

THINKING THROUGH HIGH-TECH HELL

A THEORY OF THE NEW MEDIA DYSTOPIA



MIGUEL SEBASTIÁN-MARTÍN

Peter Lang

THINKING THROUGH HIGH-TECH HELL

"New media determine our dystopian situation. Miguel Sebastián-Martín maps the new media hell. Read this book to understand how SF reproduces our dystopian present and to find the cracks where the light gets in."

—J. Jesse Ramírez, Eastern Switzerland University of Applied Sciences

"In *Thinking through High-Tech Hell*, Miguel Sebastián-Martín defines a 'dystopian structure of feeling' among SF and new media that, contrary to much recent theorizing, is ambivalent about its sense of dystopianness. Through a series of textual examples, Sebastián-Martín demonstrates how the dystopian structure of feeling both critiques and embraces the current neoliberal capitalist state of technology and new media. The book is impressively researched and thoughtfully written, moving easily from broad theoretical/philosophical discussions to pinpoint analysis, making it a relevant new contribution to new media studies and SF research."

—Liz W. Faber, Assistant Professor of English and Communication,
Dean College

Examining a cluster of British and Anglo-American series from the 2010s, this book theorizes them — and, indirectly, the epochal reality that they represent — as "new media dystopias." With this term, the author conceptualizes an emergent sub-genre of audio-visual SF which is thematically concerned with the worst effects of developments in media technologies under digital capitalism and is, ironically, produced for and distributed through digital-capitalist platforms. Across the book's chapters, the new media dystopia is approached as an epochal structure of feeling, as a narratively reflexive sub-genre, