now that one social experiment is used as a cautionary tale for anyone who thinks that people who work for a living have rights. It is almost a rationale to not respect your workers, to piss on them any way you can, to promote the highly successful capitalist ideal. Hey, I think I'll keep the money for your plane ticket. Why? Because the U.S. is still around and Russia went to hell. You don't like it, go stand in a bread line in Moscow.[317]

Whether a new model will replace the current one we are not yet to know, but the following section will explore literature's portrayal of workplace individual and collective forms of resistance against the current system and, possibly, its ability to imagine what awaits beyond the end of capitalism.

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[314] Ed Park, *Personal Days*, p. 83.
[315] Eugenio Raspi, *Inox*, p. 246.
[316] See the previously cited Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There no Alternative?*
[317] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, pp. 136–37.

5. ‘F**k the economy, the world is ours!’: practices of resistance and the end of work

This final section will try to make sense of the patterns of resistance against work in the age of neoliberalism that can be identified in the set of novels analysed. As pointed out by the American author Bob Black in *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays*, although there may be ‘some movement toward a conscious and not just visceral rejection of work’, the latter is still widely regarded among bosses and workers as ‘inevitable’ and ‘necessary’.[318] Similarly, in his comprehensive account of ‘end of work’ theories, *Critical Social Theory and the End of Work*, the scholar Edward Granter argues that the modern ideology of work is indeed something that is experienced in a ‘non-analytical’, ‘accepting’ manner.[319]

However, resisting work or openly rebelling against the miseries that it can inflict upon workers is possible and can be done through practices such as those identified by Black in the phenomena of ‘absenteeism’, ‘employee theft and sabotage, wildcat strikes and overall goldbricking on the job’[320] or, as proposed by the British author Tom Hodgkinson, in regulated strike understood as the ‘refusal to do any sort of useful work’[321] until workers’ demands are met by management. Also homelessness, according to Hodgkinson, can be seen as a ‘rejection of the capitalist way of life’ in that it grants the individual ‘freedom from work, from desire, from consumer slavery’.[322] Hodgkinson even includes ‘ambling’ – the act of walking slowly and aimlessly – among the ways in which work can be refused, and brands it ‘an act of revolt’,[323] as we will explore in more detail later in the section.

As well as engaging in the relatively peaceful forms of resistance listed above, we will see that, at times, workers end up resorting to violence so that their grievances might be heard: in the novels, street violence, acts of destruction and even homicide are all linked to discontent with working conditions or senseless dismissals. Such workers often belong to a category that the social philosopher André Gorz defines as *précaires*, a liminal group of workers who are frequently over-qualified for the jobs they perform and who are often employed only discontinuously. The *précaires*, Gorz hypothesises, are those ‘most likely to develop the consciousness that will move society beyond the grip of the rationality of capitalism/work, and

[318] Bob Black, *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays*, p. 28.
[319] Edward Granter, *Critical Social Theory and the End of Work*, p. 20.
[320] Bob Black, *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays*, p. 28.
[321] Tom Hodgkinson, *How to be Idle* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004), p. 185.
[322] Ibid., p. 115.
[323] Ibid., p. 110.

towards the abolition of work and the realisation of freedom' thanks to 'their ontological, and to a large extent temporal disconnection from the world of work, and their tendency instead to focus on extra-economic goals'.[324] According to Gorz, this neoproletarian group has the potential to challenge the capitalist system and it can become 'le principal acteur futur d'une mutation culturelle antiproductiviste et anti-étatiste'.[325]

In the following pages, I will look at some of the resistive practices described above and, in particular, at the occurrences of employee theft, public acts of disobedience (such as the refusal to conform and to work), violent protesting (including the destruction of the workplace in its symbolic representation of neoliberalism) and killing. Finally, I will comment on nonviolent displays of dissent such as those expressed in the acts of writing and aimless walking and I will conclude this section with the case study of Claudio Morici's *L'uomo d'argento*, which showcases a post-capitalist apocalyptic scenario wherein work is no longer the basis of society after a financial crash of unprecedented proportions has forever changed the course of history.

5.1 Practices of resistance

The first manifestation of resistance that I will focus on here is that of theft in the workplace and that seems otherwise unmotivated by external factors – such as any need for the goods stolen or any criminal intention. In Ferris's *Then We Came to the End*, as layoffs begin taking a toll on the employees' peace of mind, items start disappearing from people's workstations, usually 'small items – postcards, framed photographs'[326] and generally 'things of sentimental or practical value to no one but [to the owners]'.[327] The narrator's remark on the worthlessness of the stolen objects suggests that the thief is after something other than loot. At a later point in the novel, a new event provides a possible explanation for the thefts, as the office worker Yop steals a chair from the workplace after being reprimanded by management for appropriating it upon its "owner"'s dismissal. As a protest against the fact that nothing in the office truly belongs to the workers, Yop dismantles the chair and takes it to a lake close by, where he throws 'the armrests' and 'the webbed seat and backseat' 'Frisbee-style'[328] into the lake, until every piece of it has sunk below the water surface.

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[324] Edward Granter, *Critical Social Theory and the End of Work*, p. 125.
[325] André Gorz, *L'immatériel : Connaissance, valeur et capital* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), p. 92.
[326] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End*, p. 4.
[327] Ibid., p. 121.
[328] Ibid., p. 275.

Another instance of employee theft occurs in *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, whose narrator insinuates that all of the market employees are likely to be stealing on the job as a result of the fact that, as we saw in previous sections, they have to endure daily humiliations and illogical patterns of promotion or demotion:

> While waiting for the train, I listen to them bitch about their jobs. They've all been made to read one directive too many, about oxfords and hair length and "Have a nice day". They are all getting paid a different wage for the same job, and there's no reasoning behind it. People are promoted based on nothing. A sweet nineteen-year-old girl is promoted to head cashier after two weeks, leaving the others seething. I wonder if they all have pants stuffed with stolen groceries.[329]

The narrator himself, when his supervisor 'makes a comment to [him] that [he] deem[s] to be less than positive',[330] hides food and other goods down his trousers, grabbing anything that he can get his hands on: 'soy sauce, bags of coffee beans, yogurt, chocolate bars, more pens, […] tape, staples, even fish knives'.[331] In this way, the protagonist compensates for the vexations suffered at work with meals of 'sixteen-dollar-a-pound sea bass and salmon', 'langostinos in cream sauce', 'lobster tails on a bed of saffron rice', 'Pacific red salmon' and 'Alaskan king crab legs mixed with jumbo Maryland scallops'; and later, as he reaches an agreement with an employee of the meat stall, with 'two-inch-tall cuts of New York strip steak', 'filet mignon', 'big wads of hamburger meat', 'dry-aged rib eye' and even 'a rare cut of Kobe beer-fed beef'.[332] Stealing is perceived here as a rightful activity as it functions as a corrective action, a kind of payback for the injustice and immorality of low wages, high turnover and petty regulations imposed on the individuals existing within highly neoliberal work contexts.

In Levison's novel, the same kind of corrective rebalancing is the logic behind the act of watching television without having purchased an appropriate licence. The illegal action of 'stealing cable' is defined by the narrator as 'an act of civil disobedience which would make Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi proud':[333]

> The word "pirates" is often ascribed to cable thieves, a word used by the media, most of which are owned by the same people who own the cable networks. They try to convince us that cable

[329] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, p. 23.
[330] Ibid.
[331] Ibid.
[332] Ibid.
[333] Ibid., p. 47.

> thieves are eroding American morality. Closing profitable factories, laying off hundreds of workers and reopening the factories in Mexico with cheaper labor is not indicative of an erosion of morality. Paying mushroom pickers four dollars an hour is not illegal. Watching Pop-up Video for free, now that's a crime.[334]

Such small-scale stealing is, in fact, a meagre reparation for the violence perpetrated by a system that acts with the blessing of national governments and with the law on its side. At times, petty theft is all that employees can do to air their frustration with the status quo, as in the case of one of the fast-food workers of *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, who 'really wanted to do something, like something really big' but all he actually did was 'sit on the couch, eating food [they]'d stolen from work' as 'most things in the house, from mayonnaise to toilet roll, had been stolen from work'.[335] This gap between desire and action is possibly the result of the character's awareness, at least at a subconscious level, that resistance is futile unless supported by some form of broader, collective organisation. More likely, the pervasiveness of the neoliberal ideology and the widespread conviction that there is no other viable economic option render the enactment of micro-resistive practices such as stealing the only realistic disruption that workers can initiate. It could well be the case, though, that companies actually factor in employee theft and that they tolerate it because, by channelling the workers' frustration, it averts the eventuality of a far more disruptive action.

Other than stealing, employees can declare their disgruntlement through overt noncompliance or even refusal to carry out the tasks they are assigned. In *Then We Came to the End*, it is the 'refus[al] to conform' that drives the character of Tom Mota to 'dissent every chance [he] got' and to 'tell them fuck you'.[336] Tom defines himself as 'the one saying fuck you to the miseries of office life' and the only employee 'making it a point every day to show how different [he] was from everybody else' in a corporate setting where the dominant ideology was so well-established that 'nobody could resist conforming'.[337] After reading the philosopher's Ralph Waldo Emerson's works and understanding that 'to conform is to lose your soul',[338] Tom decides to wear three polo shirts one on top of the other for a month and then to turn to the prime symbol of his white-collar job, his office suit, to destroy it one piece at a time:

[334] Ibid.
[335] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 91.
[336] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End*, p. 343.
[337] Ibid., p. 345.
[338] Ibid., p. 343.

> “They think I’m a clown,” Tom repeated as he walked over to his bookshelf and grabbed the scissors himself and began to cut into his nice pleated slacks at the knee. […] Tom cut all the way around with the scissors until the trouser leg fell to his ankle. Then he started working on one sleeve of the polo, on the opposite side to the cut-off trouser leg. […] Tom’s tan-lined arm was soon visible all the way to the shoulder. A tattoo of barbed wire snaked around his biceps.[339]

The barbed wire, which conjures up, in the popular imagination, images of prison, may seem at odds with Tom’s professional persona in the publishing company, but it ceases to be out of place when one remembers how, only a few pages previously, work had been described by the narrator as ‘time served’.[340] In this context, Tom Mota’s attempts to escape conformity can be seen as a bid to break away from what he could perceive to be a form of modern incarceration.

In other novels, disobedience goes beyond the refusal to conform and instead materialises in the refusal to work *tout court*. In Johnston’s *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, Spocky, the politically engaged fast-food worker whose explanation of global capitalism was discussed in the previous section, actively avoids performing certain tasks at work, even when doing so requires more effort than the task itself, and is thus described by the narrator as a ‘conscientious objector’.[341] Spocky’s turn to political action begins here, with his engagement in a resistive action that takes more time and effort than the passive alignment with the company’s desires, the latter being what mostly enables the system to persist undeterred. In keeping with Jacques Rancière, it is ‘when those who were destined to remain in the domestic and invisible territory of work and reproduction […] take the time that they “have not” in order to affirm that they belong to a common world’[342] that dissensus emerges. In this sense, Spocky’s refusal to work can be interpreted as being truly “dissensual”.

In the same novel, the fast-food workers improvise a collective strike following a telling incident at the restaurant. One of the customers, whilst queuing to order, suddenly collapses and dies at the scene, but the shocking episode does not deter the supervisor from inciting his subordinates to continue carrying out their duties as normal, cooking the food and serving waiting customers. In response to the supervisor’s indifference, one of the employees takes to

[339] Ibid., p. 20.
[340] Ibid., p. 7.
[341] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 97.
[342] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 139.

its extreme the paradox of the money-making machine that does not stop even in the face of death, by suggesting that they "recycle" the customer's body to save on the cost of meat:

> 'Hey, can someone give me a hand? Let's get this body into the freezer'. The customers looked at him, unsure if he was for real, while Kieran [the supervisor] gestured for him to shut up. 'I'm serious. serious. Come on, we can't leave him here. […] Think about the food costs. We can get three boxes of meat out of this guy'.[343]

When the supervisor eventually fires the employee for this remark, the other workers walk out of the restaurant altogether, leaving Kieran asking, 'what is this, a strike?'. Nobody answers this, as it was not a conscious or planned decision to initiate a strike, but 'in the silence that followed, at more or less the same time, Kieran realised, and [they] realised—aye, it was'.[344] The episode ends with the "striking" workers watching through the restaurant window the surreal scene of Kieran 'stocking the condiment trays as the paramedics shocked the Teddy Boy's corpse' and, as they give up and load the body onto a stretcher, 'mopp[ing] the tiles and mark[ing] the spot with a "Caution! Wet Floor" sign'.[345] The juxtaposition between the weak, bland, positivist statement made by the "wet floor" sign and the paramedics' attempt at resuscitating the customer highlights the inhumanity and insufficiency of the profit-system when faced with the enormity of death. The generation of profit cannot pause, even if for a brief moment, to make time for traumatic events to be processed and overcome. Conversely, the employees who are on strike suddenly feel as if they had their time 'unexpectedly reimbursed', as happened 'when the school heating broke or the pipes burst or the teachers went on strike'.[346] Hodgkinson suggests that strike, albeit 'a less taxing and burdensome form of protest' compared to riots, is extremely 'irritating to our rulers' as it involves 'no work, no useful toil, working classes loafing, men standing around doing nothing all day, thinking'.[347] In that it represents an interruptive kind of action that disturbs the flow of capital, strike can generate a space for an alternative kind of time – thinking time – to appear. Taking this "time out" to think, as we have seen with Rancière's notion of *dissensus* above, can create the conditions for the organisation of collective resistance.

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[343] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 52.
[344] Ibid.
[345] Ibid., p. 53.
[346] Ibid.
[347] Tom Hodgkinson, *How to Be Idle*, p. 185.

Eventually, a group of workers from Benny's Burgers fast-food restaurant start the possibly ironically named "Benny's Resistance Army", an association committed to engaging in public acts of disobedience by creating disruption at the workplace, including carrying out petty thefts and pranks, refusing to take orders and voting for who should empty the bins. Soon, though, the group's website gains popularity beyond the boundaries of the restaurant, and the Benny's Resistance Army has 'workers writing to [them] about entitlement to maternity leave in Denmark, youth employment legislation in Canada, how to steal from the tills and not get caught' as well as new 'branches in New Zealand, in Ireland, in English towns [they]'d never heard of'.[348] Thanks to the still relatively unregulated space of the Internet, the workers are able to organise a form of communal resistance[349] that goes beyond the disruptive actions of the single employee and even beyond the national boundaries. The fact that the group operates online is what allows for mass dissemination and rapid associations of ideas and people, which creates the potential for unknown and unanticipated actors to come into contact.

Beyond the Benny's Resistance Army, however, the protagonist-narrator's dreams about the struggle against neoliberalism progressively darken towards a wish to engage in physical violence. On the 20th June 2003, on the occasion of the European Council meeting in Thessaloniki, Wayne, together with his French activist girlfriend, Manette, participates in a demonstration that starts from the city's university and ends in violent clashes with the police. In the apparent stillness of that Greek summer morning, the protagonist, a politically unengaged employee of a Scottish branch of Benny's Burgers, suddenly feels the urge to get involved in the protest:

> There were no cars. No pedestrians. Running bare to the horizon, where heat waves swayed and mottled the air, the highway carried a road movie's invitation to adventure, and it filled me with a reckless sense of freedom. I didn't feel trapped, though there was now no option but to be carried with the bloc; instead, I felt a sort of anticipation. I said to Manette, "I want to do this!" I wanted the proximity, the immediacy. I wanted to stand toe to toe with a cop and fight it out. He'd hit me with his truncheon and I'd swing back with my stick and this seemed real, it seemed.[350]

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[348] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 91.

[349] See Kristina Thalhammer, Paula O'Loughlin, Sam McFarland and others, *Courageous Resistance: The Power of Ordinary People* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 92: 'communal resistance' refers to cases where 'ongoing relationships are established or deepened, and individuals coordinate their efforts to confront injustice'; 'members' ongoing relationships build social capital and the activists employ networks among themselves to increase their effectiveness and to offer one another support'.

[350] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, pp. 177–78.

The move from the virtual community of the Benny's Resistance Army's website to the experience of being part of a collective mass of bodies at the protest in Thessaloniki marks a shift in Wayne's engagement with the issues at stake. If "virtual" resistance laid the foundations for concrete action by revealing the existence of a global community of workers who share the same grievances, the physical contact[351] with his fellow protesters induces a desire, in the protagonist, for a deeper emotional participation and for an action that impacts the environment and "the enemy" more directly and more violently. Although Wayne – unlike seasoned activist Manette – is described in the novel as lacking in-depth knowledge of political systems and organisations (we will see in the concluding section how he thought that the WTO had something to do with the protection of dolphins), his destructive rage is instinctively drawn to the symbols of work under neoliberalism. One night and without warning, he leaves Manette asleep in bed and wanders the streets of London until he finds a Benny's Burgers restaurant on whose shutters he wants to write 'something [he]'d never written before' and 'something that meant everything [they] thought all scrunched up in a few words'.[352] In the end, in red letters 'on the windows, over the door, across the whitewashed wall' he paints the words 'FUCK THE ECONOMY, THE WORLD IS OURS',[353] although he immediately comments that that was not what he actually wanted to say. Even if the reader is not told explicitly why this graffiti fails to capture the magnitude of Wayne's thoughts, his comment seems to signal a certain scepticism about the adequacy of both violent language ('fuck the economy') – which now feels almost "empty" – and of clichéd expressions ('the world is ours') that are virtually commonplace in popular culture. The latter features, for example, in the immensely influential 1995 French film *La Haine*, where one of the characters sprays a billboard bearing the words 'Le monde est à vous' and turns it into 'Le monde est à nous'. This literal and figural reappropriation was also common in subvertising practices (i.e. culture jamming) that targeted advertisements saying 'The world is yours'. In this sense, Wayne's dissatisfaction with the wording might point to a perceived insufficiency of critical devices such as the *détournement*[354] – the infamous Situtationist hijacking of capitalist language and rhetoric to subvert it "from

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[351] This craving for physical contact seems to be confirmed by another passage in the novel, when the narrator argues that 'the crowd wants to be one. We want open windows, open doors, and open mouths; we want to be carried and held and pressed and kissed. We do!', p. 87.
[352] Ibid., p. 158.
[353] Ibid., p. 159.
[354] This term was developed by the Situationists and by Guy Debord in particular in his article 'Mode d'emploi du détournement', *Les lèvres nues*, 8 (1956).

within" – thus revealing a craving for a mode of critique that lies outside of neoliberal discourse.

In another episode during the Thessaloniki demonstration, as Wayne watches as 'men in motorcycle helmets […] rip[…] axes into the aluminium shutter of Benny's Burgers', again he yearns to write something 'to claim the destruction for the workers',[355] whilst during a 2000-strong protest in Prague recounted at the very beginning of the novel, the companies that most emblematically represent global capitalism are targeted by girls who 'cobblestoned Mc-Donald's', skinheads who 'kicked the glass out of Deutsche Bank' and local kids who 'threw furniture out of KFC'.[356] On a symbolic level, attacking fast-food outlets is equivalent to attacking a certain model of organisation that cuts costs of production, salaries and workers' rights in order to maximise revenue, just as Deutsche Bank epitomises the hegemony of financial elites. To destroy the logos of the most prominent companies is to symbolically intervene in the capitalist superstructure: if we consider neoliberalism's indebtedness to the society of the spectacle (as theorised by Guy Debord),[357] then to launch an offensive on the spectacle is to go at the heart of capitalism's lie and to undermine its symbolic power. In addition, both the act of graffiti writing and that of destroying the symbols of neoliberalism can be read as manifestations of an anti-discourse that attempts to reappropriate an urban public space that has increasingly been privatised and parasitised by multinationals and, therefore, it can function as an interruption in the capitalist space.

On other occasions, violent episodes such as the ones described above follow bouts of redundancies which are again perceived as the consequence of an irrational system that values profit above workers. The most striking example of this in the novels selected comes from Levison's *Since the Layoffs*, where an increase in criminal incidents ensues from the closing of the factory that provided an occupation to most people in town. According to the narrator, 'before the factory closed, there wasn't a single armed robbery in this town', but 'since the layoffs, the late-night convenience stores have become fortresses, the six-dollar-an-hour nightshift workers there the equivalent of combat veterans. Every one of them can tell a story of a gun battle'.[358] The protagonist, Jake Skowran, explains that his anger at the dismissals 'merged into a single fury at the world, at women, relationships, procreation, the survival of the species' and that '[he] didn't care about anything, anyone',[359] as he wishes for 'a real

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[355] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 180.
[356] Ibid., p. 10.
[357] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* trans. by Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 1992; 2004).
[358] Iain Levison, *Since the Layoffs*, p. 18.
[359] Ibid., p. 117.

bloodbath, to equal the financial and emotional one which has just been drawn for all of [them]'.[360] As he tires of life in unemployment (his unemployment also being the reason why his girlfriend left him), Jake accepts an offer to become a hitman for a powerful local gangster, Ken Gardocki, who, after the shutting down of the factory, has become the sole "reliable" employer in town. Jake explains that he is not familiar with guns as his aim in life so far had been to be a husband, a father and a breadwinner, rather than a killer, and therefore he had never had any use for guns before. Yet he comments that 'ya gotta roll with the changes'[361] and that, in perfect neoliberal fashion, he has to adapt to fit the requirements of his new job as a paid assassin. Here, Jake – caught inescapably in the web of neoliberal logic – applies the discourse of flexibility typical of neoliberalism to those unsanctioned practices existing as illegal outgrowths of the system itself – his new – albeit unlawful – job, in a *détournement* that ridicules and thus undermines the validity of the system.

The first victim – the gangster's unfaithful wife – is going to die 'because [Jake] has been laid off from a profitable factory in the middle of [his] career', 'because [his] girlfriend left [him] because [he] can't deal with life in the unemployment line' and 'because some Wall Street whiz kid decided [the] factory could turn a higher profit if it was situated in Mexico'.[362] Jake holds on to the gun after the killing – despite it being the only thing that connects him to the murder of Corinne Gardocki – simply because, rather than as an instrument of death, he views it as an 'instrument of work' and 'work is a thing of honor, […] something that the people who closed the factory never understood'.[363] By retaining the gun, which has a use value and of which he is now in control, Jake symbolically repossesses the means of production and becomes unalienated through this new form of "work". Being in control of one's destiny is a primary motivating factor for the characters of the novel, regardless of the outcomes. As expressed by one of Jake's former colleagues and friend (who had also been laid off) when he takes over as Gardocki's hatchet man:

> 'I needed the money, man. I can't live like this, waiting for the fucking mailman to bring me my fucking unemployment check.' […] 'I just need to have something to fucking do, man, you know what I mean? I don't even care what it is anymore. I just need to do something. Do you know? Can you understand that?'[364]

[360] Ibid., p. 21.
[361] Ibid., p. 32.
[362] Ibid., p. 12.
[363] Ibid., p. 40.
[364] Ibid., p. 171.

This thirst for action and for power over the flow of one's life is a feeling conditioned in response to the neoliberal values of entrepreneurial action and personal responsibility, of which Jake's friend's willingness to kill (so long as he has something to do) is their disorderly extension. Indeed, after finding work in a convenience store, Jake no longer needs his job as a hitman, as he remarks that '[he's] got it out of [his] system', '[his] life isn't destroyed anymore' and '[he's] putting the pieces back together',[365] thus ascribing the worth of personal life to employment status.

At the other end of the spectrum, finally, we find those resistive practices that do not involve violence but are nonetheless suggestive of a general malaise towards the current patterns of work. In Ferris's novel, one of the employees, Hank Neary, is said to be working on a 'small, angry book about work', which – since his colleagues perceive it as non-marketable – is described as a 'failed novel'.[366] What interests Hank, though, is not profit, but the fact that 'we spend most of our lives at work',[367] and his novel can become an instance of an anti-discourse that exposes the ills of a work climate characterised by the threat of redundancies and by extensive austerity measures that deprive life of any semblance of beauty or joy. At the end of the novel, when the employees of the advertising agency have found jobs at other firms, the reader discovers that Hank has in fact succeeded in publishing a book, albeit a different one from his original project, one that focuses on the company's boss Lynn Mason and her short battle against cancer. Hank's new success as a novelist, as noted by Alison Russell, can be interpreted as an allusion to a positive use of language that contrasts with the language (repeatedly portrayed in the novel) of advertisement, which merely constituted 'a means of oiling the capitalist machinery'.[368]

The second "peaceful" way in which work is resisted is located in Johnston's *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, when, towards the end of the novel, Wayne leaves behind the violent struggles of the demonstrations described above, quits work and begins exploring London's underground 'abandoned lines and ghost stations' and the 'disused overground lines'.[369] Wayne's aimless wandering across the deserted public transport network of the metropolis mirrors the journey of the thousands of commuters who take the tube every day to reach their workplace, but in this way it highlights the contrast between the two types of travel. As we will

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[365] Ibid., p. 165.
[366] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End*, p. 72.
[367] Ibid.
[368] Alison Russell, 'The One and the Many: Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End*', p. 328.
[369] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 238.

see in the chapter dedicated to space, this erratic way of exploring the city can be interpreted as a challenge to the mode in which the non-places of transportation are typically experienced in postmodernity, but, in its being a form of non-work and unproductivity, it can also be read as a challenge to the paradigm of work itself. In his previously mentioned book *How to be Idle*, Hodgkinson indeed talks about ambling as an 'act of revolt' and as 'a statement against bourgeois values, against goal-centred living, busy-ness, bustle, toil and trouble'.[370] Hodgkinson's proposition is not new, since walking has been a part of anti-systemic philosophies from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1776) to the Situationists' *dérive* in the 1950s and the recent revival of psychogeography that we will discuss more in detail in the next chapter. In the tradition of psychogeography, the practice of walking constitutes a form of political action that opposes an aimless form of drifting to the utilitarian use that capitalism makes of public space. Johnston's protagonist's description provides a clear picture of his positively purposeless days, which are devoid of any economic goal:

> For days I explored the abandoned lines and ghost stations, the secret network of tunnels and staircases that lurks below the metropolis. I rode the Piccadilly Line, scanning for glimpses of Brompton Road, York Road, and Down Street. On the Northern Line, I looked for South Kentish Town, Bull and Bush, City Road. Above ground, I traced the routes of forgotten branch lines. Smoking a cigarette on The Strand, I saw two other men had come to see the former Aldwych Station. Why such fascination? And then I explored the disused overground lines. In spring sleet, I walked the Northern Heights, from Finsbury Park to Alexandra Palace, and near Highgate, where the yews and birches hang over the pathway, I watched a hedgehog foraging in the trackside grass. I went as far as the restored station at Quainton Road, and I walked the old Wotton Tramway to Brill. Stepping towards the barricaded Robinson Tunnel, the sun set behind me, and my shadow stretched 100 metres long. The embankments were overgrown with brambles and ragwort broke through the stony path and the silence was loud like the silence of deep underwater. If you approach the bars at the mouth of that tunnel, as the sun sets at your back, it feels honestly like the end of the world. Even graffiti artists have ceased to go there. I remember seeing barely legible flaked letters daubed on the left abutment of the tunnel: "SOLIDARITY WITH THE MINERS." And just visible, half-obscured by a hawthorn bush, a faded circled A.[371]

[370] Tom Hodgkinson, *How to Be Idle*, p. 110.
[371] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 238.

The 'abandoned lines', 'ghost stations', 'forgotten branch lines' and 'disused overground lines' of London are examples of those industrial ruins that the geographer Tim Edensor recognises as by-products of capitalist expansion and whose existence is the result of the acceleration of a global production and commodification that is quick to discard what has become obsolete. The quest for new products and more profitable markets means that 'the new is rapidly and inevitably transformed into the archaic; what was vibrant is suddenly inert, and all subsides into rubbish in the production of vast quantities of waste'.[372] Edensor argues that ruins disprove the myth of endless progress upon which neoliberal ideology relies and that they subvert the ways in which the capitalist city attempts to regulate space:

> Through their very allegorical presence, ruins can cause us to question the normative ways of organising the city and urban life, and they contain within them stimuli for imagining things otherwise. Hidden in ruins are forgotten forms of collectivity and solidarity, lost skills, ways of behaving and feeling, traces of arcane language, and neglected historical and contemporary forms of social enterprise.[373]

In Johnston's novel, these residues of deindustrialisation are repopulated by 'brambles and ragwort' and wild animals that 'transgress[…] their assigned marginal or rural locations',[374] as nature reasserts its temporality on urban space and 'the illusion of permanence dissolves'.[375] Beyond the reappropriation of public space by graffiti artists discussed in the previous pages, here it is an unruly nature that reclaims its primacy over this tiny territory of the city. As Wayne passes through this 'end of the world' scenario, he engages in the unproductive "activities" of contemplating this new flora and fauna, with the only reminder of working life represented by the reference to the sign about the miners.

Johnston's protagonist's disengagement from work, however, is only afforded to him by his bank savings that, sooner than he had anticipated, are exhausted, thus forcing him to start looking for a job again. Wayne consciously avoids work as a form of protest but, as he is confronted with poverty, he is forced to seek reinsertion into those very mechanisms of work that he had rejected, including applying for a position at a London branch of Benny's Burgers. In a neoliberal society, temporary unemployment – even when voluntary – does not represent a threat to the system, but it is rather one of its accepted "side effects". On the contrary,

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[372] Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 165.
[373] Ibid., pp. 166–67.
[374] Ibid., p. 46.
[375] Ibid., p. 44.

according to the scholar Edward Granter, the end of work as a ‘long-term tendency’ has ‘the potential to undermine the existence of this labour market and […] the capitalist system as a whole’.[376]

5.2 The end of work

As we have seen in the introduction to this chapter, the modern dogma surrounding the inevitability of work – which, as well as representing the main source of survival for the majority of people, is also unquestioningly accepted as the central provider of ‘sociality, rights, status and belonging’[377] – has been questioned by a series of thinkers and scholars as early as the nineteenth century. In this section, we will look at a literary representation of the end of work, *L’uomo d’argento*, wherein the author Claudio Morici imagines a post-traumatic future where a worldwide financial crash has wiped out virtually every existing job and a new society founded on leisure has been established in place of the old one.

Jenny, one of the characters, explains how ‘non c’era più il lavoro’ [‘there was no more work’] and ‘il lavoro era finito’ [‘work was finished’],[378] as she recalls:

> I professori consigliavano di non lasciare l’università: ‘Chiudetevi dentro’. L’attore porno era una delle professioni più ambite fra i giovani, che ora cominciavano a vendere quello che prima facevano solo per noia o per desiderio di emancipazione. La gente cominciava a razzolare intorno ai cassonetti; le donne di servizio cominciavano a ricattare intere famiglie; i registi cominciavano a girare film di fantascienza che raccontavano di un mondo dove i grillitalpa avevano preso il potere perché molto più saggi dell’essere umano; i consulenti del lavoro cominciavano a non sapere più che dirti, e nel frattempo chiedevano soldi in prestito agli studenti neolaureati. ‘Voi almeno potete fare degli stage in azienda e mangiare con i buoni pasto, no?’ dicevano.
>
> [The lecturers’ advice was not to leave university: ‘Lock yourselves in’ – they said. Being a porn actor was one of the most desirable professions amongst young people, who were now starting to sell what before they had just done out of boredom or out of desire for emancipation. People were beginning to rummage around the dumpsters; housekeepers were starting to blackmail entire families; directors started to shoot sci-fi films that told the story of a world where mole

[376] Edward Granter, *Critical Social Theory and the End of Work*, p. 7.
[377] David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*, p. 17: Here Frayne suggests that even this proposition of work as the main source of sociality and self-identity is a social and historical construction.
[378] Claudio Morici, *L’uomo d’argento*, p. 98.

> crickets had seized power as they were much wiser than humankind; labour consultants no longer knew what to tell you and, in the meantime, they were asking for loans from newly-graduated students. 'At least you can do an internship at a company and buy food with meal vouchers, can't you?', they said.] [379]

After this collapse of the economy, Jenny and a number of young people move to a city purposely built on leisure and free of the constraints of work, money and rent. A plethora of free buffets is available to the residents, all kindly offered by wellness centres, exhibition launches and strangers' birthday celebrations, and no money is wasted on car insurance or petrol, as everything is within walking distance.

The city's residents belong to two diametrically opposed categories: on one side we find the Appenarrivati ('the newly-arrived people'), who have fled the old world in search of a better life, but who are still bound by the capitalist work ethic and struggle to integrate: their faces still bear the traces of the odyssey behind them, in 'una maschera di depressione, buio, pulsioni suicide' ['a mask of depression, darkness and suicidal instincts'].[380] These new-comers are former architects, IT programmers, real estate developers, collection agents, teachers, nurses and HR managers, who – in a world where work has lost its centrality – now resort to doing lines of coke through 'biglietti da visita ormai privi di senso' ['now meaningless rolled-up business cards'].[381] In this upside-down world where work is stigmatised, it is the workers rather than the unemployed who are the marginalised of society and, when they fail to integrate, they are locked up in a mental institution-style hospital where they are given 'ergoterapia' ['ergotherapy'].[382] Here they are given a job (unpaid, as was often the case with their real-life jobs) and provided with daily tasks in order to 'soddisfa[re] il loro bisogno di avere orari mattutini, stress, un buon livello di conflitto' ['satisfy their need to have a morning routine, stress and a good degree of conflict'].[383] Indeed, as argued by the social psychologist Marie Jahoda, part of work's indispensability stems from its dominance as the main fulfiller of basic psychological needs, such as the need for the individual 'to structure their day', the need for 'wider social experience', the need 'to partake in collective purposes', 'to know where they

[379] Ibid.
[380] Ibid., p. 21.
[381] Ibid., p. 24.
[382] Ibid., p. 52.
[383] Ibid., p. 54.

stand in society in comparison with others in order to clarify their personal identity' and the need 'for regular activities'.[384]

As the protagonist visits the hospital with one of the "doctors", he finds himself 'in mezzo a decine di pazienti superindaffarati [che] spostavano pacchi, scrivevano e-mail al computer, discutevano di progetti e presentazioni' ['amongst dozens of very busy patients [who] moved parcels, wrote emails on their computers, discussed projects and presentations'][385] and walked 'con grosse pile di fogli sotto il braccio, Blackberry da tutte le parti, cravatte gialle, orologi di marca, auricolari su entrambe le orecchie' ['whilst carrying big piles of papers in their arms, Blackberries everywhere, yellow ties, brand watches, earphones in both ears'].[386] For these former workers it is 'impossible to imagine a meaningful life outside of work',[387] which Srnicek and Williams blame on the 'pervasive pressure to submit to the work ethic'[388] in our society and which constitutes the main obstacle to building a true post-work society.

The "doctor" explains that the Appenarrivati's gradual acceptance of the fact that there is no more work is like the 'grieving process' that follows a traumatic event, where a re-orientation of meaning has to take place for life to move on:

> Una volta tornati a lavorare li aiutiamo a rielaborare il lutto gradualmente. Devono acquisire a poco a poco la consapevolezza che il lavoro non c'è più, finito. Così come la vita che facevano prima. Finita. Era tutto un mucchio di cazzate.
>
> [Once they go back to work, we help them deal with the grieving process gradually. Little by little, they need to realise that work no longer exists, it's gone. Just as the life they used to lead before. Gone. It was all a load of bullshit.][389]

The description of this iconoclastic society, where the old tenets of life have disappeared, illustrates well Srnicek and Williams' claim that, for the end of work to become a reality, a cultural rather than economic revolution is necessary, one that overcomes the prevalent perception of work as the sole – albeit inadequate – provider of meaning.

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[384] Marie Jahoda, *Employment and Unemployment: A Social-Psychological Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 83–84.
[385] Claudio Morici, *L'uomo d'argento*, p. 52.
[386] Ibid., p. 53.
[387] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, p. 220.
[388] Ibid., p. 219.
[389] Claudio Morici, *L'uomo d'argento*, p. 55.

At the opposite end are the "locals", who have fully embraced the new leisure life made up of cheap beers, half-naked bodies, laughter that is louder than music and a general carefreeness. Together with the compulsion to work, the locals have symbolically discarded all the emblems of consumerist society, which can now only be found inside the town's dumpsters: 'dvd quasi nuovi, tostapane, lampadari, scarpe da ginnastica, biglietti aerei per New York, videocamere digitali, palloni da calcio, iPod Touch bianchi, elicotteri telecomandati, vestiti della Diesel' ['DVDs, toasters, lighting fixtures, trainers, plane tickets to New York, digital cameras, footballs, white iPod Touches, remote-controlled helicopters, Diesel clothes'][390]. This rejection of consumer goods goes hand in hand with the abolition of work in two ways. Firstly, capitalism's constant manufacturing of false needs persuades the individual 'to sacrifice the fight for shorter working hours and more leisure time to a desire for more stuff'[391] and therefore renders the abolition of work unfeasible. Therefore, doing away with this desire, as in the case of Morici's "locals", is presented in the novel as what enables them to live in a workless society. Secondly, as argued by Frayne, if the appeal of material things rests in their fulfilling our innate needs for 'social acceptance, respect, self-esteem and a cultural identity'[392] – which, as capitalism convinced us, can be purchased – consuming can be seen as a form of compensation for the miseries of work and as a 'consolation for the "unmet needs of the spirit"'.[393] In this way, the disappearance of work would warrant the disappearance of the need for spending.

However, what the narrator-protagonist defines as their 'better world' without work, in which the residents had spent 'anni a non fare niente, a ridere tutto il tempo, a drogar[s]i giorno dopo giorno' ['years on end doing nothing, laughing all the time and doing drugs day in, day out'] in order to 'consolidare uno stato mentale sempliciotto, stabile e duraturo' ['consolidate a stable and durable dimwit state of mind'],[394] rather than representing a credible positive alternative to the status quo, presents us with what Frayne defines as a 'false dichotomy' that pits work against laziness and disregards other valuable non-work activities such as 'caring for children, parents, neighbours, partners and friends' but also 'playing, talking, enjoying nature, or creating and appreciating cultural artefacts'.[395] To the meaninglessness of work, Morici opposes an apocalyptic vision of the future of humanity characterised by the tedium and meaninglessness brought by the end of work, which is described as a catastrophe that has left

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[390] Ibid., p. 34.
[391] David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*, p. 85.
[392] Ibid., p. 86.
[393] Ibid., p. 91.
[394] Claudio Morici, *L'uomo d'argento*, p. 21.
[395] David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*, p. 190.

most scarred and damaged, and the rest to lead a purposeless life made of substance abuse and meaningless relations. Whilst several theorists have advocated for the end of work as an opportunity for a more meaningful existence, *L'uomo d'argento* recognises the ills of work under capitalism and its potential (albeit extreme) consequences, but it fails to convey how a world without work could be not only possible but also desirable. As postulated by Srnicek and Williams, 'a post-work world is […] not a world of idleness; rather, it is a world in which people are no longer bound by their jobs, but are free to create their own lives'.[396] According to these scholars, this can only be achieved through a 'counter-hegemonic approach to work' that 'overturn[s] existing ideas about the necessity and desirability of work'.[397]

In this sense, it is worth looking at a passage at the end of the novel, where the narrator explains that nobody in the new leisure society reads any books, and that a book would have revealed to the residents that their world was not that dissimilar to the one they had left behind:

> Nessuno del posto […] leggeva libri. Non avremmo mai potuto leggere un libro che raccontasse come stavano davvero le cose. Un libro che spiegasse, magari in forma narrativa, che eravamo sempre gli stessi e in realtà stavamo tutti male e andavamo verso l'autodistruzione, esattamente come il mondo da cui eravamo venuti.
>
> [No local person […] read any books. We could have never read a book that told about how things really were. A book that explained, maybe in a narrative form, that we were still the same and that, in reality, we were all suffering and on the verge of self-destruction, just like the world where we had come from].[398]

Here, Morici seems to allude to a political function of literature and narrative as capable of providing a point of orientation and of exposing that 'false dichotomy' between work and laziness that fails to account for meaningful activities outside the realm of work. On a meta-level, therefore, Morici's novel itself could be ultimately interpreted as a discourse of critique that shows its readers how this dichotomy works and how subsumed to the neoliberal ideology they are that they cannot imagine a meaningful world without work.

[396] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, p. 153.
[397] Ibid., p. 222.
[398] Claudio Morici, *L'uomo d'argento*, p. 139.

6. Conclusion: 'Maybe we can jump off the train'?

At the diegetic level, the corpus of novels analysed seems to offer a largely defeatist view on the future of neoliberal work and of the system that provides it with both an ideology and an economic justification. In particular, in the fiction the sentiment seems to be prevalent that, despite the attempts at challenging work practices and work culture, the absence of a coherent internal organisation within anti-capitalist movements or the lack of their members' political awareness are factors which render resistance ultimately futile. As a result, the novels' characters become victims to that ideological stance that Mark Fisher brands as 'capitalist realism', that is 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it'.[399] In *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, for example, the Scottish anti-globalisation movement appears to be so heterogeneous and disorganised that it lends itself to a rather humorous portrayal. When Wayne is invited to the Socialist Workers Student Society of the University of Central Scotland (Swsucs) he is immediately greeted by Stan, its twenty-year-old president 'with a goatee beard and some sort of spasm',[400] who admits that the society is composed of only three members and then excuses himself to go help two men trying to assemble a line of desks:

> The smaller man tried to pull the desk one way, and Stan tried to pull it the other way, and the larger apparatchik said, "I think we need to turn it around." "This way or that way?" "That way." "This way?" "Here, let me," said the Green Party woman, seeing the slapstick efforts of her new friends. "I think it needs to go round that way," said the World Development Movement guy. "Like that?" said Stan. "No," said the big apparatchik. "You go this way; you go that way, yes?"[401]

These anti-globalists whose slogans are 'Grants Not Fees', 'Build the Socialist Alternative to New Labour', 'The World is NOT for Sale' and 'They Say Cut Back, We Say Fight Back'[402] are depicted as struggling with the simple task of moving some tables in the right direction. The reference to the 'apparatchik' – a functionary of the Soviet Union – effectively ridicules the inoffensiveness of these activists against the powers of capitalism. Their inability to

[399] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, p. 1.
[400] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 81.
[401] Ibid.
[402] Ibid.

cooperate successfully to reach the common goal of assembling tables metaphorically points at the fact that, while they are united in their common enemy (as demonstrated through their anti-neoliberal slogans), these movements are vividly divided in their approaches.

Wayne himself, who, as we have seen, even participates in prominent anti-capitalist protests across Europe, does not seem to have a real understanding of the nature of the struggles he is involved in. When asked to sign a petition in support of the anti-WTO protests, he admits that he 'wasn't sure what WTO stood for, but [he] thought the protests had something to do with dolphins. To not sign would now mean that [he] was against the protests, in favour of killing dolphins'.[403] As he stops working for Benny's Burgers, Wayne withdraws from the struggle '[sticking] [his] fingers in [his] ears and sa[ying] "Na na na-na na" to capitalist modernity'[404] since, in his new condition of non-employment, 'all the demonstrations, rallies, and public meetings seemed futile'.[405] Here Wayne seems to embody a certain egoism of resistance, which is judged as more or less useful according to self-oriented motivations, but also a fundamental loss of hope. To his girlfriend Manette, who accuses him of having given up fighting for a better world, he responds:

> 'Like what? Wander about town waving a flag? D'you think if there had have been twenty-one people at the demo instead of twenty then we would have achieved a critical mass? Seriously, how long are you going to keep kidding yourself? There are a handful of us here, a handful there; sometimes we gather together and we number a few thousand—it's nothing.'[406]

Manette, on the other hand, in her defence of collective action against Wayne's pessimism, represents the only ray of hope in the novel:

> 'Ah. Just now feels like defeat? Maybe. Then in five years, ten years, twenty years, something will happen – some stupide war or pension collapse or environmental crisis or recession – and it's a spark, and every student being trained for a stupide job, and every bored worker, and every unemployed person, and everyone who is without papers, and all the people who must work longer and longer for less and less pension, and are isolated, and are taught to hate themselves, they will look at the world of capital, and they will be in the streets, millions of them, and they will imagine the future.'[407]

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[403] Ibid., p. 78.
[404] Ibid., p. 200.
[405] Ibid., pp. 199–200.
[406] Ibid., p. 206.
[407] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 208.

Wayne's perception of resistance as fundamentally useless, however, is shared by the protagonist of Eugenio Raspi's *Inox*, who 'sceglie[…] la diserzione perché in realtà il [loro] esercito ha le polveri bagnate' ['choose[s] desertion because in truth [their] army's gunpowder is wet'] and 'il [loro] sciopero non spaventa la dirigenza del gruppo russo' ['[their] strike does not scare the management of the Russian group'], who 'l'avevano già messo in conto e ora sono lì che aspettano di prender[li] per fame' ['had already taken it into account and are now waiting there to starve [them] out'].[408] Srnicek and Williams appear to confirm such pessimistic views on resistance struggles when they claim that these 'rise rapidly, mobilise increasingly large numbers of people, and yet fade away only to be replaced by a renewed sense of apathy, melancholy and defeat'.[409] Despite 'a multitude of small-scale successes and moments of large-scale mobilisation' the final judgement on the effectiveness of these movements is of an 'overarching failure'.[410]

Another trait shared by the novels is the way in which, despite lamenting the violence and injustice inherent in the system, their characters ultimately accept the inevitability of work, which retains its primacy as the main provider of meaning in the individual's life. The protagonist of *Since the Layoffs*, after experiencing the lows of life in unemployment, slowly rebuilds his life around a new job, thanks to which '[his] life isn't destroyed anymore' as '[he's] putting the pieces back together'.[411] The 'creative' workers of *Then We Came to the End*, after the wave of redundancies that overturned their existences, eventually find jobs in other agencies, the first ones that would have them, or, for the less fortunate ones, uninsured day jobs from temporary agencies. The narrator describes them as walking around their new offices 'with [their] two minds', as '[they] were delighted to have jobs', but 'bitched about them constantly'.[412] In the office of *Personal Days*, where again the scene is dominated by daily terminations for the employees, in an unexpected turn of events the narrator accepts a new role as supervisor despite knowing that this will bring him isolation from and the hatred of his former colleagues. In general, as pointed out by Lye, both Ferris's and Park's office novels 'share a similarly pessimistic outlook on the capacity for workers' political resistance to economic victimization'.[413]

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[408] Eugenio Raspi, *Inox*, p. 242.
[409] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, p. 17.
[410] Ibid., p. 23.
[411] Iain Levison, *Since the Layoffs*, p. 165.
[412] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End*, p. 359.
[413] Colleen Lye, 'Unmarked Character and the "Rise of Asia": Ed Park's *Personal Days*', p. 240.

Not even Goodman's *Intuition* seems to foresee any change in the competitive workplace of the Philpott research institute, where, after the decision of Sandy Glass to quit as main seeker of funding, Marion Mendelssohn resigns herself to the idea that she will have to 'project[…] her work into the future, assuring others that results would come to pass where as yet there were none' and she will have to 'dirty[…] her hands' by 'go[ing] to the dog and pony shows and talk[ing] up the lab'.[414] The young researcher Robin, on the other hand, after reporting her colleague's apparently fraudulent research results to an independent board and no longer wanting to be part of such an environment, continues working albeit for a different laboratory.

In *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, as we have seen, after a period out of work in which the protagonist withdraws from the struggle against neoliberalism, the exhaustion of all his finances forces him to seek employment once again and he even submits an application to work at Benny's Burgers, which had constituted the prime target of his anti-capitalism.

In Levison's *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, similarly, after a period of voluntary unemployment the protagonist resumes his job hunt, on account of the fact that:

> I'm as sick of work as the next guy, but I'm still practical enough to recognize the *need*[415] for it. Without work, where would all the new breed of millionaires that I read about in Time Magazine get their dry cleaning done? Who would fix their cars? Who would strip for them when they unload their trophy wives for the evening and go out for a night on the town? Us, the ununited workers of the world. I get the newspaper and dig through the classifieds.[416]

Although the narrator/protagonist recognises that the necessity of work is something established from on high and for the benefit of those at the top, he does not propose any alternative vision of a workless future, as a true revolution cannot be initiated by scattered individuals unsupported by a national or supernational movement, such as the 'ununited workers of the world'.

If *L'uomo d'argento*, as it has been shown, is the only one amongst the novels considered to imagine a post-work society, its alternative to the much-decried emptiness of a late-capitalist life centred on work is an equally empty existence founded on the utter disengagement from the outside world in order to preserve a 'stable and durable dimwit state

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[414] Allegra Goodman, *Intuition*, pp. 333–34.
[415] My emphasis.
[416] Iain Levison, *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*, p. 143.

of mind'.[417] No positive proposition is offered for a future society in which the relevance of work is scaled down and other, possibly more meaningful activities regain their place and value.

At a meta-level, however, these novels' denunciation of the systemic violence at the heart of capitalist work and, more significantly, of our society's resigned acceptation of it, constitutes an important form of critique in itself. In this sense, these authors help construct a new awareness in their readers of the subtle workings of neoliberalism and, since what is invisible is destined to go unchallenged, by making them visible their writing acts as a form of resistance. Significantly, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs* directly addresses the reader, who is imagined to be enslaved in their role as a worker who *must* put down the book to 'set [their] alarm', 'lay out [their] work clothes' and begin their daily commute on a train, 'watch[ing] the fields pass until the sun sets, until [they] see only a reflection of [themselves]'.[418] Johnston hints that it is up to us, the readers, the people, to intervene in the capitalist discourse to change its course as 'it's like we're on a runaway train and the guard is shouting at the stoker to work harder and harder' and 'we can keep grafting until we hit the end of the line; or, with a collective leap of imagination, maybe we can jump off the train'.[419] Whilst the narrator acknowledges the allure of capitalist life (maybe he will 'get a career in human resources, fall in love with a girl from accounts, and holiday in Southern France') and its inescapability (he will 'work until [he's] seventy-five and die of throat cancer on the week [he'd] planned to retire'), he likes to think that he and the reader 'will meet during some as yet unimagined social struggle. [They'll] stand guard on a picket line or share the weight of a banner. When [their] hands are up and [their] head is bleeding and the police are preparing to charge, [they] will link [their] arms'.[420] In what sounds like a call to action, Johnston reminds us that, despite the widespread sentiment that there is no alternative, 'the future is unwritten'[421] and, however small, we can still play a part in scripting it.

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[417] Claudio Morici, *L'uomo d'argento*, p. 21.
[418] D.D. Johnston, *Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs*, p. 246.
[419] Ibid., p. 100.
[420] Ibid., p. 246.
[421] Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

'*Sous les pavés, la plage*!': the subversion and reappropriation of liminal landscapes

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I turn to the representation of so-called "liminal landscapes" in four contemporary works of fiction in order to provide an alternative perspective on literature's renewed attention for in-between places. This perspective interprets such attention as an attempt, on the part of the authors, to redefine and challenge the position that place occupies in neoliberal culture. The concept of liminal landscape can be loosely made to overlap with that of *heterotopia* (Foucault)[422] and *non-place* (Augé).[423] Indeed, as pointed out by the anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen in his recent work *Liminality and the Modern* (2014), liminality refers to 'any "betwixt and between" situation or object, any in-between place or moment, a state of suspense, a moment of freedom between two structured world-views or institutional arrangements',[424] and the attribute of "liminal" can and has been applied to sites ranging from 'specific thresholds' to 'more extended areas, like "borderlands", and even to "whole countries"'.[425] It is within this broad sense of the term *liminal*, as a 'catch-all expression for an ambiguous, transitional or interstitial spatio-temporal dimension',[426] that I carry out my analysis, which enables the inclusion of a wide array of situations, spaces and subjectivities that can be termed "liminal".

The rationale behind the choice to focus on liminal spaces in a discussion centred on literary practices that challenge and subvert the dominant ideology lies in their being sites where, according to an established scholarly tradition,[427] the social norms that characterise "normal" social structure are suspended and subverted, as they play host to 'ideas of the ludic, consumption, carnivalesque, deterritorialisation[428] and inversion or suspension of normative

[422] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', trans. by Jay Miskowiec, in *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, (1967; 1984), pp. 1–9.
[423] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*.
[424] Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern, Living Through the In-Between*, p. 7.
[425] Quoted in *Landscapes of Liminality, Between Space and Place*, eds. Dara Downey, Ian Kinane, and Elizabeth Parker (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 10.
[426] Ibid., p. 3.
[427] This is the case already in Victor Turner's work, and especially in Rob Shields' *Places on the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1991).
[428] Here we refer to 'deterritorialisation' in the sense of a 'process of taking control and order away from a place, from a territory' [Phillip Vannini and Jonathan Taggart, *Off the Grid: Re-Assembling Domestic Life* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 181].

social and moral structures of everyday life'.[429] However, as noted by the scholars Hazel Andrews and Les Roberts in their edited volume *Liminal Landscapes, Travel, Experience and Spaces In-Between* (2012), 'liminal spaces also provoke counter ideas of social control, terror, surveillance, production and territorialisation'.[430] The coastal resort of Brighton beach described by Rob Shields in his book *Places on the Margins* (1991), for example, which he depicts as a Victorian site of 'tourism, leisure, pleasure and consumption', vividly contrasts with today's southern British coast, where the mass housing of asylum seekers renders it rather a 'space of transnational labour, migrancy, racial tension, death, fear, uncertainty and disorientation'.[431] More generally, the panoptic surveillance provided by security camera systems and human policing in most non-places is more reminiscent of the *heterotopias of deviation* described by Foucault in 'Des Espaces Autres' where deviation from the norm is monitored and segregated.[432] In the following pages, I look at a range of liminal landscapes that alternatively or simultaneously embody either of these resistive or panoptic characteristics: from shopping malls to airport hotels, from the heterotopias of museums and prisons to the "deadzones" of unmapped, empty urban spaces and modern dwellings, this chapter examines the way in which the status of liminal places as sites of subversion or as places of social control is constantly challenged and rewritten.

The usefulness of literary fiction for a discussion on the role of place in contemporary society can be found in that quality of literature that the scholar Eric Prieto summarises as the 'ability of fictional representations to shape our attitudes about the actual environments through which we move',[433] to 'generate new spatial concepts and attitudes'[434] and to 'understand the often misunderstood properties of emergent forms of place'.[435] The validity of this analysis therefore lies in the aptness of literary fiction, in the 'creative, performative act'[436] of representation, to shed light on the way in which a given society at a given time perceives and interprets certain spaces and spatial practices. With regards to the relationship between literature and liminal spaces in particular, like liminality, literature is often 'drawn to the

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[429] Hazel Andrews and Les Roberts, *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces In-Between* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 6.
[430] Ibid.
[431] Ibid.
[432] In 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', Foucault defines *heterotopias of deviation* such as prisons and psychiatric hospitals as sites 'in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed', p. 5.
[433] Eric Prieto, *Literature, Geography and the Postmodern Poetics of Place* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 1.
[434] Ibid., p. 2.
[435] Ibid.
[436] Ibid., p. 11.

emergent, the interstitial, and the difficult to understand'.[437] The scholars Downey, Kinane and Parker go as far as saying that:

> Literature itself is liminal; the reader is suspended in a state of constant liminality, between the real world and the imaginative world of the text. It is on the margins, from within the imaginative potentiality of the liminal space/state, that 'myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art' are brought into creation, and which allows for the generative possibilities of new ideas, forms, and states of being.[438]

The corpus of literary works selected for my analysis comprises one British, one American and two Italian novels that constitute the starting point for a transnational comparison. The impact that the economic and social changes brought about by neoliberalism had on these countries, on their people and their landscapes, I will argue, has been determinant in prompting a range of different reactions to such transformations, which in turn are reflected in the literary production of that period. The chapter will consider context-specific variables, as each novel contextualises issues of spatial and personal liminality that are specific – or more specific – to that country at that point in time, from the Italian post-war economic boom that led to a dream of accumulation of capital and meaningless possessions, to the progressive marginalisation of England's southern coast, now populated by the liminal subjects of migration and diaspora, and finally to Islamophobia and practices of exclusion of the liminal "other" in the United States.

In chronological order, the first work that I have chosen to analyse is *Bla Bla Bla* (1997)[439] by Giuseppe Culicchia, one of the contemporary Italian writers to have dealt most consistently with space and, in particular, with urban space.[440] The second work considered is the lesser known *La discarica* by Paolo Teobaldi (1998).[441] Here Teobaldi, as in other works

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[437] Ibid., p. 9.
[438] *Landscapes of Liminality, Between Space and Place*, eds. Dara Downey, Ian Kinane, and Elizabeth Parker, p. 14.
[439] Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla* (Milan: Garzanti, 1997).
[440] Culicchia was born in Turin in 1965. Well-known to the Italian readership, he is the author of several novels, short stories and non-fiction books, and he has curated the Italian translation of English and French works. His first novel, *Tutti giù per terra* (1994), features one of the first examples of precarious workers in Italian literature. Many of his writings focus on his hometown, Turin, such as *Brucia la città* (2010), *Torino è casa mia* (2005) and *Torino è casa nostra* (2015).
[441] Paolo Teobaldi was born in Pesaro in 1947. Although not as well-known as Culicchia, he has published several novels that have been translated into many languages: *Scala di giocca* (1984), *Finte: tredici modi per sopravvivere ai morti* (1995), *La discarica* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 1998), *Il padre dei nomi* (2002), *La badante. Un amore involontario* (which was nominated for the prestigious Strega Prize for 2005), *Il mio manicomio* (2007), and *Macadàm* (2013).

such as *Macadàm* (2013), focuses on the problematic relationship between non-place and history. Whilst a non-place, as defined by Augé, is prototypically a non-identitarian and non-historical space – as opposed to place, which is, on the other hand, historical[442] – Teobaldi's work appears to challenge the traditional definition of non-place by blurring the distinctions between non-places and places of dwellings, as he endues the liminal landscapes of his novels with a renewed sense of history. The third novel selected is the psychogeographical journey of Iain Sinclair's *Dining on Stones* (2004).[443] Sinclair is a well-known psychogeographer and writer (his most famous work being *London Orbital* (2002), dedicated to London's M25 ring road), whose works mostly consist of urban explorations of interstitial landscapes, where the act of walking is used to challenge the traditional use that we make of spaces of travel and consumption.[444] Sinclair's fiction is often set in interstitial spaces that do not feature on maps, in an 'unmapped' territory, and *Dining on Stones* is particularly relevant to this discussion as the walk at the centre of the "novel" takes place on the coast, in a liminal space *par excellence*. The final work that I have included in this selection is the American novel *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, written by Edmond Caldwell and published in 2012.[445] The novel, or rather anti-novel[446] (as the author himself defines it) has prototypical non-places as its main subject-matter. The author/narrator explicitly states that he does not want to *set* his novel in non-places, but that non-places *are* the theme of the novel and often become places for potential subversion of the status quo.

In general, these works were selected as they all variously challenge the status of liminal landscapes as spaces of neoliberalism and they all stage, by different means and in different ways, a reappropriation of such spaces on the part of the subject. Other more notable works

[442] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, p. 77.
[443] Ian Sinclair, *Dining on Stones or The Middle Ground* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).
[444] Born in 1943 in Cardiff, Iain Sinclair's vast artistic production includes poetry, prose fiction, non-fiction books, essays and documentaries. His work mainly centres on the city of London and its peripheral and forgotten areas, with psychogeographical journeys being almost a constant of his writing.
[445] Edmond Caldwell (1961–2017) was an American scholar, activist and writer. He obtained a PhD in literature in 2002 and accepted a tenure track job, although, in his Goodreads profile biography, he claims that he would have preferred not to. In an obituary written by Joseph G. Ramsey and Boyd Nielson he was defined as a 'writer, literary squatter, saboteur' who was underrated by critics and reviewers 'either too dull to recognize groundbreaking writing or too servile in their thoroughgoing commitment to institutional channels and endorsements' (see Joseph G. Ramsey and Boyd Nielson, 'A Tribute to Edmond Caldwell', *Dispatches from the Poetry Wars*, <https://www.dispatchespoetrywars.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Edmond-Caldwell-Tribute.pdf>, [accessed 24 July 2020]). *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant* (Dallas: Say It with Stones, 2012) remains his only published novel.
[446] As explained by Joseph G. Ramsey in his tribute to Caldwell, an anti-novel, as per Caldwell's intentions, would 'blow up so-called "literary fiction" from the inside out' (p. 33) by highlighting the social complicity of conventions such as Hook and Back-Story (p. 158), Sympathetic Character (p. 159), Realistic-yet-Dramatic Story Plot (p. 159), Deep Psychological Interiority and Epiphany (p. 79), Narrative Closure and Cathartic Resolution (p. 129).

could have certainly featured in this discussion, above all the late fiction of J.G. Ballard, which has dealt widely with the relationship between the subject and the neoliberal built space and to which a great deal of scholarly literature has been dedicated. However, whilst Ballard's fiction mainly focuses on the negative effects that an anonymous built environment has on the individual, which ultimately lead to the collapse of the social structure and to the retreat into an irrational primitivism, the aim of this chapter is to explore the possibilities that non-places hold for positive subversion, as catalysts for change, and therefore Ballard's fiction has not been included in this corpus.

This chapter is divided into four sections, each one of which looks at a different facet of the treatment of liminal landscapes in the works considered. In the first section, entitled 'Placelessness, hyperreality and the search for authenticity', I focus on the problematisation, in all four works, of the authenticity of place. The novels considered variously portray a placeless (Relph) and inauthentic landscape. From the flatscapes of Culicchia's cities to Teobaldi's home space, populated by the artificial smells of years of capitalist accumulation, and from Sinclair's nightly apparitions of the Ibis hotel to Caldwell's depiction of the airport hotel as a landscape of simulacra, these authors shed light on a society that is ill-at-ease with the anonymity of space in consumer culture. The very same anonymity that Augé, in his acclaimed work *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1992) indicated as capable of unburdening the individual subject of his everyday identity, duties and responsibilities, is here perceived as physically sickening and unbearable.

The second section, 'Liminal identities: non-conformity, (in)visibility and surveillance', explores the relationship between in-between spaces and in-between identities. The novels selected feature individuals who, for various reasons, find themselves marginalised or between socially acceptable codes as they interact with a space that is equally marginal or in-between. In Culicchia's *Bla bla bla*, the exasperating indifference of neoliberal society, initially embodied by the "consumerscape" of the mall, is what prompts the out-of-place protagonist's decision to vanish without a trace, thus initiating a new, "discontinuous", mode of aimlessly travelling the city. *La discarica*'s main character, Tizio, has also failed to integrate into an increasingly neoliberalised Italy, as his mediocrity (already embodied by the anonymity of his name – which replaces his full name, the more classical Tiziano) [447] has confined him to the margins of the job market, where he is constantly in-between professions and incapable of successfully playing the game of the accumulation of capital. Tizio, paradoxically, only

[447] 'Tizio' in Italian is the equivalent for *guy*.

appears to experience a sense of belonging when he starts working in what is traditionally understood to be a marginal space, the landfill, as he deals with the scraps discarded by society. *Dining on Stones* also discusses liminal identities, and, in particular, what Sinclair defines as the 'coastal lowlife' made up of asylum seekers and urban unfortunates. Sinclair's novel, as it seeks to challenge the apparent invisibility of the liminal spaces of British wasteland, similarly postulates the centrality of these subjects (who, in his view, are all but invisible) in the now forgotten English coastal resorts. Caldwell's protagonist's in-betweenness, finally, results from his perceived suspicious looks (his fixation on being an American with "Arab" facial features) as well as from an unresolved doubt about his possible bisexuality. *Human Wishes*' main character, in fact, obsesses over his "otherness" as he traverses America's and Europe's non-places (the airport, the airport hotel, the anonymous Russian city, the rest stop, the museum, the mall and the heterotopic prison) and records the psychological and physical effects that such places have on him.

In the third section of this chapter, 'Restoring an erased history', I concentrate on one of the strategies employed by these authors in order to overcome the permanently liminal character of the landscapes outlined in the previous sections. To varying degrees, literature's challenge to the neoliberal space stems in these novels from a desire to put history back into prototypically 'non-historical' places (Augé). In the utterly impersonal condominium where he resides, in which all the apartments are the mirror image of each other (identical but inverted), Teobaldi's Tizio roams the cold underground tunnels to peek into his neighbours' garages, populated by the myriad castoff objects which he believes pay testimony to fifty years of history. This idea that a society's waste can help reconstruct the history of a nation is reiterated in the second part of the novel when Tizio, now working for the newly inaugurated local landfill, organises an exhibition entitled 'L'odore delle cose: cinquant'anni di accumulazione secondaria' ('The Smell of Things: Fifty Years of Secondary Accumulation'), whose explicit aim is to piece together Italy's post-war history through an analysis of its waste. In Sinclair's work, on the other hand, it is the simple act of walking (as opposed to car travel) which 'restores the memory' of a collective and personal history in the forgotten landscape that surrounds the A13 road. The A13, from blank space on the map, becomes 'a semi-celestial highway, a Blakean transit to a higher mythology, a landscape of sacred mounds and memories'.[448] *Human Wishes* again stages a longing for historical places. The protagonist's search in the 'ultra-

[448] Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*, p. 116.

conformist dystopian [Roissy] Village'[449] for the notorious chateau of Pauline Réage's novel *Histoire d'O* (1954), together with a long excursus on the old Watertown Arsenal (which once stood on the site where the Arsenal Mall now rises), constitute exemplifying instances of this desire to reinstate history in places that had been somehow de-historicised.

In the final section, which I have named 'Reappropriating space: from homelessness to revolution', I look at what is perhaps the most interesting aspect of fiction's challenge to the neoliberal landscape, namely the potential that liminal places offer for the development of subversive practices aimed at the reappropriation of space on the part of the subject. In *Bla bla bla*, the protagonist's commitment to an erratic journey through the city that subverts and disrupts normal travel (sequential and uninterrupted) enables him to 'breathe' the city, to almost repossess it. This journey eventually takes him to the far more extreme experience of homelessness, which alone is said to guarantee a true unmediated experience of the city. In *La discarica*, a deeper understanding of the territory is made possible by Tizio's job as a bin-man, which puts him into contact with the more authentic side of the town: the waste that it produces. Similarly, the reappropriation of his own home, formerly regarded by Tizio as a non-place of accumulation, occurs through the repossessing of its smells, as the strong scent of Tizio's body after a day's work replaces that of the inanimate objects that had overfilled the apartment during the years of his marriage with Natalia. In *Dining on Stones*, the reappropriation of liminal space is realised by the slower acts of walking and dowsing, which subvert and challenge the velocity of modern travel, as 'the city belonged to anyone who walked it' and not to those who drove through it. In Caldwell's anti-novel, instead, the reclamation of liminal space takes the form of a real revolution, as the protagonist advocates for airport runways to be repossessed by their legitimate dwellers: the rabbits that had been exterminated as they posed a threat to air travel security. The city streets, on the other hand, should be returned to the ostracised youth of the banlieues, where the hope for a better future lies. As for the Taylorised shopping mall, the protagonist's utopic dream for this space is one of subversion, in which the 'white proles' and the 'black proles' will rise up against the 'system'.

2. Placelessness, hyperreality and the search for authenticity

Already in 1976, the Canadian geographer Edward Relph, in his best-known work *Place and Placelessness*, addressed the issue of the authenticity of place and place-making practices in

[449] Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant,* p. 40.

post-industrial societies. Relph decried the pervasiveness, in contemporary society, of a placeless geography, a term that indicated the lack of both 'diverse landscapes and significant places'.[450] Mass communications, mass culture, big business, powerful central authority and the economic system, according to Relph, all encouraged *placelessness*, which involved a 'weakening of the identity of places to the point where they not only look alike but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experience'.[451] The protagonists of the novels analysed in this chapter all find themselves immersed in spaces and landscapes that are perceived as being inauthentic, artificial, identical to each other and, in other words, placeless. Such spaces provoke feelings of unease and even anxiety in the characters and stir in them the desire for a more authentic relationship with space.

A first example of this placelessness can be found in the flat urban landscape of the anonymous foreign metropolis that is at the centre of Culicchia's *Bla bla bla* and that shares the traits of cities as diverse as Turin, London and Prague.[452] *Bla bla bla* is the story of an unnamed narrating "I" who, whilst waiting for his wife in a shopping mall like any other, suddenly feels the heaviness of his conformist existence and, as a consequence, decides to vanish without a trace. Culicchia's city is identical in all its parts ('ovunque uguale a se stessa'):[453] houses, streets, road signs, billboards and waste look the same in every quarter, and the city is studded with a series of indistinguishable French cafés. No recognisable faces populate the city, where the only sense of familiarity is provided by the sameness of consumer goods:

> Migliaia di persone intorno a me e non un volto o un gesto familiare, soltanto i prodotti mi riconoscono e mi chiamano, stivali e cartoline, sciarpe e videoregistratori, SE NON SAI COSA VUOI QUI LO TROVERAI, leggo su un cartello, QUI LO TROVERAI.
>
> [Thousands of people all around me and not a familiar face or gesture. Only the products recognise me and call out to me. Boots and postcards, scarves and VHS players. IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT, YOU WILL FIND IT HERE, I read on a sign, YOU WILL FIND IT HERE].[454]

What Marc Augé described as the 'paradox of the non-place', namely the fact that for 'a

[450] Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976), p. 79.
[451] Ibid., p. 90.
[452] Culicchia confirms this fact in the novel's acknowledgements.
[453] Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla*, p. 49.
[454] Ibid., p. 66.

foreigner lost in a country that he does not know […] an oil company logo is a reassuring mark; among the supermarket shelves he falls with relief on sanitary, household or food products validated by multinational brand names',[455] is not welcomed by Culicchia's protagonist as something equally comforting. The ubiquity of the reminders of consumerism in this novel, rather, is painfully emblematic of the fundamental inescapability of the contemporary social model. Even those supposedly "alternative" cultural forms are only an alternative *version* of consumerism: the colourful market stalls that the city lays out for the benefit of the younger generation in search of alternatives, ultimately, merely perpetuate the system:

> Coagulando[456] qui i giovani di una città che invecchia, smerciando giovinezza, una giovinezza alternativa, fatta di scarpe alternative, alternative t-shirt, maglioni alternativi; musica alternativa per giovani, giacche alternative per giovani, berretti per giovani alternativi; alternativi romanzi e alternativi film per giovani alternativi; persino cibo alternativo, giovane: e i giovani comprano, non hanno alternative.
>
> [By gathering here the youngsters of an aging city, selling off youth, an alternative youth, made up of alternative shoes, alternative t-shirts, alternative jumpers; alternative music for young people, alternative jackets for young people, caps for alternative young people; alternative novels and alternative films for alternative youngsters; and even alternative food, which is young itself: and the youngsters keep buying, they have no alternatives.][457]

Uniformity and sameness also connote the hundreds of social outcasts and beggars who inhabit, unseen, the city: 'persone buttate a terra, per strada. […] Uomini, donne, vecchi, ragazzini. Sembrano tutti vestiti di nero, ma osservando meglio i loro abiti si intuisce che secoli fa dovevano avere altri colori, è solo la sporcizia a renderli uniformi' ['people lying on the ground, in the streets. […] Men, women, teenagers. They all look as if they were dressed in black, but, looking more closely at their clothes, you can guess that centuries ago they must have been other colours: it is only dirt that makes them look homogeneous'].[458] The erasure of the beggars' identity, already initiated by their exclusion from the riches of capitalist society, is further advanced by the dirt on their clothes, which flattens differences and reduces them to black figures against the tarmac.

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[455] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, p. 106.
[456] Literally, "coagulating".
[457] Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla*, p. 83.
[458] Ibid.

The homogeneous consumerist space then becomes hyperreal space in the simulated homes encountered during a trip to IKEA, where only a simulacrum of home life is possible as 'ci sono finti fiori e finti libri dappertutto, anche il pavimento su cui camminiamo è un finto pavimento, è come stare sul set di una soap opera, finte vite comprano qui i loro finti scenari […] è un'occasione, prezzi bassi, pagamenti rateali, SALDI, SCONTI, RIDUZIONI' ['there are fake flowers and fake books everywhere, and also the floor on which we walk is a fake floor; it is like being on a soap opera set, fake lives buy their fake sceneries here. […]. It's a bargain, low prices, payments by instalments, SALES, DISCOUNTS, REDUCTIONS'].[459] Inauthentic spaces are the price to pay for enjoying reduced prices and cheap furniture.

The pervasiveness of neoliberalism in all aspects of social life, though, is even better symbolised, according to Culicchia's protagonist, by what the American sociologist George Ritzer named the 'McDonaldization of society', which in *Bla bla bla* acquires a more literal meaning. The 'vera natura del Capitalismo' ['true essence of capitalism'] is said to be found in McDonald's fast-food restaurants and in their Big Mac burger, with the 'gas intestinali e puzzolenti' ['intestinal and smelly gases'] it causes in those who consume it, which testify to McDonald's unique ability to literally 'penetrare così intimamente nei propri dipendenti, altro che la Fabbrica Integrata o il Modello Giapponese' ['penetrate so intimately inside their employees. Forget the Integrated Factory or the Japanese model'].[460] The protagonist's challenge to and rebellion against the capitalist society of which he is a part, which we will analyse in the following sections of this chapter, is therefore carried out against the backdrop of an urban flatscape characterised by sameness, depthless and lack of significant spaces.

In Teobaldi's *La discarica*, on the other hand, the uniformity and artificiality that connote neoliberal space mostly affect domestic space, and they do so in at least two ways. Firstly, Tizio's home is portrayed as a *non-place*, as defined by Augé as a non-anthropological place, which is not relational, not historical and not concerned with identity.[461] Tizio's home space is impersonal and undifferentiated from the other apartments that constitute the condominium he bought with his wife Natalia (Lia), which appears to have been built in the way that best serves the logic of consumption:

> Quando i trecento condòmini tornavano febbrili dalla Spesa Grossa di fine mese, a ridosso del ventisette per via della valuta, fuori poteva anche piovere ma loro avevano

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[459] Ibid., p. 97.
[460] Ibid., p. 71.
[461] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, pp. 77–78.

la galleria e così arrivavano tranquilli con la macchina piena come un uovo davanti al proprio cubicolo, potevano scaricarla senza bagnarsi e già c'era l'ascensore pronto con la porta aperta per portare su la roba fino agli appartamenti, tutti identici e speculari, uno di qua e uno di là sul pianerottolo, tanto che se uno andava dal vicino a chiedere un po' di zucchero provava un sottile senso di straniamento a vedere che, a parte l'odore, la casa era uguale eppure capovolta. Insomma sembrava che una *ratio* superiore guidasse il percorso delle merci prescelte dall'Ipermercato agli appartamenti simmetrici, dove sarebbero state scartate e consumate.

[When the three-hundred residents came back all feverish from the end-of-the-month Big Shop, just before the twenty-seventh because of the currency, it could well have been raining outside, but they had the Tunnel, so they calmly reached their cubicle with their car bursting at the seams. They could unpack it without getting wet and the lift was there with the door open waiting, ready to bring up the stuff to the apartments, all identical and symmetrical, one on this side of the landing and one on the other, to the point that, if someone went up to their neighbour to ask for some sugar, they would feel a faint sense of estrangement in seeing that, other than the smell, the house was identical to theirs and yet reversed. Hence it seemed that a higher reason governed the path of the goods – chosen by the supermarket – to the symmetrical apartments, where they would be unwrapped and consumed].[462]

Space in the apartment block is planned and organised according to an obliged path that from the temple of consumption that is the supermarket moves the products – in the style of a conveyor belt – to the house. Instead of a production line, here we have a "consumption line" that reduces individual experience to the anonymous and always-identical one of consuming. The 'higher reason' governing the path of the goods points to the illusoriness of choice in capitalist society, where individual freedom is in actuality circumscribed within the limits imposed by an ideology mainly interested in economic calculus.

Tizio and Lia's home is also rendered a place of consumption (as opposed to a place of dwelling) by the countless material objects that Lia has accumulated as a symbolic compensation for her husband's failure to accumulate capital. Tizio's rejection of and repulsion towards capitalist accumulation is reiterated several times in the novel as the forms of accumulation that he terms 'secondary and tertiary accumulation' are deemed responsible for

[462] Paolo Teobaldi, *La discarica*, pp. 74–75.

the destruction of many families (including his) and for making the already small-sized modern homes uninhabitable:

> L'accumulazione secondaria e terziaria […] a cui si era dedicata non solo sua moglie ma tutta la smisurata sinistra inconsapevole razza dei finti ricchi o dei finti poveri, che ormai coincidevano, aveva riempito le case di oggetti inutili, sghembi, irregolari, scaleni e fetenti, i quali avevano occupato ogni centimetro cubico dei loro mobili e ogni centimetro quadrato delle superfici disponibili, sottraendo ossigeno alla già ristretta cubatura delle moderne case fino a renderne insopportabile il fiato. Punto e basta'.
>
> [Secondary and tertiary accumulation […] to which not only his wife, but all the vast, sinister and oblivious race of the fake rich or fake poor – who by now were the same thing – had devoted themselves, had filled the homes with useless, crooked, irregular, scalene and fetid objects that had taken up every cubic centimetre of their furniture and every square centimetre of the available surfaces, thus stealing oxygen away from the already limited volume of modern houses to the point of making their smell unbearable. End of.][463]

Lia's thousands of 'oggetti mostruosi e inutili' ['monstrous and useless objects'][464] have turned their house into the ugly copy of Tizio's in-laws, progressively altering their smells. In the Trecca's family home, where Lia grew up, the stairs, the laundry, the meals, the children and even the bikes smelled the same, their individuality evened out by the flattening power of mass consumption.

Smell is a central and recurring theme in the novel, where it represents the second way in which inauthenticity and artificiality affect domestic space. *La discarica* repeatedly contrasts authentic and inauthentic smells, with the former generally being associated with more traditional forms of life and labour and the latter with capitalism and accumulation. The smell of Tizio and Lia's bedroom is described as a 'tanfo stanco' ['tired stench'],[465] as opposed to the 'onesta puzza di vecchi' ['honest stink of old people'][466] that defines Tizio's grandparents' room. Again, Tizio's pantry had a distinct smell, but did not smell 'onestamente' ['honestly'],[467] like the old grocer's shops. The main contraposition, though, is that of the bad

[463] Ibid., p. 151.
[464] Ibid., p. 11.
[465] Ibid., p. 39.
[466] Ibid.
[467] Ibid., p. 53.

smell of the 'oggetti inanimati, cioè privi di un'anima, brutti e senz'anima, fatti di materiali resistenti se non indistruttibili' ['inanimate objects that lack a soul, ugly and without a soul, and made of resistant if not indestructible materials'][468] and the good smell of the human body after working an honest job. The most emblematic example of the first category is the dentist's clock:

> Un oggetto mostruoso e minaccioso, con tutti quei dentoni in rilievo, di notte luminosi perché bagnati di fosforo, che somigliava alla bocca spalancata di uno squalo in un museo di storia naturale; e per di più proditoriamente e proustianamente intriso di disinfettante orale, tale quindi da emanare un inquietante odore di studio dentistico.
>
> [A monstrous and threatening object, with all those big teeth visible in relief, bright at night as they had been soaked in phosphorous, and which looked like the gaping mouth of a shark in a natural history museum; and, what's more, it had been treacherously and Proustianly saturated with oral disinfectant and therefore it was able to release an unsettling smell of dental surgery.][469]

The clock is a "present" from Tizio's rich dentist brother-in-law that appears at various points in the novel and that Tizio denotes as 'uno splendido esempio di Kitsch' ['a wonderful example of kitsch']:[470] with the arrival of the clock in the house, Tizio's home is pervaded by 'la puzza del dentista, dell'accumulazione secondaria e della peggiore ipocrisia' ['the stink of dentist, of secondary accumulation and of the worst hypocrisy'].[471] The clock here comes to emblematise the artificial and manipulative nature of capitalism in its ability to colonise space, in this case via olfactory means. Another example of this can be found in the synthetic fumes given off by the silo of Tizio's other brother-in-law's furniture factory, which 'emanava al massimo un vago sentore di nobilitato, che scimmiottava in vari modi le venature del legno ma che col legno aveva solo una lontanissima parentela da parte della cellulosa' ['at most emanated a vague scent of melamine, which mocked in various ways the veining of wood, but which was only very remotely related to wood on the side of cellulose'].[472] Once again, the inauthenticity revealed by the silo's smell metonymically alludes to the falsity that lies behind the brother-in-law's money-making machine.

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[468] Ibid., p. 175.
[469] Ibid., p. 83.
[470] Ibid.
[471] Ibid., p. 84.
[472] Ibid., p. 132.

Opposed to the inauthentic smells of capitalist accumulation we find smells which are linked to more traditional forms of work. Tizio is an intellectual who entered the job market late and, therefore, was never able to hold on to a job for more than short periods of time. This prevented him from fully taking part in the capitalist accumulation game (to which his wife's family dedicated their lives), a fact that played a central part in Lia's decision to leave him. Shortly after the separation, Tizio finds employment with the local waste collection service, first as a bin-man and later as director of the newly built recycling facility. The contact with what the city discards, with the strong smells of the dumpsters scattered around the town, is cherished by Tizio as a new, more authentic experience. During his tour of the bins, for instance, he frequently describes their smell as 'good'; the strong smell inside the cabin of the van used to collect the waste is depicted as 'una miscela maschia di sudore, fumo di sigarette, nafta, gas di scarico di diesel, birra e retrogusto stantio di mondezza' ['a virile mix of sweat, cigarette smoke, naphtha, diesel exhaust gas, beer, and a stale aftertaste of rubbish'] and yet Tizio finds it 'non del tutto sgradevole' ['not completely unpleasant'].[473] His tour of the city bins becomes a new olfactory experience, in every way different from the smell of his house whose degeneration had been caused by the over-abundance of material objects that had come between Tizio and Lia, between Tizio and his sons, and between Lia and her sons.[474] In the town,

> Tizio tirava su gli odori che esalavano dalle cucine degli alberghi, dalle pensioni e dai bar; e, già che c'era, anche gli odori personali della gente, i dopobarba e i deodoranti per ascelle e i vari tipi di shampoo usati dai turisti, dai suoi concittadini; e anche i deodoranti non usati dai russi, che già cominciavano a stendere le loro cianfrusaglie su un telo a ridosso delle aiuole […]: l'odore miscellaneo del cuoio dei binocoli, del legno smaltato delle matrioske, dei distintivi col profilo di Lenin, di vodka, di dignità perduta, di quando avevano liberato i prigionieri dai lager e facevano paura al mondo.
>
> [Tizio took in the smells that emanated from the hotel kitchens, from the small hotels and bars; and, whilst he was there, he also took in the people's personal smells, the aftershaves and body deodorants and the various types of shampoos used by the tourists, by his fellow citizens; and also the deodorants that hadn't been worn by the Russians, who were already beginning to lay out their knick-knacks on a beach towel just before the flower beds […]: the miscellaneous smell of the binoculars' leather, of

[473] Ibid., p. 106.
[474] Ibid., p. 139.

> the Russian dolls' polished wood, of the badges with Lenin's profile, of vodka, of lost dignity, of when they had freed the prisoners from the lagers and the world was scared of them.][475]

Coming home from a day of work, on various occasions the protagonist stops to reflect on his own body's new smell, a smell which he associates with the dignity of manual work. This new smell is 'un'essenza nuova composta di mondezza fresca, di broda e del sudore dei suoi colleghi' ['a new essence made up of fresh rubbish, dirty water and the sweat of his colleagues']:[476]

> Sapeva un po' di Tiboni e un po' del Moro, che nella pelle, fantasticò, si portava dietro un sentore di spezie e di selvatico, di giungla e d'oceano, particelle residue delle sue tre-quattro mogli, dei suoi cento figli e della terra rossa del suo paese, delle carovane e dei cargo che aveva preso per venire in Italia.
>
> [He smelled a bit like Tiboni [a colleague] and a bit like Moro [another colleague of African origin], who – Tizio fantasised – carried in his skin a scent of spices and wilderness, of jungle and ocean. These were probably the residual particles of his three or four wives, of his one-hundred or so children and of the red soil of his country, of the caravans and the cargo vessels that he must have taken in order to come to Italy.][477]

Tizio often remarks on the pride he takes in his new smell, which he has 'guadagnata sul campo, cioè sulle strade della sua città, davanti agli occhi di tutti' ['earned on the field, on the city streets, before everyone's eyes'][478] and frequently postpones showering in order to 'salvaguardare quella sua nuova identità di lavoratore, che erano trent'anni ormai che gli sfuggiva' ['preserve his new virile identity as a worker, which had been slipping away from him for now thirty years'].[479] This theme of the dignity of manual work, as opposed to the inauthenticity of more speculative professions, is reiterated once more in the contrast delineated between the smell of the house movers, who had been called to collect Lia's belongings, and that of the Trecca sisters. Whilst the movers' is an 'onesto lezzo' ['honest stench'], Lia's and her sisters' is a 'disgustoso miscuglio di flit e di selvatico' ['disgusting

[475] Ibid., p. 104.
[476] Ibid., p. 123.
[477] Ibid., pp. 123–24.
[478] Ibid., p. 124.
[479] Ibid.

mixture of an insecticide and a wild smell'];[480] and again, later on, Lia's scent is described as an 'odore acre di franchising' ['acrid smell of franchising'][481] because of her profession as a wholesale meat dealer. In the novel, smell, therefore, can be understood to be highly symbolic of the phoney nature of neoliberal culture (in the case of artificial or synthetic smells) or of a yearning for authenticity embodied by more traditional ways of life.

The British work *Dining on Stones* by Iain Sinclair, on the other hand, focuses on the liminal areas left unexploited by capitalist greed, in the territory between the A13 road and the coast. The A13 'isn't London. And it isn't anywhere else',[482] a landscape made up of 'hopeless future projects, retail suburbs, development scams, ski slopes sculpted from toxic waste, the inflorescence of entropy'.[483] London's liminal territory is a landscape that is 'pending, in abeyance, a future development site' and the arterial road is 'somewhere to cook the future. A rogue laboratory in which to undertake high-risk experiments, mix-and-match surgery, retail facelifts'.[484] Sinclair's is a landscape in-between, suspended between its past and its future: it is one of those blank spaces on the maps that 'geographers are too lazy to see',[485] not yet fully exploited by venture capitalists but no longer carrying traces of their previous history. It is made of 'cities that appeared overnight, out of the swamp, offering nothing to the now isolated holdouts in their doomed terraces and council blocks'.[486] As noted by Brian Baker apropos of the better-known *London Orbital*, here Sinclair 'diagnoses the privatisation of space and the erasure of the markers of history and community'[487] in contemporary Britain. This eradication of history in Sinclair's 'cancelled landscape'[488] is made evident by the overbearing presence of buildings and objects that are a 'toxic gaudy'[489] testament to a culture of transition: new ruins, 'a burger shack, a drinking den, a discontinued filling station, the car park of a hypermarket under an enormous and agitated sky'.[490] The buildings are 'untransformed, fossils of chipped plaster, deleted trade names; white ferns growing from weather-damaged courses',[491] and 'East London is haunted by a sense of non-specific embarrassment, of having outlived its liberties.

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[480] Ibid., p. 142.
[481] Ibid., p. 157.
[482] Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*, p. 62.
[483] Ibid., p. 37.
[484] Ibid., p. 56.
[485] Ibid., p. 170.
[486] Ibid., pp. 120–21.
[487] Brian Baker, *Iain Sinclair* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 14.
[488] Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*, p. 145.
[489] Ibid., p. 62.
[490] Ibid.
[491] Ibid., p. 58.

Too much message, not enough content. Traffic lights hold trapped motorists, travellers, in a time warp'.[492]

Several of the places that make up Sinclair's liminal territory share the attributes of *non-places*, such as anonymity, lack of identity and of historical ties. Two prime examples of this are the Travelodge hotel, with its anonymous 'Eurostyle', and the Ibis hotel. The Travelodge is presented as:

> A peacetime barracks in Germany. Small square windows, which open on the tilt, masked in gauzy drapes. No entrance on the A13 side. Nothing to draw attention to itself. The Travelodge concept was: filling-station forecourt in which you are permitted to sleep. Refuel, pass water, watch television. Pick up a complimentary map – on which the next Travelodge will be marked.[493]

The Travelodge is conceived exclusively as a space to be passed through, a 'transit point',[494] as defined by Augé, which is in perfect harmony with the 'transient amnesia of the road, keep moving, see nothing'[495] noted by Sinclair. The Ibis hotel, then, has an entire chapter of the same name dedicated to it and it is described as a 'frontier post'[496] and as a 'holding zone, a customs post with no customs'[497] that 'prized its anonymity too much'.[498] As was the case with the Travelodge, the Ibis, with its in-betweenness, can be considered to be highly emblematic of the liminality of Sinclair's territory.

And yet, this liminal landscape of which the Travelodge and the Ibis are symbols also represents the future, the A13 being the 'highway on which the sacred cities of Thames Gateway will depend'.[499] Sinclair here hypothesises a time when the peripheries will occupy a central place in forthcoming spatial configurations and where city centres will turn into objects merely destined for tourist consumption:

> With the blessing of government and mayor, the one thing on which they agree, brownfield swamps will witness the beginning of a process whereby London is turned

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[492] Ibid.
[493] Ibid., p. 123.
[494] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, p. 78.
[495] Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*, p. 180.
[496] Ibid., p. 252.
[497] Ibid., p. 372.
[498] Ibid., p. 371.
[499] Ibid., p. 177.

> inside out. Centre as an inauthentic museum (haunted by authentic beggars, junkies, prostitutes), flexible rim as a living, working, vibrant economy. Meanwhile: stasis.[500]

This process described by Sinclair is in line with what Henri Lefebvre identified as a consequence of neo-capitalist activity, namely the dislocation of the centre towards the periphery and the transformation of city centres into 'aestheticized spaces' and 'high quality consumption products'.[501] As in the two novels analysed earlier, the problems of authenticity and inauthenticity of neoliberal landscapes re-emerge here, this time in relation to the theme-parking of the city carried out in the course of Margaret Thatcher's English Heritage project. *Dining on Stones* testifies to the fact that 'the revenants of Thatcherite policies of privatization and deregulation continue to haunt British urban spaces':[502]

> [It] write[s] and rewrite[s] the city as [it] capture[s], subvert[s] and uncover[s] the tensions inherent in the transformation of British urban space by proposing an understanding of alternative spaces and emergent citizens, identities, and communities that occurred, and continue to occur, as a result of Thatcherism.[503]

Sinclair's marginal landscapes are reminiscent of the dystopian spaces portrayed by J.G. Ballard in his novels, although it is as if, as pointed out by Baker, 'Ballard's predictive mythologies came true'.[504]

In the final work considered in this analysis, Edmond Caldwell's American anti-novel *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, the protagonist, an American male of supposedly Middle-Eastern appearance, records his psychological distress as he passes through or is trapped in archetypical *non-places* such as airports and airport hotels, service stations and shopping malls, and also in heterotopic spaces such as museums and prisons. Unlike Augé's, white middle-class, male stereotype, Pierre Dupont, the protagonist of the prologue of *Non-Places*, Caldwell's character does not experience the same 'feeling of freedom'[505] in having nothing to do other than wait. After being overbooked on his flight back to the United States, our protagonist and his unmistakably white American wife are allocated a room in one of the airport hotels that make up the Zone Hotelière of Paris Charles de Gaulle airport. Whilst the wife easily

[500] Ibid.
[501] Quoted in Robert Bond, *Iain Sinclair* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2005), p. 175.
[502] Kim Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space: After Thatcher*, p. 3.
[503] Ibid.
[504] Brian Baker, *Iain Sinclair*, p. 8.
[505] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, p. 2.

sails through one of the enormous Parisian airport's many *non-lieux*, nonchalantly disappearing with her laptop in search of Wi-Fi-connection, the protagonist's reaction to the *non-place* is one connoted by overwhelming feelings of anxiety. The Zone Hotelière is built on a hill that resembles an island (although one surrounded by tarmac), a 'cordoned-off island like the banlieues, albeit for a higher-paying brand of castaway';[506] its every detail is marked by sameness and it is the simulacrum of something else. The food served at the hotel 'in spite of the variety […] had all tasted the same'[507] in its 'original indigestible sameness'.[508] The hotel room, on the other hand, is described as a self-contained 'pressurized cabin',[509] which virtually qualifies it as an extension of the aircraft and which triggers the protagonist's inquietude:

> The thought of a pressurized cabin caused him to experience anxiety, so he opened the window again and let in the sound of the tarmac-surf. […] There was nothing to do now but relax for the next twenty-four hours but still he felt anxious, even restless.[510]

The small hotel room, 'aggressively clean and orderly and functional, in its aggressively minimal way',[511] is explicitly depicted as a hyperreal space, as the exponentiation of the quintessential postmodern space of the simulacrum as 'every hotel room was a simulacrum of a real room, but the rooms in these special hotels for the routinely overbooked and bumped were clearly *the simulacra of hotel rooms*, i.e. the simulacra of simulacra'.[512] In Caldwell's novel, space comes to directly affect the individual both physically and psychologically. The pressurised-cabin like quality of the small hotel room has 'a dehydrating effect on [the protagonist's] sinuses',[513] as he identifies a peculiar feeling of 'lamination' extending from the enclosed space of the room to his own nose and throat.

> The insides of his sinuses now felt thoroughly laminated, as if he continued to breathe the insides of his lungs would become laminated too, he would die unless he held his breath, in which case he would die too and be left with the lump of food-mix in his intestines to be hosed down the drain the next morning.[514]

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506 Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, p. 31.
507 Ibid., p. 28.
508 Ibid.
509 Ibid., p. 23.
510 Ibid.
511 Ibid., p. 29.
512 Ibid.
513 Ibid., p. 24.
514 Ibid., p. 29.

And again, shortly afterwards:

> He became aware again of the condition of lamination, of the almost complete lamination of his sinuses and the incipient but advancing lamination of his gorge, his windpipe, his lungs, which threatened to *bring him into a harmony with the external lamination of the Zone Hotelière* [emphasis added] that would necessarily entail his complete annihilation by the time it reached his brain.[515]

From the hotel room, this condition of 'lamination' has extended to the entire Zone Hotelière, to the outside world with the 'laminated sunniness of June',[516] and also to the inside world of the protagonist's body whose organs, he perceives, are succumbing to it. That of 'lamination' is an 'inescapable [condition] on the island of hill-hotels'.[517] By virtue of its connection to plastics, itself a cornerstone of the consumer-based economy, in *Human Wishes* lamination becomes the tangible sign of a plastification of neoliberal space that promotes sameness and deprives it of authenticity and that threatens to infiltrate every aspect of the individual's life.

In order to counter this feeling of lamination, the protagonist decides to set out on a walk, in search of some authentic feature of the landscape, of 'a point of interest to redeem his stay in the Zone Hotelière'.[518] He believes that he will be able to locate 'a house which had served as the prototype for the notorious chateau'[519] of Pauline Réage's novel *Histoire d'O* and therefore he ventures in the direction of the Roissy village. To the protagonist's horror, though:

> The village was not a real village, everything was new although it had been built to look old-fashioned and quaint, it was shiny and clean and laminated and new, all new subdivisions built in the kitschy style of a retro French village.[520]

The kitsch Roissy village turns out to be nothing more than an 'ultra-conformist dystopian village',[521] a company town housing only the employees of the Charles de Gaulle airport. The protagonist observes that the company town is part of the same arterial system that links the

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[515] Ibid., p. 30.
[516] Ibid.
[517] Ibid.
[518] Ibid., p. 36.
[519] Ibid.
[520] Ibid., p. 38.
[521] Ibid., p. 40.

airport hub, the overbooked travellers' hotels and the airport staff, and that the future of the whole planet, to his uttermost dismay, is to become a big company town. There is no hope for authenticity in the Zone Hotelière as, even if the protagonist were able to find the house used as a prototype for the chateau of *Histoire d'O*, 'it would turn out to be some monstrosity that the French heritage industry had subcontracted to Disneyworld France'.[522] Upon discovering that he will not find any authentic place in the Zone Hotelière, the protagonist feels the lamination now covering his eyes, the latter '[looking] at the fake streets and at the fake houses as if through a film of acetate'.[523] Again, the laminated landscape encroaches upon the human body, with this corporeal plastification possibly a metaphorical allusion to neoliberalism's inescapable grasp that does not spare any corner of human life.

The quest for authenticity is thematised in another episode from the novel, in the chapter entitled 'American rabbit' and dedicated to the museum, another space typical of our modernity, which Foucault defines as 'heterotopic'. Foucault explains the principle behind its creation in the following manner:

> The idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, […] of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place.[524]

In Caldwell's novel, the museum is portrayed as an inauthentic space where 'every piece […] is different and yet the same'[525] and where any genuine understanding of the artwork on the part of the spectator is prevented by the constant mediation provided by explanatory plaques or by pre-packaged readings that hark back to popular models of interpretations of the world. When visiting a museum exhibition of Joseph Cornell's boxes, the protagonist reflects on the impossibility of having an 'authentic aesthetic experience' in a museum today:

> Reviewing his notes he finds that he has a Marxist analysis of the boxes (the imaginary resolution of the real social contradiction of residual craft ethic and emergent machine mass production) and a psychoanalytic analysis of the boxes (vaginas with fangs) but

[522] Ibid.
[523] Ibid., p. 38.
[524] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', p. 7.
[525] Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, p. 92.

> has he had an aesthetic experience yet? Is aesthetic experience even possible anymore? Is the idea of aesthetic experience itself a nostalgia? Perhaps any aesthetic experience we have today is not an aesthetic experience, but rather a simulation of an aesthetic experience, a reproduction of an aesthetic experience, a reproduction of a reproduction, he reasons.[526]

Through his character, Caldwell appears to enact the typically postmodern rejection of grand narratives as totalising interpretative paradigms, and he denounces the inauthentic nature of contemporary society, where only a simulation of an aesthetic experience is still possible. The philosopher Richard Shusterman identifies four common features of aesthetic experience that historical formulations of the concept have tended to share: it is 'valuable and enjoyable'; 'it is something vividly felt and subjectively savored, affectively absorbing us' and 'standing out from the ordinary flow of routine experience'; 'it is meaningful experience, not mere sensation'; and 'it is a distinctive experience closely identified with the distinction of fine art and representing art's essential aim'.[527] In a society that has progressively moved, as noted by Shusterman, from an experiential to an informational culture, an unmediated and uncommodified experience of art is increasingly difficult to attain. Ironically, for the protagonist of *Human Wishes* the conditions for an aesthetic experience are only met in the museum's toilet, with 'everyone emptying their bladders into Marcel Duchamp's fountain'.[528]

3. Liminal identities: non-conformity, (in)visibility and surveillance

If the works considered in this chapter all variously deal with liminal spaces, their protagonists can be described as possessing similarly liminal identities. As we will explore in this section, the novels selected engage with marginal or in-between characters who, for different reasons, perceive themselves as non-belonging to the societies where they exist. Whilst Culicchia's and Teobaldi's male protagonists' liminality is the result of their rejection of consumer culture, Sinclair and Caldwell portray individuals who, due to their race or origin, find themselves excluded from or on the margins of society. This exclusion here is first and foremost a spatial exclusion, as place is key in differentiating between "us" and "them", with those who remain behind (or, rather, outside) being left on the spatial fringes of the urban landscape or in

[526] Ibid., p. 107.
[527] Richard Shusterman, 'The End of Aesthetic Experience', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55.1 (1997), p. 30.
[528] Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, p. 92.

segregated places. This would be in line with what the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss defined as an *anthropoemic* way of coping with the other, a strategy based on an attempt to eliminate it.[529] It is significant that, in three out of the four novels analysed, relevance is accorded to the relationship between these liminal identities and the liminal spaces of neoliberal societies: the in-betweenness of Teobaldi's landfill site, of Sinclair's unmapped territory of London and of Caldwell's *non-places* certainly plays a role in mirroring, complementing or shaping the characters' identities and in determining the *place* that they occupy in the world.

Culicchia's protagonist has always had 'la sensazione di trovarsi fuori posto' ['the feeling of being out of place'],[530] of not "fitting in" with the consumerist society in which he is immersed. In the opening pages of the novel, he is waiting for his wife outside the restrooms of 'l'ennesimo centro commerciale' ['the umpteenth shopping mall'],[531] embodying only the conformist identity of the consumer, identical to that of many others like him:

> Tutti abbiamo un'aria distrutta, annoiata, stanca, vestiti come siamo da maschi adulti occidentali in vacanza durante la stagione estiva […] addestrati dall'infanzia a ostentare indifferenza, ma inalanti ed esalanti ormai soltanto disperazione.
>
> [We all look exhausted, bored, tired, dressed as we are as Western male adults on holiday during the summer season […], trained since childhood to display indifference, but now only inhaling and exhaling desperation].[532]

Although the system compels them to buy incessantly, these consumers appear fatigued and dissatisfied with their lives, participating in the same collective experience of consumption and yet divided and isolated by it. It is at this apparently random point that the protagonist decides to disappear, to 'andar[s]ene prima che sia troppo tardi' ['leave before it is too late'],[533] so he runs through the underwear aisle and the pottery aisle, and, passing by the artificial flowers, he finds the stairs and escapes. His sudden disappearance gives the protagonist the sensation of a newly-conquered freedom:

[529] Quoted in Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 101.
[530] Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla*, p. 50.
[531] Ibid., p. 11.
[532] Ibid.
[533] Ibid., p. 12.

> La stessa sensazione di quando avevo diciott'anni, scuola finita, esami passati, estate davanti, nessun obbligo, niente appuntamenti, tutto ancora da succedere, cosa farò tra un'ora, cosa mi accadrà da qui a una settimana, un mese, un anno?
>
> [The same feeling of when I was eighteen. School finished, exams passed, summer ahead, no obligation, no appointments, everything still to happen: what will I do in an hour, what will happen to me in a week's time, a month, a year?][534]

Out in the city, his only identity becomes that of a passenger, of 'una sagoma antropomorfa portata a spasso da un autobus' ['an anthropomorphic shape driven around by a bus'],[535] who could be anybody that nobody knows anything about. After his disappearance, the protagonist initiates an aimless journey across the city, which purposely contrasts with the daily commute of the thousands of workers who just as aimlessly hurry through the dark corridors of the metro:

> Vite che passano da una scatola all'altra di continuo senza tregua sino all'ultimo contenitore, legno scuro foderato a pochi metri sotto terra o stretto fra altri proprio uguali su pareti ad alveare, e poi niente, tutto lì, una discesa senza soste verso la decomposizione pianificata.
>
> [Lives continuously passing from one box to another, ceaselessly, until the last container, lined dark wood a few metres underground or squeezed between other identical ones on hive walls. And then nothing, it's all there is, an unstoppable descent towards a planned decay.][536]

The fast-paced contemporary lifestyle aimed at maximum productivity is laid bare in its ultimate lack of purpose, as one common destiny unites all. Unlike that of the protagonist, the commuters' aimlessness is unconscious: although their routine gives them an illusion of purpose, from a metaphysical perspective their endless rushing is pointless. In light of this recognition, the protagonist's refusal to conform and his aimless wanderings are configured as an attempt to "get outside the box".

This theme of the futility at the heart of the capitalist development model is reiterated later on in the novel and it constitutes a recurrent aspect of Culicchia's critique of contemporary

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[534] Ibid., p. 13.
[535] Ibid.
[536] Ibid., p. 27.

society. As we have seen, this futility is the basis of the protagonist's decision to part from and reject his previous conformist life. During his new empty days, he watches other people walking and he wonders whether 'avevano una vera ragione per svegliarsi oggi, o se ieri sera abbiano messo la sveglia automaticamente, senza pensarci, seguendo ritmi preconfezionati, gli operai alle sei, gli impiegati alle sette, i ricchi e i disoccupati insieme, ben oltre le otto, in tempo per il golf o la lite con la moglie che lavora' ['they all had a reason to wake up today, or did they automatically set their alarms last night, without thinking, following pre-defined rhythms, labourers at six, office workers at seven, the rich and unemployed at the same time, well after eight, just in time for the golf game or for the fight with their working wife'].[537] This unthinking submission of the body's biological rhythms to the demands of work and capital, embodied by the docile commuters' 'pre-defined rhythms', resonates with that described by Marx in *Capital* (1867), by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and by Lefebvre in *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (1992).

Working life, despite being indicated as the only opportunity for social contact nowadays, is seen as a pointless and hypocritical 'trafila, curricula colloqui sorrisi strette di mano e via, a scannarsi allegri e soddisfatti' ['routine [of] CVs, interviews, smiles, handshakes and then of everyone happily and contentedly being at each other's throat'].[538] The fate of humanity in general looks rather bleak, as explained by Culicchia's character further on:

> Lo sterminio è dentro di noi, non c'è bisogno di una Bestia dalle dieci corna e dalle sette teste, l'Amazzonia brucia, il Sahara avanza, Raggi Ultravioletti divorano di cancri la nostra pelle, tra Epidemie, Flagelli, Carestie, la Terza Guerra Globale è questa, si combatte nel nome del conto Profitti e Perdite e che importa se per vincerla è necessario distruggere l'Universo, quello che conta è guadagnare, l'Utile d'Esercizio è Dio e noi siamo i suoi soldati, e siamo perduti […], perduti, perduti, perduti.
>
> [The extermination is inside us, there is no need for a Devil with ten horns and seven heads; the Amazonia is burning, the Sahara advances, Ultraviolet is eating our skin with cancer, amidst Epidemics, Plagues, Famines. This is the Third Global War, we fight in the name of Profit and Loss, and what does it matter if, in order to win it, we will need to destroy the Universe? The only thing that matters is to make money, Net Profit is our God and we are his soldiers, and we are lost […], lost, lost, lost].[539]

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[537] Ibid., pp. 32–33.
[538] Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla*, p. 20.
[539] Ibid., p. 90.

The protagonist, who had spent his life 'finge[ndo] di credere in qualcosa, in cambio di una serie di piatti di minestra' ['pretending to believe in something in exchange for something to put on the table'],[540] eventually decides to break free from the constraints of the patterns of work and life in which he had been trapped. His craving for change manifests itself in the desire for a non-purposive experience of urban space, as he feels 'la tentazione di imboccare un'uscita a caso sull'autostrada, scendere alla prima stazione lungo il percorso, cambiare volo all'ultimo momento in aeroporto' ['the temptation to take a random exit on the motorway, to get off at the first station along the journey, to change flight last-minute at the airport'].[541] As will be discussed in the last section of this chapter, this aimless travel can be read as a subversive practice that, in the wake of the Situationists' *dérive* and of psychogeography, can challenge capitalism's attempts at regulating and commodifying the city. This option of aimlessness by Culicchia's character results in 'giornate senza meta, senza obiettivi, senza orari, talmente indefinite da non sapere come maneggiarle, che farne, cosa aspettarmi, nelle quali l'unica certezza è data dall'evidenza dei luoghi e dei loro nomi' ['days that have no destination, no objectives and no times, so undetermined that you don't know how to handle them, what to do with them, what to expect, and in which the only certainty is given by the patency of places and of their names'].[542]

The protagonist's journey eventually leads him to experience the condition of homelessness, whereby, as he effectively turns himself into a social outcast, his state of non-belonging reaches its climax. This is signalled, in the novel, by two real or perceived attitudes that other people display towards him and that highlight his own physical and spiritual separateness from the mass. The first attitude is that of a "surveillance society" that is constantly intent on monitoring its citizens. The protagonist senses the gaze of passers-by and control systems alike, which make him increasingly aware of his difference. As he queues at a telephone box, he imagines the others' judgement on his non-conformity:

> Orecchie che ascoltano. Occhi che guardano. Guardano me. Da ogni volto. Occhi che mi squadrano. Occhi che mi giudicano. Eccolo lì, quello senza nessuno con cui parlare. Cosa ci fai in un posto del genere, con la tua ridicola carta da 50 unità in mano?

[540] Ibid., p. 95.
[541] Ibid., p. 16.
[542] Ibid.

> [Ears listening. Eyes watching. They're watching me, from every face. Eyes scrutinising me. Eyes judging me. There he is, the one with nobody to talk to. What are you doing in a place like this, with your ridiculous 50-unit card in your hand?].[543]

The presence of a now homeless person who no longer holds links with family and friends at a telephone box is perceived as a transgressive act as it violates the "purpose" for which that space was built. In his work *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, the geographer Tim Cresswell explains how the effect of place always intersects with sociocultural expectations. The appropriateness of certain behaviours in certain places is ideologically constructed, and inappropriate use of place, even when unintentional, is perceived as an act of resistance. It is interesting to note how Cresswell chooses the example of homelessness as a non-deliberate attempt to transgress place. The geographer recalls how, in the early 1980s, streets, parks and even Penn Station in New York were flooded with thousands of homeless people and the then mayor Ed Koch, failing to cleanse his town of these unwanted "residents" through repressive strategies, resorted to normative discursive divisions by declaring that 'reasonable people would know that a railroad station is for traveling and not for urinating'.[544] This recourse to a supposedly shared consensus on the function of a place such as a station and the reference to practices that transcend this function as 'transgressive' can shed light on the fact that 'space and place are used to structure a normative landscape',[545] but also on the potential that these same places hold for meaningful resistance. In Culicchia's novel, as we will see in the following pages, the violation of spatial and behavioural norms on the part of the protagonist cannot be dismissed as merely incidental to the condition of homelessness (as was the case in Cresswell's example), but is part of a *conscious* effort to engage with urban space in an alternative way.

However, the character's awareness of his spatial transgression, which suggests a fundamental internalisation of normative discourses about urban space, reinforces his perception that there is a ubiquitous surveilling eye that polices his out-of-placeness. This closely mirrors the interiorisation of norms and subsequent self-censoring described by Foucault and is signalled by two further episodes in the novel. As he seizes a box of chocolates in a supermarket to survive another day of hunger, he grows more and more convinced that the surveillance cameras of the shop are following him and watching his every move. Not long

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[543] Ibid., p. 78.
[544] Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 4–5.
[545] Ibid., p. 8.

after this passage, the protagonist is forced to look for food among the scraps of a marketplace, but he struggles to overcome the shame of being seen, as he again imagines the disapproving looks of bystanders:

> Non devo far altro che […] fingere che […] tutti insomma, non abbiano occhi per vedermi […] fantastico, mi riempio le tasche con tutto quello che capita, sforzandomi di ignorare gli sguardi, bulbi oculari puntati su di me da ogni direzione; dita che mi indicano, labbra che mi nominano, guardatelo, guardatelo, guardatelo là, raccoglie gli scarti come un animale, capace di mangiarseli senza neanche lavarli, una specie di porco allo zoo, un porco-scimmia umano, circolano strane forme viventi in città da un po' di tempo a questa parte.
>
> [I only need to pretend that everyone else doesn't have eyes to see me. Great, I am filling my pockets with anything that comes, trying to ignore the looks, eyeballs staring at me from all directions; fingers pointing at me, lips mentioning me: 'look, look at him, look at him there, he's picking up scraps like an animal, he's probably going to eat them without washing them first, a sort of pig in a zoo, a human monkey-pig. There are weird lifeforms around the city lately'].[546]

The fear of being singled out as an outcast by the rest of society culminates in the encounter with a woman and her child during one of the lowest moments of the protagonist's adventure. After finding a wallet on a bus, the main character has a lavish meal in a restaurant, one consisting of too many courses for a stomach no longer accustomed to large quantities of food. The feast results in the protagonist being sick on the pavement and lying exhausted on the ground. As a mother passes by with her child, the latter asks her '*Cos*'è?' ['what is *it*]?' [my emphasis] whilst pointing at the homeless man and her answer is one that seals the protagonist's final objectification and nullification in the eyes of society: 'Niente, […] non è niente, andiamo' ['Nothing. […] It's nothing, let's go'].[547]

La discarica's protagonist Tizio also lives on the margins of neoliberal society, although such marginality is not entirely the result of a concrete rejection of neoliberal values – as was the case for the homelessness of Culicchia's character – but rather it is a feature of his persona. Tizio, despite studying and earning a degree, has never succeeded in accessing a stable profession, one that would allow him to start a profitable career and engage in the accumulation of capital. Unlike his wife's family, the Treccas, Tizio is

546 Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla*, pp. 110–111.
547 Ibid., p. 116.

Una brava persona […], un uomo onesto, istruito, legato alla famiglia, ma […] non era e non sarebbe mai stato capace di fare i soldi, nonostante gli esempi e i consigli a portata di mano. Che poi era vero: non solo Tizio non era stato capace di accumulare un capitale come si conveniva a tutti i membri maschi adulti, in linea diretta o acquisita, di una famiglia estesa di tipo tribale, operante da oltre mezzo secolo nel settore del commercio all'ingrosso delle carni, ma era proprio diamagnetico ai soldi: lui e i soldi si respingevano come i poli omologhi di due calamite.

[A good person […], an honest man, educated, a family man, but […] he wasn't and he would never be able to make money, despite the good models and the advice close at hand. It was actually true: not only had Tizio been incapable of accumulating capital as was appropriate for all male adult members – by blood or marriage – of an extended family of the tribal kind, which had worked for over half a century in the meat wholesale trading. He also was diamagnetic to money: he and money repelled each other as the like poles of a magnet].[548]

This inability to accumulate wealth is what renders Tizio an outcast in a capitalist society, his status as a non-entity already embodied by his generic name. Over the past thirty years, Tizio had managed to lose all the jobs he had had; he had not succeeded in buying a proper house, nor a house in the countryside; he did not have ambitions and did not work two jobs as the Treccas did. Even during the war, the Treccas had been able to trade goods and gain wealth, working with either the Fascists or the Partisans according to whichever one proved more advantageous at a particular time. The conflict, therefore, had provided a valuable opportunity for speculation for the Treccas, who had followed a logic not that dissimilar to capitalism's profiteering from crises and disasters. Tizio's patent non-belonging to the Treccas' clan, caused by his lack of 'l'antica furberia dei fattori [miscelata] con una recentissima vulgata dell'etica calvinista' ['an ancient farmers' craftiness [mixed] with a very recent version of Calvinist ethics'],[549] is what ultimately leads to his separation from his wife Lia. Tizio's mediocrity prevents him from fitting in with the pressures of capitalist culture on the individual's needs for professional achievement. His career is halted by his complete disinterest in standing out:

Tizio era misurato in tutto, anche nel sudore: non mangiava troppo, non beveva troppo, non pisciava fuori dal water, non sgomitava, non occupava troppo spazio, non sbraitava sul lavoro, non picchiava né la moglie né i figli, non sbatteva le porte o i pugni sul tavolo, non tirava i piatti

[548] Paolo Teobaldi, *La discarica*, p. 91.
[549] Ibid., p. 56.

sul muro: insomma non faceva né aveva mai fatto né soprattutto voleva fare paura a nessuno, nemmeno alla gatta di casa. Logico che un tipo così non potesse avere una progressione di carriera.

[Tizio was moderate in everything he did, including sweating: he didn't eat too much, he didn't drink too much, he didn't piss outside the toilet, he didn't elbow his way in, he didn't take up too much space, he didn't yell at work, he didn't beat up his wife and children, he didn't slam doors or bang his fists on the table, and he didn't fling plates against the wall. Basically, he didn't scare anybody, he had never scared anybody and above all he didn't want to scare anybody, not even the house cat. It is only logical that someone like that could not progress up the career ladder].[550]

Even his clothes' size is average ('M, *medium size*, taglia media: mediocre anche lì' ['M, medium size […]: mediocre even in this']),[551] which makes him inadequate for a society where bullying and fighting to stand out seem to be the distinguishing marks of the capitalist individual. Tizio is also a liminal entity who escapes precise classification. When trying to define Tizio, Tiboni, one of his new waste collector colleagues, struggles to find an appropriate word for him and his job, and instead mumbles a series of generic names such as 'uno studiato' ['a learned one'], 'un professore' ['a professor'], 'un Coso' ['a whatchamacallit'].[552] Tizio's liminality is also inferable from his belonging to the no-man's land of that excess workforce waiting on a redeployment list. He was a part of the:

Dotazione Organica Aggiuntiva, un ruolo minore, paragonabile forse solo al sostegno agli handicappati, una specie di limbo inventato dai sindacati […] e poi era entrato in soprannumero, cioè era diventato senza neanche accorgersene soprannumerario; e poi, a quarantacinque anni, era entrato in esubero, anzi era diventato egli stesso un esubero, cioè a rigore era diventato esuberante.[553]

[Additional staffing, a minor role, perhaps only comparable to that of a special needs teaching assistant, a sort of limbo designed by the trade unions […] And then he had become surplus to requirements, that is he had become, without even realising it, a surplus. And then, at forty-five

[550] Ibid., p. 90.
[551] Ibid., p. 96.
[552] Ibid., p. 107.
[553] It is interesting to note in the Italian original that the term "esuberante" also means "lively", which can possibly allude to the fact that Tizio's demotion is what leads to the beginning of his new, happier life as a waste collector.

> years of age, he had become superfluous, or rather he himself had become a redundancy, that is, to be precise, he had become redundant].[554]

Tizio's in-betweenness results from the fact that, despite studying and preparing for a career in traditionally white-collar professions, he lacks the ruthlessness required, fails to enter the job market at the right time and, therefore, finds himself demoted. Tizio belongs to the category of those who "did not make it", of:

> Tizi come lui, espulsi, cresciuti e, molti, invecchiati ai margini del mercato del lavoro, dove molti però non riuscivano neanche ad arrivare per guardare quant'era esposto sulle bancarelle, le occasioni e le opportunità disponibili, per barattare le loro idee e la loro forza muscolare, insomma la loro stessa vita, con quello che era in vendita; e dove poi, con tutta quella confusione, era anche difficile muoversi.
>
> [Guys like him, who had been expelled, had grown up and many of them had grown old on the margins of the job market, where many, however, couldn't even make it to see what was on display on the stalls. Where many couldn't get to see the occasions and opportunities available, to trade off their ideas and their physical strength – essentially their own life – for what was on sale; and where, with all that chaos, it was also difficult to move].[555]

Tizio's uneasiness with his situation is materialised in his relationship with food, which he frequently vomits not by virtue of the food's heaviness, but because of 'la grevità della sua vita, delle sue giornate, del suo non-lavoro che si accumulava e ribolliva e urgeva contro il piloro, il cardias o quello che era' ['the heaviness of his life, of his days, of his non-work, which gathered and boiled over and pressed against the pylorus, the cardia or whatever it was'].[556]

A change occurs when, shortly after Lia's departure from the family home, Tizio is suddenly invited to join the local waste collection team as a street cleaner. Unexpectedly, the apparent downgrade does not translate for Tizio into feelings of malaise, but, on the contrary, working with waste provides the protagonist with a new sense of belonging. Tizio approaches the challenges of his new job 'con grande umiltà e grande curiosità' ['with great humility and great curiosity'][557] as he grows increasingly proud of his new profession. This pride, as we

[554] Ibid., p. 92.
[555] Ibid., p. 161.
[556] Ibid., p. 28.
[557] Ibid., p. 143.

have seen in the first section of this chapter, is embodied by his new smell, the strong reminder of his new identity as a worker. Tizio finds meaning in manual work that is of public use and he observes that he had never found his true vocation before going to work for the AMURU (the town waste collection service). As opposed to vomiting foods, Tizio now remarks a new regularity in his toilet habits, something that he is pleased with and that he describes in great detail in the novel. This tension between work and material bodily functions can be explained in light of Lefebvre's argument that the body acts as a point of contact between social and biological rhythms, in the sense that 'our biological rhythms of sleep, hunger and thirst, excretion and so on are more and more conditioned by the social environment and our working lives'.[558] In the liminal spaces of the city's refuse, and even more so in the space of the recycling facility, where everything returned to what it had originally been, Tizio – a displaced subject of late capitalism – appears to find a healthy convergence between natural and externally dictated rhythms and, therefore, his place in the world.

In *Dining on Stones*, Iain Sinclair too deals with liminal subjects, in particular with those who have been rejected or marginalised by neoliberal society for reasons linked to ethnicity, social status or position with respect to the law. Sinclair's coast is inhabited by various kinds of outcasts, all with 'different cultures, different origins, different exiles',[559] but all united by their condition of non-belonging. These can be classified into four main categories: the migrants, the marginalised whites, the outlaws, and the elderly. The first category is made up of 'melancholy men from the Balkans' watching the waves, Kurds following young women 'silently, hungrily, at a respectful distance, never quite becoming a nuisance', but also by less recent migrants such as 'Glaswegians and third-generation Paddies',[560] drinking on the promenade. Sinclair explicitly challenges the director Stephen Frears' assertion that asylum-seekers and economic immigrants are the 'unseen of the city' (in their escaping the attention of established visual regimes) by rejecting the notion of their invisibility and suggesting that 'if this lot had been any more visible you'd have to stick a preservation order on them'.[561] The migrants, all but invisible, function as scapegoats for the other alienated members of society by providing someone to look down on, whilst giving 'a dull resort a touch of colour'.[562] The asylum-seekers' out-of-placeness lies in their tragic character, as begging solidarity in the

[558] Stuart Elden, 'Rhythmanalysis: An Introduction', in Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 1992; 2004), p. xii.
[559] Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*, p. 323.
[560] Ibid., p. 51.
[561] Ibid., p. 52.
[562] Ibid.

hyper-individualist West is seen, at very least, to be pointless, as ‘their timing was all wrong, they were asylum-seekers at a period when there were no asylums left’.[563] They are also trapped in the forced idleness that comes with lacking the right to work in the host country:

> [They] didn’t really do anything. They hung about, on the porch of the Adelphi, taking photos of each other. They walked, in pairs, groups, or alone, through the gardens. They made calls on their mobiles. They looked at the sea.[564]

To these migrants’ lack of “doing”, embodied by the unproductive and non-economically oriented use they make of the coastal resort, corresponds the abundance of “being”, discernible in their socialising (in person or on the phone), their walking without a destination, their recording the present moment in photographs and their contemplating the sea.

The second category, which I have called ‘the marginalised whites’, consists of the poorer social strata of indigenous subjects who are marginalised for economic or cultural reasons. Sinclair describes these people as:

> Small groups of bareheaded men in bright leather jackets, jeans, white trainers, being turned out of crumbling Victorian buildings (salt-eaten facades, loose window frames); turned loose to slouch on broad pavements. Knowing better than to occupy dew-damp park benches, or to hang about the bowling green. Unwelcome in seafront cafés. Suspect in post offices and charity shops. Pissing in doorways.[565]

The attitude of the authorities towards those who failed at or were failed by the capitalist dream is one of ‘benevolent social control’:

> Keep out of the way of the paying punters and do what you like. We’ll put a roof over your heads and supply you with vouchers. You won’t starve. Want to work a number, off the books, with the builders who are patching up Mocatta’s ruined hotels and mid-Victorian terraces? Fine. No insurance claims, no additional benefits. Keep quiet, keep clear of the public streets and make your own sandwiches.[566]

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[563] Ibid.
[564] Ibid., p. 199.
[565] Ibid., pp. 50–51.
[566] Ibid., p. 51.

The council's stance towards these legal aliens embodied by this quote relies on the idea that their invisibility from public and private space alike is a condition for their being tolerated by society. It is society, then, that even spatially relegates them to their permanently liminal role of social outcasts.

The third category is that of tolerated outlaws, purposeless criminals, 'glue-sniffers without the energy to sniff. Scrawny youths who headbutted their way into already vandalised cars. Ram-raiders who hit depressed video outlets. Without the car. And made their getaway with an armful of empty cases'.[567] Their crimes are as meaningless as their existence, merely 'enacted for the benefit of (out-of-service) CCTV cameras'.[568]

Finally, the last category of liminal subjects dwelling on the coast is that of the elderly, 'the Undead, […] keeping deathwatch on a fading sea. Veterans of the Thirties, confined to their cabins, outlived by arthritic pets'.[569] These senior citizens live in decadent blocks of flats such as the Ocean Queen, a 'speculation that had foundered, too tired, post-historic, botched and patched, even for south-coast property sharks'[570], which gives the impression of something unfinished.

The picture of the English coast sketched by Sinclair greatly differs from the Brighton beach described by Rob Shields in *Places on the Margins*, which was configured as a 'socially defined zone appropriate for specific behaviours and patterns of interaction outside of the norms of everyday behaviour',[571] where the individuals who partook in the experience of liminality could benefit not only from an 'escape from the built-in cues and spatialisation of 'normal', work-a-day life',[572] but also from a 'liberation from the regimes of normative practices and performance codes of mundane life because of [liminality's] interstitial nature'.[573] Up until the 1950s, Brighton beach was a space of *carnivalesque* transgression of social norms, where Victorian holidaymakers could expose their body in liberating ways that were socially unacceptable elsewhere, and later, with the tradition of the "dirty weekend", where devoted husbands could turn into adulterers. In the coastal landscapes of *Dining on Stones*, however, transgression of social norms does not derive from the peculiar freedoms granted by liminality (and liminal space), but, rather, it is the result of poverty, boredom and social alienation. The condition of liminality, for the marginalised subjects who populate the

[567] Ibid., p. 206.
[568] Ibid.
[569] Ibid., p. 340.
[570] Ibid., p. 339.
[571] Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity*, p. 75.
[572] Ibid., p. 86.
[573] Ibid., p. 84.

English coast, is a permanent one; it is what traps them on the coast in the perpetually transitional state of the forgotten people, not what brings a welcome and pleasant break from the everyday routine. What the scholar Steven Allen, in his article 'British Cinema at the Seaside – the Limits of Liminality', describes as characteristic of the depiction of the seascape in contemporary British cinema, could here be applied to Sinclair's representation of the coast. Sinclair's focus, indeed, is not on:

> Those temporary, touristic breaks from the norm, but the lived, or rather inert, existence of seaside resorts. Not the lawlessness of the margins, nor the sexual freedom of the temporary home, nor even the carnivalesque undermining of authority, but, rather, a limbo zone devoid of opportunities, where the failure of hopes and desires closely correlates to the landscape. The liminal remains, but as an ironic touchstone, so that the travel of tourism becomes the stagnation of stasis, the reassuringly British familiarity becomes a dislocated sense of otherness, and the fluidity of identity becomes an entrapping sense of officially regulated marginality.[574]

This correlation between the liminality of the landscape and that of the marginal subjectivities who inhabit it acquires centrality in Caldwell's *Human Wishes*, where the in-betweenness of its protagonist is specular to that of the non-places he traverses over the course of the novel. His liminality does not result from social exclusion, nor from a dissent from neoliberal values, but from the perceived suspiciousness of his "foreign" looks. In his vision, despite his status of privileged American with full rights and a stable financial position (we know this as he and his wife can afford transatlantic flights and business travel), his 'large nose and a somewhat swarthy complexion and a heavy five o'clock shadow even minutes after he'd shaved'[575] assimilate him to an Arab, which in turn bears the vague threat of terrorism in the eyes of the Western people with whom he crosses paths. This fear of being regarded as suspicious is exacerbated by the passage through highly controlled spaces such as the airport and the shopping mall. At the airport, 'he thought that the immigration official at the border-control booth had looked at him sceptically when running his passport, even though he was a citizen. Maybe he looked like a terrorist'.[576] He begins wondering whether his fellow passengers share the same scepticism about his origins, or whether, despite his distinctively

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[574] Steven Allen, 'British Cinema at the Seaside – the Limits of Liminality', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 5.1 (2009), pp. 53–71.
[575] Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, p. 30.
[576] Ibid., p. 11.

American accent, ‘he might look more foreign than American’.[577] This reciprocal suspicion can be seen as an expression of what Michalis Lianos in *Dangerous Others, Insecure Societies: Fear and Social Division* (2013) terms ‘the sociocultural hegemony of insecurity’.[578] According to Lianos, insecurity in postindustrial society acts both as a form of social cement and as a way to preserve the status quo. In this latter sense, fear of the other complements the ‘art of defending one’s individual condition and biographical plans’,[579] which has become strategic to the system and it reinforces ‘the individualistic tactics’[580] that the dynamics of contemporary capitalism generates. Ultimately, Lianos argues, ‘the foundation of tensions and security and safety considerations around ‘immigrants’, ‘foreigners’, ‘Islamic terrorists’, ‘(bogus) asylum seekers’, ‘deviant youths’, ‘single mothers’… is the configuration of late capitalist competition’.[581] Caldwell’s character regularly participates in this logic of exclusion: he feels like an Arab in the West, a Jew to the Arabs, a Chechen to the Russians. This exclusion is spatially signalled by what the author defines as the protagonist’s ‘physical separateness’,[582] which is well exemplified by a passage from the first chapter of the novel. Whilst waiting for his luggage at the airport’s arrivals, the protagonist is unexpectedly approached by a police agent with her sniffer dog, who is oddly interested in his suitcase. The suspicion raised by the dog’s behaviour though, despite the absence of any proof of guilt (the object of the dog’s curiosity will turn out to be an apple forgotten in the suitcase), triggers a change in the other passengers’ attitudes towards the already suspicious-looking protagonist. Significantly, the same sentence is repeated at two different points in the novel, but with a variation that fully materialises in spatial terms the protagonist’s removal from the “community” of the travellers. If initially the narrator records how the protagonist had ‘the ambient sense of a general reorganization of attitudes and postures among the group surrounding the carousel, of which he was a part’,[583] the passage is reproduced in almost identical form following the encounter with the sniffer dog, with the observation that the protagonist ‘had the ambient sense of a general reorganization of attitudes and postures of the group around him, of which *he was no longer a part* [my emphasis]’.[584] The quasi-repetition of the sentence above signals a shift in the character’s sense of belonging to the group of passengers. As the necessity of proving one’s

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[577] Ibid., pp. 14–15.
[578] *Dangerous Others, Insecure Societies: Fear and Social Division*, ed. by Michalis Lianos (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 1.
[579] Ibid.
[580] Ibid., p. 2.
[581] Ibid.
[582] Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, p. 16.
[583] Ibid., p. 15.
[584] Ibid., p. 20.

innocence is, as postulated by Augé, a crucial feature of non-places,[585] the ghost of culpability symbolised by the dog's lingering around the suitcase results in a feeling of exclusion from the non-place itself.

The protagonist's non-conformity and consequent suspiciousness, though, are not limited to his physical appearance. Non-conformity in the behaviour considered appropriate for a particular place can also be regarded as suspicious in a conformist society. Again, when waiting for his luggage at the airport, the protagonist absent-mindedly places his foot on the carousel's edge only to take it down moments later, as 'nobody else was doing this'.[586] Shortly afterwards, he decides to squat to take some stress off his legs, but 'nobody else had been squatting at that moment'.[587] Had he been elsewhere, the act of squatting may have not contravened any of the spoken or unspoken laws that regulate the appropriate and inappropriate use of place. In the airport, however, any deviation from the norm appears in the mind of the protagonist as a possible infringement. A second example of this can be noted in a later chapter entitled 'The cruiser' and set in a motorway service station, where the shared agreement on the appropriate use of place is in explicit violation of the highway code. Failing to drive over the speed limit is to drive suspiciously slowly, unless one is already suspicious like the novel's protagonist, in which case one is trapped in a situation of impasse where any contravention of the rules of the road (whether by negligence or excessive zeal) is viewed as dubious:

> He is afraid of being pulled over by the cops, of being pulled over for some trifling or not so trifling traffic violation and the encounter escalating, the rules of the road are set up in such a way that to drive entails violating the rules of the road, you have to drive over the speed limit and if you don't you are driving too slow, suspiciously slow, the definition of driving is the violation of the rules of the road, but this driver in particular tends to inspire suspicion by his very being, he is an inherently suspicious character and behind the wheel of an automobile necessarily violating the rules of the road his inherent suspiciousness becomes suspiciousness squared, a suspicious character behind the wheel of a deadly weapon.[588]

As the character's heightened paranoia about his suspiciousness transforms him into a terrorist, the space of the car too is transfigured into a 'deadly weapon'. A similar occurrence of supposedly inappropriate use of place that qualifies the protagonist as suspicious can be found

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[585] See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, p. 101.
[586] Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, pp. 12–13.
[587] Ibid., p. 13.
[588] Ibid., p. 70.

in the chapter 'Time and motion', whose events take place in a shopping mall. If the toilet facilities are made available to the mall's customers, who have earned the right to avail of them on account of their being customers, the high frequency of the protagonist's trips to the restrooms, he fears, does not constitute an opportune use of that space. The protagonist imagines an entire set of 'commandments for proper mall comportment' that include 'Thou shall not wear improper dress gang regalia or Arab noses and Thou shall not take pictures without Simon's [the establishment's] permission, a visual culture worried about people making visual representations they hadn't anticipated'.[589]

The issue of topographic transgression is also addressed in the second chapter, where the protagonist experiences a sense of being out-of-place when walking in the Zone Hotelière of Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport, after being overbooked on his trip back to the United States. As seen in the previous section of this chapter, when overwhelmed by the feeling of 'lamination' brought by the artificiality of the spaces around him, the protagonist decides to venture out in search of some authentic place that will counteract the advancing lamination. It is here, though, that he begins wondering whether his suspiciously non-conformist looks allow his presence in the ultra-conformist Roissy village:

> Maybe he had strayed into some kind of forbidden zone, unwittingly he had strayed into a zone that was off limits at certain times of the day, or off limits at least to suspicious looking characters such as he had always suspected himself to be.[590]

In Caldwell's novel, non-places, as they inherently stress the necessity to conform to pre-determined roles (the role of the passenger, the driver, the customer etc.), exasperate the feelings of non-belonging of those who do not abide by their tacit codes of conduct and, in so doing, they shed light on the problematic of non-conformity within strictly regimented space. The feeling of exclusion is heightened, in the novel, by the omnipresent gaze of surveillance systems, be it closed-circuit security cameras, or the scrutinising looks of the other users of the non-place. When approached by the policewoman at the airport, during the incident with the luggage, the protagonist 'without looking [has] a sense of everyone watching',[591] such as when he feels the probing look of the security guard in the chapter dedicated to the trip to the museum. The apotheosis of the surveillance society, however, is reached in the aforementioned

[589] Ibid., p. 135.
[590] Ibid., p. 42.
[591] Ibid., p. 20.

episode at the shopping mall, where the close monitoring of the mall's users is coordinated, in the protagonist's vision, by Simon, of the children's game 'Simon says'. Simon is described as a discreet but pivotal figure in the overlooking of the mall's bustle of people and goods:

> Simon is shy, Simon prefers to work behind the scenes, Simon wants to keep his eye on you but doesn't want you keeping an eye on Simon, so Simon says, Photography and videotaping on the premises is forbidden without the permission of the management, meaning the permission of Simon. […] It is a matter of finely-calibrated speed and feed and necessarily therefore of surveillance, of ever-vigilant surveillance via closed-circuit cameras to ensure the regular and unimpeded speed and feed of shoppers in search of the lowest possible prices.

Simon 'work[ing] behind the scenes' is a confirmation of the invisibility of neoliberal workings and, once again, it mimics the architecture of Bentham's panopticon analysed by Foucault, where the prison guard can observe the prisoners at any time without ever being seen, thus ensuring compliance without actually having to be there. The ubiquitous presence of surveillance systems is here interpreted as an indispensable condition for providing the consumers with the lowest possible prices. Surveillance, more than concerning itself with the disciplining and punishing of "the other", appears to be instrumental to consumer capitalism in purposefully reducing the initially heterogeneous identities that pass through the shopping mall to the one and only identity of the consumer. The 'temple of consumption' that is the mall is, following the definition given by Zygmunt Bauman in his work *Liquid Modernity*, a Foucauldian heterotopic space, a place without a place, a purified space where 'the differences inside, unlike the differences outside, are tamed, sanitized, guaranteed to come free of dangerous ingredients – and so be unthreatening'.[592] The task of today's 'liquid surveillance'[593] is precisely that of annulling these differences through enforced assimilation, through what Claude Lévi-Strauss calls an *anthropophagic* strategy of dealing with the other, which, unlike the *anthropoemic*[594] one mentioned at the beginning of this section, is not 'aimed at the exile or annihilation of the others', but at the 'suspension or annihilation of the otherness'.[595] As

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[592] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 99.
[593] The term was coined by the scholar David Lyon in his work 'Liquid Surveillance: The Contribution of Zygmunt Bauman to Surveillance Studies', *International Political Sociology*, 4 (2010), pp. 325–38.
[594] In *Tristes tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss defines 'anthropoemy' (from the Greek *émein*, to vomit) as the practice of 'ejecting dangerous individuals from the social body and keeping them temporarily or permanently in isolation, away from all contact with their fellows, in establishments specially intended for this purpose'. Vice versa, anthropophagic strategies neutralise the danger posed by the other by assimilating it into the dominant society, therefore erasing all traces of otherness from it. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, trans. by John and Doreen Weightman (London: Penguin Books, 1955; 2011).
[595] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 101.

pointed out by Bauman, everyone in the mall can safely assume that everyone else has come there for the same purpose, that of consuming. And consuming is what one is expected (and gently coerced) to do in the mall, which could explain Caldwell's protagonist's unease as he would rather hide in a bookshop than complete the task that he had set out to do, namely shop for clothes. For the suspicious character who cannot conform, the experience of shopping causes acute anxiety:

> He has come to the mall this afternoon to shop for clothes but the task of trying on clothes in the dressing rooms where he's always certain he'll be suspected of shoplifting and therefore spied on by hidden cameras as he reveals his hairy flabby gut and dirty underwear in order to wedge himself into the too-tight clothes he's over-optimistically plucked from the racks is so humiliating that he needs to calm himself in a bookstore between forays.[596]

Even the character's failure to fit into the clothes that he has chosen (his choice of size could here confirm his desire to conform to "the standard" and to be assimilated) is a sign of his non-conformity, something that he feels will certainly not escape the attentive gaze of the cameras.

To conclude this section, I would like to turn the attention to one more facet of Caldwell's protagonist's in-betweenness and non-belonging. If the conclusion reached here is that the main character of *Human Wishes* is defined by his liminality, which is materialised by the half Arab looks and by the out-of-placeness discussed above, the author does not miss the opportunity to pass a number of explicit remarks about the protagonist's liminal nature. The significance of the relationship between the liminal character and the liminal landscape in which he is immersed is reiterated several times in the novel. In 'The four horsemen bridge', which depicts the protagonist's solitary walks in the streets of St Petersburg, it is said that 'he wandered the Nevsky Prospekt like a ghost, just another ghost in a ghost town, a shade among the shades. He had lost his way in the limen, in the ashen In-Between, forever now In Between'.[597] And again, when the protagonist has stopped at a service station, in the chapter 'The cruiser', the congruence between the in-betweenness of the character and that of the landscape is once more commented upon by the author:

> To capture what is the embodiment of rest, to communicate it in the body of a text, that which he has experienced at rest stops and which is embodied rest, a consonance or alignment of body and

[596] Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, pp. 130–31.
[597] Ibid., p. 60.

> mind and place and text such that we credit again the old ideas of Arcadia, Elysium, the Happy Hunting Ground, Eden, in their modern or perhaps postmodern or to be less loaded and problematic and put off for now the vexed question of periodization let's choose as our adjective contemporary their contemporary incarnation as the In Between.[598]

The protagonist finds solace in the in-between space of the service station, the in-between here constituting a contemporary version of Arcadia. However, not all in-between spaces hold such possibilities for comfort. Throughout the novel, the liminal protagonist struggles with anxiety and unease as he traverses and lingers in liminal places until, in the Kafkaesque conclusion of the novel, the character wakes up to find himself inexplicably imprisoned for a crime he does not seem to remember committing, and realises that he is indefinitely trapped in a non-place:

> Maybe they were on the moon. The point was that he was nowhere. He had no country and no name. He was off the grid. He was off the map. In the non-place for the non-people. A camp could be closed down. For purposes of publicity. But there would always be non-places for non-people. Always. Did he understand that. It was important for him to understand that. Because he was a non-person in a non-place.[599]

This passage throws light upon one aspect of liminal spaces that vividly contrasts with the opportunities for freedom and positive anonymity offered by Augé's transit spaces by reminding the reader how liminal spaces can be first and foremost spaces of segregation and of exclusion. Caldwell's prison more closely resembles Foucault's heterotopias of deviation, and it is only liminal in the sense of a place without a place, not in Victor Turner's original meaning of a place where the experience of segregation (the first phase of a ritual in which the individual is separated from the society to which he/she belongs) was a temporary one.

By looking at the liminal identities portrayed in the four novels analysed, it could be tentatively concluded here that none of the characters appear to have a positive experience of liminality, one that reasonably envisages the traditional *reintegration* into society at the end of the liminal phase. Failure to adapt to the fast-changing forces of the market, non-conformity or rejection of capitalist values only seem to lead to permanent marginalisation and ostracisation.

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[598] Ibid., pp. 69–70.
[599] Ibid., p. 253.

4. Restoring an erased history

As introduced at the beginning of this chapter, some of the novels considered here appear to stage a reaction against the postmodern dehistoricisation of place and the proliferation of inauthentic places described in the first section. This reaction, or rather challenge, is one rooted in an urge to reinstill a legitimate history in places now entirely devoid of it (as in the case of Caldwell's Arsenal Mall), or to pit more marginal or personal histories against official national history. The latter strategy is particularly visible in Teobaldi's strong opposition to an optimistic recollection of economically thriving post-war Italy and in Sinclair's rebellion against Margaret Thatcher's English Heritage project, a 'practice in theme-parking that […] turned genuinely historical streets…in prosperous parts of the country into simulacra'[600] and whose 'rewriting of national identity […] paved the way for a constructed nostalgia to replace other versions of historical reality, as less marketable moments of English history were substituted with something much more palatable for tourist dollars'.[601] In Thatcher's project, history and the arts were to become 'culture industries' whose new purpose was that of generating profit.

Teobaldi's Tizio, whose unease with the inauthenticity of his home and its artificial smell of secondary accumulation culminates in physical sickness, scouts for pieces of history in his neighbours' garages. Here the objects discarded from the higher floors attest to the accumulation perpetrated in the fifty years that followed the Second World War:

> D'estate, quando la galleria semisepolta garantiva un po' di fresco rispetto alla calura esterna, a Tizio piaceva pedalare sottoterra con la scusa del fresco per spiare i garagini dei suoi simili e dissimili, dov'erano raccolti ed esposti cinquant'anni di storia […] Carrellando in bicicletta davanti alle trecento porte aperte era possibile vedere come dallo Stato della Chiesa si fosse passati a votare per i comunisti e a scrivere VIVA TOGLIATTI e NO ALLA LEGGE TRUFFA! sui muri della villa del Conte.
>
> [In the summer, when the half-buried tunnel offered some cool from the heat outside, Tizio liked to cycle underground, with the excuse that the air was fresher, in order to peek into the little garages of his fellow humans – some similar and others not so similar to him – where fifty years of history were gathered and displayed. […] Dollying on his bike before the three-hundred open

[600] Patrick Wright, *On living in an Old Country*, quoted in Kim Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space: After Thatcher*, p. 5.
[601] Kim Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space: After Thatcher*, p. 5.

> doors, you could see how, from the Papal States, people had come to vote for the Communist Party and to write 'Long live Togliatti' and 'No to the Scam Law!' on the walls of the count's villa].[602]

The discarded objects hidden in the neighbours' garages also point to the volatility of ideologies and political allegiances, which are espoused or cast aside like commodities at one's convenience. As the tunnel is 'half-buried' underground, so too are the testaments to a history that Tizio's fellow residents have kept at a distance, repressed in shame and hidden away in the depths of their garages. These testaments are the repudiated objects associated with farmhouse living that do not have a place in the modern, functional homes of the consumerist era: 'credenze di legno smaltate di verde', 'qualche matra', 'macchine da cucire' and 'macchinette per tappare le bottiglie di vino col sughero' ['wooden dressers polished in green or pale blue', some 'kneading troughs', 'sewing machines' and 'small machines used to plug wine bottles with cork'], whose presence in the garages is indicative of the fact that the families living in the condominium, albeit to different extents, 'avessero […] preso le distanze dalle proprie origini contadine e dagli oggetti che gliele ricordavano' ['had distanced themselves from their peasant origin and from the objects that reminded them of it'].[603]

Tizio is convinced that an analysis of what has been rejected by his contemporaries can throw a new light onto a society's history and uncover those histories that have failed to be recorded or that have been deliberately excluded from the collective memory of his nation, therefore exposing the constructed character of the latter. This conviction finds a more complete elaboration towards the final part of the novel, when he succeeds in securing a job as director of his new local landfill. Tizio, in his new role, develops a research project focused on the importance of everyday life, the funding of which, he claims, is justified by 'fondate giustificazioni di carattere scientifico, cioè storico e umanistico, attinenti allo studio degli stili di vita, dei ritmi e dei modi del consumo urbano' ['founded motivations of the scientific kind, that is motivations that are relevant for the field of history and the humanities and that are related to the study of the lifestyles, the patterns and the ways of urban consumption'].[604] Tizio is persuaded that there, in the landfill, 'i documenti più veri della storia patria' ['the truest

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[602] Paolo Teobaldi, *La discarica*, p. 75. The electoral reform of 1953, which was dubbed "The Scam Law" by the opposition parties, was designed by the leader of the Christian Democracy Alcide De Gasperi in order to ensure the continued hegemony of his party. The law, opposed by the Communist Party (PCI) led by Palmiro Togliatti and by all the other minority parties, would reward the party obtaining the absolute majority of votes with a bonus number of seats in parliament.
[603] Ibid.
[604] Ibid., pp. 172–73.

documents of [Italian] national history']'[605] are to be found, together with the traces of his love for Lia, now faded away, and of his grandparents, of his father and his mother. The aim of the research therefore, at least in its creator's intentions, comprises an affective element that proposes both a more personal and an alternative history to the official exaltation of the economic boom, with the goal:

> Di focalizzare meglio la storia degli ultimi cinquant'anni in base agli oggetti rifiutati, individuando nei rifiuti le icone e i segni portanti dei terribili decenni passati, insomma la vera storia dell'accumulazione secondaria, che aveva rovinato tante famiglie e tante coscienze, oltre che l'odore di Lia'
>
> [Of better focusing the history of the last fifty years according to the objects discarded, by identifying in the waste the icons and the main signs of the terrible past decades or, in other words, the true history of secondary accumulation, which had ruined so many families and consciences, as well as Lia's smell].[606]

Tizio's project is reminiscent of Gianni Celati's notion of the 'archaeological bazaar', which the writer developed in the early 1970s and which sought to oppose an alternative history made of 'an archaeological bric-à-brac of rejects' to a superseded kind of 'monumental history'.[607] In the archaeological bazaar, as noted by the scholar Anna Botta in her article 'The Alì Babà Project (1968–1972): Monumental History and the Silent Resistance of the Ordinary', the various fragments of history are described by the archaeologist/intellectual 'piece-by-piece' and 'without trying to place them permanently in some historical collocation or explanation'.[608] Like Celati, Teobaldi's character quite literally pursues a history of the 'objet enfoui'[609] (the buried object) that can unveil a plurality of previously hidden histories and question official historical accounts.

Tizio's ambition, though, is grossly misunderstood by his community, with the local newspaper seeming to promote a constructed nostalgia for the past decades and reporting about:

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[605] Ibid., p. 173.
[606] Ibid.
[607] Anna Botta, 'The Alì Babà Project (1968–1972): Monumental History and the Silent Resistance of the Ordinary', in *The Value of Literature in and After the Seventies: The Case of Italy and Portugal*, eds. Monica Jansen and Paula Jordão (Utrecht: University of Utrecht, 2007), p. 548. <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/294530> [accessed 8 June 2020]
[608] Ibid.
[609] Ibid., p. 549.

> Una ricerca all'insegna dello scavenging, […] la quale ricerca, diceva il giornalista, avrebbe consentito alla comunità cittadina di ritrovare gli anni verdi, i bei tempi andati, la dolce ala della giovinezza, l'età dell'oro, l'età dell'Acquario, i favolosi anni sessanta, the way we were, gli anni del boom e dell'accumulazione primaria: insomma tutto il contrario di quello che pensava lui.
>
> [A research project in the spirit of scavenging […] that, according to the journalist, would have allowed the community to rediscover the golden years, the good old times, the sweet bird of youth, the golden age, the Age of Aquarius, the fabulous 60s, the way we were, the years of the economic boom and of primary accumulation: basically, the exact opposite of what he believed].[610]

The final stage of Tizio's project involves an exhibition, to be hosted by the landfill and entitled 'L'ODORE DELLE COSE: Cinquant'anni di accumulazione secondaria' ['The Smell of Things: Fifty Years of Secondary Accumulation'], where objects chosen as examples and metaphors that represent secondary accumulation are laid out on tables and are displayed for the benefit of the students and the general public.[611] An additional benefit of the exhibition, Tizio believes, is that it will encourage the development of a new environmental awareness by promoting 'più misurati stili di vita' ['more moderate lifestyles'] and the 'civile pratica della raccolta differenziata' ['civil practice of recycling'].[612] However, Tizio's main objective is that of literally uncovering a different history, one that deviates from hegemonic narratives and that is buried in the lower strata of litter stored in the landfill. Whilst in the top layers 'quasi tutti gli oggetti testimoniavano, più che un diffuso arricchimento, un diffuso sogno d'arricchimento' ['almost every object testified, rather than to a widespread accumulation of wealth, to a widespread dream of accumulation of wealth'], the middle layers revealed a different past:

> Dagli strati intermedi, dopo un intercalare di terra pressata, venivano fuori altri oggetti e annate di riviste e di giornali, a volte incredibilmente ben conservati, come se sotto tutta quella putredine, che poi si scaricava per i camini, ci fossero alcune bolle d'aria pulita: ed emergevano i resti cartacei di un altro sogno, questo meno diffuso però, cioè che la rivoluzione fosse lì lì per venire: questione di anni, di mesi forse: bastava convincere gli ultimi indecisi, accelerare la lotta con un po' di gas, alzare appena il livello della benzina nelle bottiglie Molotov, che le masse sarebbero

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[610] Paolo Teobaldi, *La discarica*, p. 173.
[611] Ibid., p. 179.
[612] Ibid., p. 181.

> scese in piazza […] gli studenti si sarebbero uniti con gli operai, i contadini con gli impiegati, i pastori coi soldati; e in seguito a questi mostruosi accoppiamenti il mondo sarebbe radicalmente cambiato, cosa di cui già si coglievano le prime inequivocabili avvisaglie.
>
> [From the middle layers, under a layer of compact soil, other objects and issues of magazines and newspapers appeared, sometimes incredibly well preserved, as if under all that rot — which was then emptied out in fireplaces — there were pockets of clean air, and the paper remnants of another dream (a less widespread one though) emerged: the dream that the revolution was about to happen. It was a matter of years, months maybe: it was just about convincing the last few hesitant ones, speeding up the fight with a bit of gas, slightly increasing the level of gasoline in the Molotov cocktails, and the masses would have taken to the streets […] the students would have joined the workers, the farmers with the office workers, the shepherds with the soldiers; and, after these monstrous matchings, the world would have radically changed, something of which the first unmistakeable signs could already be seen].[613]

Teobaldi's Tizio here challenges the positive memory of the capitalist dream that defined post-war Italy and lays bare the traces of another, more meaningful dream: the dream of a revolution that, if entirely successful, would have changed the course of history and overturned the dominant economic model. This dream or ideal project, as Tizio explains, had been spoiled by 'il fumo dei lacrimogeni' ['the smoke of tear gases'] mixed with that of 'le bombe nelle banche e sui treni' ['the bombs in banks and trains'],[614] a reference to the political terrorism of the Years of Lead that had shaken Italy during the 1970s and early '80s, and that had seen as its protagonists both left and right-wing extremist groups, many of whose members had previously been involved in the student and worker strikes at the end of the 1960s. Teobaldi here appears to support the thesis that Italian politics between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1980s was characterised by a 'strategy of tension',[615] whose motiveless bombings aimed at civilians and generally attributed to far-right groups were possibly part of a grander scheme to clip the wings of the revolutionary project of 1968.

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[613] Ibid., p. 178.
[614] Ibid., p. 179.
[615] The term, originally in English, was coined by the journalist Leslie Finer in an article published in the newspaper *The Observer*, to describe the attempt on the part of political and military players with connections with the United States to create a situation of instability in certain Mediterranean countries – mainly relying on bombings and terror attacks – which in turn would prevent the likely political turn towards the left that would have followed the Hot Autumn events of 1968. (See Leslie Finer, '480 held in terrorist bomb hunt', in *The Observer*, 12 December 1969, quoted in Anna Cento Bull, *Italian Neofascism: The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Nonreconciliation* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), p. 65.

Similarly to Teobaldi's interest in bringing to light a different and more personal history through a collage of discarded objects, Sinclair explores those histories enshrined in the marginal and neglected in-between spaces that surround the A13, an 'unlucky road' that, however, 'comes with a freight of memory'.[616] In opposition to the national character of the history promoted by Thatcher's English Heritage, Sinclair's attention shifts towards local history, whose account is often intermingled with fictional elements arising from the author's impressions and imagination. *Dining on Stones* is almost a tribute to local histories, unknown facts and curious anecdotes, as every place encountered on the walk is accompanied by a historical digression on its origins, evolution or fate. We can observe, by way of example, the following passage about the seaside town of St Leonards-On-Sea:

> History was lightly worn in St Leonards. James Burton, in his dotage, carved a town, a post-urban estate (with Classic pretensions), out of the hillside. His son, Decimus, on a commission in Tunbridge Wells, persuaded some free-floating royalty to winter on the coast: the Duchess of Kent and the young Princess Victoria. The usual riffraff–jaded aristos, Irish adventurers, gamblers, pimps, cooks, theatricals – followed. Crescent parks with Gothic follies. Masonic temples. An ugly church, designed by Burton himself, was replaced by an uglier one by Gilbert Scott (the power-station man).[617]

Seaside towns are said to be 'big on memory, bits of wood dug from the sand, spars, fragments of pots rescued from the deep. Albums of dead sailors, faces peeled by experience, layers of wrinkles and ice-bleached whiskers. Piped and sweatered. Faces too strong for the technology'.[618] The provincial museums in these towns 'never fail to charm, bell jars of borrowed air: no expectations, no agenda, no obligation to inform'.[619] Sinclair's writer – one of the protagonists of the novel and one of the author's alter egos – earlier admits to being rescued by 'Danny the Dowser', a character who accompanies him for part of the walk, as Danny has 'a book of local history cobbled together by one of those green walkers who dedicate their lives to revealing the location of London's few remaining secret spaces'.[620] In order to piece together the local histories of the decaying seascapes of Britain, the writer explains how he assembles 'monster files of cuttings and photographs, everything that could be known about the worst of London, the A13. Company histories, geologists' reports, traffic-flow statistics,

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[616] Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*, p. 95.
[617] Ibid., p. 289.
[618] Ibid., p. 326.
[619] Ibid., p. 325.
[620] Ibid., p. 190.

gangland memoirs'.[621] Sinclair's histories vividly contrast with the commodified and marketable national history envisioned by Margaret Thatcher in the National Heritage Act of 1983, which reallocated the management of the English historic patrimony – previously in the hands of the Department of the Environment – to a board of trustees tasked with increasing overall cost efficiency. This resulted in the creation of a heritage industry that, in Tim Edensor's words, 'capitalises on the burgeoning nexus between consumption and leisure in the production of historic places' and 'tends to mobilise specific ways of remembering the pasts of places' as 'in servicing the requirements of commodification and the need to tell a coherent, seamless story about the way things were, heritage banishes ambiguity and the innumerable ways of interpreting the past to compile a series of potted stories and spatially regulated displays'.[622] In contrast to the kind of history "sold" by the heritage industry, according to the scholar Kim Duff, Sinclair's 'DIY heritage project' made up of fragments of local histories inherently 'disrupts the possibility of imagining the city as cohesive, mappable and ultimately marketable'[623] and it reveals the alternative history embedded in 'the edges of society, the identities, and spaces that had been cast off by Thatcherism as dirty and uneconomically viable'.[624] In *Dining on Stone*s, in particular, these liminal and invisible histories are made visible by the act of walking. As noted by Sinclair himself, 'walking restores memory',[625] a notion reminiscent of Michel de Certeau's idea of the enunciative function of walking, which implies that 'the production of stories about the places people live is indissolubly connected to memory, history, the traces of the past'.[626] According to the scholar Brian Baker, walking may also 'offer a practice of everyday life which allows a resisting reading of urban space (and its strata of memory and history)'.[627] This observation is particularly pertinent to a discussion centred on the idea that uncovering the histories dismissed and repressed by official accounts can constitute a way of challenging and opposing the status quo, particularly when such accounts service a neoliberal agenda. As noted by Duff, indeed, '[the] appropriation of historically significant space by English Heritage was an attempt to preserve a historical English identity that included the Victorian values of decreased state intervention that Thatcher espoused'.[628] Challenging such an appropriation by setting the micro-narratives of local

[621] Ibid., p. 82.
[622] Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality*, p. 133.
[623] Kim Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space*, p. 20.
[624] Ibid., p. 33.
[625] Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*, p. 71.
[626] Quoted in Brian Baker, *Iain Sinclair*, p. 27.
[627] Ibid., p. 28.
[628] Kim Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space*, p. 5.

histories against a state-approved version of national history can be seen as a deliberately subversive practice. Here Sinclair attempts to introduce a counter-hegemonic discourse that focuses on the liminal spaces left behind by neoliberalisation to tell the reader a different tale about our economic model, one that diverges from an official narrative centred on neoliberalism's success.

Caldwell's opposition to neoliberalism, on the other hand, focuses on a critique of consumerism, which, in his view, as well as turning historical places into non-places, impacted significantly on the workers' rights and on the possibilities for meaningful work. We have seen earlier how the unnamed protagonist of *Human Wishes* hopelessly roams the Zone Hotelière of Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport in search of a historical authenticity that will counteract the artificial lamination springing from a landscape of simulacra, however, the most consistent disquisition on the de-historicisation of place in favour of non-place can be found in the chapter dedicated to the Arsenal Mall. The Arsenal Mall emblematically pays testimony to a society where historical places have been supplanted by consumer spaces, a shift that Caldwell explains by means of a lengthy comparison between the shopping mall built in 1983 and the old Watertown Arsenal that once stood in its place and that lent its name to the mall. Such a comparison is articulated in three main points, all of which constitute a reflection more on the state of work in the late capitalist era than on the changing nature of place per se. The proliferation of non-places is, in fact, the tangible face of the disappearance of pride from work and of the objectification of the workers. 'Both the Arsenal Mall in 2007 and the Watertown Arsenal armaments factory one hundred years ago', Caldwell explains, were characterised by 'speed and feed and surveillance',[629] but there was a difference between the two:

> A hundred years ago instead of a mall named the Arsenal there was a real arsenal the Watertown federal arsenal and armaments factory and it was men with stopwatches and slide-rules instead of surveillance cameras and it was Frederick Winslow Taylor instead of Simon giving the say-so and helping to bring everyone the lowest possible prices and it was skilled craftsmen patterning molding forging pouring cutting grinding and polishing machine parts and weapons parts over their lathes and planers and grinders and drills instead of unskilled mostly female retail cashiers and shelf-stockers.[630]

[629] Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, p. 115.
[630] Ibid.

Paradoxically, the technological advances that occurred since the beginning of the last century, together with widespread compulsory schooling, did not prevent what Caldwell describes as a fundamental deskilling of the workforce. As for the Taylorist idea of the scientific management of work, although this did indeed help transform workers into objects, as their work was rationalised in order to ensure maximum efficiency, Caldwell's narrator seems to suggest that when the Taylorist system was introduced labour's position was stronger, and it would have been impossible to ignore the workers' voices to the extent that they are ignored today:

> One hundred years ago labor was stronger and more organized in some sectors anyway certainly the skilled craftsmen of the foundries and machine-shops of the federal arsenals organized in the AFL craft unions so Congress had to act like the fix wasn't already in, at least it was something today it is nothing, today when the fix is in the fix is in, period, full stop, shut up and get back to work or whoops your work isn't there anymore is it, tough shit look there are still plenty of service jobs around, the Watertown Arsenal used to make things but now it is the Arsenal Mall and it sells things you can always get a job selling things.[631]

In neoliberal America, trade unions have lost their ability to protect the workers, who are now no more than replaceable cogs in a machine whose ultimate aim is to feed consumerism in an endless cycle, buying and selling things. At the time of the Watertown Arsenal, 'the workers didn't want reduced prices if it also meant being reduced to demeaning unskilled labor'[632] as 'the quality of their work was of the greatest possible importance, the source of their pride as working men was the quality of their work, their reputations and self-esteem and their very sense of themselves as men were all based on producing good work'.[633] Yet, Taylor's scientific management was the precursor of what, in his 1993 work of the same name, the sociologist George Ritzer calls 'the McDonaldization of society', that is 'the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world'[634] in an attempt to extend the rationalisation of society to the economic sphere. However, the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control at the heart of the McDonaldized society conceal underlying irrationalities, the first of which is precisely identified by Ritzer as the

[631] Ibid., p. 117.
[632] Ibid., p. 118.
[633] Ibid., p. 121.
[634] George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (London: SAGE, 1993), p. 1.

dehumanisation of the workers on the part of capitalism.[635] Workers are said by Caldwell to be treated like objects to the point that they themselves turn into objects.

> Even today at their workplaces the workers remain the subjects or rather the objects of countless experiments, ceaseless experiments because capitalism needs constantly to revolutionize the means of production in order to make more profits and bring us the lowest possible prices, capitalism and its handmaiden science, revolution always a bad idea of course someone might get hurt but what is capitalism itself other than a ceaseless and relentless revolution enlisting so-called science and performing countless and never-ending experiments on human objects without any kind of review at all other than the quarterly review of the bottom line, the permanent revolution that is Capital.[636]

Caldwell here connotes neoliberalism as a permanent revolution, but one that, unlike other forms of radical change, is accepted as a given and is not subject to scrutiny. If the only permitted revolution is that which reinvents the system in order to generate more capital, Caldwell's writing, with its lack of punctuation and cumulative sentencing can be viewed as an attempt to resist logical structures and, by extension, the rationalizable structures of capitalism.

Ultimately, bringing two places into comparison – the now disappeared Watertown Arsenal, with its past of meaningful work and workers' pride at the dawn of Taylorist rationality, and the Arsenal Mall, where workforce in the service industry is now an exchangeable commodity – constitutes Caldwell's pretext to retrace the history of capitalism from its infancy to the present. As evidenced by all the chapters that form *Human Wishes*, each non-place represents the starting point for a discussion on the harmful effects of neoliberalism on contemporary society, and the dehistoricised Arsenal Mall effectively serves the purpose of launching a critique of contemporary work under capitalism.

5. Reappropriating space: from homelessness to revolution

This final section will concentrate on the opportunities offered by liminal spaces in the novels considered for the emergence of resistive practices that seek to reclaim those spaces previously appropriated by neoliberalism. Such an act of reclaiming can allow for the system to be contested in the hope, in turn, of ultimately overturning capitalism. According to Tim

[635] Ibid., p. 32.
[636] Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, p. 122.

Cresswell, spaces and places can be used to both structure and question a normative world, as 'the unintended consequence of making space a means of control is to simultaneously make it a site of meaningful resistance'.[637] The idea that space can be instrumental to resistive practices that can challenge neoliberalism resonates strongly with the Marxist thought of the philosopher Henri Lefebvre and of the geographer David Harvey. As we will see in more detail in the following pages, Lefebvre's conviction was that spatial practices which are outside the norm, such as squatting and slum dwelling, could challenge official discourses of space. Harvey, for his part, successfully persuaded a new generation of Marxist scholars that 'space and place matter to capitalism and they are thus integral to any project to overthrow it'.[638] Liminal spaces in particular lend themselves to the experimentation of new practices that might oppose official discourse. Liminality, already in its theorisation by Victor Turner, was seen as a 'positive alternative […] to ideologies promulgated by the ruling elite'.[639] Foucault's *heterotopias*, which as we have seen share several attributes with the liminal, are described in Eric Prieto's work *Literature, Geography and the Postmodern Poetics of Place* as 'countersites', as 'zones of resistance and freedom'.[640] Moreover, if we recognise that liminal spaces are often also marginal ones, the remarks made by the feminist author bell hooks in her article 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness' are also relevant for the point discussed here, as she describes marginality as a 'site of resistance' and a 'location of radical openness and possibility'.[641] Marginality, despite its peripheral and disadvantaged position, occupies a 'central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse' since 'it offers the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds'.[642]

In the four novels analysed, space is employed in various ways as a tool to launch a critique of neoliberalism that originates from its treatment of space itself. In Culicchia's *Bla bla bla*, the protagonist's erratic journey through the city functions as an explicit subversion of the workers' mechanically repetitive daily commute, whilst the more extreme experience of homelessness later provides a more authentic encounter with urban reality. Similarly, the less conventional relationship that a binman has with the city allows Tizio in *La discarica* to regain

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[637] Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, p. 163.
[638] Phil Hubbard and Rob Kitchin, *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (London: SAGE, 2011), p. 239.
[639] *Landscapes of Liminality, Between Space and Place*, eds. Dara Downey, Ian Kinane and Elizabeth Parker, p. 9.
[640] Eric Prieto, *Literature, Geography and the Postmodern Poetics of Place*, p. 85.
[641] Bell hooks, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 36 (1989), p. 23.
[642] Ibid., p. 20.

that closeness to ‘his territory’ that is normally taken away in the mediated representations of glossy brochures. The placemaking power of Tizio’s new job metonymically extends to the non-place of his home, which he re-appropriates through the ‘authentic’ smells of his sweaty body after a day’s work, smells which, as we have seen in the previous sections, are capable of contrasting the artificial scent of the inanimate objects accumulated by his wife Lia. In *Dining on Stones*, Sinclair’s decision for his protagonists to walk through the marginal spaces of the A13 road – in stark contrast with the typically motorised travel reserved for such spaces – acts as a way of reclaiming the liminal spaces of Britain, as does the act of dowsing with improvised equipment through this invisible wasteland. Caldwell’s novel, finally, is the one that most passionately (and almost violently) advocates for a reappropriation of space by the displaced subjects of neoliberalism, those to whom cities and peripheries truly belong. The mall, protagonist of the previous section, shifts from being a place of surveillance, control and exploitation of workers to being the epicentre of an armed revolution that will mark the end of capitalism as we know it.

As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, the protagonist of Culicchia’s novel, following his decision to abandon his previous life in the consumerist world, drifts through an anonymous city from place to place, with the indefiniteness and apparent purposelessness of his days making him come to wonder how he could even fill them. The ostensible lack of purpose of the protagonist’s drifting is directly compared to that of the workers’ own drifting, as they passively repeat the same moves workday after workday without questioning their real values. The passengers of the metro are described as:

> Topi che corrono muti diretti dappertutto e in nessun luogo, giorno dopo giorno, mese dopo mese, anno dopo anno, nelle vene della metropoli, grigi tubi gonfi di sangue grigio, ATTENTI AL BUCO annuncia a ripetizione l’altoparlante nelle stazioni dove il marciapiede è troppo corto e non arriva alle carrozze, ATTENTI AL BUCO, sia che stiate salendo o che vogliate scendere, ATTENTI AL BUCO, che non vi inghiotta.
>
> [Mice running silently, going everywhere and nowhere, day after day, month after month, year after year, inside the veins of the metropolis, grey pipes full of grey blood. MIND THE GAP, the loudspeaker announces on a loop in the stations where the pavement is too short and the carriages

don't reach. MIND THE GAP, whether you are boarding, or you want to get off. MIND THE GAP, mind that it doesn't swallow you up].[643]

The underground passageways of the metro are depicted as a grey-veined urban creature that threatens to swallow the grey flow (blood) of commuters rushing to work. The purposelessness of the passengers/mice running around without going anywhere is directly specular to the exhilarating aimlessness of the protagonist's destination-less journeys across the city, when he makes an interesting discovery:

> In città esiste una linea della metropolitana senza inizio e senza fine. […] Il bello della linea gialla è che non ha una stazione di arrivo né una di partenza, posso prenderla e viaggiare senza soluzione di continuità sotto la superficie terrestre, come un topo impazzito in un qualche test di laboratorio.
>
> [The city has a metro line that has no beginning and no end. […] The best thing about the yellow line is that it doesn't have an arrival nor a departure station. I can take it and travel without interruption under the earth's surface like a mouse gone crazy in some laboratory test].[644]

Whilst the futility of the other passengers' hurrying around is one dictated by capitalism's rhythms of incessant production and productivity, the protagonist's unproductive erring on the tube is precisely its opposite: by hyperbolically mirroring the former, its mockery is configured as a rebellion against the contemporary way of life. This new non-linear, maze-like mode of interacting with urban space (as in the unconventional use of the metro line discussed above), continues with the protagonist's bus journeys and solitary walks across the city. Again, no final destination, no maps, no goals for his purposefully empty days, as he goes 'da un autobus all'altro, ininterrottamente, senza sapere dove st[a] andando, dove scendere, dove fermar[si]: al capolinea ripart[e] nella direzione da cui [è] appena venuto, poi cambi[a] mezzo a metà percorso, senza motivo' ['from one bus to the next, continuously, not knowing where [he's] going, where to get off, where to stop: at the terminus [he] sets off again in the direction where [he]'s just come from. Then [he] changes vehicle mid-route, for no reason'].[645] Finally, he walks:

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643 Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla*, p. 20. The Italian 'buco' could also be translated as 'hole', which would paint a more ominous picture of an abyss ready to swallow the passing travellers.
644 Ibid., p. 19.
645 Ibid., p. 63.

Cammino, cammino, cammino: trascorro le mie giornate attraversando silenzioso quartieri sconosciuti, mercati, edifici, rifiuti, alberi.

[I walk and I walk and I walk. I spend my days silently passing through unknown neighbourhoods, markets, buildings, waste, trees].[646]

And the aimless walk continues, a few pages later, until the protagonist finally finds peace from the overpowering visual bombardment of urban space in a blind alley:

Cammino fra loro, attraversando le zebre sulla strada in mezzo al traffico, svoltando a caso in vie sconosciute, senza sapere dove sono diretto, senza sapere dove mi stanno portando, in un susseguirsi di sacchi d'immondizia, pizzerie, cinema porno, fino a che su un cartello leggo la scritta VICOLO CIECO, mi volto e sono solo.

[I walk amongst them, crossing at the zebra crossings on the road in the middle of the traffic, randomly turning into unknown streets, not knowing where I am headed, not knowing where they are taking me, in a succession of bin bags, pizzerias, porn cinemas, until I read the words 'BLIND ALLEY' on a sign. I look back and I am alone].[647]

When seen in the context of the novel as a whole, the urban ramblings of Culicchia's protagonist appear to be more than that 'tranquillante e narcotica' ['tranquillising and narcotic'][648] experience identified by Luca Pocci in his study on Culicchia's treatment of the city. They seem to constitute rather a political experience, in which the character attempts to savour the city's unexplored streets and everydayness without agenda – thus 'ruptur[ing] the pervasive expectation of utility'[649] – as he solely wants 'inspirare, espirare, mettere un piede davanti all'altro. Provare a non dover essere più nessuno' ['to inhale, exhale and put one foot in front of the other. To try to not have to be anyone'].[650] This idea is reiterated in more extreme fashion later on in the novel, as the protagonist expresses his desire to lose himself into nothingness:

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646 Ibid., p. 23.
647 Ibid., pp. 32–33.
648 Luca Pocci, 'La trilogia sulla città di Giuseppe Culicchia', *Forum Italicum*, 42.2 (2008), p. 319.
649 Aaron Kerr, *Encounters and Thoughts: Beyond Instrumental Reason* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019), p. 56.
650 Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla*, p. 39.

> Voglio solo non pensare a niente. Voglio solo non ascoltare niente. Voglio solo non respirare niente. Voglio solo non vedere niente. Voglio solo non sognare niente. Fottere il niente. Perdermi nel niente. Nel niente. Nel niente. Nel niente.
>
> [I only want to not think about anything. I only want to not listen to anything. I only want to not breathe anything. I only want to not see anything. I only want to not dream anything. To not fuck anything. To get lost into nothingness. Into nothingness. Nothingness. Nothingness.][651]

If we reflect on the fact that neoliberalism's success lies precisely in its ability to create needs and desires (such as the desire to endlessly consume), Culicchia's character's lack of desires is telling of a resolution to part from a life ruled by neoliberal values, where 'se piove mi dico solo: sta piovendo […]; altrimenti vedo qualcosa di rosso, una buca delle lettere, un edificio, una macchia di fiori, e dentro di me ripeto rosso, rosso, rosso, rosso, rosso, rosso' ['if it's raining, I only tell myself: it's raining; […] otherwise if I see something red, like a letterbox, or a building, or a patch of flowers, I repeat to myself red, red, red, red, red, red'].[652] The sight of anything in the city is no longer associated with any longings, hopes or fears, but every object and every phenomenon are experienced almost as pure signifiers whose meaning is undetermined and does not have an unambiguous reference in the outside world.

Culicchia's character's distancing of himself from capitalist life reaches a climax as he progressively but deliberately lets himself slide into the condition of homelessness, when not even basic needs such as eating and having a safe space to sleep are easily met. Homelessness can be considered as a subversion of official spatial practices, one of those 'clandestine and underground' practices that, according to Lefebvre, 'suggest and prompt revolutionary restructurings of institutionalized discourses of space and new modes of spatial praxis such as that of squatters, illegal aliens and Third World slum dwellers, who fashion a spatial presence and practice outside the norms of the prevailing (enforced) spatial socialisation'.[653] The protagonist's scorn towards neoliberalism and this scorn's relationship to his chosen homelessness as a rejection of neoliberal values are made explicit in an invective against the sacred bonds of the family, which is responsible for the continuation of a species of social climbers, of which he has grown weary:

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651 Ibid., p. 53.
652 Ibid., p. 36.
653 Phil Hubbard and Rob Kitchin, *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, pp. 281–82.

> Ne ho abbastanza di pianti isterici, crisi nervose, convulsioni forsennate. La Sacra Famiglia. Sacri stupri familiari. Sacri incesti familiari. Sacri familiari parti extrauterini. Sacre familiari fecondazioni artificiali. Sacri sconti famiglia. Sacri mutui familiari. Sacri familiari riti satanici. Sacre station wagon familiari. Il Sacro Consenso della Famiglia. La Sacra Conservazione della Specie. Una specie di arrivisti, garimpeiros, leccaculo, alla quale anch'io appartengo.
>
> [I've had enough of hysterical cries, nervous crises, mad convulsions. The Sacred Family. Sacred family rapes. Sacred family incest. Sacred family ectopic births. Sacred family artificial inseminations. Sacred family discounts. Sacred family mortgages. Sacred family satanic rites. Sacred family station wagons. The Sacred Agreement of the Family. The Sacred Preservation of the Species. A species of careerists, garimpeiros, lickasses, a species I also belong to].[654]

The tirade against the family as the basic unit of the capitalist system, as a replica of the capitalist structure, is reiterated in even more blasphemous terms towards the end of the novel, where the protagonist, as the struggles of his life on the streets appear to have brought him to an early death, recites an irreverent version of the Lord's Prayer:

> Dacci oggi il nostro fottimento quotidiano, fotti le nostre cucine economiche, fotti le nostre ferie programmate, fotti il padre, la madre, il figlio e lo Spirito Santo, fotti orari, regolamenti, stipendi, doppi servizi, bolli auto, spese condominiali, bollette del gas, FOTTI NOI E I NOSTRI FOTTITORI COME NOI LI FOTTIAMO E FOTTITI ANCHE TU NEI SECOLI DEI SECOLI, AMEN.
>
> [Give us this day our daily fucking over, fuck our range cookers, fuck our planned leave, fuck the father, the mother, the son and the Holy Ghost, fuck schedules, regulations, salaries, the two bathrooms, car taxes, condo fees, gas bills. Fuck us and those who fuck us over as we fuck them over, and fuck you too, forever and ever, Amen].[655]

Here, Culicchia seems to highlight a certain convergence of capitalist values with an understanding of the family and of family life as it was defined and promoted by the Catholic Church. The latter, historically – as evidenced in the Introduction to this thesis – also supported those conservative forces that furthered the neoliberal cause. Yet, the rather violent rejection

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[654] Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla*, p. 92.
[655] Ibid., p. 126.

of capitalist living as a whole, as expressed in the above 'prayer', is paralleled by a glimmer of happiness. Homeless living, despite the patent difficulties described above and in previous sections (which also involve the reduction of the individual, in the eyes of passers-by, to a less-than-human entity), enables Culicchia's character to have a more authentic, unmediated experience of the urban space. In evident contrast with the passive use – discussed earlier – that the commuters made of the city, at the end of the novel the protagonist's encounter with urban reality is radically changed. The city is no longer that of the 'grey pipes full of grey blood' of the metro, but that of a euphoric humanity caught in the sunniness of a carnival day:

> E nel sole ora le strade sono piene di folla, è carnevale, ballerini, pagliacci, poliziotti […] nel sole carri stracolmi di orde in festa, sudate, serpenti umani che fendono le vie spostandosi impercettibilmente da un isolato all'altro.
>
> [And, in the sun, the streets are now crowded with people. It's Carnival: dancers, clowns, policemen […] in the sun, floats overflowing with hordes of people, celebrating, sweaty, human snakes that plough through the roads, by moving imperceptibly from one block to the next].[656]

What we imagine to be the protagonist's death, at the close of the novel, is accompanied by a peculiar feeling of happiness, the first true moment of happiness that he seems to experience since the beginning of his journey. 'Ancora poco e questo bla bla bla finirà. Allora ogni cosa tornerà pura e perfetta. Non ci sarà più niente' ['Not long now and all this bla bla bla will come to an end. Then everything will return pure and perfect. There will be nothing anymore'],[657] he says as he approaches his end. In light of this affirmation and of the message of the book as a whole, it can only be hypothesised that the *bla bla bla* that gives the novel its title is the meaningless frenzy of capitalist life, which, with his death as a homeless person who has renounced everything, the protagonist has permanently repudiated. In this manner and in contrast with Manuela Spinelli's argument about *Bla bla bla*'s protagonist as ultimately incapable of doing away with money and, therefore, with capitalism,[658] Culicchia's character actually seems to find peace in homelessness, as he repeats to himself at the epilogue: 'sono

[656] Ibid., p. 125.
[657] Ibid., p. 123.
[658] Manuela Spinelli, 'Frammenti di identità e di umanità. L'individuo nella città globale', *La letteratura italiana al tempo della globalizzazione*, *Narrativa*, 35/36 (2013/2014).

felice felice felice ecco lo sento è questo il gran finale' ['I am happy happy happy…here it is, I can feel it, this is the grand finale'].[659]

La discarica makes a similar point to that made by Culicchia, as it investigates the possibility of contrasting the capitalist inauthenticity discussed at the beginning of this chapter through the experimentation of more authentic forms of spatial and social practice. Tizio's experience as a binman, in particular, although not as radical as the option of homelessness and not a deliberate choice, unexpectedly reveals itself to be the vehicle for a less mediated and a seemingly more genuine encounter with the territory. In contrast with the reality proposed by brochures and promotional tourist leaflets, the bin tour allows for the landscape to be understood for what it is:

> Il giro dei cassoni fissi era bello e istruttivo; e non pesante perché la fatica la faceva tutta il camion e intanto si vedeva com'era fatto il mondo, cioè la provincia o forse era meglio dire il territorio comunale o il comprensorio, il vecchio contado, e le industrie per quello che erano e le imprese artigiane uguale, perché un conto erano i cataloghi, i dépliant o pieghevoli, gli stampati e le brossure, e un conto quello che c'era dentro i cassoni.
>
> [The tour of the fixed dumpsters was beautiful and informative; and it wasn't heavy because the lorry did all the hard work and in the meantime you could see what the world looked like, that is the province, or maybe it was better to say the municipal territory, or the district, the former Earldom and the factories for what they were, and the same was true of the artisan businesses, because one thing was what was in the catalogues, the leaflets, the brochures, the pamphlets and the paperbacks, and another thing was what was inside the dumpsters].[660]

The world of waste is characterised by an authenticity unknown to consumerist ways of living. The epitome of this world is the newly opened landfill site located in an unexplored area called Roncaccio, a liminal zone beyond 'la terza periferia, i vallati e la circonvallazione' ['the third periphery, the valleys and the bypass'] and 'una terra fuori dal tempo' ['a land outside of time'].[661] This 'disastrata waste land' ['devastated wasteland'][662] is made up of improvised and provisional roads and dunes; it is 'un mondo a parte fatto di rifiuti che si alimentava di rifiuti' ['a world apart made of waste, which fed on waste'].[663] Yet, the 'provvisorie strade tracciate

[659] Ibid., p. 126.
[660] Paolo Teobaldi, *La discarica*, pp. 130–31.
[661] Ibid., p. 118.
[662] Ibid., p. 120.
[663] Ibid., p. 166.

dai caterpillar' ['provisional roads traced by Caterpillars'], in their precariousness, are defined as 'affascinanti' ['charming'].[664] This 'paesaggio in fieri' ['landscape in the making'] fosters in Tizio that sense of belonging that was unattainable at home, and this new territory becomes 'il suo territorio' ['his territory'].[665] The liminal character of the unexploited landscape is therefore what opens up new possibilities for the displaced subject of neoliberalism. The landfill, for its very function, also directly fights the essentially consumerist nature of secondary accumulation thanks to the practice of recycling:

> Nei nuovi impianti della nuova discarica tutto ritornava ciò che era stato […] E grazie alla razionale pratica della raccolta differenziata, al Roncaccio il ferro tornava ferro, l'alluminio delle lattine tornava banda d'alluminio; il vetro vetro nel suo basilare tricolore, bianco, verde e marrone; gli stracci stracci, la carta carta e così si poteva continuare a produrre libri o carta igienica senza segare gli alberi; perfino il crocchiante e ingombrante PVC delle bottiglie tornava ad essere PVC, anche se più scuro, buono per produrre suole o tacchi di scarpe; forse, a studiarci su, si poteva farlo ridiventare filato bianco e petrolio nero e magari foresta.
>
> [In the new plants of the new landfill everything went back to its original state […] And thanks to the rational practice of recycling, in Roncaccio iron became iron again and the cans' aluminium went back to being aluminium strip; glass became glass again in its basic three colours – white, green and brown; rags became rags again, paper became paper so that we could continue producing books or toilet paper without chopping down trees; even the crunching and bulky PVC used in bottles went back to being PVC, although darker, good to make shoe soles and heels with. Maybe, if it was researched properly, it would have been possible to make it become white yarn and black petroleum again, and maybe even woodland].[666]

The world of waste, as argued by the sociologist Guido Viale, is 'un vero e proprio mondo, complesso e simmetrico a quello delle merci che, dietro lo specchio in cui la civiltà dei consumi ama riflettersi e prendere coscienza di sé, ci restituisce la natura più vera dei prodotti che popolano la nostra vita quotidiana' ['a world in its own right, a complex and specular one to the world of goods that, behind the looking glass in which consumer society likes to look at itself and gain self-awareness, returns the truest nature of the products that fill our everyday lives'].[667] Waste collection, in Teobaldi's novel, mirrors and opposes capitalist accumulation,

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[664] Ibid.
[665] Ibid., p. 167.
[666] Ibid., pp. 165–66.
[667] Guido Viale, *Un mondo usa e getta: La civiltà dei rifiuti e i rifiuti della civiltà* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994), p. 7.

as recycling is presented as fundamentally antithetical to consuming. This newly-found authenticity brought by Tizio's new job is also crucial in the reappropriation of his home-space, which, as we previously discussed, shared several traits with an anonymous non-place, a non-place where capitalist accumulation had taken over every empty corner of the small apartment. If *La discarica* stages a dichotomy between the artificial smells of secondary accumulation and the genuine smells of manual work, the latter appear to have the ability to reclaim the home-space and oust the material traces of neoliberal culture.

> Adesso la sua casa […] stava riprendendo a respirare. Al posto degli innumerevoli oggetti e arredi della falsa accumulazione secondaria era subentrata l'aria fresca; la nuova puzza che sentiva provenire dalle sue ascelle era frutto di un lavoro, del sudore della sua fronte.
>
> [Now his house […] was starting to breathe again. Fresh air had taken over in place of the countless objects and decorations of the false secondary accumulation; the new stench that he could smell coming from his armpits was the result of work, of the sweat of his forehead][668]

In *Dining on Stones*, the repossessing of spaces previously appropriated by neoliberalism is a far more conscious operation than it was for Teobaldi's Tizio. Sinclair's alter-ego writer makes the wilful decision that 'the road would have to be walked. Every yard of it, Aldgate to the sea'.[669] Sinclair's predilection for walking is notorious to any reader who is familiar with his writing and with the typically pedestrian character of psychogeographical urban exploration. If walking, as we have seen, is able to reinstate history in places devoid of it, it also allows for slower forms of travel that oppose and subvert everyday commuter travel and motorised travel alike. Typical of the Situationists and their *dérives*, walking is almost a standardised form of opposition to capitalism that, as Edensor argues, 'bypass[es] and subvert[s] the commodification of everyday space, and the spectacularisation and bureaucratic disciplining of the city'.[670] The walker is drawn to non-spectacular places that are 'beyond hegemonic regulation and representation' and that can become 'counter-sites from which revolutionary desires and understandings could be articulated'.[671] Sinclair's choice of walking along the A13 road, a space reserved for those who drive, is to be interpreted as a subversive act simply because it is rare 'in the contemporary transit-orientated city' where 'everyone is

[668] Paolo Teobaldi, *La discarica*, p. 125.
[669] Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*, p. 12.
[670] Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality*, p. 87.
[671] Ibid.

trying to get somewhere, usually in a hurry'.[672] When the writer begins walking, he finally gains an insight into 'quarters of London that [he]'d previously seen through the windows of moving vehicles',[673] quarters that would have otherwise escaped his gaze. However, walking is not the only act that reverses the hurried journeys of working commuters: other similarly slow ways of traversing space fulfil the same purpose. The cyclists who interrupt the writer's walk with their ideal projects of 'video surveillance of empty buildings, albums of rephotographed graffiti, underground streams tracked to source',[674] and above all the improvised dowsing expedition with Danny the Dowser, challenge the use made of liminal spaces in neoliberal society as spaces to be merely passed through. These practices, in their apparently meaningless slowness, aim to reclaim a liminal territory exploited but ultimately forgotten by capitalism, thus echoing practices suggested in the work of scholars such as Christoph Lindner, who indicates slow urbanism as a way to counter the acceleration of the globalised city and to increase sustainability.[675] In Sinclair's novel, dowsing – originally a divination practice aimed at locating underground water through the use of a rod – is the most prominent embodiment of this slowness and of a renewed interest in extra-economic values, and is described as 'an explanation of a liminal world that commuters and salaried slaves had no time to notice'.[676] This peculiar attention to a landscape that generally goes unnoticed appears to constitute an attempt to encourage a more meaningful relationship with liminal space that can combat the current state of abandonment.

If, in the previous three novels, the reappropriation of liminal space was carried out in peaceful forms, with the most drastic action being the violation of normal spatial practice by elected homelessness, Caldwell's *Human Wishes* calls for a fully-fledged armed revolution that will overthrow the system. The feeling of artificial lamination that assails the protagonist in the Zone Hotelière, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, cannot be counteracted by the vain attempts to find authentic historical places in a Disneyfied France. Caldwell's protagonist explicitly juxtaposes the lamination that envelops the drains beneath the carpet of the airport hotel with the slogans of the 1968 protests that promised that 'beneath the paving stones of the boulevards we might find the beach'.[677] In this way, the author almost establishes a direct

[672] Oli Mould, *Urban Subversion and the Creative City* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 105.
[673] Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*, p. 79.
[674] Ibid., p. 13.
[675] See for example: Christoph Lindner, 'Interrupting New York: Slowness and the High Line', in *Cities Interrupted: Visual Culture and Urban Space*, eds. Shirley Jordan and Christoph Lindner (London, Bloomsbury, 2016).
[676] Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*, p. 116.
[677] Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, p. 39.

correlation between the triumph of capitalist inauthenticity (symbolically embodied by lamination) and the end of the utopic revolutionary project of ’68. Scholars such as David Harvey actually regard the protest movements of the late 1960s as instrumental to the establishment of neoliberal hegemony, as neoliberalism effectively co-opted the idea of individual freedom from a repressive system to push its ideology of economic deregulation and personal responsibility.[678] The success of capitalist “rationality” against the “empty signifiers” of the dissident slogans of the student and worker movement is emblematised, in Caldwell’s novel, by the allure of the tidy Frutiger font used on airport signs:

> Its distinguishing qualities are cleanliness, proportionality and rationality. All the workers and students started reading the signage with the new Frutiger typeface instead of the notoriously utopian slogans of the posters burning in the boulevards, they were captivated by the ultramodern Frutiger typeface whose sleek easy-to-read lines told them that the best way to the beach was to call off the strike and go back to work, right as the extermination squads in their Charles de Gaulle airport vests were lined up waiting for them at the end of the burrows with the guns and the dogs they went back to work.[679]

The Frutiger font here symbolises the capitalist promises of wealth and modernity that, more than any violent repression ever could have, slyly persuaded the students and the workers that capitalism was the only way forward, and, in so doing, brought the revolutionary project to an end. In this view, the long meandering sentences that make up Caldwell’s syntax can be interpreted as attempts to directly counter – at least at the linguistic level – the rationality and conciseness of the Frutiger font. Caldwell’s protagonist, in what is perhaps a reference to the riots that broke out in the suburbs of several French cities in November 2005, concludes that his only hope to fight the advancing lamination lies in the displaced and marginalised subjects (human and animal) of late capitalism, the Arab youth segregated in the *banlieues* and the rabbits exterminated *en masse* to free the airport runways of any potential danger:

> His only hope was in the banlieues, among the young French persons who wore North African and Middle Eastern noses in the decaying council flats of the endless cités, he reasoned. They had made the banlieues burn last fall and they would make them burn again, they would finally burst out of their insular banlieue prisons, join forces with the rabbits and flood all the tarmacs,

[678] See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 5.
[679] Edmond Caldwell, *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant*, pp. 39–40.

> the rabbits by themselves were no match for the exterminators in their Charles de Gaulle airport vests and their extermination equipment including dogs and weasels but together with the youth of Algerian and Moroccan and Tunisian descent and suspicious appearance they could make a go of it, burning the banlieues and flooding the tarmacs. His only hope of escape from the creeping condition of lamination and loops was to ally himself with them, with the banlieue youth of suspicious appearance who had never been overbooked and bumped and washed ashore at the Zone Hotelière because they could not afford the luxury of being overbooked and bumped, and the rabbits who wanted the tarmacs for themselves.[680]

The reclamation of the spaces seized by capitalism, here metaphorically exemplified by the Arab youths and by the rabbits, is to be realised through a concrete action that will physically repossess these spaces as they belong to the subjects who had been dispossessed of them. The imaginary alliance between the youth of the *banlieues* and the rabbits, in its post-human challenge of human exceptionalism, is just another way of resisting the hubris at the heart of capitalist development that understands the world as the sole property of mankind or, rather, of the wealthy part of it.

The second instance in which the protagonist of *Human Wishes* imagines a powerful reaction that will shake the status quo is on the occasion of his visit to the Arsenal Mall discussed in the previous section. The mall, a prototypical non-place and temple of consumption, is also a *heterotopia* by virtue of its being within the city but not a part of it, as described by Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Modernity*. Here, Caldwell conceives a scenario where the heterotopic mall becomes the protagonist of a dream of subversion of this 'Taylorized conveyor-belt stuffing mass-produced trash into the open maws of mindless thumbless mall-zombies'[681] since, as explained by the narrator:

> Opportunities for subversive appropriation are available to us everywhere, cracks in the armor of the big machine, fissures, gaps, opportunities to be seized, maybe every text of pessimism and despair can yield up subtexts of wild subversion, each type its antitype, shreds of heretical apocrypha, perhaps even here, yea here, in this food court in the Watertown Arsenal Mall where a hundred years ago the molders and machinists rose up against the Taylor method but because they had only been defending their AFL craft-privileges and their white dick privileges they had

[680] Ibid., pp. 47–48.
[681] Ibid., p. 145.

failed, maybe their grandchildren and their great-great grandchildren would get it right one day because there's always this heretical subtext and antitype lurking somewhere.[682]

The revolution is around the corner: the possibility that the exploited "working class" of late capitalism will rise up against the system is not a remote one, as is not, at least in the protagonist's imagination, the chance that he will take up arms and take down the surveillance and control system embodied by 'Simon':

> Never know when these white proles and black proles and brown proles stuffing Cinnabons into their mouths out of cardboard containers and licking their fingers might rise up in a body and sugar-rush next door into the Foot Locker and Lady Foot Locker to grab the heaviest boots off the racks shouting *Kick the Bosses in the Ass, Power to the Working Class!* […] One day he'll join some doughty fellowship armed with AK-47s and clad in balaclavas and kafiyas […] and venture into the Taylorized sweatshops and shopping malls of Mordor to bring down Sauron or Simon or whoever and melt his evil ring of power back down to the bad penny it was to begin with.[683]

If, in consideration of the protagonist's personality, it could be affirmed with a reasonable degree of certainty that he would be highly unlikely to launch an attack in the middle of a busy mall, it is no less interesting that Caldwell chose a non-place dedicated to consumption as a starting point for a violent contestation of neoliberalism. As we have seen, liminal spaces offer opportunities for positive resistance on account of the fact that they often are spaces of control or segregation. If, in keeping with bell hooks' claim that 'the appropriation and use of space are political acts',[684] both their appropriation by neoliberalism and their reclaiming by subversive forces can be considered to be political statements. The margins can therefore be *at the same time* 'sites of repression and of resistance'.[685] It is this final remark that possibly best summarises the use that the authors make of liminal spaces in these novels, as tools to subvert the neoliberal system from within.

[682] Ibid.
[683] Ibid., pp. 145–46.
[684] Bell hooks, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', p. 23.
[685] Ibid., p. 21.

6. Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I have attempted to show how the works selected engage with liminal spaces in ways that reverse and subvert the use made of them by neoliberalism. From the dissatisfaction with the inauthenticity of modern life and the de-historicisation of significant places arises a desire to establish novel relations with capitalist space. In Culicchia's text, the city and its transport network are no longer the monopoly of the distracted journeys of the thousands of commuters repeated in identical form day after day, but they are fully lived by the protagonist as he rambles through unknown paths on a journey that will lead him to becoming homeless and to experiencing the city in more direct, authentic forms. The "occupation" of public space on the part of the homeless, in its violation of the appropriate use of space prescribed by the written or unwritten rules established by "the system", is in this novel a deliberate rejection of neoliberal society and an attempt to distance oneself from its constraints.

Teobaldi's work also challenges the conventional use of space, in this case that of the liminal zones assigned to the disposal of waste, in order to contest the neoliberal development model based on consumption and a culture of disposability. The landfill protagonist of *La discarica*, originally a site where the by-products of capitalist accumulation are stored and hidden away, becomes a valuable testimony to Italy's history, worthy of becoming the object of an exhibition that will benefit the entire community and, at an individual level, provides Tizio with a new sense of belonging and self-worth. Whilst all the works analysed offer insights into real opportunities for positive subversion of the status quo, it is worth noting that *La discarica* is the novel that overall presents the most optimistic epilogue as far as its denouement is concerned. Tizio truly appears successful, in the end, in finding both meaning to his life and, we can infer, a new love in a woman whose job is to fight consumerism and accumulation: recycling.

Sinclair's liminal spaces that coast along the A13 road, from forgotten background to motorised travellers, become the protagonists of the writer's walk, valued in their being bearers of those forgotten local histories that stand in opposition to the (marketable) official national history. The same can be said about the English coast explored by Sinclair's protagonists, which, far from being the place of tourism and consumption that it once was, with its present of migration and apparent decay still retains a peculiar charm for the writer, who can uncover its suppressed histories.

Finally, Caldwell's non-places, which the author reveals as being highly controlled spaces whose functioning relies on the exclusion of those who do not or cannot conform, can hold, by virtue of these very attributes, unexpected opportunities for positive subversion, as we have seen in the appeal to action to the employees of the Arsenal Mall.

The works analysed all propose, to varying degrees of optimism, that concrete possibilities to subvert specifically capitalist patterns exist. In some cases, the success of these subversive actions remains confined to the single individual (as is the case for Culicchia's protagonist's final discovery of happiness as the *bla bla bla* dissolves and he dies a homeless man with no possessions and no obligations); in other cases, these novels envisage a collective action that can have a wider-scale impact on society as a whole.

CHAPTER THREE

'A craving for terrible things': Deviance and Liminality as 'Second Life' in Contemporary Leisure

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I look at the ways in which leisure, in particular in its "deviant" guises, is represented in three contemporary novels in order to shed light on the role that extreme forms of leisure play in providing an escape from the overbearing rationality that lies at the heart of capitalist societies. The works forming the object of analysis of this chapter are Don DeLillo's[686] 1985 postmodern American novel *White Noise*,[687] the British *Cocaine Nights*,[688] penned by the science-fiction writer J.G. Ballard[689] in 1996, and finally the posthumously published 2015 novel *Manuale di solitudine*,[690] by the Italian novelist Giampaolo Rugarli.[691] I have selected these works based on the consideration that they all engage in a systematic

[686] Donald Richard DeLillo was born in 1936 in New York. He has published eighteen novels, as well as short stories, plays and essays. Since the start of his career in the 1970s, he has been awarded several prestigious literary prizes and is regarded as one of the most influential contemporary American writers (the literary critic Harold Bloom defined DeLillo as one of only four living American authors 'who deserve our praise'; see Harold Bloom, 'Dumbing Down American Readers', *The Boston Globe*, 24th September 2003, <http://archive.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing_down_american_readers/>, [accessed 25 July 2020]). *White Noise*, in particular, consecrated DeLillo's success and earned him a National Book Award for fiction. DeLillo's fiction deals with the typically postmodern preoccupations of unbridled consumerism, the loss of meaning in a world of simulacra, and the role of the mass media and television in contemporary culture. DeLillo's writing is programmatically committed: in a 2005 interview, he argued that 'writers must oppose systems. It's important to write against power, corporations, the state, and the whole system of consumption and of debilitating entertainments' (Stéphane Bou and Jean-Baptiste Thoret, 'A Conversation with Don DeLillo: Has Terrorism Become the World's Main Plot?', trans. by Noel King, *Panic*, 1 (2005), pp. 90–95, <http://perival.com/delillo/interview_panic_2005.html>, [accessed 25 July 2020]).

[687] Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin Group, 1986).

[688] J. G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights* (United Kingdom: Flamingo, 1996).

[689] The literary production of James Graham Ballard (1930–2009) includes around twenty novels, short stories, satires and essays. Ballard is perhaps one of the most influential figures within the genre of science fiction, which he often employs to portray a dystopian version of modernity. Many of Ballard's works focus on the social and psychological effects that the built environment (for example in the shape of functionalist architecture such as in *High Rise*, 1975) or that gated communities where the rich entrench themselves in the pursuit of personal security (as, for instance, in *Running Wild*, 1988; *Cocaine Nights*, 1996; *Super-Cannes*, 2000; and *Millennium People*, 2003) have on the human subject. Famous cinematic adaptations of Ballard's work include Steven Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun* (1987), David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) and the more recent *High Rise*, directed by Ben Wheatley in 2015.

[690] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine* (Venice: Marsilio, 2015).

[691] Giampaolo Rugarli was born in Naples in 1932. He worked in an important bank in the North of Italy from 1955 to 1985 and only upon his retirement was he able to dedicate himself entirely to writing. Despite having published over twenty novels between 1987 and his death in 2014, there have been virtually no academic studies about his work.

critique of their respective societies by staging the ways in which violence has recently become almost a form of entertainment.

With regards to the first work considered, many of the scholarly works on DeLillo's *White Noise* have traditionally focused on its importance as the literary text that has most prototypically thematised and voiced postmodern concerns, such as the idea that our experience of reality is always mediated or pre-interpreted, or the constant preoccupation with man-made ecological disasters.[692] *White Noise* has indeed been celebrated for its ability to 'illuminate reigning theories of cultural post-modernism, as if it were written as an example of what Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, or Jean Baudrillard have been saying about our socio-cultural condition'.[693] Whilst several of the premises that underpin my analysis hark back to postmodern theories, in this chapter I will build on these theories by suggesting a reading of *White Noise* that integrates them with the recent sociological debate on deviant leisure in neoliberal societies. This approach can provide an additional perspective to the existing readings of *White Noise* by attempting to explain the quest for extreme and "liminal" experiences (which various characters in the novel seek as a cure for the fear of death – the theme around which the plot revolves) as "playful" forms of escape.

Ballard's *Cocaine Nights*, on the other hand, precedes and inaugurates what has been branded as the author's 'late fiction', a phase in his literary production where the exploration of the relationship between violence and community becomes an occasion for conducting a critique of consumer society. Ballard's late fiction seems to suggest that 'the infantilizing illusions promoted by consumerism will result in boredom punctured only by outbreaks of violence',[694] but also that this very violence can act as a powerful cohesive force which unites and cements communities. Among Ballard's late novels, *Cocaine Nights* constitutes a privileged object for a study on the representation of leisure in literature, as the social *milieu* portrayed in the novel is that of a "leisure society", a futuristic community of wealthy and prematurely retired young professionals devoted to nothing other than lying on sunbeds and engaging in an array of recreational activities.

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[692] See, for example: Frank Lentricchia, *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Leonard Wilcox, 'Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative', *Contemporary Literature*, 32.3 (1991), pp. 346–65; Douglas Keesey, 'A Stranger in Your Own Dying: *White Noise*', in *Don DeLillo*, ed. by Douglas Keesey (New York: Twayne, 1993); N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge, 'Toxic Events: Postmodernism and DeLillo's *White Noise*', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 23.4 (1994), pp. 303–23; Mark Conroy, 'From Tombstone to Tabloid: Authority Figured in *White Noise*', *Critique*, 35.2 (1994), pp. 97–110.

[693] Cornel Bonca, 'Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species', *College Literature*, 23.2 (1996), p. 26.

[694] Graham Matthews, 'Consumerism's Endgame: Violence and Community in J.G. Ballard's Late Fiction', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36.2 (2013), pp. 122–39.

Whilst a vast amount of literature has been published on DeLillo's work and, to a lesser extent, on Ballard's fiction, Rugarli's novels remain virtually unknown to the international and even to the Italian readership and, possibly for this reason, have eluded the scrutiny of academic debate. Despite this, Rugarli's depiction of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century Italy, which remains consistent throughout his works and finds its culmination in his last work *Manuale di solitudine*, provides an interesting insight into the violent reactions against the social effects of the neoliberal agenda and has therefore been included in this analysis.

Following an initial sketching out of the novels' backdrop as one characterised by the pervasiveness of consumerism and by an emptiness of meaning, this chapter moves on to focus on four aspects of the relationship between leisure and violence that are thematised in the works considered. The first section, entitled 'Playing at the edge: the search for the extreme and the thrill of the in-between', is dedicated to the seeking of thrills and limit experiences as forms of entertainment and as a remedy for boredom and even fear in a world that is perceived as hyperrational and therefore unexciting. This section draws mainly on leisure theory, in particular on scholarly work on escape, limit experience, and edgework, as well as on Chris Rojek's concept of 'wild' leisure. Escape in leisure studies generally refers to the desire to evade the rationalisation and constant surveillance that characterise contemporary life. What Max Weber indicated as the increased rationalisation and bureaucratisation of work and of life itself, together with the new mechanisms of surveillance put in place by modern states and aimed at regulating their citizens' conduct at all times (Foucault's "Panoptic" society, which finds its most complete actualisation in contemporary electronic surveillance), would therefore constitute the base for the individual's increasing need for escape. This section also looks at recent applications of Victor Turner's studies on liminality in traditional societies to contemporary leisure, such as Turner's late publications on the 'liminoid' (the liminal of post-industrial societies) and Bjorn Thomassen's more recent work on the 'limivoid', and I will propose these as possible paradigms for the interpretation of the novels in question. In the literary works considered, it is the experience of being on the edge, of living in the interstices between life and death, that allows the protagonists to escape their routines and engage in a more leisurely "second life". In *White Noise*, the proximity with death, which includes, among other deviant acts, the attempted murder of another human being, relieves the protagonist of the burdensome thought of his own mortality. In *Cocaine Nights*, the repeated performance of crime allows Ballard's characters to achieve a greater sense of self-awareness and provides them with a renewed sense of self. Finally, in *Manuale di solitudine*, one of the protagonists' search for excitement is embodied by her longing for the near-death experiences that she seeks

on the rollercoaster in the hyperreal space of the fairground, as well as in the series of homicides that she perpetrates to mitigate temporarily the tedium of her days.

The second section of this chapter, ‘The spectacle of violence: public enjoyment of private tragedy and the mediatisation of the violent event’, deals with the spectacularisation and mediatisation of violence, whose performance in the novels is to be enjoyed by casual but eager spectators. In this section, I draw on the cultural criminologist Mike Presdee’s observations on the spectacle of violence as a widespread and widely accepted form of public entertainment. In DeLillo’s work, car crashes, chemical disasters and buildings on fire represent an occasion for collective entertainment and for the establishment of human contact. Similarly, the community depicted in *Cocaine Nights* is fundamentally voyeuristic in nature, with acts such as the burning of cars and boats, rapes and acts of vandalism being staged as a means of offering a show for the public enjoyment of improvised audiences, and of promoting a sense of community amongst them. Finally, Rugarli’s description of the moment of death as a carnival of colours, smells and sounds renders it a fascinating spectacle to be consumed by involuntary spectators. A corollary of the spectacularisation of violence on which I will also comment is its aestheticisation, which turns violence and death into consumable works of art, whether in the form of figurative compositions or amateur film productions intended for later enjoyment.

In the third part, ‘The routinisation of the extreme and the trivialisation of death as the ultimate transgression’, I explore the ways in which the spectacularisation of violence and death culminates in their trivialisation, as death is reduced to an unexceptional event. In DeLillo’s novel, natural disasters and the death of hundreds of people have lost their impact on TV audiences and in everyday discourse to the point that these deaths are regarded as a routine pastime. In the universe of *Cocaine Nights*, the repeated exposure to violence leads the residents of the community of Estrella de Mar to regard crime as simply ‘one of the performance arts’.[695] In *Manuale di solitudine*, Rugarli’s characters go as far as presenting death positively as a possible escape from the madhouse of existence, and, in this logic, murder becomes an act of “kindness”. In this novel, the description of cemeteries also lends itself to the view of a generalised banalisation of the experience of death in which the cemetery, traditionally a place of respectful remembrance, is instead portrayed as resembling a landfill site.

The final section of this chapter, ‘*Carnivalesque* subversion as unrestricted play’, concentrates on the thematisation of carnival – the most traditional site of unfettered

[695] J. G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 146.

playfulness – in Ballard's and Rugarli's novels, whose diegetic universes are configured as "upside down". *Cocaine Nights*' anti-hero, Bobby Crawford, successfully manages to build a society founded on crime, thus enacting a subversion of the status quo and the normalisation of a new, perverted order based on the pervasiveness of deviance. *Manuale di solitudine* also portrays a world characterised by a state of permanent carnival, where the celebrations of traditional carnival described in the book represent but a pale shadow of the more dangerous widespread human folly. If, as posited by Presdee, a connection exists between carnival, crime and consumer culture as 'in the ever-expanding realm of commodification and consumption, acts of hurt and humiliation, death and destruction, all become inextricably woven into processes of pleasure, fun and performance',[696] the recurrence of carnival imagery in these novels could be indicative of contemporary society's desire to turn the leisure time of carnival into the true transgression of violence.

This part also looks at contemporary instances of Bakhtinian *carnivalesque* – here understood as a 'blanket term that refers to those traditional, historical and enduring forms of social ritual, such as festivals, fairs and feasts' that provide 'sites of ordered disorder […] where social rules are broken and subverted; and where one can explore one's "otherness", secret desires and most intimate pleasures'[697] – and it interprets them as both symptomatic of the search for liminal leisure in capitalist society and as an anti-systemic practice. Here I will contextualise Rugarli's use of the *carnivalesque* as a form of social critique of neoliberal Italy in his wider work, where the process of "carnivalization" comes to affect various aspects of everyday life including death, and ultimately involves the very destruction of the logic of language and therefore, provocatively, of the privileged tool of capitalist rationality.

2. Setting the context: a deprivation of meaning

The information era in which we live has been described by the anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen as a 'world of ontological excess'[698], which has left the individual ultimately bored, disorientated and therefore desperately yearning for meaning. The seeking of out-of-the-ordinary experiences, such as the thrills found in extreme sports and the entertainment offered by the leisure industry today (we can think of the cases of bungee jumping or skydiving), the commodification of violence and suffering for the benefit of hungry-for-novelty TV audiences

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[696] Ibid., p.55.

[697] Tony Blackshaw and Tim Crabbe, *New Perspectives on Sport and 'Deviance': Consumption, Performativity, and Social Control* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004), p. 53.

[698] Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*, p. 16.

and even, in more extreme cases, the forms of otherwise unmotivated "deviant" or violent behaviour, can all be explained as part of a search for meaning that often takes the shape of a quest for meaningful experience. The protagonists of the novels considered find themselves operating in a context of meaning deprivation. This appears to be either the result of the incessant bombardment of information to which the omnipresent myriad of media-outlets subjects them (which renders it impossible to discern between meaningful and non-meaningful information), or it stems from their inhabiting a landscape where temporality only exists in the form of an eternal present designed to suit their leisurely idleness.

White Noise follows the life of Jack Gladney, a college professor who prides himself on having invented the academic field of 'Hitler studies' in America, and who lives with his large family in the quiet Midwestern town of Blacksmith. Both Jack and his latest wife, Babette, initially appear to be well integrated in the consumer culture that is the backdrop of their lives. The Gladney's universe is one where 'religion, rural simplicity, masculinity, and intellectual pursuits are all inadequate sources for identity and significance [and where] consumerism, or economic fulfilment, is the only remaining element that seems able to lend meaning to [their] existence'.[699] Jack and Babette believe themselves to have achieved a 'fullness of being':[700]

> In the mass and variety of [their] purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment [they] felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in [their] souls.[701]

Jack (and, as we find out later on in the novel, Babette) is constantly haunted by the fear of death, which, according to the critic John Duvall, he attempts to repress by means of 'television, shopping and Hitler scholarship'.[702] Jack, a figure of the postmodern intellectual, goes so far as to describe the experience of shopping as a process of self-discovery, as an activity which alone is able to reassure him of his self-worth:

[699] Karen Weekes, 'Consuming and Dying: Meaning and the Marketplace in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 18.4 (2007), p. 293.
[700] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 20.
[701] Ibid.
[702] John N. Duvall, 'The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 50.3 (1994), p. 143.

> I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. I sent clerks into their fabric books and pattern books to search for elusive designs. I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me. We crossed from furniture to men's wear, walking through cosmetics. Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors in security rooms. I traded money for goods. The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of *existential credit* [emphasis added].[703]

Here Jack would seem to embody the ideal consumer of a 'liquid' consumer capitalism, one who is 'not a coherent and self-disciplined individual with a fixed identity, but somebody who can identify with an endless supply of commodity goods; somebody who is always open to new desires and new fantasies'.[704] In another passage, Jack describes the operation of withdrawing cash as an almost mystical moment of pan-harmony. Here, the silent dialogue of what Augé calls the contractual[705] nature of the relation between individual and cash machine authenticates Jack's life, as if the ATM, by putting its stamp of approval on his finances, were able to confer meaning to his existence:

> Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. […] we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies.[706]

This alignment between the desires of the individual and those of the system (embodied by the ATM) ensures Jack's integration in society and rewards him with a sense of personal value. Shopping and consumerism, though, ultimately fail to relieve Jack of his fear of death, since a 'fullness of being […] that comes from consumption offers no real protection to anyone'.[707] As we will see in the following sections, consumerism's inability to provide stable meaning

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[703] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 84.
[704] Tony Blackshaw and Tim Crabbe, *New Perspectives on Sport and 'Deviance': Consumption, Performativity, and Social Control*, p. 9.
[705] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, p. 101.
[706] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 46.
[707] Stacey Olster, 'White Noise', in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, ed. by John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 88.

makes way, in the novel, for more extreme forms of evasion that eventually result in open violence. As DeLillo himself explained in an interview, contemporary violence can be seen as ‘a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfilment in America’ and it reflects a ‘desperation against the backdrop of brightly colored packages and products and consumer happiness and every promise that American life makes day by day and minute by minute everywhere we go’.[708]

Ballard’s world is also one deprived of meaning, since the universe of *Cocaine Nights* is illustrated as an ‘eventless world’[709], a ‘world beyond boredom’[710], a situation that, in the introduction to the novel, James Lever defines as the ‘outcome of capitalism’s natural tendency to isolate and encourage an obsession with security in its consumers’.[711] The novel is set in the sunny Costa del Sol in Spain, ‘a zone as depthless as a property developer’s brochure’[712], an alienated world that Ballard depicts as ‘capitalism’s terminal zone’.[713] The community of Estrella de Mar is a ‘leisure society’ populated almost entirely by British expats inhabiting apartments and terraced houses whose architecture appears to be dedicated to the ‘abolition of time’.[714] Timelessness is in fact an evident aspect of this society founded on enforced leisure: the Costa del Sol is described as a world with ‘no past, no future and a diminishing present’[715] and as ostensibly characterised by the absence of any social structure. As well as timeless, the Costa del Sol is configured as a Baudrillardian landscape of *simulacra*,[716] with the outskirts of the town of Marbella hosting ‘King Saud’s larger-than-life replica of the White House and the Aladdin’s cave apartments of Puerto Banus’,[717] whilst its old town is described as a ‘theme village with mock-Andalucian streets, antique shops and café tables’.[718] Ballard’s hyperreality is a world marked by kitsch and inauthenticity, or, adopting once again Relph’s terminology, by *placelessness*. In an inauthentic world, as in the case of DeLillo’s and Ballard’s, ‘the trivial is made significant and the significant is made trivial, the fantastic is made real, the authentic debased and value is measured almost entirely in terms of the superficial qualities of cost,

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[708] Quoted in Matthew J. Packer, ‘“At the Dead Center of Things” in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*: Mimesis, Violence, and Religious Awe’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 51.3 (2005), pp. 648–66.
[709] J. G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*.
[710] Ibid., p. 34.
[711] Ibid.
[712] Ibid., p. 16.
[713] Andrzej Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 174.
[714] J. G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 33.
[715] Ibid., p. 34.
[716] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Editions Galilee, 1981).
[717] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 17.
[718] Ibid., p. 31.

colour and shape'.[719] As argued by Gasiorek in his study on Ballard, the leisure society of *Cocaine Nights*, '[whilst] seemingly offering a life of freedom after decades of work, turns out to be a pre-fabricated fantasy characterised by anomie, as evidenced by its isolation from Spanish society, its thraldom to satellite TV, and its retreat from public space'.[720]

In *Cocaine Nights*, the community of the town of Estrella de Mar has found a way to fight such inauthenticity and alleviate their boredom via pursuit of a particular type of leisure activity. The protagonist, Charles Prentice, initially travels to Estrella de Mar in order to help his brother Frank, who has been arrested after pleading guilty to an arson attack in which five people lost their lives. However, Charles soon becomes entangled in the secret leisure life of the tourist resort, made up of frequent acts of vandalism and widespread crime, and fully integrates himself into the new social order that has been established. The idea that it is in leisure activities that we can express our authentic selves derives from an understanding of leisure as being characterised by 'freedom from compulsion, choice, self-expression and "peak experiences"'[721] (qualities that would be lacking in the realm of work), and has been widely exploited as an explanation for phenomena such as unofficial, illegal leisure and crime. Rojek's work, in particular, interprets the pervasiveness of abnormal leisure as a response to a perceived inauthenticity in everyday life.[722]

In Rugarli's novel *Manuale di solitudine*, finally, the loss of meaning is painted through the picture of a South of Italy that is split between tradition and progress, where 'c'è molta televisione, ma il treno è ancora a binario unico' ['television is everywhere, but the railway still runs on a single track'],[723] where the parish church and the retirement home still occupy a central place in the village life. In a small provincial town near Sapri, the university professor Francesco and his younger wife Irene have bought an apartment in a prestigious building called 'Le colonne d'Ercole' – a name that metaphorically casts the building as a gateway that marks the end of the known world and represents a threshold to the future. With its seven floors and its resemblance to a medieval fort, the condominium vividly contrasts with the more traditional houses around it. Irene appears to be in perfect harmony with the materialistic and consumerist nature of contemporary life: her 'terra promessa […] il supermercato' ['promised land [is] the supermarket'][724] and she is convinced that the meaning of life can be found in material goods:

[719] Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, p. 83.
[720] Andrzej Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard*, p. 174.
[721] David E. Harris, *Key Concepts in Leisure Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p. 28.
[722] See Chris Rojek, *Leisure Theory: Principles and Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
[723] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, p. 10.
[724] Ibid., p. 200.

> A guardare il luccichio della mobilia appena comprata, come stelle in un cielo in miniatura, ebbene le veniva il magone, si illudeva di aver raggiunto lo scopo della vita, di ogni possibile vita. Ma sì, lo splendore delle cose materiali esprimeva il senso del nostro stare al mondo. Non c'era altro.
>
> [When she was looking at the twinkle coming from the newly bought furniture, which sparkled like stars in a miniature sky, she felt a lump in her throat as she deluded herself into thinking that she had achieved the purpose of life, of every possible life. Of course, the splendour of material things expressed our sense of being in the world. There was nothing else].[725]

Francesco, on the other hand, defines himself as 'un fuori tema' ['out of context']:[726] he refuses to resign himself to a world whose values he does not seem to understand nor share. When discussing why it is better not to be a parent in the twenty-first century, the image he depicts of the world he inhabits – through the forceful accumulation of reasons below – is one of desperation and destruction, one where even the possibility of there being hope for the future is denied:

> Come era possibile fare il padre in un mondo dove c'era Internet e c'erano pure l'Afghanistan, la Siria, le battaglie ideologiche sui profilattici, la malavita, la droga, i maschi con orecchino e tatuaggi, gli omofobi? E dove l'immondizia era destinata a straripare, rovesciando sulle strade tonnellate di pesce marcio?
>
> [How could one possibly be a father in a world where there was Internet and then there was also Afghanistan, Syria, ideological battles around condoms, gangsterism, drugs, men with tattoos and earrings, homophobes? A world where waste was destined to overflow, spilling tons of rotten fish onto the streets?][727]

Ecological concerns, the fear of a global war, and the loss of certainties lead Francesco to believe that humanity is ultimately destined for self-destruction:

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[725] Ibid., p. 160.
[726] Ibid., p. 53.
[727] Ibid., p. 158.

> [Un mondo] occupato a distruggersi – e l'umanità sempre più simile a un'onda di lemming impazziti, quei topi che, incolonnati, fuggono per chi sa dove, e invece, appena raggiungono il mare, si buttano in acqua e annegano.

> [(A world) busy destroying itself – and humanity becomes increasingly similar to a wave of mad lemmings, those little creatures who try to escape all in a line to God-knows-where and yet, as soon as they reach the sea, they dive into the water and drown].[728]

As a solution to this, Francesco has decided to draw an imaginary circle around his bed to divide this 'animalesca, degradante [e] sordida' ['beastly, degrading and sordid'] reality'[729] from the world of his own imagination. His personal drama originates precisely from his inability to come to terms with the discrepancy between the material world and the make-believe reality that he has fabricated in his mind. An objective correlative of Francesco's ineptitude is his sexual impotency, which only hinders his encounters with 'le creature viventi' ['living creatures'][730] and does not affect his secret rendezvous with his imaginary lover Carlotta, whose figure Francesco makes coincide with that of the actress Charlotte Gainsbourg. Despite having married twice, Francesco has never succeeded in consummating the marriages, nor to truly love his wives, whilst he regards his feelings for Carlotta as the only real ones. In *Manuale di solitudine*, indeed, the only possible form of love is represented by "impossible love", which constitutes the ultimate rejection of the outside world, 'un patto di estraneità alla meschinità del vivere' ['a resolution not to be involved in the petty nature of life'].[731] In contrast with Francesco's withdrawal from a capitalist world that appears to him to be more and more deeply rooted in the material side of existence – a withdrawal that still traps him in the world of simulacra – Irene's reaction is one of violent rebellion, of disobedience and of refusal. Although she seems to represent a better fit for contemporary society than her husband, as we will see, her incessant search for meaningful experience and human contact, as much as the chain of murders of which she will become the author, betray her uneasiness and desire for escape.

[728] Ibid., pp. 71–72.
[729] Ibid., p. 222.
[730] Ibid., p. 39.
[731] Ibid., p. 68.

3. Playing at the edge: the search for the extreme and the thrill of the in-between

In their 1986 work *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process*, the sociologists Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning argue that 'the degree of restraint which is imposed in our type of society upon the spontaneous, elementary and unreflected type of excitements, in joy as in sorrow, in love as in hatred'[732] has rendered modern society highly unexciting. Elias and Dunning state that certain emotions, which seem to have been repressed by what, in an eponymous work, Elias terms as 'the civilising process', have in truth been relegated to specific moments in the individual's existence. Such moments mainly consist in one's leisure time and in the time of sport, where the thrills lacking in an ever-more bureaucratised and rationalised professional life are allowed to be thoroughly lived. Hooliganism is, according to Dunning, an example of this need for irrationality in an over-rational society, as this search for thrills often coincides with an increased propensity to commit acts of violence and to give vent to those more "primitive" impulses that normally have no room in one's daily routine.

In this section, I will focus on a quest for excitement that leads to deviant behaviour and outbreaks of violence, and that can be explained as belonging to the sphere of leisure and recreational time. In the texts considered, violence emerges as a reaction against and a valuable alternative to the commodified society created by the neoliberal economic model, a society that is regarded as inauthentic and unfulfilling. The increased focus on personal security and on the elimination of risk from the individual's life, moreover, has had the unintended effect of inducing more and more people to deliberately seek artificially fabricated risks that would supposedly endow their lives with meaning.

As we have seen, the society portrayed in DeLillo's *White Noise* is one characterised by the omnipresence of consumer goods and advertisements, with their reassuring but false promise of eternity, which has ultimately estranged death from the individual's life, thus creating an illusionary impression of immortality. Whilst the violent death of others is continuously screened on TV and in film, one's personal death appears as an unlikely, unbearable and unreal event. The protagonist Jack and his wife Babette are obsessed with the fear of their own deaths, to the point that they contrive different strategies to cope with it. If Babette comes to the decision to participate in the trial of a drug called *Dylar*, which is said to cure the fear of death, Jack is seduced by far more extreme temptations. The series of actions that he puts in place to

[732] Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 34–35.

counteract his primordial fear can be explained as instances of a more general attempt to reduce the distance that separates him from death as if, in so doing, he were able to exorcise its hold over his life. It is in Jack's conversations with his colleagues at The-College-on-the-Hill that most theories on how to defeat the terror of dying find systematic expression. In a discussion with the chemist Winnie Richards, Winnie articulates a very positive defence of fear, by expressing the view that the thrill of facing a concrete threat holds an enormous power in increasing an individual's self-awareness:

> 'Picture yourself, Jack, a confirmed homebody, a sedentary fellow who finds himself walking in a deep wood. You spot something out of the corner of your eye. Before you know anything else, you know that this thing is very large and that it has no place in your ordinary frame of reference. A flaw in the world picture. Either it shouldn't be here or you shouldn't. Now the thing comes into full view. It is a grizzly bear, enormous, shiny brown, swaggering, dripping slime from its bared fangs. Jack, you have never seen a large animal in the wild. The sight of this grizzer is so electrifyingly strange that it gives you a renewed sense of yourself, a fresh awareness of the self—the self in terms of a unique and horrific situation. You see yourself in a new and intense way. You rediscover yourself. You are lit up for your own imminent dismemberment. The beast on hind legs has enabled you to see who you are as if for the first time, outside familiar surroundings, alone, distinct, whole. The name we give to this complicated process is fear.' 'Fear is self-awareness raised to a higher level.' 'That's right, Jack.' 'And death?' I said. 'Self, self, self. If death can be seen as less strange and unreferenced, your sense of self in relation to death will diminish, and so will your fear'.[733]

The accumulation of pronouns referring to the individual suggests an obsession with the self that is typical of hyperindividualistic societies, which is paralleled by a detachment from the natural world, here represented by the bear. The fear of the bear, therefore, has the potential to release something more primitive, a more elementary relation with the self that was lost in the civilising process. In this sense, fear is instrumental to the possibility of having a more immediate experience of the world, in a society where both experience and knowledge are always already mediated and pre-interpreted by the watchful eye of the media. The sensation that one gets from finding oneself on the edge, halfway between danger and safety, between life and death and in close contact with the latter, can have the positive effect of providing the individual with a renewed sense of self, which is able not only to reduce the fear of death, but

[733] DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 229–30.

also to keep death itself away, if only for a while. This increased self-awareness is consistent with the sociologist Stephen Lyng's observations on edgework, the experience of which would produce a sense of 'self-realisation' or 'self-determination'. In turn, this would lead the individuals to 'experience themselves as instinctively acting entities', closer to a natural state where a more primitive version of the self is at the mercy of natural forces, thus leaving them 'with a purified and magnified sense of self'.[734] As Jack's colleague, Murray Siskind, explains to reassure Jack (who has been exposed to the fumes of a toxic black cloud and, therefore, feels his death sentence weigh heavily upon him):

> Survive a train wreck in which a hundred die. Get thrown clear when your single-engine Cessna crashes on a golf course after striking a power line in heavy rain just minutes after takeoff. It doesn't have to be assassination. The point is you're standing at the *edge* [emphasis added] of a smoldering ruin where others lie inert and twisted. This can counteract the effect of any number of nebulous masses, at least for a time.[735]

Again, the experience of 'standing at the edge', between life and death, reminds one of the excitements sought out in extreme sports and liminal leisure. Murray's hypothesis also seems to suggest the desperate need for a return to a Darwinian scenario of 'survival of the fittest', although, in its postmodern version, the survivor is no longer rewarded with the mere continuation of their species, but with a brand new set of thrills capable of replenishing their life with meaning. This newly-found proximity with death is again materialised in the episode of the *Zumwalt*, the gun that Jack's father-in-law gifts him with in order to make his daughter's intellectual husband "a real man". Despite being initially reluctant to accept the unwanted present, Jack later discovers in the gun an almost seductive force, a secret delight in possessing a deadly weapon:

> Whenever I remembered the gun, lurking in a stack of undershirts like a tropical insect, I felt a small intense sensation pass through me. Whether pleasurable or fearful I wasn't sure. I knew it mainly as a childhood moment, the profound stir of secret-keeping.[736]

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[734] Quoted in Tony Blackshaw and Tim Crabbe, *New Perspectives on Sport and 'Deviance': Consumption, Performativity, and Social Control*, p. 54.
[735] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 287.
[736] Ibid., p. 274.

Owning a gun is but another way of playing at being on the edge, by giving one the faculty (at least potentially) to kill oneself or other people, of being, in short, master of one's own destiny. Jack's fascination with the gun gradually turns into a proper "second life", a more meaningful experience that can help him understand his place in the world:

> I resumed staring at the gun. It occurred to me that this was the ultimate device for determining one's competence in the world. I bounced it in the palm of my hand, sniffed the steely muzzle. What does it mean to a person, beyond his sense of competence and well-being and personal worth, to carry a lethal weapon, to handle it well, be ready and willing to use it? A concealed lethal weapon. It was a secret, it was a *second life* [emphasis added], a second self, a dream, a spell, a plot, a delirium.[737]

This "second life" longed for by DeLillo's characters and perceived as more exciting and more real than ordinary life represents the postmodern variant of the Bakhtinian second life and second world of carnival, a world 'outside officialdom'[738] where the temporary subversion of the established social order is a given possibility. But whilst in Bakhtin's carnival there is never room for violence, which is, in fact, actively fought by the power of laughter, in consumer culture carnival becomes 'the carnival of crime', as pointed out by the sociologist and cultural criminologist Mike Presdee. According to Presdee, starting from the late twentieth century, 'the acceleration of the dominance of capitalism […] coupled with the more cultural aspects of what we have come to term post-modernism have provided the context for a hugely complex fragmentation and reworking of carnival where the debris of carnival litters daily life'.[739] In the 'unbearable rationality of modern life',[740] carnival is 'no longer a "parodic reversal" but […] a true transgression'.[741] Jack's *carnivalesque* second life is in fact made up of petty transgressions such as that of possessing a gun (not illegal in most of the United States, but still felt as a source of illicit pleasure by the protagonist) as well as by real violations of moral and social norms. Disobedience in *White Noise*, by bringing one closer to death, is the only thing possessing the potential to create a barrier between the individual and their own demise, and therefore to disintegrate death's power. Jack himself acknowledges transgression as a way to escape death, but he initially seems to disassociate himself from such solutions:

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[737] Ibid. p. 254.
[738] Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Hélène Iswolsky, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 6.
[739] Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 43–44.
[740] Ibid., p. 33.
[741] Ibid., p. 44.

> What do I do to make death less strange? How do I go about it? […] Do I risk death by driving fast around curves? Am I supposed to go rock climbing on weekends? […] Do I scale the sheer facade of a ninety-story building, wearing a clip-on belt? What do I do, Winnie? Do I sit in a cage full of African snakes like my son's best friend? This is what *people* [emphasis added] do today.[742]

This list of possible remedies to overcome the fear of death includes several of what we would consider examples of abnormal leisure. Jack recognises the seeking of risks in practices such as dangerous driving or extreme sports as being constitutive of his time's zeitgeist. The shift from the exclusive 'people' to the first person 'I' in the following passage, though, suggests the professor's eventual involvement in the society that he claims to observe only clinically, as Jack fully embraces rebellion as a valuable tool to keep the grim reaper at bay:

> This must be how *people* [emphasis added] escape the pull of the earth, the gravitational leaf-flutter that brings us hourly closer to dying. Simply stop obeying. Steal instead of buy, shoot instead of talk. *I* [emphasis added] ran two more lights on the rainy approach roads to Iron City.[743]

The postmodern intellectual is seduced by the idea of disobedience and, from this point onwards, the light-hearted conversations between Jack and his colleagues regarding their little transgressions (such as closing their eyes for a few seconds whilst driving on the motorway or urinating in the sink of public toilets) are replaced by a more concrete project that reaches out to death in a far more dangerous way. Under the pretence of 'talking theory', Jack's colleague and friend Murray proposes an original view of murder as something able to counteract personal death and provide strength to the killer:

> 'I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. We don't have the disposition, the rage or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die. But think what it's like to be a killer. Think how *exciting* [emphasis added] it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up. It explains any number of massacres, wars, executions.' 'Are you saying that men have tried throughout history to cure themselves of death by killing others?' 'It's obvious.' 'And you call this exciting?' 'I'm talking

[742] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 230.
[743] Ibid., pp. 302–03.

> theory. In theory, violence is a form of rebirth. The dier passively succumbs. The killer lives on. What a marvelous equation. As a marauding band amasses dead bodies, it gathers strength. Strength accumulates like a favor from the gods. […] The killer, in theory, attempts to defeat his own death by killing others. He buys time, he buys life. Watch others squirm. See the blood trickle in the dust'.[744]

Murray defines the prospect of killing another human being as something 'exciting' and describes murder as a game. Indeed, the whole process of 'gaining life credit' recalls the widespread practice in videogames of killing rival characters in order to 'store up' lives for the protagonist-gamer. But this opposition between the 'killer' and the 'dier' also mirrors, in a way, the capitalist version of a social Darwinism that, as we have seen in the first chapter of this thesis, pits winners against losers, those who "make it" against those who do not. Murray's theoretical plan is eventually realised by Jack, who sets out to assassinate Willie Mink, the person in charge of the experiment that had brought his wife to encounter the *Dylar* drug. In the end, Jack only wounds Willie and does not commit the homicide that he had initially planned, but instead takes him to a hospital and saves his life. According to the writer Lidia Yukman, the reason behind the failed murder would lie in the fact that in a postmodern novel (as in a postmodern world) 'death no longer provides any meaningful telos for plots'[745] and, by refusing to kill Willie Mink, Jack would be denying the plot its traditional closure. But Jack's refusal could also be motivated by the fact that he is again playing at the edge between life and death: by getting close to death without quite "touching" it, Jack can experience the pleasure of being in-between, in the liminal zone of deviant playfulness. The whole experience of handling a gun and, therefore, almost owning another human being's life gives Jack that feeling of a 'fullness of being' that was only illusorily to be found in material goods. As he extracts the *Zumwalt* and prepares to shoot, Jack feels 'great and nameless emotions', discovers 'who [he is] in the network of meanings' and '[sees] things new',[746] thus achieving greater self-awareness and retrieving long-lost meaning. This sensation of having found one's place and aim in the world is further strengthened by the 'generous' act of saving Willie's life, which leads Jack to wonder whether '[it is] better to commit evil and attempt to balance it with an exalted act than to live a resolutely neutral life'.[747] Jack Gladney's adventure in DeLillo's

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[744] Ibid., pp. 290–91.
[745] Quoted in Matthew J. Packer, '"At the Dead Center of Things" in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: Mimesis, Violence, and Religious Awe', p. 661.
[746] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 312.
[747] Ibid., p. 314.

novel, therefore, closes with the recognition that a supreme act of violence redeems his characters from the lack of purpose reigning in their lives and can constitute a more “authentic” alternative to the leisure experiences offered by capitalist society.

Similarly, Ballard, in *Cocaine Nights*, paints the picture of a world devoid of meaning, a world where neither politics nor religion succeed in providing people with meaningful experience: ‘politics are a pastime for a professional caste and fail to excite the rest of us. Religious belief demands a vast effort of imaginative and emotional commitment, difficult to muster if you’re still groggy from last night’s sleeping pill’.[748] In a society where everything is commodified and where value is only measured in terms of material qualities, even the church is represented as a functionalist space, as a ‘a white geometrical structure that was a modest replay of Corbusier’s Ronchamp Chapel, more space-age cinema than house of God’.[749] The only remaining thing that is still able to excite people is crime. Crime and transgressive behaviour, as pointed out by Bobby Crawford, the novel’s anti-hero, include ‘all activities that aren’t necessarily illegal, but provoke us and tap our need for strong emotion, quicken the nervous system and jump the synapses deadened by leisure and inaction’.[750] Despite paradoxically being a society entirely founded on leisure, Estrella de Mar is in search of more extreme leisure practices. Bobby Crawford has successfully managed to establish a new meaningful society for the community of Estrella de Mar, a community that, having suffered the consequences of the individuals’ entrenchment into guarded enclaves, now benefits from a thriving culture and from a true and renewed community spirit. Crawford’s achievements are simply the result, in his opinion, of an enlightened view of life that contemplates the constant reiteration of criminal acts as a solution for boredom. As was the case for DeLillo’s Jack, here violence, in its reminding people of a ‘more elemental world than money’,[751] plays a crucial role in increasing the individual’s self-awareness, their perception of the world they inhabit and the values that they cherish. This idea finds its most complete theorisation, in the novel, in a conversation between Charles and Crawford, where the latter argues that acts of vandalism and burglaries, paired with the police’s unsatisfying response, can wake the individual from their ‘sleep’ and encourage him/her to take on a more active role in shaping their life:

> ‘You’re more aware of yourself. Dormant areas of your mind that you haven’t visited for years become important again. You begin to reassess yourself, as you did, Charles, when that Renault

[748] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 180.
[749] Ibid., p. 137.
[750] Ibid., p. 180.
[751] Ibid., p. 81.

> caught fire. […] The process takes time. The crime wave continues – someone shits in your pool, ransacks your bedroom and plays around with your wife's underwear. Now rage and anger are not enough. You're forced to rethink yourself on every level, like primitive man confronting a hostile universe behind every tree and rock. You're aware of time, chance, the resources of your own imagination. Then someone mugs the woman next door, so you team up with the outraged husband. Crime and vandalism are everywhere. You have to rise above these mindless thugs and the oafish world they inhabit. Insecurity forces you to cherish whatever moral strengths you have, just as political prisoners memorise Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*, the dying play Bach and rediscover their faith. Parents mourning a dead child do voluntary work at a hospice.' 'We realise time is finite and take nothing for granted any more?' 'Exactly'.[752]

As it happened with *White Noise*'s imaginary encounter with the bear, this new sense of self-awareness arises from a return to the more natural state of 'primitive man' faced with 'a hostile universe'. Yet, the break-ins also contribute to creating among the residents a sense of collective purpose that transcends capitalist individualism: as pointed out by the scholar Jake Huntley, crime, by 'making everyone a potential target of criminal acts, thereby establishing an equality of victimhood', becomes a 'catalyst for community regeneration'.[753] Crawford's mission at Estrella de Mar then extends to the Residencia Costasol, an apartment complex designed to provide a crime-free existence for retired young professionals and consisting of 'empty rooms', 'white walls enclosing nothing, ready for dramas of *boredom* and *ennui*' and the '*meaningless* flicker of a thousand football matches' [my emphasis].[754] Albeit for a limited time, Crawford is again successful in awakening the Residencia from its sleep of the mind by breaking into the apartments, ransacking and vandalising them. As he remarks shortly afterwards, 'the important thing is that people are thinking again, looking hard at who they are. They're building' what Crawford defines as 'a *meaningful* world for themselves, not just fitting more locks to the front door' [my emphasis].[755] The apex of this chain of petty crimes committed by Crawford is what truly sets in motion the events of the novel, namely the arson attack that leaves five people dead during the celebrations for the Queen's birthday at the Hollingers' house. Whilst seeming apparently motiveless, the murder is revealed at the end of the novel to have been orchestrated by the entire town of Estrella de Mar with the only purpose of tying the community together through the carrying out of a majestic act of deviance:

[752] Ibid., p. 243.
[753] *J. G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions*, eds. Jeannette Baxter and Rowland Wymer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 218.
[754] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 265.
[755] Ibid., p. 293.

> A great crime was needed, something terrible and spectacular that would bind everyone together, seal them into a sense of guilt that would keep Estrella de Mar going for ever. It wasn't enough to remember Bobby Crawford and all the minor crimes he committed – the burglaries and drugs and sex-films. The people of Estrella de Mar had to commit a major crime themselves, something violent and dramatic, up on a hill where everyone could see it, so we'd all feel guilty for ever'.[756]

Here Ballard presents the guilt that derives from a spectacular violent act as one of the forces that help cement a sense of community among the residents of Estrella de Mar, who would otherwise merely consist in what Bellah et al. in *Habits of the Heart* (1985) define as a 'lifestyle enclave', whose members share 'patterns of appearance, consumption and leisure activities', but are 'not interdependent, do not act together politically and do not share a history'.[757]

If both DeLillo's and Ballard's characters embrace deviant leisure and outright violence to successfully restore meaning to their lives (at least provisionally), in *Manuale di solitudine* the author makes a more pessimistic stand on the human condition in the age of neoliberalism. We have seen in the previous section how the novel's protagonists, Professor Francesco Giardino and his wife Irene, embody two opposite forms of reaction to the discernment that the reality they live in can only cause them disappointment and suffering. Francesco's rebellion, as we have seen, is one of an intellectual struggle to come to terms with the failure of the romantic ideal that called for life to be interesting and meaningful. His rejection of material reality is evident in his seeking refuge in the private realm of his own imagination, in the leisure activity of daydreaming and the only place where platonic sentiments and love are still allowed to exist. Francesco's rebellion ultimately consists in his election of solitude, which gives the novel its title, as a way of life. For Francesco, isolation becomes the only protection from the threats and dangers of an outside world that appears 'povero, arido, senza colori' ['miserable, arid, colourless'] to him, since, as his father had taught him, 'era sempre meglio essere ostaggi piuttosto che vittime' ['it was better to be hostages than victims'].[758] The act of 'withdrawing from a society that is regarded as inauthentic and unfulfilling'[759] is, according to Rojek, a major element of what he terms 'invasive leisure', where the retreat into solitude often leads to resorting to alcohol or drugs as a way of escape. Indeed, solitude in the novel becomes a

[756] Ibid., p. 317.
[757] Quoted in Tony Veal, Chris Rojek and Susan M. Shaw, *A Handbook of Leisure Studies*, p. 522.
[758] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, pp. 124–25.
[759] Chris Rojek, *Leisure Theory: Principles and Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 186.

category for interpreting all the evils that poison the world and an explanation for wars, massacres and deaths:

> Sembrerà incredibile, ma i carri armati a Budapest, il Vietnam del napalm e il mondo arabo del petrolio (morti a milionate), le bombe che ammazzano i poveri cristi, i bambini di Beslan, tutto questo e altro ancora, tanto altro che non si finirebbe mai di elencare, tutto questo si riassume nella parola SOLITUDINE. […] Aveva ragione mio padre: meglio disegnare un cerchio e non oltrepassarlo se non volando con la fantasia. Non c'è altra scelta, non c'è altra vita.
>
> [It may seem crazy, but the tanks of Budapest, the Napalm of Vietnam and the Arabian world of oil (with the millions of Dead), and the bombs that butcher the poor souls, the Beslan children…all this and so much more, so much that you could go on and on with the list…They all come together in that one word: SOLITUDE. In the end my father was right: it is far better to draw a circle and choose not to go beyond it, unless you are soaring high in your own imagination. There is no other choice. There is no other life.][760]

In this instance, solitude rather seems to coincide with the individualistic impulses behind neoliberalism's search for profit, which remains unchallenged despite the death and destruction that it causes in many parts of the world. Francesco's rejection of the neoliberal society, as well as in his voluntary isolation, resides too in a desire for an authenticity that can bring the individual closer to 'l'essenza del vivere' ['the essence of life'].[761] The breakout of irrationality in Francesco's ordered world manifests itself in his wish for 'quando tre per quattro fa dieci o quindici' ['when three by four [to] equal ten or fifteen'],[762] and also in his dream of howling at the moon with his imaginary lover Carlotta, which ends up colliding with the inalienable mediocrity of existence:

> Il problema era di essere non uno stesso corpo ma una stessa anima, e solo ululando come i lupi, tutti e due insieme, magari mettendoci a quattro zampe uno vicino all'altra, alzando la testa verso la luna o una scheggia della luna a galla tra le chiome degli alberi e la nuvolaglia, solo così avremmo attinto l'essenza del vivere. Fermai la macchina in una radura. Discesi. Fui avvolto dall'ombra, da querce e da faggi, alberi più che centenari, alberi che esprimevano l'immobile felicità della rassegnazione. Ululai. Una, due, tre volte. Ululai con più forza. […] dove mi ero

[760] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, pp. 125–26.
[761] Ibid., p. 119.
[762] Ibid., p. 70.

> rifugiato non c’erano che la mediocrità di una automobile utilitaria e la ferocia di un bosco in cui ero soltanto io che ululavo.
>
> [The problem was not being one body, but one soul, and it was only by both of us howling together that we would have been able to glean the essence of living, perhaps by getting down on all fours next to each other and raising our head towards the moon or the sliver of moon which was floating between the foliage of the trees and the scud. I pulled over in a clearing. I got out and found myself covered in the darkness cast by the oak and beech trees. They were trees which were hundreds of years old and which expressed the static happiness of resignation. I howled. Once, twice, three times. I howled louder. […] In the place where I had taken refuge there was only the mediocrity of my economy car and the ferocity of a forest where I was the only one howling]. [763]

As already identified for De Lillo’s and Ballard’s characters, Francesco dreams of breaking his condition of solitude through a more immediate relationship with the natural world, which he craves to experience in the almost primitive, elemental act of howling. This desire for a primordial wilderness inevitably clashes with the sight of his parked car, a reminder of the inescapability of his life and solitude. In sharp contrast with Francesco’s resignation to ‘vagabondare tra i fastidi di questo mondo, mentre ardevano le fiamme dei [suoi] sogni’ [‘roam amongst the bothers of this world, whilst the flames of [his] dreams burned on’][764] is Irene’s embrace of true transgression as part of her quest for meaning. Irene initially resorts to sensation seeking on the rollercoaster of the local fairground to remedy her boredom and dissatisfaction with her daily life. The fairground represents a ‘place for controlled excitement’, an ‘escape centre in which the rules of everyday life are relaxed and the boundaries of social behaviour are rolled back’.[765] The trips on the rollercoaster indeed allow Irene to give vent to a desire for thrills and limit-experiences that is unattainable in the hyperrationality of the real world. Irene’s search for excitement in the near-death experience of the simulated fall closely resembles that frequently sought out in extreme leisure practices such as bungee jumping. The aforementioned anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen, in *Liminality and the Modern*, provides an insightful interpretation of bungee jumping that can account for the central role which extreme leisure occupies in the leisure industry of hypercapitalist societies. Thomassen’s understanding

[763] Ibid., p. 119.
[764] Ibid., p. 74.
[765] Chris Rojek, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), p. 165.

of bungee jumping is that of a liminal experience, of something that, according to Victor Turner's definition, lies 'betwixt and between' social norms, and is lived 'in the cracks and holes in the structures of official society'.[766] As we have seen, during the liminal phase, as is the case for the rites of passage of traditional societies, what is normally forbidden is permitted, hierarchies are subverted and the boundaries between life and death become more permeable. If Turner had already attempted to apply his theory of liminality to industrialised societies by coining the term 'liminoid' to denote the modern version of the liminal that can be found in leisure, Thomassen extends the concept to develop the notion of 'limivoid'. The 'limivoid' includes all those experiences that betray the need for a 'desperate search of experience in a world of ontological excess'.[767] Thomassen's argument is that, whilst the rites of traditional societies presuppose a change of status after the liminal phase (for example the passage into adulthood), the rites of our societies are devoid of such transformation. Jumping into the void leads to nothing but the void itself. In Thomassen's words:

> It is a feeling of danger, a culture-specific elaboration of falling or flying, and clearly a deliberately provoked near-death experience. It is a jump into the abyss: a jump into the void – and that is it. It is fun, of course, a short laugh, a moment of playful encounter with death; and then back to normality. […] The jump is into a void that is simply…a bottomless void with no other meaning.[768]

In Rugarli's novel, Irene makes a similar remark about her time on the rollercoaster, when she claims that beyond the jump into the void, there is nothing other than the void itself:

> Fortuna che le montagne russe funzionavano nel modo migliore, e non so quante volte mi lasciai travolgere dall'amplesso del vuoto. Non era mai vuoto abbastanza, tanto è vero che esclamavo 'Aeroplano!' come in un viaggio nel cielo, solo che un viaggio ti conduce da una parte o da un'altra, e invece dopo il vuoto non c'è che il vuoto, come io mi sentivo nel cuore.
>
> [Luckily the rollercoaster was up-and-running again, and I don't know how many times I let myself be overwhelmed by the embrace of the void. It was never empty enough, though, to the extent that I would yell 'Airplane!' as though I was flying in the sky, except a journey usually

[766] Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime*, p. 9.
[767] Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*, p. 169.
[768] Ibid., p. 188.

takes you from one place to another, whilst here beyond the void there was only more void, which was how I felt in my own heart].[769]

Irene, who looks for 'limivoid' experiences in the liminal space of the fairground, can herself be considered a liminal subject. Her husband defines her as 'una figlia dell'aria [il cui] posto era nell'aria' ['a daughter of the air [whose] place was up in the sky'] and as 'straniera su questa miserabile terra (perché lei era una straniera, anzi una clandestina)' ['a stranger on this miserable Earth (for she was a stranger, or rather a stowaway)'],[770] which connotes her as an in-between creature who does not fully belong in the life that she leads. However, Irene's simulated encounter with death in the fairground – ultimately a by-product of capitalist culture – still proves to be insufficient in restoring meaning to her life. Extreme experiences make one long for increasingly more sensational ones and Irene's transgressions come to involve her murdering several of her neighbours. Murder in *Manuale di solitudine*, as was the case in Ballard's *Cocaine Nights*, is a motiveless leisure activity, as pointed out by the grotesquely named Dr. Decubito,[771] a suspect in the initial stages of the investigation into the chain of deaths that has struck the building. Decubito reprimands Magistrate Garofano for his lack of understanding of modern crime by blaming the investigator's old-fashioned ideas:

'Lei non arriverà da nessuna parte, finché va a caccia del movente. La sua mentalità è all'antica, molto all'antica. Lei pretende che ogni causa abbia un effetto e ogni effetto una causa. Non è più così. Navighiamo nel mezzo di un mare in tempesta, senza bussola, e senza sapere dove andare. La sola filosofia possibile è godersela, fingendo di essere immortali'.

['You will not get anywhere whilst you keep looking for motive. Your way of reasoning is old-fashioned. Really old-fashioned. You expect every cause to have an effect, and every effect to have a cause. This is no longer the case. We are sailing in the midst of stormy waters without a compass and without knowing where we are going. The only possible philosophy is to enjoy it, to pretend that we are immortal'].[772]

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[769] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, p. 186.
[770] Ibid., p. 213.
[771] The Italian 'decubito' translates as 'decubitus' or 'bedsore'. Interestingly, several of Rugarli's characters, such as Atroce ('atrocious, terrible'), bear grotesque names that point to that ridiculing of death that will be discussed in the following pages.
[772] Ibid., p. 101.

Killing becomes a 'way to feel alive', a stratagem to fight boredom in a world that has lost its points of reference, as was the case with Jack Gladney in *White Noise*. Shortly afterwards, the building's porter, Nicola Atroce, puts the blame on the society of mass media and unbridled consumption for the ever-growing presence of meaningless murder:

> Oggi si pensa entro i limiti segnati dallo schermo del televisore. Si rimane a casa, ma è come vagare in un bosco che non ha uscita: non si sa più che cosa è bello e che cosa è degno. […] ancora oggi si uccide per gelosia, per vendetta, per denaro, ma si può uccidere anche per niente, per curiosità, per noia, per aggiungere l'assassinio alle precedenti esperienze.
>
> ['Nowadays our thoughts are confined within the four edges of a TV screen. You stay at home, but it's like walking around a forest with no way out. You just don't know what's beautiful and what's worthy. Even today we kill for jealousy, for revenge, for money, but it's also possible to kill someone for no apparent reason, out of curiosity, out of boredom, or to add murder to your list of priors'].[773]

Irene, when finally admitting to being responsible for the series of deaths, justifies her actions by paradoxically defining herself, the murderer, as 'una vittima della società dei consumi e del polverone mediatico' ['a victim of consumer society and of the media circus'].[774] Murder therefore becomes a pastime like any other, a manifestation of what Rojek has termed 'mephitic leisure'[775], which denotes those forms of entertainment that envisage the harming of another individual as a primary component of the fun. In this respect, we will see in the following sections how murder is further trivialised in *Manuale di solitudine* and how it becomes part of everyday normality. For this reason, even homicide eventually fails to provide a durable escape from boredom and to give meaning to Irene's life, who laments how 'continuav[a] a non sentir[si] del tutto viva' ['she still did not feel completely alive'][776] and returns to the fairground to lose herself in that 'sensazione stupenda […] di straniamento e di fuga dal mondo' ['wonderful sensation of estrangement, of getaway from the world'].[777] If the characters of *White Noise* and *Cocaine Nights* still appear to believe that committing a violent act could succeed, albeit in a negative way, in helping them overcome the fear of death or endless boredom, *Manuale di solitudine*'s more resigned and defeatist view suggests that what for

[773] Ibid., pp. 101–02.
[774] Ibid., p. 181.
[775] Chris Rojek, *Leisure and Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).
[776] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, p. 183.
[777] Ibid., p. 147.

DeLillo and Ballard was only an apocalyptic vision of the future, for Rugarli has become an undeniable certainty. Rugarli's greater pessimism could be interpreted here as resulting from its later publication date (2015) and, therefore, from its dealing with a world that has seen first-hand the shortcomings of the neoliberal economic model – which culminated in the 2008 financial crisis – but also its unwavering hegemony post-crisis.

4. The spectacle of violence: public enjoyment of private tragedy and the mediatisation of the violent event

In this section, I look at the ways in which violence and death are spectacularised and turned into objects designed for public entertainment in neoliberal society. Although not exclusive to contemporary culture,[778] it is only logical that, in a world dominated by the never-ending commodification of each and every aspect of our lives, hurt and humiliation too have become products to be consumed by avid audiences and, therefore, have become an integral part of leisure activity. In his work *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime*, Presdee describes how fascinated he was with the extreme violence taking place in a boxing ring:

> I was horrified several years ago at my own emotional reactions to a world championship boxing match that ended in dramatic scenes of death and dying. I realised then that what I had been enjoying were two men systematically, and legally, beating each other to death. If indeed I had recorded the fight, as no doubt millions did, I would now be in possession of my own 'snuff' movie, to replay at my own convenience and for my continual enjoyment whenever I felt the need. The question I asked myself was how had I come to be sucked in by the razzmatazz and hype of the promoters, so that I would sit down with a drink by my side and get excited by watching a man being beaten to death.[779]

From weather disasters broadcast on reality TV to programmes specifically conceived for the public humiliation and shaming of others (we can think, for example, of the British 'Jeremy Kyle Show'), real violence is increasingly being 'manufactured for enjoyment through a sophisticated and commercially organised global industry'.[780] The success of such programmes is in itself the clearest indicator of a widespread craving for a way out of the hyperrationality of daily lives, for deviant pleasures and transgressions that remain 'without remorse, without

[778] We can think, for example, about the gladiatorial spectacles in ancient Rome, where violence was almost offered as a "gift" to the Roman people.
[779] Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime*, p. 69.
[780] Ibid.

punishment and without sanction'.[781] All this with the additional benefit that these transgressions are to be enjoyed in the privacy of our homes, away from any real danger and without the 'pain of effort'.[782]

White Noise and *Cocaine Nights* abound with episodes where violence and death are spectacularised for the entertainment of individuals, families and crowds. At times, as in the case of Presdee's story of the boxing match, DeLillo's and Ballard's spectator is rather unsettled by the deviant nature of their desire. In most instances, however, their secret seduction with the spectacle of violence makes them an accomplice in the performance of the deviant act itself. In *White Noise*, Heinrich, Jack Gladney's adolescent son, is the character who, more than any other, embodies the contemporary thirst for violent displays. In all three episodes that I will refer to here, Heinrich shows great enthusiasm for the scenes that he himself witnesses and does not conceal his wish for more extreme experiences. The first occasion when this happens is at the scene of a car accident, where the sight of wounded bodies, blood and first aiders stirs feelings of excitement in him, to the surprise of Jack, who remains silently perplexed:

> Heinrich kept watching through the rear window, taking up his binoculars as the scene dwindled in the distance. He described for us in detail the number and placement of bodies, the skid marks, the vehicular damage. When the wreck was no longer visible, he talked about everything that had happened since the air-raid siren at dinner. He spoke enthusiastically, with a sense of appreciation for the vivid and unexpected. I thought we'd all occupied the same mental state, subdued, worried, confused. It hadn't occurred to me that one of us might find these events brilliantly stimulating. I looked at him in the rearview mirror. He sat slouched in the camouflage jacket with Velcro closures, steeped happily in disaster. […] I'd never heard him go on about something with such spirited *enjoyment* [emphasis added]. He was practically giddy. […] His voice betrayed a craving for terrible things.[783]

Heinrich *enjoys* what would normally be considered the upsetting scene of a car accident. Its nature as an 'unexpected' event even makes it 'stimulating' and generates feelings of enthusiasm and appreciation in the boy.

A second episode that epitomises this desire for spectacular disasters in *White Noise* is that of the fire at the mental hospital. The night that the town's insane asylum burns down, Jack

[781] Ibid., p. 73.
[782] Ibid., p. 80.
[783] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp.122–23.

and Heinrich, along with several other men with their adolescent boys, drive there to admire the spectacle of the fire. Events such as this, as Jack/DeLillo observes, are well suited to fathers and sons 'seek[ing] fellowship', providing a 'conversational wedge'[784] for normally awkward dialogues: 'There is equipment to appraise, the technique of firemen to discuss and criticize. The manliness of firefighting – the virility of fires, one might say – suits the kind of laconic dialogue that fathers and sons can undertake without awkwardness or embarrassment'.[785] In a time where consumerism and commercialism are no longer capable of creating meaning, their ability to sustain true kinship bonds and community has also waned. Although commerce produces what Thomas Ferraro defines as an 'aura of connectedness among individuals' and 'an illusion of kinship', this community is merely a 'transiently functional'[786] one. The spectacle of violence, on the other hand, appears to be able to create 'occasions of symbolic contiguity'[787] between individuals. The scene is further enriched by the grand entrance of a woman dressed in a nightgown, a patient 'so lost in dreams and furies that the fire around her head seemed almost incidental'.[788] Jack and Heinrich's reaction is that of gasping, 'almost in appreciation' of the 'powerful and real'[789] nature of this apparition of madness. At this point, Heinrich points out how he could just continue looking at the blaze for an endless time, as if he were watching a fire in a fireplace, and refers to the evening as his 'first burning building',[790] which makes one prefigure an intention to go and watch more burning buildings in the future. The enjoyment of the quasi-theatrical spectacle of the burning hospital, though, quickly comes to an end when a chemical smell suddenly permeates the air, the smell of 'acrid matter' (possibly insulation burning) which briskly interrupts what, to the watchers, had been an 'ancient, spacious and terrible drama', but which has now been compromised by the 'small and nasty intrusion'[791] of something unnatural. The spectators almost feel betrayed, as their private encounter with the elemental powers of nature is cut down by the synthetic appearance of a sharp and bitter smell that forces them to leave in disgust. The people's disappointment is also the result of a "breach" in the unspoken agreement that wants the spectator to be untouched by the violence that he witnesses, as Presdee points out with regards to television violence, where

[784] Ibid., p. 239.
[785] Ibid.
[786] Quoted in Karen Weekes, 'Consuming and Dying: Meaning and the Marketplace in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*' p. 294.
[787] Jeremy Green, 'Disaster Footage: Spectacles of Violence in DeLillo's Fiction', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 45.3 (1999), p. 574.
[788] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 239.
[789] Ibid.
[790] Ibid., p. 240.
[791] Ibid.

we can experience ‘the pain of privations, the suffering of war, the real fear of violence and crime’[792] without directly participating in them and all from the comfort of our sofas. If in the first two incidents the protagonists were permitted to enjoy the scenes of deviance from their privileged locations at a distance, it is when this distance is reduced that the spectator is left with surprise and disappointment. Again, in the second part of the book, which is entitled ‘The airborne toxic event’ and deals with the effects of a black cloud caused by the chemical spillage of a derailed train, the fear and horror at the health risks and dangers brought about by the cloud are mixed with ‘a sense of awe that bordered on the religious’.[793] The black cloud is at the same time ‘a terrible thing to see’, for all the potential of destruction and death that it carries, but it is also ‘spectacular’ in its ‘cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and wilful rhythms’ and in its being ‘part of the grandness of a sweeping event’.[794] The cloud’s appeal consists precisely in its grandeur, in its life-threatening qualities that make it an exciting sight. Despite the chemical nature of the cloud, this still seems to possess the attributes of a thrilling natural disaster, which brings the individuals closer to the thought of death and, therefore, closer to nature in an utterly artificial society.

Cocaine Nights features very similar situations to DeLillo’s, where violence and death are a spectacle to be consumed and enjoyed as leisure. Ballard’s spectacles of violence, however, far from being improvised events, become deliberately staged theatre performances organised by “generous” benefactors for the collective entertainment of the community. In this manner, for example, a rape in a Porsche becomes an evening show for the voyeuristic gaze of the rich residents of Estrella de Mar. Charles, the novel’s protagonist, is ready to come to the aid of the victim, when he notices the presence of a row of parked cars directly facing the Porsche:

> Several of the front seats were occupied by the drivers and their passengers, all in evening dress, faces concealed by the lowered sun vizors. They had watched the rape attempt without intervening, like a gallery audience at an exclusive private view.[795]

When describing examples of what he terms ‘wild leisure’ (which consists in ‘sporadic, opportunistic attempts to escape from social scripts that are perceived as limiting’[796]), Rojek points out that whilst ‘for many, transgressing and doing wrong is inherently pleasurable […]

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[792] Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime*, p. 71.
[793] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 127.
[794] Ibid.
[795] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 57.
[796] Chris Rojek, *Leisure Theory: Principles and Practices*, p. 186.

for others the act of observing these performances voyeuristically is exciting'.[797] In Estrella de Mar, rape has become a commodity to be enjoyed in evening dresses as if at the opening night of a theatre performance, with the watchers safely sitting in their private boxes. These spectators merely view the rape they are watching as a distant show, which leaves no room for sympathy with the victim. As noted by Gasiorek, 'spectatordom or […] voyeurism […] points to a derealisation of the external world and a depersonalisation of the other'[798] which well accounts for the spectators' ability to enjoy the violence without participating emotionally in the act.

In the same fashion as DeLillo's characters' fascination with fire at the mental hospital, Ballard too is enthralled by the potential for entertainment held by ritual burning. As DeLillo's characters were drawn to watch the 'bonfire spectacle' at the asylum, so too does the town on the Costa del Sol gather to revel in the burning of a speedboat. After stealing and joyriding in the boat, a mysterious figure (most likely the tennis instructor Bobby Crawford) sets fire to it to provide a 'piece of night-theatre, a water-borne spectacular to perk up the restaurant trade'.[799] The reaction of the onlookers is one of admiration for the unexpected 'performance':[800] 'The harbour road was packed with cheering spectators who had stepped from the nightclubs and restaurants to enjoy the display, eyes gleaming like their summer jewellery'.[801] Once again, fire is the protagonist of what Ballard calls 'one of the modern world's pagan rites',[802] the torching of the automobile. Charles's car is burned up before his eyes, witnessed by a group of young women dancing at a nearby nightclub. No reactions of disdain follow the blaze, but a pool party begins instead as an 'excited response to the inferno',[803] which Charles is himself tempted to join. The deviant spectacles created by Crawford are exploited as tools which can remove the constraints and address the failings of a hyper-organised society in providing new meaning for the spectators.

Rugarli's irreverence goes even further than Ballard's and affects the delicate moment of death. Although it can be safely argued that *Manuale di solitudine* does not systematically spectacularise violence (certainly not in the same proportions as *White Noise* and *Cocaine Nights*), Rugarli on one occasion lapses into the description of the spectacular death of Mrs Jole Bernasconi. Jole, who is electrocuted by her hairdryer whilst having a bath on the first day

[797] Ibid.
[798] Andrzej Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard*, p. 182.
[799] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 146.
[800] Ibid.
[801] Ibid., p. 144.
[802] Ibid., p. 159.
[803] Ibid.

of Carnival, dies an almost triumphal and colourfully *carnivalesque* death. The victim is virtually reduced to food and the author ironically lingers on the most sensuous aspects of death, such as the smells, the colours and the sounds to create a grandiose performance. Jole's mother-in-law is the improvised, but fascinated, spectator of her death, as she contemplates the ritual in awe:

> Fu questione di attimi. Le dita di Jole si rattrappirono e si anchilosarono sull'apparecchio, spandendo fetore di carne bruciata e assumendo a poco a poco colore e sembianza di carbonella. L'acqua della vasca cominciò a bollire, mentre l'infelice Jole rovesciò gli occhi, e con il capo si inabissò al di sotto del gorgoglio. Emersero i piedi che puntarono verso il cielo e, in mancanza, verso il soffitto. Il brodo, in cui la sventurata stava cuocendo, si caricò di colori e odori sempre più densi, tanto che la suocera contemplò affascinata senza darsi premura di sollecitare i soccorsi. Purtroppo il fon, precipitato nell'acqua, mandava brontolii di frittura, stridori, eruttazioni e spetezzamenti. Ne seguiva che la professoressa seguitava a lessare, e oramai al completamento del rito mancavano solo una patata, una carota e un sedano.
>
> ['It was all over in a matter of seconds. Jole's fingers stiffened around the grip of the hairdryer, sending up the odour of burned meat whilst her fingers slowly but surely came to resemble charcoal in colour and in appearance. The water in the tub began to boil over, whilst the unfortunate Jole's eyes rolled to the back of her head and her head sank just below the brim of the bathtub. Her feet sank below the water line and pointed towards the sky, or rather the ceiling of the bathroom. The stew in which the unlucky victim was cooking started to burst with ever stronger smells and colours, to the extent that her mother-in-law contemplated the scene with a sense of fascination without rushing to phone the emergency services. Unfortunately, the hairdryer, which had previously fallen into the water, now began to hiss as though frying, and also emitted a series of shrieks, belches and wheezes. As a result, the teacher began to boil, and the only thing missing to complete the ritual was a potato, a carrot and a stick of celery'].[804]

If death, as we have seen, has been progressively distanced from everyday life, Rugarli's *carnivalesque* depiction of Jole's departure has the effect of bringing the reader closer to its materiality and naturality.

In the three novels, however, the appeal of death and violence as objects for spectacle is also intimately tied to the more general process of their aestheticisation. Their authors indulge in descriptions of violence that emphasise the aesthetic qualities inherent to the brutality of evil,

[804] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, pp. 59–60.

whether it be visual or sensory. DeLillo's tableau of the aforementioned car accident is defined as a 'formal composition', a piece of figurative artwork, with the balance of bodies caught in the light as in an altarpiece and the Gladney's family playing the part of the spectators at an art exhibition:

> Two people were bloody. There was blood on a smashed window. Blood soaked upward through newly fallen snow. Drops of blood speckled a tan handbag. The scene of injured people, medics, smoking steel, all washed in a strong and eerie light, took on the eloquence of a formal composition. We passed silently by, feeling curiously reverent, even uplifted by the sight of the heaped cars and fallen people.[805]

Towards the end of the novel, upon shooting Willie Mink, Jack's comments are ones that aestheticise Willie's feelings, first his fear at the sight of the gun and then his pain when pierced by Jack's bullet. Both fear and pain are denoted as 'beautiful'[806] and Jack is pervaded by the almost ecstatic pleasure of participating in the scene. One more form of aestheticisation of violence in DeLillo's novel is what I would call an 'aesthetics of blasphemy', which occurs in the very final pages of the novel. After the attempted murder of Willie Mink, Jack runs to a surgery clinic in an attempt to save Willie's life and crown his exalted gesture with one final act of compassion. The surgery is run by a group of German nuns who no longer believe in heaven, angels and saints, nor in redemption. They live abiding by traditions not out of genuine faith but because, in their opinion, only their simulated beliefs will prevent the world from collapsing. Jack's reaction to this revelation is one of denial as he refuses to accept that not even a nun believes in her own religion anymore. At this point, the nun treating Jack's wounds, Sister Hermann Marie, bursts into a long and ostensibly blasphemous invective against him. Incomprehensible to Jack, as she vehemently recites in German, the blasphemy nonetheless appears to him as endowed with a sort of aesthetic charm:

> She said something in German. I failed to understand. She spoke again, at some length, pressing her face toward mine, the words growing harsher, wetter, more guttural. Her eyes showed a terrible delight in my incomprehension. She was spraying me with German. A storm of words. She grew more animated as the speech went on. A gleeful vehemence entered her voice. She spoke faster, more expressively. Blood vessels flared in her eyes and face. I began to detect a

[805] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 122.
[806] Ibid., p. 312.

> cadence, a measured beat. She was reciting something, I decided. Litanies, hymns, catechisms. The mysteries of the rosary perhaps. Taunting me with scornful prayer. The odd thing is I found it beautiful.[807]

In an article on *White Noise*, the scholar Cornel Bonca claims that Jack finds the speech beautiful as 'once again, he has glimpsed the quick of the human death-fear, heard the naked cry for pity implicit in all human speech, heard the offering of language which is stripped of all meaning except the desire to bridge the lonely distances'.[808] However, Jack's interpretation of the vehement speech, as he *decides* that those incomprehensible words must be part of a litany, seems to point towards a desire, on his part, to make a connection between religion and scorn, to find beauty in blasphemy.

As for Ballard, in an interview with the author, Jeannette Baxter defines his work as 'a sustained critique of the aestheticization of violence within contemporary history and culture'[809] with reference to the frequency with which aestheticised forms of violence appear in his novels. The auditory beauty found by Jack in the sounds of the desecrating prayer has its sensory counterpart in Charles's vaguely perverted fascination with the 'perfume of [his] own strangulation'[810] in *Cocaine Nights*. On one of Charles's first evenings in his brother's apartment in Estrella de Mar, a disguised Bobby Crawford breaks into the flat and almost strangles him, intentionally leaving him in shock but alive. The strangulation attempt, which leaves Charles seconds away from his own death, unexpectedly entangles him in a labyrinth of smells that 'embrace […] him like a forbidden memory'.[811] 'The faint scent of bath gel' worn by the assassin, which 'still clung to [his] skin',[812] incarnates the aestheticisation of an olfactory stimulus that is deeply associated with a violent event, thus symbolising the aestheticisation of violence itself.

In Rugarli's novel, on the other hand, the aestheticisation of violence occurs on a theoretical rather than a material and sensorial level. In *Manuale di solitudine*, during one of Francesco's dialogues with the 'Comerzi', a group of fictional interlocutors that populate his imagination, they provocatively point out the intrinsic beauty lying in the carrying out of evil:

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[807] Ibid., p. 320.
[808] Cornel Bonca, 'Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species', p. 38.
[809] *J.G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Jeannette Baxter (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), p. 126.
[810] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 100.
[811] Ibid.
[812] Ibid.

> La dannazione di vivere, portandosi addosso la propria condanna a morte. E allora non c'è che il peccato, il rifiuto delle regole, l'offesa all'ordine costituito. Se la sorte comune è la fine, almeno andare al patibolo da ribelli. Rubare, mentire, fornicare con chi non si deve, uccidere. La bellezza del male.
>
> ['It's the curse of living: you have to carry your own death sentence around with you. And so the only things left are sin, breaking the rules and rebelling against the establishment. If death is man's common destiny, then at least let's go to the execution block as rebels. Steal, lie, sleep with people you shouldn't, kill. The beauty of evil'].[813]

The 'beauty of evil', whose transgressive character is implicit in the oxymoronic nature of the expression itself, here comes to embody the rebellion against the mediocrity and finiteness that characterise the human condition. This culture of the aesthetics of violence finds its climax in the ever more frequent mediatisation of death and violent events through 'the various sound, print and visual media outlets of television, radio, video and the Internet'.[814] As previously mentioned with reference to Presdee's theory, the audience of the spectacle of violence is only a distant one, protected behind the glass of a screen and, therefore, untouchable; both physically and emotionally detached from the violence flowing before their eyes. The media provide us with a very particular kind of abnormal leisure experience: they allow us to 'play at being deviant, at being collectively evil and to share a collective thrill that stands outside of reality'[815] without the inconvenience of taking part in that deviance. In the 'self-destructive cocktail of capitalism'[816] made up of commodification and scientific rationality, the media represent the privileged place to give vent to repressed desires and to the need for transgression: they are a 'bridge to a displaced world of irrationality and a chance where our subjectivity runs riot'.[817] *White Noise* is the novel that, among the three considered, best exemplifies the extent to which postmodern society has mediatised violence for the sake of public entertainment. The intriguing power of natural disasters broadcast on reality TV and the reasons behind our fascination with them are at the centre of a long discussion between Jack Gladney and his fellow professors. In the following passage, Jack describes his family's reaction to the powerful scenes of death shown on TV as a moment filled with excitement:

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[813] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine* p. 70.
[814] Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime*, p. 70.
[815] Ibid., p. 74.
[816] Ibid., p. 85.
[817] Ibid.

> That night, a Friday, we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese. There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. Heinrich was not sullen, I was not bored. Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death. Babette tried to switch to a comedy series about a group of racially mixed kids who build their own communications satellite. She was startled by the force of our objection. We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping.[818]

When Jack discusses this episode with his colleagues, professor Alfonse Stompanato remarks how being attracted to such programmes is a perfectly normal reaction whose *raison d'être* lies in our need to 'break up the incessant bombardment of information' since 'only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them'.[819] The astonishing lack of emotional empathy in the disaster on the part of the Gladneys can be explained as resulting from a detachment from the catastrophic event enabled by the particular style of the documentary. As Presdee explains:

> The product becomes alienated from the process so that images of people dying in weather disasters, when seen in entertainment-style weather programmes, are about the inevitability of death and the excitement of observing it, rather than as images that say something about tragedy and trauma.[820]

These producers of violent entertainment actively search for extreme experiences to increase their profits by feeding their hungry-for-deviance audience with ever newer thrills. In another passage from *White Noise*, the novel thematises the way in which these news broadcasters are scouting for tragedy for the benefit of their faithful spectators. A news reporter is at a crime scene where a body has been found by the police and the general expectation is that the recovery of more bodies (or perhaps the many victims of a pogrom) is imminent. The reporter grows increasingly impatient as airtime passes and no other body is unearthed, as do the thousands of people (among whom are Jack and Heinrich) who await their fair share of catastrophe from their sitting rooms:

[818] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 64.
[819] Ibid., p. 66.
[820] Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime*, p. 70.

> The sense of failed expectations was total. A sadness and emptiness hung over the scene. A dejection, a sorry gloom. We felt it ourselves, my son and I, quietly watching. It was in the room, seeping into the air from pulsing streams of electrons. The reporter seemed at first merely apologetic. But as he continued to discuss the absence of mass graves, he grew increasingly forlorn, gesturing at the diggers, shaking his head, almost ready to plead with us for sympathy and understanding. I tried not to feel disappointed.[821]

However, only the most horrific and spectacular happenings are considered worthy of the undivided attention of the media, whilst other equally tragic events do not make the news simply because they are not shocking enough for the public. The literary critic Tom LeClair calls this the 'anesthetizing effect of televised death',[822] to describe the audiences' inurement to the catastrophes seen on television resulting from continued exposure. After the airborne toxic event, a man carrying a small TV set gives a long speech in front of the people that had to evacuate the city to escape the black cloud and resentfully remarks how there is no news report about their tragedy:

> There's nothing on network. […] Not a word, not a picture. On the Glassboro channel we rate fifty-two words by actual count. No film footage, no live report. Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore? […] Shouldn't the streets be crawling with cameramen and soundmen and reporters? Shouldn't we be yelling out the window at them, "Leave us alone, we've been through enough, get out of here with your vile instruments of intrusion". Do they have to have two hundred dead, rare disaster footage, before they come flocking to a given site in their helicopters and network limos? […] The airborne toxic event is a horrifying thing. Our fear is enormous. Even if there hasn't been great loss of life, don't we deserve some attention for our suffering, our human worry, our terror? Isn't fear news?[823]

When extreme experiences turn into norm, violence loses its impact on people's consciousness. As argued by Thomassen, the media industry can do nothing but keep up with our incessant need for stronger emotions in our daily quest for meaning:

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[821] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 222–23.
[822] Michael Hardin, 'Postmodernism's Desire for Simulated Death: Andy Warhol's Car Crashes, J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 13.1 (2002), p. 43.
[823] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 162.

> We don’t even react anymore when we see people killed in film; it is even funny, but also a bit boring, unless of course a move to some new kind of extreme violence or evilness, or ‘artistic’ and creative ways of killing with smart weapons, or inflicting new degrees of physical or psychological suffering on the innocent victim.[824]

Sometimes, too, consuming violence through the spectacles offered by the media is no longer enough and from consumers we ourselves become producers of violent entertainment. The web is saturated with amateur videos displaying violence being proudly perpetrated on innocent animals, bullying in school, teenage sex (including non-consensual), fights and so on, which are shared and re-posted countless times on social media. And although such videos naturally raise indignation among the majority of viewers, they continue to be produced, posted, shared and consumed in an endless cycle that highlights the voyeuristic but hypocritical nature of our society. Presdee talks about a ‘dilemma’ faced by our society: ‘whether to intervene in social acts or to film them’.[825] In the deviant community of Ballard’s *Cocaine Nights*, filming violence taking place becomes almost a social duty and through the ‘voyeuristic gaze of [the] camera’, ‘events and emotions are translated into distanced representations’.[826] As part of the recreational activities organised by the residents of Estrella de Mar, the ‘film club’ of the town decides to shoot a pornographic video starring the residents themselves. When the scene is over and the women are getting dressed (one as a bride and the others as bridesmaids), two men unexpectedly break into the set and in turn rape the ‘bride’. The photographer continues to film through the violence, apparently untouched by what is happening and without intervening. The film ends with the camera moving around the bed in a ‘bizarre attempt at an artistic finale’[827] and showing the bruised bride in the act of wiping her eyes with a pillow, rubbing her arms and knees and finally smiling at the camera, like a ‘brave child swallowing an unpleasant medicine for her own good’.[828] Filming violence ensures the availability of the spectacle of violence for the ‘later viewing pleasure’[829] of a potentially much wider audience.

One final aspect of the mediatisation of violence in the novels considered that I would like to mention is the fact that in *White Noise* (and partially in *Cocaine Nights*, although much more so in other Ballardian novels) its mediatisation is what guarantees the authenticity of an event. In a 1993 interview, DeLillo claimed that ‘we’ve reached a point where things exist so they

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[824] Bjørn Thomassen*, Liminality and the Modern*, p. 154.
[825] Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime*, p. 74.
[826] Andrzej Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard*, p. 72.
[827] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 127.
[828] Ibid.
[829] Andrzej Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard*, p. 182.

can be filmed and played and replayed'.[830] In *White Noise*, reality needs to be filmed in order to simply exist and to acquire meaning. One prime example of this is the episode of the averted plane crash. Jack is at the airport to pick up his teenage daughter, when the rumour spreads that a plane has almost fallen from the sky following a mechanical failure. The passengers, though, make it unharmed to the airport, where one survivor recounts their terrible adventure in front of a large crowd. Despite the lengthy descriptions of the averted disaster and the fear that accompanied it, the man's only audience are the airport's travellers. Again, as in the case of the airborne toxic event, there is no media coverage of the incident, as fear is not 'news enough' to deserve the journalists' attention. What is significant, here, is Jack's daughter Bee's comment: "'Where's the media?' she said. 'There is no media in Iron City'. 'They went through all that for nothing?'"[831] The passengers' story has no meaning, no purpose if it has not succeeded in attracting any reporter to the scene, if it has not been, in a word, mediatised. In DeLillo's world, the media legitimises reality and not the other way around. As noted by John Duvall, in DeLillo's postmodern world 'television, the intertextual grid of electronic images, creates the real'[832] and 'the only thing that confirms the reality of experience is its construction as media event'.[833] In *Cocaine Nights*, the camera lens is the only device capable of reassuring the characters of their existence. In talking about the Residencia Costasol, Crawford observes how 'there's a kind of amnesia at work here – an amnesia of self. People literally forget who they are. The camera lens needs to be their memory'.[834] As argued by Gasiorek, 'in this hyperreal domain of simulation the camera alone provides the sense of reality required for identity to sustain itself'.[835]

5. The routinisation of the extreme and the trivialisation of death as the ultimate transgression

In this section, I will look at the ways in which, when violence and death are repeatedly offered as a valuable source of entertainment, whether as constituents of extreme leisure practices or as mediatised spectacle, they eventually undergo a process of banalisation that integrates them

[830] Quoted in Jeremy Green, 'Disaster Footage: Spectacles of Violence in DeLillo's Fiction', p. 582.
[831] DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 92.
[832] John N. Duvall, 'The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*', p. 131.
[833] Ibid., p. 134.
[834] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 262.
[835] Andrzej Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard*, p. 181.

into normal social life. Among the distinctions wiped out by postmodernism, 'the very boundary between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, between seriousness and play, is systematically becoming more and more porous'.[836] Sights and experiences that would have normally provoked stronger reactions now fail to attract the attention of the distracted contemporary individual. As pointed out by René Girard, 'the monotonous regularity of such violence over time diminishes its power to create meaning',[837] thus causing the need for ever more exciting and extreme experiences. If death, for example, should constitute an exceptional event in the individual's life, the continuous exposure to the (often violent) death of others in documentaries and films has eventually caused '"extreme acts" like sexuality and violence [to become] increasingly trivialized as part of everyday normality and leisure'.[838] Or, as noted by Banu Helvacioglu in an article on DeLillo's treatment of death, 'we have […] started parting ways with the actuality of our own death, distracted by the daily televised coverage of wars and natural disasters. We have become absent-minded enough to conflate death as a literary and theoretical theme with the paradoxical nature of death itself'.[839] If both DeLillo and Rugarli (less so Ballard) deal with their characters' tormented relationship with the thought of personal death (as we can see, for instance, in Jack and Babette's obsessive fear of death or in Francesco and Irene's long reflections about it), their novels abound with trivialised examples of death and normalised violence.

The first way in which death is trivialised in these works is in its reduction to the status of an unexceptional event. In *White Noise*, Jack's colleague Murray compares the nature of death in the urban context with that of smaller towns and states how 'in cities no one notices specific dying. Dying is a quality of the air'.[840] The relatively low importance that somebody's death has in the city is directly linked, according to Murray, to the anonymity allowed and promoted by urban life, where a name is not automatically associated with a face or a quality. In a town, on the other hand, 'there are houses, plants in bay windows. People notice dying better. The dead have faces, automobiles. If you don't know a name, you know a street name, a dog's name. "He drove an orange Mazda"'.[841] And yet, despite Murray's conviction that provincial dying does not 'depress the soul […] for several lives to come'[842] as much as city dying would,

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[836] Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern*, p. 2.
[837] Quoted in Matthew J. Packer, '"At the Dead Center of Things" in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: Mimesis, Violence, and Religious Awe', p. 657.
[838] Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern*, p. 2.
[839] Banu Helvacioglu, '"Modern Death" in Don DeLillo: A Parody of Life?', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 48.2 (2015), p. 189.
[840] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 38.
[841] Ibid.
[842] Ibid.

what marks the individuality of a person in towns are the superficial attributes of name, residence and the car they used to drive, a fact that points to a commodification of human relationships and to a lack of knowledge of the person beyond these material attributes. Death itself, in another passage from the novel, is portrayed as having been commercialised. Jack reveals how his relationship with doctors has long been informed by the fear that they will lose interest in his life, that they will 'instruct their receptionists to call other names before [his], take [his] dying for granted'[843], which in other words signifies the dread of others trivialising his own death. In consumer society, one patient's life is potentially more valuable than another's, as if the world was divided into class A and class B patients.

This point is curiously similar to one raised in another of Rugarli's works, a short-story entitled 'Il paramedico' ('The Paramedic'), which was published in his collection *Il punto di vista del mostro* in 1989. In this story, the protagonist, who works in a hospital where he transports corpses from the various wings of the building to the morgue, often discusses with his colleagues the discretionary nature of the medical profession, in its faculty to decide which patients are worthy of being treated (possibly according to an assessment of their economic value) and which instead are not. In *Manuale di solitudine*, instead, death is presented as something irrelevant, as made explicit by the comments that Irene makes in the course of her dialogues with her husband:

> Prima sali e poi scendi, come sulle montagne russe, e magari, se uno non si tiene abbastanza forte, cade dal carrellino in corsa, batte la testa e muore. Succede tutti i giorni in tutto il mondo: la morte è una scadenza obbligatoria, meglio accoglierla sorridendo.
>
> ['First you go up, then you go down, just like on a rollercoaster and maybe, if you don't hold on tight enough, you fall from the rushing cart, bang your head and you die. It happens every day all over the world. Death is a mandatory expiration, it's better to meet it with a smile on your face'].[844]

And again, in another conversation with Francesco:

[843] Ibid., p. 76.
[844] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, p. 66.

Tu hai un'idea esagerata della morte. La morte degli altri non ci riguarda, e la nostra mette fine alla solitudine, all'abbandono. Rende visibile qualche cosa che è già in atto, giorno per giorno. Questa valle di lacrime.

['Your idea of death is rather exaggerated. Other people's deaths don't matter to us, whereas ours puts an end to loneliness, to abandonment. It makes visible something that is already happening, day after day. This vale of tears'].[845]

In both instances, death, in addition to being relegated to the role of an everyday matter, is also praised for its ability to provide a safe escape from a world dominated by chaos and suffering. Similarly, the building's porter Nicola Atroce, with reference to the funeral of the lawyer Simeone Bernasconi (one of Irene's victims), does not miss the opportunity to notice the pointlessness of lengthy religious rituals to celebrate the deceased:

Siamo […] schiavi del pregiudizio di durare, quando, ahimè, si consumano le scarpe e si consumano le creature viventi. Quando la sorte si avvera, sarebbe meglio sorridere e Simeone Bernasconi sarebbe stato preferibile ricordarlo senza troppo salmodiare. Un po' di musica afroamericana sarebbe stata perfetta.

['We are […] slaves of the prejudice of lasting when, alas, shoes and living creatures perish alike. When destiny comes calling, it would be better to smile – and it would have been better to remember Simeone Bernasconi without all those psalms. A bit of Afro-American music would have been perfect'].[846]

But in Rugarli's novel not only has death been trivialised: homicide itself is described by Irene as 'niente di eccezionale' ['nothing exceptional'],[847] as an innocent way to hasten something that is meant to happen anyway:

Solo in apparenza l'omicidio è un evento eccezionale, mentre è un caso di questo mondo come tanti altri. È la risorsa di quelli che non vogliono dare un posto di riguardo alla morte, che ne fanno un modo come tanti altri per risolvere i problemi. Qualche cosa di simile a una vincita al lotto. E poi, prima o dopo, tutti dobbiamo togliere il disturbo: non cambia niente ad affrettare i tempi.

[845] Ibid., p. 115.
[846] Ibid., p. 129.
[847] Ibid., p. 80.

['Only on the surface does murder seem to be an exceptional event, whereas it's no different to any other case in this world. Murder is the means used by those who don't want to hold death in high regard, who use it as a way like any other to solve problems. It's a bit like winning the lottery. And then we all have to die sooner or later. Speeding things up a little doesn't change a thing'].[848]

In Ballard's *Cocaine Nights*, death is not the only phenomenon to be regarded as something of little importance: sexuality, crime and even violence are also systematically trivialised. As far as death is concerned, at the funerals for the victims of the Hollingers' fire, there are very few signs of gloom in the cemetery and the mourners are described as talking to each other like 'members of a recreational society'.[849] As for sexuality, in the community of Estrella de Mar, people are said to often have sexual intercourse without realising it and even rape is defined as 'awful' but nonetheless useful in 'keep[ing] the girls on their toes'.[850] Jeannette Baxter, in her interview with Ballard, even notices how in *Cocaine Nights* 'the word "game" substitutes for acts of violent gang rapes'.[851] When Charles, the novel's protagonist, accidentally witnesses a rape attempt and intervenes to rescue the victim, the latter simply walks away as if nothing had happened and joins her girlfriends dancing at a party. Criminal acts in Estrella de Mar are a widespread commodity, and yet no one in the community appears to take notice since, as revealed by Bobby Crawford, 'we don't take anything too seriously in Estrella de Mar. Not even…crime'.[852] The residents, in fact, repeatedly claim that their town is a crime-free area, patrolled by their own private police force who guarantee social order.

As well as portraying death, violence, sexuality and crime as lacking the importance traditionally accorded to them, the works analysed present us with further forms of trivialisation of "extreme acts". In DeLillo's novel, according to Michael Hardin, the very fact that Hitler (and by extension the Holocaust) has been commodified and packaged with pop culture by a university is already an indication that death has been made banal.[853] In *White Noise*, death and its rituals are also banalised in their being equated to the act of shopping. In a conversation between Jack and Murray in a shopping mall, the latter eulogises the virtues of

[848] Ibid., p. 23.
[849] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 62.
[850] Ibid., p. 133.
[851] *J.G. Ballard. Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Jeannette Baxter, p. 124.
[852] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 133.
[853] Michael Hardin, 'Postmodernism's Desire for Simulated Death: Andy Warhol's Car Crashes, J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*', p. 41.

the Tibetans' acceptance of death, which they welcome 'without awe or terror'.[854] Murray then goes on to describe the experience of dying according to the Tibetans, as a 'walk toward the sliding doors' into a 'sealed off', 'self-contained', 'timeless' place where everything is 'well-lighted'.[855] Such qualities could well be predicated about the supermarket where Jack and Murray find themselves, an interpretation that seems to find confirmation in Murray's statement that 'here we don't die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think'.[856] In the consumer society that is the backdrop to *White Noise*, it comes as no surprise that what most closely resembles the rituals surrounding death are those connected to shopping. In an interview with the journalist Maria Nadotti, DeLillo significantly affirmed that 'if you could write slogans for nations similar to those invented by advertisers for their products, the slogan for the US would be "Consume or Die"'.[857]

Similarly, on the screen, the violence of nature expressed by a forest fire is 'in the psychic sense […] on a lower plane than a ten-second spot for Automatic Dishwasher All'.[858] Indeed, the constant exposure to the 'deeper waves [and] deeper emanations' of TV commercials has caused people to get 'brain fade',[859] which has rendered them incapable of distinguishing between the messages they are presented with. This devaluation of extreme experiences finally implicates, in DeLillo's work, the attitude towards wrongdoing, which, in Jack's fears, is reduced to a matter of molecules and brain cells. Upon discovering that his wife is using Dylar in an attempt to cure her fear of death, Jack cannot help wondering whether, in a context where everything is regarded as merely being the product of some alterable brain chemistry, evil acts will eventually lose their meaning:

> What happens to good and evil in this system? Passion, envy and hate? Do they become a tangle of neurons? Are you telling me that a whole tradition of human failings is now at an end, that cowardice, sadism, molestation are meaningless terms? Are we being asked to regard these things nostalgically? What about murderous rage? A murderer used to have a certain fearsome size to him. His crime was large. What happens when we reduce it to cells and molecules? My son plays chess with a murderer. He told me all this. I didn't want to listen.[860]

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[854] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 38.
[855] Ibid.
[856] Ibid.
[857] Quoted in Michael Hardin, 'Postmodernism's Desire for Simulated Death: Andy Warhol's Car Crashes, J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*', p. 41.
[858] Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 67.
[859] Ibid.
[860] Ibid., p. 200.

If DeLillo gives expression to the grounded fear that extreme experiences today will lose their impact on the people's lives and will eventually become utterly meaningless, Rugarli's pessimism again leads him to foresee far more worrying outcomes. In *Manuale di solitudine*, violence (specifically in the form of murder) and death are trivialised in two further ways, other than through the insistence of their lack of exceptionality that we have previously discussed. The first of these ways involves the long-standing discussion, in the novel, on whether it is appropriate to eliminate those individuals that for various reasons are judged not worthy of living. In Rugarli's novel, death is often invoked as an act of social hygiene and even as a gesture of friendship. Irene would go as far as to wish for the existence of what Senator Mascaroni, her aunt's old friend, calls an 'abilitazione a vivere' [a 'life permit'], an imaginary licence that certifies a person's right to life. This belief is more or less explicitly shared by other characters in the novel: for example, after the homicide of Eros Bernasconi, the disabled child who "accidentally" falls from his balcony, Francesco and Dr. Decubito, in discussing Eros's death, both define it as a sign that the balance of nature has been restored. Eros, according to these characters, was a 'creatura deforme e inutile' ['deformed and useless creature'][861] whose very existence had upset the natural order. With the naming of Eros as 'useless', Rugarli appears to show his reader what happens when the neoliberal logic of personal value as fundamentally dependent on economic value is extended to its most extreme consequences. Shortly afterwards, the murder of Dr. Decubito is explicitly defined by Nicola Atroce as a 'sublime gesto di igiene sociale' ['sublime act of social hygiene'].[862] The very concept of the 'abilitazione a vivere' ['life permit'] seems to presuppose the same 'perception of others as invalid' and the 'dehumanization of others'[863] that are at the base of several manifestations of Rojek's 'mephitic leisure', namely the abnormal type of leisure that involves the harming of another human being. Francesco, despite claiming that he does not share Irene's view on the life permit (which he considers a blasphemy), applies this very same idea on a greater scale. He argues in fact that a natural disaster would prove 'providential' in its potential to skim the world population when the earth will be overcrowded with twenty or thirty billion people.

A second indicator of the substantial trivialisation of death in the novel is to be found in Rugarli's descriptions of cemeteries. Cemeteries, in *Manuale di solitudine*, are places where the cult of the dead has stood aside to make way for a profanation of the sacredness of death.

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[861] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, p. 87.
[862] Ibid., p. 117.
[863] Chris Rojek, *Leisure Theory: Principles and Practices*, p. 186.

Everything in the graveyard where Irene's aunt Carmela is buried suggests carelessness and dereliction, with the lack of affection or emotion by the living displayed by the absence of flowers, neither real nor artificial. Similarly, the cemetery in Hammamet, which Francesco visits during a trip to Tunisia, rises up in a place where '[è] tutto banale' ['everything [is] banal'][864] and reminds him more of a landfill site than of a final resting place, a fact that Francesco attributes to the conventions of Islam but which in reality reflects a broader trend of banalisation of death:

> Non fiori […], non piante più o meno verdi, non monumenti sepolcrali, non cippi marmorei. Tra una tomba e l'altra vidi bottiglie e lattine abbandonate, vidi qualche cartaccia, vidi un cane che bighellonava in cerca di non so che cosa.
>
> ['No flowers, no greenish plants, no sepulchral monuments, no memorial stones made from marble. Amongst the graves I noticed empty bottles and cans, some waste paper, a dog who was wandering around looking for who-knows-what'].[865]

This description of the cemetery as a landfill site is consistent with Rojek's observations on the contemporary cemetery, which, from 'place of dignity and solemnity'[866] in bourgeois culture, has almost become a tourist site. Rojek ascribes this to the breaking down, in modernity, of the 'barriers between the sacred and the profane, the closed world of the cemetery and the outside world of commerce and spectacle'.[867] His portrayal of Jim Morrison's gravesite shares many of the traits of Rugarli's cemeteries: 'empty wine bottles and beer cans are regularly deposited on the site. The surrounding crypts are scrawled with graffiti'.[868] In *Manuale di solitudine*, in even more extreme fashion, the ultimate rebellion against death is expressed in the double reference to the act of spitting on graves, which reads as a more definitive sign of defiance. Irene, as she visits her aunt's grave, spits on her tomb as an act of revenge against the woman who had caused her immense suffering during her childhood, but the graveyard keeper leads her to notice the pointlessness and lack of originality of such a gesture, since nowadays 'sulle tombe vi sono più sputi che fiori' ['there are more spits than flowers on graves'].[869] In quoting the French writer Boris Vian's novel *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* (*I Spit on Your Graves*),

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[864] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, p. 154.
[865] Ibid., pp.154–55.
[866] Chris Rojek, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel*, p. 141.
[867] Ibid.
[868] Ibid., p. 142.
[869] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, p. 121.

Francesco defines spitting as 'l'ultimo grido della trasgressione' ['the last yell of transgression'],[870] and wonders whether spitting on a grave is really directed against the dead or death itself. This remark would suggest that not only have people lost interest in the traditional act of mourning, but they have now begun actively to revolt against the sacredness of man's common demise.

6. Carnivalesque subversion as unrestricted play

As we have seen in the introduction to this chapter, with the advent of capitalism, a new rational economy has become the dominant developmental model in the world. The supremacy of rationality, though, far from being confined to the economic sphere, has come to affect virtually all aspects of human existence and of social interaction. According to Max Weber, in fact, 'the rationalization of society, the domination of drives by the ego/superego, and the "civilizing process" were all part of the same cultural movement',[871] one whose economic counterpart lay in the neoliberal doctrines. The growing popularity of extreme forms of leisure and play, such as the success of extreme sports and the spectacularisation of violence on TV that we have discussed earlier, would only be the symptom of our society's need for escape from such an excess of rationality. However, these extreme leisure practices have, in parallel, been fully appropriated by the market economy through the leisure industry, which has turned them into profit-generating commodities. Carnival, a traditional site for unrestricted play, has also undergone the same commodification process. As noted by the political theorist Andrew Robinson, 'the popular culture which provided the basis for carnival is, in the most harshly capitalist countries, being destroyed by the penetration of the state into everyday life',[872] as capitalism has enacted a 'recuperation' of carnival imagery and has appropriated and tamed its most radical elements. The disappearance of true carnival has, therefore, been paralleled by its return as a commodity. According to a line of thought that notably includes Turner's analysis of carnival as a liminal moment (a time out of time and outside normal social structure), modern carnivals are devoid of any subversive force and are but commodified reaffirmations of traditional values. Carnival, in its presentation of chaos as the only possible alternative to order, ultimately serves a hegemonic function and restates those values of the market that it pretended

[870] Ibid., p. 122.
[871] Lauren Langman and Maureen Ryan, 'Capitalism and the Carnival Character: The Escape from Reality', *Critical Sociology*, 35.4 (2009), p. 482.
[872] Andrew Robinson, 'In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival Against Capital, Carnival Against Power', *Ceasefire*, (2011) < https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/> [accessed 24 May 2020].

to overturn. According to this view, then, carnival sustains capital. Subversive elements of carnival, however, are still visible in various aspects of everyday activity, albeit in a mutated form. As we saw in the previous sections, according to Presdee today's society has moved from carnival to the carnival of crime:

> The acceleration of the dominance of capitalism throughout this century coupled with the more cultural aspects of what we have come to term post-modernism have provided the context for a hugely complex fragmentation and reworking of carnival where the debris of carnival litters everyday life. Carnival is no longer a 'parodic reversal' but now a true transgression.[873]

Presdee identifies these fragments of traditional carnival in those practices connected to 'deviant leisure', such as 'S&M, raving, recreational drug-taking, hotting and rodeo, gang rituals […], festivals and extreme sports'.[874] In both Ballard's and Rugarli's works, instances of carnival imagery appear in association with outbreaks of irrationality or violent rebellion. *Cocaine Nights*' twenty-fourth chapter title, 'The Psychopath as Saint', is emblematic of the true colour of Ballard's Costa del Sol. The title refers to Bobby Crawford and to the society founded on crime that he has helped to realise. Charles defines him as 'some kind of saint',[875] 'a new kind of Messiah',[876] 'the Imam of the marina'[877] and 'the Zoroaster of the beach umbrella',[878] who has had the merit of understanding 'the first and last truth about the leisure society',[879] namely that crime fosters creativity, civic awareness and community spirit. Crawford's society is a Bakhtinian 'world upside down', where the *carnivalesque* reversal of roles makes the criminal a saint and violence cements communities. During a carnival celebration at the Residencia Costasol, amongst the carnival floats, Crawford's holiness is crowned by his grandiose public stripping. Carnival is a recurring metaphor in other works by Ballard, such as his 1975 novel *High Rise*, where the violence and collapse of social structure which followed the rebellion carried out by its residents against a high rise building are defined as having a 'pleasant carnival atmosphere'.[880]

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[873] Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime*, p. 44.
[874] Ibid., p. 47.
[875] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 280.
[876] Ibid., p. 289.
[877] Ibid.
[878] Ibid.
[879] Ibid., p. 281.
[880] J.G. Ballard, *High Rise* (London: Liveright, 2012), p. 38.

In Rugarli's work, whilst carnival celebrations are presented as essentially commodified events, where masking and folly are limited to a well-delimited lapse of time and imply the eventual return to normality, the truly subversive nature of carnival resurfaces in other, more subtle, areas. As argued by Julia Kristeva,[881] the *carnivalesque* in a text does not necessarily lie only in its plot, but it can also be identified in the textual images and in the language used. It is in these areas that the more seditious elements of carnival peek out from Rugarli's literature. The first indicator of the presence of the *carnivalesque* in Rugarli's work is the insistence on the more material aspects of corporeality, with the repeated focus on the lower body and on excrement. According to the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, the valorisation of the lower body, of excreta, the profane, the grotesque and the obscene are typical traits of a literary genre that he calls 'grotesque realism', which constitutes part of his notion of carnival and which consists in bringing bodily functions into the field of art (in this case literature). In *Il battello smarrito,* a novel which Rugarli published in 2012, there are countless references to the 'material bodily lower stratum'[882] in general and to excrement in particular. *Il battello smarrito* is an apocalyptic account of the future that awaits Italy and the world, where an epidemic of madness has left entire cities and villages destroyed and one of the few remaining groups of survivors stranded on a boat. Given the novel's focus on folly, *carnivalesque* acts that subvert normality are highly frequent. The novel is saturated with images of excrement being left in sight, thrown around and even eaten. In a dialogue between the minister Walter Pelosi and one of the devils whose appearances recur in the novel, the minister finds the devil intent on a coprophagic act and tries to reprimand him for banqueting on something deemed unhealthy. The devil's response is that 'niente è più ecologico della merda. Cereali, ortaggi, carni… tutti sani prelibati alimenti filtrati dal corpo umano. Pane e merda è il migliore mangiare che ci sia' ['nothing is more ecological than shit. Cereals, vegetables, meats…all deliciously healthy foods that have been filtrated by the human body. Bread and shit is the best meal in the world'].[883] The theme of coprophagy is also explored in the short story entitled *Sadismo*, which Rugarli published in the collection *Il punto di vista del mostro*. In *Sadismo,* a university professor has been asked by his publisher to write a monograph on the subject of coprophilia and sexual deviations. Although initially reluctant to carry out the task, the professor eventually reflects that the lower status of faeces should indeed be challenged. He wonders 'perché ricondurre gli escrementi al dominio del male? Non era questa un'idea

[881] Quoted in Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 149.
[882] Mikhail Bakhtin and Hélène Iswolsky, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 78.
[883] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Il battello smarrito* (Venice: Marsilio, 2012), p. 70.

infantile regressiva tipica di un mondo che limitava le categorie del reale al binomio pappa-cacca?' ['why do we relegate excrements to the domain of evil. Was this not a childish, regressive idea, which was typical of a world that understood reality in terms of din-dins and poo-poo?][884] In *Metempsicosi*, another story of the same collection, Rugarli makes one of his characters go as far as to affirm that faeces express 'il senso ultimo delle cose' ['the ultimate meaning of life'].[885] In the Bakhtinian carnival, the high and the low constantly exchange roles, so that the meaning of life can certainly be identified in 'poo'. In *Il battello smarrito*, in describing the unusual circumstances of the death of a young woman, Rugarli remarks that 'era morta a soli ventisei anni, uccisa dalla uremia, cioè dalla piscia, e che la piscia riuscisse a uccidere era orribile e meraviglioso' ['she had died at the young age of twenty-six, killed by uraemia, or rather by piss. And the fact that piss could kill was both horrible and fascinating'].[886] He then continues by observing that the duty of urine was 'raccogliere e convogliare le essenze della follia' ['to gather and funnel the essences of folly'],[887] a function that in this case it had not been able to carry out correctly. Here, the material function of urinating is attributed a higher, more abstract purpose. In proper carnival fashion, the material is elevated to the spiritual and abstract and the spiritual and abstract are lowered to the material level.

Another aspect of this renewed interest in the materiality of the body in Rugarli's literature is the grotesque descriptions of human bodies and, in particular, of dead bodies. There is no morbidity in the author's approach to the more concrete sides of death, but rather a desecrating irony that, in ridiculing the material aspects of the dead body, trivialises it and eventually distances it from the observer. In *Il punto di vista del mostro*, the last story of the collection of the same name, a serial killer and his sister (who has only just discovered her brother's real identity) contemplate the body of his latest victim, their old maid Cecilia. The sister, unexpectedly, does not feel any horror, scorn or pity at the sight of the body. The body does, however, almost cause her to laugh: 'Quell'ammasso di carne flaccida e bianca stimolò il mio senso del ridicolo e dovetti fare uno sforzo per trattenere una risata' ['That mass of flabby flesh stimulated my sense of the ridiculous and I had to make an effort to hold back a laugh'].[888] In *Manuale di solitudine*, the description of Jole Bernasconi's death in her bathtub (which emblematically takes place on the first day of carnival), offered, as we have seen, another

[884] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Il punto di vista del mostro: Racconti*, p. 118.
[885] Ibid., p. 194.
[886] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Il battello smarrito*, p. 63.
[887] Ibid., p. 63.
[888] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Il punto di vista del mostro: Racconti*, p. 231.

grotesque description of the dying body. In both these passages, the ridiculing of the dead body evokes the carnival mockery of death, in its bringing down conventions through the making fun of serious discourse.

As well as in the insistence on vulgar, obscene and grotesque aspects of the body and its relationship to the world, this insistence on the materiality of the body also makes an appearance in the desire to free the body from the conventions and restrictions imposed by the civilising process. In the short story *Scopertamente*, the protagonist defines civilisation as 'inhuman' and instead longs for a re-earned beastliness. The male protagonist is a so-called 'exhibitionist': he surprises passers-by with sudden displays of the intimate parts of his body in what he defines as an aspiration to 'recuperare l'antica innocenza' ['regain the old innocence'].[889] His perception of the body is that of something that has been imprisoned in underwear and clothing by 'le regole di decoro e di buona creanza' ['the rules of decency and respectability'],[890] whilst the more natural instincts have been repressed and suppressed. Quoting from the story:

> I corpi anelavano alla riconquista della libertà perduta; chiedevano di mostrarsi, di offrirsi, di respirare, di ridere, di fremere, di rabbrividire, di abbandonarsi, di godere. […] Bisognava cambiare il corso del mondo.
>
> ['The bodies were yearning for the chance to take back their lost freedom. They were longing to exhibit themselves, to offer themselves up, to breathe, to laugh, to tremble, to shiver, to let themselves go, to be satisfied. […] It was necessary to change the way the world worked'].[891]

In *Scopertamente*, the protagonist's rebellion against the excesses of rationality is configured as an attempt to challenge the ways in which we understand nudity in rational societies. In *Manuale di solitudine*, Irene's exposure of her body in the liminal fairground is connoted as a 'lack of decency' by the building's porter, Nicola Atroce. Atroce, in a conversation with Francesco, observes how, in seeing Irene on the rollercoaster, he was struck by 'la disinibizione della signora' ['the uninhibited nature of the woman'], who 'calava sul suo carrellino, col vento che le sollevava la veste sino alle anche' ['descended in her cart, with a wind which lifted her

[889] Ibid., p. 67.
[890] Ibid., p. 64.
[891] Ibid.

dress up to her hips'].[892] As pointed out by Rob Shields in his discussion on the exposure of the body in the liminal space of Victorian Brighton beach:

> The foolish, undisciplined body is the most poignant symbol of the carnivalesque – the unclosed body of convexities and orifices, intruding onto and into others' personal space, threatening to transgress and transcend the circumscription of the body in the rational categories of Individual, Citizen, Consumer, Worker or Owner.[893]

In a century where the naked body is exchanged as a commodity in advertising and the media, the *carnivalesque* attention to an undisciplined lower body, in the act of exhibiting genitals, still appears to retain a potential for subversion.

Another aspect of the *carnivalesque* in Rugarli's literature that I would like to consider here is the destruction of the logic of language that he appears to conduct in several of his works. If language is the tool of discourse and rationality, then it is clear how undermining language is ultimately a way of undermining rationality. Carnival subversion can affect language in several different ways. The most typical of these is the employment of swearing and insults with the intent '[of] subverting the stabilising tendencies of dominant speech-genres'.[894] In Rugarli's short story *Avventura del professor Giblisco*, for example, the fall into irrationality by a distinguished professor is signalled by his sudden and involuntary use of blasphemy during a dinner with fellow intellectuals. The overly indignant reaction of his audience immediately reveals the fact that not merely good manners, but rationality itself has been challenged and offended. However, Rugarli goes further than employing vulgar language to signify a rebellion against the dominant culture. A more scandalous and possibly less exploited mode of destroying language to which Rugarli recurs in several of his works is the curious featuring of instances of what in *Il battello smarrito* he defines as 'il neolinguaggio', a new language. In this new language, which resembles gibberish, there is no intelligible correspondence between signifier and signified. It is a language made up of potential words, of words formed according to the word formation rules of a certain language (in this case, naturally, Italian), but that are not attested. *Il battello smarrito* abounds with examples of these potential words, where a number of dialogues between some of the characters in the novel are reduced to utterances such

[892] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, p. 132.
[893] Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin. Alternative Geographies of Modernity*, p. 95.
[894] Andrew Robinson, 'In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival Against Capital, Carnival Against Power'.

as ‘canterasi, salamenti ploscio ploscio’, ‘Pistorio vain la paderna’ or ‘Tapelanzi chilone ten miruli’[895]. In the same manner, in *Manuale di solitudine*, Francesco declares that:

> C’è tanta follia che ha bisogno di esplodere […] Io stesso…certe volte…non so come esprimermi, se non al di fuori dei modi codificati…Sepeloni pelicanti rospiglioso…mi comprende?
>
> [‘There is so much craziness that you need to let out […] Me too… Sometimes…I’m not sure how to say it, except for outside codified ways…*Sepeloni pelicanti rospiglioso*…do you understand me?’][896]

The only means to convey folly is through a language that moves away from a standard and codified one. It is typical of the language of carnival to replace the fixed order of language with a free slippage of signifiers.[897] It is as if a sort of schizophrenia of language were at play here, ‘schizophrenia’ in the Lacanian sense of a ‘breakdown in the signifying chain’.[898] The experience that the schizophrenic has of ‘pure material signifiers’ in *Il battello smarrito* is shared by non-pathological subjects and is perceived as a valuable strategy to access some higher truth which is unattainable through conventional and rational language. One of the rare interpretations that Rugarli gives of his neo-language is contained in a quote from Elisabetta, a character from his 2001 novel *La viaggiatrice del tram numero 4*. Elisabetta’s comment on her neo-language monologues is that non-conventional language has the potential of bringing one closer to grasping the mystery of life:

> Trattenevo con me stessa conversazioni apparentemente insensate. Uscivo dai limiti (dalle pastoie) del linguaggio. Inventando nuove parole, tentando altre forme grammaticali e sintattiche, mi rendevo conto che sarei riuscita a conoscere più di quanto reso accessibile dall’armamentario tradizionale. […] *‘Garendi solitani Scian Katiuss’* ripetei per cinque o sei volte, a bassa voce. Garendi Solitani *Scian Katiuss*…credetti di esser vicina a sfiorare il mistero delle cose.

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[895] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Il battello smarrito*, p. 44. These terms have not been translated, as they are the author’s inventions.
[896] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, p. 77.
[897] See Andrew Robinson, ‘In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival Against Capital, Carnival Against Power’.
[898] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 27.

> I had several conversations with myself which were apparently nonsense. I went beyond the limits (and the restraints) of conventional language. By making up new words and experimenting with different grammatical and syntactical forms, I realised that I would have been able to understand a lot more than what the traditional tools of language made available. […] *'Garendi solitani Scian Katiuss'* I repeated a good five or six times under my breath. *Garendi solitani Scian Katiuss*… I believed I was close to discovering the meaning of life.[899]

Rugarli's operation is reminiscent of the one carried out by earlier anti-systemic and anti-capitalist movements such as Dadaism, which also advocated for 'the creative possibility of language shorn of its burden of definitive meaning'.[900] But also one of the features of the *carnivalesque* breaking down of the conventions of ordinary language, according to Bakhtin, is indeed to enable genuine dialogue, something that is prevented in everyday, normal interaction. The widow D'Ascenzi, a character in *Il battello smarrito*, explains how this new language is also the most suitable to describe the realm of feelings, which find no words that are adequate to describe them in conventional language. In *La viaggiatrice del tram numero 4*, finally, we witness what could be seen as an extension of the breakdown of the virtually univocal relationship between signifier and signified. Here, this form of "non-correspondence" comes to affect the attribution of authorship, that is the relationship between works and quotes and their authors. Rugarli's characters inadvertently misattribute quotes and anecdotes in what appears as the 'Death of the Author' brought to the extreme. The Genesis account of the tree of knowledge is attributed to Goethe's *Faust*; *I sepolcri* becomes a work by Leopardi; the Virgilian 'omnia vincit amor' was a quote by Catullus and so on. One of the various characters that populate the novel, the painter Van Kastor, even states that names themselves have no importance. What we perceive as the exclusive relationship between a person and their name is of little relevance. Despite the time spent together, Van Kastor cannot remember the name of Stefania, one of his travelling companions. He variously refers to her as Fastenia, Nefastia, Festania, Teniasfa and Aniafest. This series of anagrams, as well as indicating a somewhat deviant non-correspondence between a person and their name, also harbours some creative potential; the innovation that, by breaking the boundaries of language, instils new meanings into it. In Rugarli's work, it appears, *carnivalesque* elements such as the renewed attention to the materiality of the body (in its grotesque characters) and the schizophrenia of language are used to give a voice, in literature, to a deviant response to the excesses of rationality. In this

[899] Giampaolo Rugarli, *La viaggiatrice del tram numero 4* (Venice: Marsilio, 2001), p. 34.
[900] Christopher Bigsby, *Dada and Surrealism* (London: Routledge, 1972; 2018), p. 27.

sense, Rugarli's strong critique of contemporary society takes the form of an indulgence in irrational forms and a longing for a lost innocence that was wiped out by the civilising process. The celebration of folly is a response to the possible apocalypse that awaits humanity when the Earth will have been exploited to its end in order to please the Money God. Carnival can be interpreted as an instrument of Rugarli's social critique, in that the *carnivalesque* stages an alternative narrative to the status quo. The world 'upside down', Rugarli seems to suggest, is nothing more than the world as our truest selves would like it to be.

7. Conclusion

We have seen how, in all three authors considered, deviant and violent acts often become forms of entertainment. All three authors stage their characters' quest for thrills and for experiences that presuppose the removal of boundaries between life and death, which are highly reminiscent of those proposed by the extreme sports offered by the leisure industry, or of those noticeable in abnormal or illegal forms of leisure activity, such as joyriding or the use of recreational drugs. In *White Noise*, DeLillo's characters long for feelings of danger, for the experience of being on the edge between life and death, as we have seen in the praise of fear at the sight of a dangerous bear (which would give the individual a greater sense of self-awareness) or in the thrill of handling a deadly weapon (in the episode of the *Zumwalt*). Similarly, in *Cocaine Nights*, increased self-awareness is achieved thanks to the feelings of fear and insecurity caused by widespread criminal activity, which is also a valuable instrument in promoting creativity, culture and community. Again, in *Manuale di solitudine* Irene looks for excitement and meaning in the near-death experience of the simulated fall of the rollercoaster, a typical example of contemporary "extreme" leisure practice.

The success of these strategies in creating meaning, though, progressively diminishes, as the novels grow more pessimistic. If, in *White Noise*, the seeking of the extreme was an object for academic discussion and an intriguing possibility, in 'a time when postmodernism was merely a threat',[901] in *Cocaine Nights*, crime and transgressive behaviour become 'the only thing that can rouse people'.[902] Despite apparently celebrating criminality and psychopathology, as noticed by Gasiorek, 'these supposedly oppositional practices are the

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[901] Leo Robson, 'The Latest Phase in His Dying: Twenty-Five Years Ago, in *White Noise*, DeLillo Perfected a Distinctive, Paranoid Style. His New Novel is a Distant Echo of that Masterpiece', Book review, *New Statesman*, (2010) <https://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/03/white-noise-delillo-jack-novel> [accessed 24 May 2020]
[902] J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, p. 180.

alienated products of the social realm they propose to subvert'.[903] In *Manuale di solitudine*, finally, motiveless murder is recognised as a widespread phenomenon, born out of either boredom or curiosity. What in *White Noise* was merely a fear, in the twenty-first century has become a reality. When the disenchantment with the illusions of consumerism has reached its peak, Jack's 'second life', which he found in illicit thrills, has become Francesco's acknowledgement that 'there is no other life'. Irene's murders do not make her feel that she took part in something like the glorious act of Jack's attempted murder of Willie Mink: rather, she remarks how she still does not feel alive.

In both *White Noise* and *Cocaine Nights*, moreover, the spectacularisation of violence became an occasion for community creation: burning buildings, natural disasters and car crashes in *White Noise*, and rapes and the torching of cars and boats in *Cocaine Nights* offered themselves as spectacles to be consumed as entertainment by the public. By presenting us with such spectacularised forms of violence, the authors engage in a critique of a world that has systematically mediatised extreme acts and has successfully integrated them into leisure. But, whilst the characters of *White Noise* wondered whether it was normal to enjoy the violence shown on TV, in the society of Rugarli's 2010s the fact that one can engage in violent behaviour and derive pleasure from it is presented as a given.

We have also observed how constant exposure to these extreme experiences ultimately integrates them into the normality of everyday life as they become routinised and trivialised. The novels stage several examples of this banalisation of violence and death, but again Rugarli's later literature does more than merely showing this trivialisation. When presenting murder as a sublime act of social hygiene, or the violation of the sacred nature of the cemetery, Rugarli takes the banalisation of extreme experiences further, in his portrayal of their desecration. Finally, if the worlds depicted in the novels considered can be described as 'permanent carnivals', that is, according to Thomassen's definition, worlds where limit experiences turn into norm, they do so with significant differences. In Ballard's novel, the 'world upside down' of Bobby Crawford was no more than a social experiment confined to the dozing expat communities of the Costa del Sol, or possibly a foretaste of what the future of civilisation would look like. In *Manuale di solitudine* folly has come to encompass the whole world and humanity: 'c'è una follia che governa il mondo ed è una follia la stessa esistenza' ['there is a madness that rules the world and existence itself is madness'].[904] If DeLillo's slogan

[903] Andrzej Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard*, p. 175.
[904] Giampaolo Rugarli, *Manuale di solitudine*, p. 80.

for consumerist America was ‘Consume or Die’, for Rugarli it has become ‘Give in to folly or die’:

> So che per uscire dal cerchio [della solitudine] dovrei morire. A meno di accettare la follia ossia comprendere che tutto è alla rinfusa (se così si può dirsi), che le sghignazzate e i singhiozzi si confondono. Il caos non è mai finito, ha assunto sembianze di ordine, solo per lavorare più sotto e rendersi meno conoscibile. Comunque indomabile. Viviamo in una mescolanza di detersivi, di delinquenza, di bombe, di ragazze seminude, di gare canore e di comunicati commerciali…Internet è la verità rivelata.
>
> [I know that dying would be the only way to get out of the circle [of solitude]. Unless you accept the madness, or rather understand that everything is upside down (if you can say that), that sneers and sobs merge into one. There is never any end to chaos, it has masqueraded as order only in order to work deeper down and render itself less recognisable. Untameable, in any case. We live in a mix of detergents, of crime, of bombs, of half-naked women, of singing contests and advertisements…the Internet is the revealed truth].[905]

In the aftermath of a world economic crisis that hit the whole of Western society, the promises and opportunities laid out by consumer society, which were already wavering in DeLillo’s eighties America, have now given way to utter disenchantment. Escape for the neoliberal individual, it seems, can no longer be found in the seeking of a proximity with death (through the experience of ‘being on the edge’), but only through identification with death itself.

[905] Ibid., p. 228.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in the introductory pages of this thesis, over the course of the past forty years, not only has neoliberalism successfully established itself as the most suitable economic paradigm for the globalised world, but the neoliberal ideology has become a hegemonic mode of discourse, a naturalised worldview that, largely unquestioned, has spread its tentacles to incorporate every aspect of everyday life. This thesis purported to investigate the ways in which fragments of this ideology and their effects on the individual and on society seep through the contemporary literary production of Britain, the United States and Italy. Secondly, this work intended to determine whether country-specific patterns are identifiable in the fictional representations of life under neoliberalism as a result of the different trajectories that these countries took with regards to neoliberalisation, which was sold as an economic opportunity in Britain and in the USA in the early 1980s, but was only resignedly accepted at the dawn of the 1990s in Italy as a bitter pill to swallow in order to reap the benefits of European integration. Finally, this research aimed to reassess the willingness of literature to engage in a critique of the status quo, to challenge the tenets of neoliberal supremacy and to put forward counter-hegemonic discourses that represent an alternative vision to the current social order. In the following sections, I will attempt to provide a concise and critical summary of the most significant findings in relation to the three research questions outlined above.

1. Fictionalising structural violence

Contrary to the preoccupations voiced by scholars such as Jeffrey J. Williams and Walter Benn Michaels – and outlined in the Introduction to this thesis – about the irredeemable implication of literature in the workings of neoliberalism, with its resulting subjugation to the capitalist realist logic, the novels analysed in this thesis explicitly draw attention to the systemic faults of neoliberal economies and to the consequences that these have at both the individual and the societal level. In all of the three macro areas considered (working life, spatial practices and leisure time), the novels denounce the violence and irrationality at the heart of the system and thus expose the lie that insists on economic prosperity and self-realisation as being best guaranteed by the neoliberal model.

In the sphere of work, the imperative to consume and to satisfy constantly new "needs" ultimately enslaves a considerable proportion of the population in both blue and white collar jobs by forcing them to work increasingly longer hours under increasingly harsher conditions. The widespread insecurity of employment – which calcifies into a condition of permanent

liminality and which is only rendered more palatable by the myth of flexibility – results in a new form of post-industrial alienation whose tangible expression lies in physical illness and in the 'mental health plague' that Fisher identified as a defining feature of the most harshly neoliberal countries. The resurfacing of these disorderly bodies and minds in the novels interrupts symbolically the positive capitalist narrative and betrays materially the existence of an underlying and invisible structural violence.

The authors identify the culprits of contemporary alienation in automation, in the awareness of substitutability, in the recognition of structural inequalities, in the requirement to approach work unquestioningly and to commit our whole persona to the job (including the most intimate aspects of our personality and attitudes), and in the submission of creativity to the desires of capital. A number of now common workplace practices are also held up as examples of systemic violence: the demotion of workers, the setting of unrealistic, contradictory or valueless goals, the use of carrot and stick strategies to discipline the workforce, the quest for the maximisation of profits no matter what, the profiting from social injustices, and the relegation of workers to a permanent position of inferiority.

The writers also uncover the structurally violent capitalist appropriation of space, one that dispossesses individuals and communities of public space.[906] The latter is legally expropriated by parasitical corporations and multinationals that contribute to render it an anonymous, dehistoricised, aestheticised and theme-parked space devoted to the reproduction of capitalist values and to the generation of private profits. Assimilation and conformity – albeit normalised and therefore unconscious – are the *conditio sine qua non* of access to these highly controlled spaces, which enact a marginalisation and outright spatial exclusion of those who do not or cannot conform to the dominant values.

In the third instance, the authors decry the ways in which consumer culture operates a commodification of leisure, the epitomes of which are the heritage sites, literary landscapes and theme parks described in some of the novels. Even forms of spontaneous or deviant leisure sought as a breakout from capitalist rationality are a 'bogus' form of escape, as 'the system cannot permit consumers to escape from dependency upon the commodity form'.[907] As shown in the texts analysed, consumer culture, for example, effects an aestheticisation, spectacularisation and mediatisation of real violence and limit experiences, which are packaged as consumable products and as forms of entertainment that can be sold and capitalised upon.

[906] For the concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.
[907] Chris Rojek, *Ways of escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel*, p. 123.

1.1 Watched like 'lab rats': Panopticism in the society of control

One specific type of violence exerted on the individuals by the system that returns almost obsessively in the works analysed and across the three macro areas identified is a type of panoptical surveillance to which people are permanently subjected, whether as part of a drive towards enhancing security in the face of risk, towards increasing productivity and efficiency at work, or 'to construct and monitor consumption patterns'.[908]

If there is a consensus about the fact that we now live in a 'surveillance society', to the point that the phenomenon has its own academic area of 'Surveillance Studies', scholars in the field feel that 'surveillance theory for the twenty-first century is obliged to look beyond the panopticon'[909] designed by Bentham and more recently re-elaborated by Michel Foucault. As opposed to Bentham and Foucault's model, which relies on a physical and spatial surveillance that presupposes a shared locality between the watcher and the watched, contemporary scholars have either argued for a networked kind of surveillance grounded in digital rather than physical technologies (Gilles Deleuze,[910] Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson,[911] and Shoshana Zuboff),[912] or have called for a combination of panopticism and digital surveillance (dataveillance, access control, social sorting and peer-to-peer surveillance).[913] Technology is certainly the defining element of contemporary surveillance, as is also the case in most of the examples seen in the corpus of novels examined for this project, but there is one point where the fictionalisation of surveillance systems under capitalism in the novels differs from the assessment provided in academic accounts. Contemporary theorists in Surveillance Studies identify a key difference between panoptical surveillance, in which the individual was aware of the possibility of being watched at any given time and self-disciplined as a result, and digital surveillance, which often takes place without us knowing that a surveillance system is in place (as in the case of computer spyware). Crucially, the works of fiction analysed seem to refer to a mode of surveillance more akin to the traditional panopticon, with the characters' alienation arising precisely from the cognizance that their every move is potentially monitored and

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[908] Maša Galič, Tjerk Timan and Bert-Jaap Koops, 'Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation', *Philos. Technol.*, 30 (2017), p. 22.
[909] *Theorizing surveillance: The Panopticon and Beyond*, ed. by David Lyon (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2006), p. 18.
[910] Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control'.
[911] Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson, 'The Surveillant Assemblage', *British Journal of Sociology*, 51.4 (2000), pp. 605–22.
[912] Shoshana Zuboff, 'Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization, *Journal of Information Technology*, 30 (2015), pp. 75–89.
[913] For an overview of these concepts see Maša Galič, Tjerk Timan and Bert-Jaap Koops, 'Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation'.

regulated by an invisible system, and that, as the protagonist of *Since the Layoffs* puts it, we are being watched on video like 'lab rats'.[914]

Although the de-individualisation of panoptical surveillance seems somewhat at odds with the neoliberal glorification of freedom and individuality, the past decades have seen a 'global shift toward a system based upon a politics of supremacy and subordination, a disciplinary politics that works at micro and macro levels of everyday life'.[915] Increased surveillance in public and private space, and at the workplace, has also stemmed from an obsession with the minimisation of risks, whether these are in the form of security threats or financial risks (such as, for example, the insurance cost of a worker with poor health). The novels showcase an array of surveillance techniques aimed at regulating workers, work patterns, and urban and liminal spaces. These involve tracking devices that geolocalise the worker at all times, video surveillance, peer-to-peer monitoring and cards that register one's workday. If at the workplace the awareness of ubiquitous surveillance exacerbates feelings of alienation and meaninglessness, the highly controlled nature of capitalist space compels the individual to assimilate (Caldwell) or it sanctions their exclusion (Culicchia and Sinclair). The pervasiveness of CCTV cameras in public and private spaces, more than any other means of surveillance, confirms the survival of panopticism beyond Foucault's disciplinary societies, as, through what Foucault calls *normation* – 'the processes that create habits, rituals and how things are done, thereby creating norms of behaviour'[916] – individuals are moulded into obedient citizens and consumers.

2. Narratives of resistance

Alongside the portrayal of the shapes that structural violence assumes in everyday life, the authors also consistently narrativise the reactions to this violence at the micro and macrocosmic level. Resistive practices are directed against the injustices of the work system, against the capitalist appropriation of space and against a highly organised leisure that reproduces features of work and does not allow for the free expression of the self. Theft on the job intended as a corrective action, noncompliance, refusal to work, employee collective resistance, outbreaks of physical violence, unproductive ambling, and writing to expose the ills of work under capitalism (the latter, at the meta level, an allusion to the political function of literature) all

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[914] Iain Levison, *Since the Layoffs*, p. 60.
[915] Stephen Gill, 'The Global Panopticon? The Neoliberal State, Economic Life, and Democratic Surveillance', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 20.1 (1995), p. 39.
[916] Maša Galič, Tjerk Timan and Bert-Jaap Koops, 'Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation', p. 16.

speak of a recognised unease with neoliberal work practices that are perceived as harmful and as the product of social injustice.

At the level of space, the novels' characters challenge the status of liminal spaces as spaces of neoliberalism through an overall advocacy for non-purposive forms of travel that generally rely on slowness, and that involve a new appreciation of those in-between zones that have been anonymised, dehistoricised or relegated to the margins whilst awaiting to be exploited by capitalism. Topographic transgression in general, emblematised by the experience of the homeless "occupying" public soil, symbolically stakes a territory previously controlled by capitalist forces. The possibility itself to marketise public space is then contested through the proposal of more marginal and personal histories that oppose an official, national and monumental history that is implicated in the perpetration of the neoliberal discourse.

As concerns leisure practices, manifestations of deviant or abnormal leisure are staged as the dangerous side of an extreme bureaucratisation and rationalisation of life that leaves no space for truly unproductive and non-economically interested activities. The novels engage with what we have termed a supposed 'carnivalisation' of society that arises from a widespread need to give vent to those primitive instincts that had been gagged by the civilising process. The creative potential of carnival, though, is also exploited by the writers to conduct a critique of neoliberal rationality and to call for a more immediate relationship with the more natural aspects of existence.

More generally, many of the novels analysed in this thesis attest to a yearning for a reconciliation with these more elemental sides of life and for a true authenticity that is perceived as lacking in the contemporary world. Against the inauthenticity of the placeless, hyperreal, aestheticised or theme-parked landscapes of consumerism, these authors propose practices such as walking, dowsing, ambling, and collecting waste, which emphasise slowness over speed and allow for a closer, more intimate relationship with the territory and with the natural world. Against the false promises of consumer fulfilment that divest the world of meaning, the novels' characters search for meaningful experience in out-of-the-ordinary endeavours, in proximity with the animal kingdom, with danger and death. For all the pledges of consumer culture to provide us with authentic experiences – as is evident in the clever manufacturing of spaces, products and advertisements that appeal to and exploit our natural craving for a closer connection with nature – capitalism ultimately *sells* an authenticity that is revealed for what it is, a marketing tactic that fails to satisfy this innate human need.

2.1 'No such thing as society'?

In an interview published in *Women's Own* in 1987 with the journalist Douglas Keay, Margaret Thatcher famously declared that 'there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families'.[917] Although it is true that the quote is often reported out of context, usually as proof of Thatcher's espousal of a new brand of neoliberal individualism that shelves the need for social solidarity, and therefore as a justification for the dismantling of the welfare state, this remark by the then Prime Minister can still validly be viewed as an attempt to legitimise a new discourse of individual responsibility that sought to replace that of community.

As an ideology founded on the principles of individualism and competition, neoliberalism certainly contributed to what has effectively been the disintegration of traditional forms of community which we discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. The recognition of this weakening of community in capitalist society and the concurrent longing for more spontaneous and less calculative communal bonds are another recurring theme in several of the novels considered and, once again, across the three macro-areas studied. The desire for a kind of sociality that overcomes capitalist individualism and that recategorises the other as a human subject rather than as an impediment to the fulfilment of our wants is narrativised in a number of episodes, from the craving for 'craic' and for a type of social contact with no end outside of itself at the workplace, one that transcends the limits imposed by an exploitative environment that pits workers against each other, to the seeking of communal moments and collective purpose in (deviant) leisure and in the partaking of the many spectacles of violence that now constitute as many occasions for entertainment.

Even if these experiments at community building in the novels turn out to be only temporary and ephemeral, as the characters are essentially bound by the individualistic logic of the neoliberal universe in which they operate, the authors still make a crucial point about our contemporary condition. By bringing to the fore the paradox of a society where community is simultaneously craved and relentlessly destroyed, these writers de facto call into question the naturalness of the myth of individual responsibility – exemplified by Thatcher's proverbial phrase – and denounce its politicised and socially constructed character.

[917] Interview for *Woman's Own* ('No Such Thing as Society'), <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>, [accessed 21 June 2020].

3. Neoliberalism*s*?

In the Introduction of this thesis, we set out to establish whether the literary portrayal of the social effects of neoliberalisation in the Italian texts converges with or diverges from that of more prototypically neoliberal countries such as Britain and the USA. Can we talk about one brand of neoliberalism that is shared by countries with diverse histories and a diverse path to neoliberalisation, or should we instead refer to a plurality of "neoliberalisms", with distinct characteristics and context-specific ramifications?

Undeniably, the novels engage with and reflect the specific social, political, economic and geographical realities in which they were produced. On the Italian front, these include the boom of consumerist culture starting from the post-war period (Teobaldi and Culicchia); a south of Italy suspended between tradition and progress (Rugarli); the closing of the Terni steelworks (Raspi); and the sense of a hopeless future after the financial crash (Morici). The British novelists focus on a range of contexts that span from the communities of English expats on the Costa del Sol in the mid 1990s (Ballard) to the legacy of Thatcher's English Heritage and the unexploited liminal territory of the A13 road (Sinclair), and finally to the challenges faced by Scottish fast-food workers at the beginning of the 2000s (Johnston). Finally, the American novels explore the 1980's illusions of consumerism and endless wealth (DeLillo); the volatility of the US job market in the early 2000s (Levison, Ferris and Park); the neoliberalisation of academia (Goodman); and the disenchantment with non-places coupled with an obsession with security exacerbated by the events of 9/11 (Caldwell).

Without seeking to detract from the valuable insights that the authors provide into their particular historical and geographical condition – in particular with reference to specific policies or events that had an impact on the respective country's economy, landscape or culture – it must be noted that by and large the novels studied display a broad commonality of themes and motifs, and share a rather kindred vision of neoliberal society. The precarisation of existence, the anonymisation of urban space and the commodification of violence are preoccupations that recur across cultures and even across different decades since the neoliberal ideology took hold at the beginning of the 1980s, thus suggesting a certain degree of universality of these phenomena. If it is true that my own field of comparative literature typically favours analyses that identify common patterns in different cultural traditions and historical eras, which are often the result of existential constants (such as the themes of death, love, jealousy, revenge etc.), in this case there seems to be a politically-determined reason behind such striking similarities. Although the timescale for the implementation of neoliberal

policies and the infiltration of the ideology underlying these may vary from one country to another – and there is a sense of a more "advanced" form of neoliberalism in the British and American novels, where the spectre of the gig economy is already visible compared to an Italian corpus more concerned with a generic propagation of consumerism and with impending economic collapse – neoliberalism is still to be considered a global phenomenon with broadly recognisable social effects. In fact, neoliberalism benefits precisely from the adoption of free market principles at a global level, as these facilitate the flow of capital across countries and continents. For this reason, in a globalised world where processes such as the deregulation of labour, the privatisation of key economic sectors and of public spaces, and the consequent commodification of most aspects of our existence have been consistent features of the policies of many countries, it is logical that the consequences of these polices be broadly similar.

4. Is it really easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism?

The final issue that this thesis sought to address was whether contemporary literature has retained its autonomy from the mythologies of neoliberalism and thus the ability to call the system into question and to imagine an alternative order, or whether it has succumbed to it. The analysis conducted for this research seems to confirm Johansen and Karl's assessment that reducing contemporary literature to a dichotomy between contestation and capitulation risks being overly simplistic and failing to fully capture the relationship between fiction and neoliberalism.[918] The systematic and explicit portrayal, in the novels, of neoliberalism as a structurally violent system that hides behind the positive catchwords of freedom, flexibility and progress, clearly refutes the idea of a reluctance on the part of these authors to engage in a critique of the neoliberal present. What must be added, though, is that these writers also put on display the fundamental resignation of their characters to the ubiquity of this systemic violence, thus exposing the omnipresence of capitalist realism and its role in halting any meaningful drive to revolution. This results in plots that exude defeatism, which in turn casts contemporary authors as perpetuators of the idea that there is no alternative.

In reality, the novels tell a tale about the ineffectiveness of a resistance that is limited to cynicism, that only superficially engages with the issues at stake and that does not succeed in imagining a credible alternative. This is in line with the failures identified by critics such as Fisher, who (drawing on Žižek) observes that most forms of rebellion remain at the level of

[918] Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl, *Neoliberalism and the Novel*, p. 5.

belief, saying that 'so long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange'.[919] *Believing* in the meaninglessness of money, for example, does not prevent us from *acting* like it is of extreme importance, a disavowal that favours the smooth continuation of the capitalist system. In a similar fashion, Frayne remarks that most acts of rebellion against capitalism are of the 'gestural' kind (such as watching an anti-capitalist film or wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt) and are therefore configured as 'an act of resistance that provides an illusion of empowerment whilst ultimately leaving the world unchanged'.[920] This is the case, in the novels, with some of the public acts of disobedience highlighted in the first chapter, such as Ferris's character's desire not to conform to the corporate setting where he works by wearing several T-shirts stacked one on top of each other, or cutting his office suit as a sign of protest.

Even the impact to be had by demonstrations such as those joined by the protagonist of Johnston's text has been questioned by scholars, with Srnicek and Williams warning against the romanticisation of rioting and insurrection and including them as examples of what they call 'folk-politics'. In the scholars' view, whilst demonstrations, together with occupations, sit-ins, squatted communes, carnivalesque street protests and happenings, are 'capable of generating an array of new and powerful ideas of human freedom' (such as feminist, anti-racist and gay-rights demands), they are 'unable to replace the faltering social democratic order'.[921] The authors define 'folk-politics' as 'a collective and historically constructed political common sense that has become out of joint with the actual mechanisms of power'[922] and that, 'against the abstraction and inhumanity of capitalism, […] aims to bring politics down to the "human scale" by emphasising temporal, spatial and conceptual immediacy'.[923] The reasons identified by Srnicek and Williams for the ineffectiveness of folk-politics' tactics are that folk-politics does not generally initiate actions but only reacts to specific events; it lacks long-term strategic goals; it predilects fleeting practices such as temporary occupations; it does not propose a new system but remains anchored to the familiarities of the past; and finally it prefers the voluntary or the spontaneous over the institutional.[924] Srnicek and Williams also blame folk-politics for refusing to acknowledge the complexity of the contemporary world by calling for a return to 'authenticity, immediacy, a world that is "transparent", "human-scaled", "tangible", "slow",

[919] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?,* p. 13.
[920] David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*, p. 214.
[921] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future, Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, p. 42.
[922] Ibid., p. 25.
[923] Ibid., p. 26.
[924] Ibid.

"harmonious", "simple" and "everyday"',[925] and thus rejecting the possibility of a truly post-capitalist world. For the latter to develop, there would need to be a project that embraces the complexity of the world and that includes 'the creation of new cognitive maps, political narratives, technological interfaces, economic models, and mechanisms of collective control'.[926]

In this sense, at the diegetic level literature does indeed often fail to propose a positive alternative to the status quo, one that goes beyond cynicism, resignation or apocalyptic visions of the end of the world. What literature can provide, though, is an opportunity for that decolonisation of the imaginary from hegemonic discourses and that critical reassessment of the present envisaged by Di Martino and Verdicchio.[927] If, as argued by Srnicek and Williams, what is needed is a cultural revolution that questions established discursive practices, then, by fictionalising these, writers can incite the reader to scrutinise his/her reality and to start searching for new ones.

5. Contribution and implications of the study

In seeking to reassert the role that contemporary literature plays in shedding light on the socially constructed character of normative discourses, this work directly inserts itself into the debate on the political possibilities of literary fiction under neoliberal conditions, a contentious issue for scholars such as Huehls, Greenwald Smith, Shonkwiler, La Berge, Shapiro, Deckard, Kennedy, Johansen, and Karl, amongst others. If the nature of neoliberal ideology as "common sense" equates it to a Barthesian myth, which implies 'the loss of the historical quality of things' and is ultimately a 'depoliticised speech',[928] this thesis argues that literature's exposure of the myth, in a way, repoliticises the neoliberal discourse and reframes it as a historical contingency rather than as an inevitability. Therefore, this analysis adds further evidence about the existence of a literary corpus that, albeit with the limitations described above, does not shy away from engaging with the present and offering a critique of it.

In addition to the above, this thesis contributes to an increasingly growing area of comparative literature that is interested in the bilateral relations between fiction and neoliberalism by adding a body of Italian case studies to the existing scholarship. In particular,

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[925] Ibid., p. 34.
[926] Ibid., p. 37.
[927] *Encounters with the Real in Contemporary Italian Literature and Cinema*, eds. Loredana di Martino and Pasquale Verdicchio, p. X.
[928] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957; 1972), p. 142.

the research carried out in this work establishes connections between the preoccupations with the neoliberal world-order by Italian authors and their British and American counterparts. By charting the recurrent anxieties of writers from different countries, it is possible to discern the traces of a common imaginary that can eventually help a global society awaken to the failings of the system and begin a shared journey towards a yet unimagined future.

Finally, this thesis brings together disparate applications of the concept of liminality in various disciplines, and it traces back its ubiquity to the hegemony of a neoliberal culture of transitoriness that finds its most fitting expression in the category of the in-between. By drawing upon scholarly investigations of liminal work, liminal spaces and liminal leisure in contemporary culture, my analysis exploits the possibilities of liminality as both a symptom of the precarity of life under neoliberalism and as a privileged place for the emergence of resistive practices that propose to subvert the dominant consensus.

6. Limitations and scope for further research

By its very nature, a comparative work necessarily entails the selection of a relatively limited corpus of novels amongst all the potentially relevant works of fiction written in a certain period. The analysis of different primary sources could have highlighted similar trends in the portrayal of the neoliberal condition to those identified by this thesis, but it could have also revealed additional or contrasting perspectives. Whilst the novels examined here certainly contribute to the argument of contemporary literature as a committed kind of writing, the conclusions drawn in this thesis do not preclude the coexistence of this kind of writing with works of fiction characterised by that disengagement and that implication in neoliberal market values identified by other scholars. In this sense, generalising the findings of this research by concluding that contemporary literature is tendentially critical of late capitalism would mean deliberately overlooking a body of works that abstain from critique or that possibly openly exalt the freedoms, prosperity and standard of living afforded by the advent of the neoliberal model to a part of the world population. An investigation into the ways in which life under neoliberalism is presented by its advocates, for example, would constitute another equally fruitful avenue for future research.

One more aspect that would merit further exploration is the potential role of the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 in acting as a *discrimen* for a change in the perception of the neoliberal system and in opening a crack in its dogmatised hegemony. Although the crisis revealed several shortcomings of the current system that had remained invisible or at least

uncontested until then, with the exception of the government's intervention in the bailouts of banks and key industries – which openly exposed the flaws inherent in the principle of the self-regulating market, the tenets of neoliberal ideology and organisation have perdured virtually unchanged to this day. Amongst the novels analysed in this research, those published in the years following the financial crash appear to be more apocalyptic in tone, in particular in the cases of Morici and Rugarli, a fact that could signal the fear of an aggravation in the precarity and vulnerability of the human condition. However, further work would be needed to establish whether there are identifiable patterns in the attitudes of writers towards neoliberalism pre- and post-crash.

If the financial crisis failed to unseat the current capitalist model, several commentators[929] have indicated the ongoing (at the time of writing) Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 – which is predicted to trigger a long-lasting global recession – as a turning point for a restructuring of the world order that harbours the possibility to bring about the end of capitalism. Even though we are not yet to know whether this restructuring will in fact take place and to what extent it will overthrow a system that has dominated the world stage for the past four decades, the ways in which the events of this year will be reflected and re-imagined in cultural texts in the months and years to come will provide new material to illuminate the complex relationship between literature and the economic present.

[929] See, by way of example: William Davies, 'The last global crisis didn't change the world. But this one could', *The Guardian*, 24th March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/24/coronavirus-crisis-change-world-financial-global-capitalism> [accessed 24 June 2020]; George Monbiot, 'The horror films got it wrong. This virus has turned us into caring neighbours', *The Guardian*, 31st March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/31/virus-neighbours-covid-19> [accessed 24 June 2020]; in a recent interview, the philosopher Noam Chomsky has defined the extent of the damage caused by the pandemic as 'a colossal market failure, exacerbated by the capitalism of the neoliberal era': C. J. Polychroniou, 'Chomsky and Pollin: To Heal from COVID-19, We Must Imagine a Different World', *Truthout*, <https://truthout.org/articles/chomsky-and-pollin-to-heal-from-covid-19-we-must-imagine-a-different-world/> [accessed 24 June 2020].

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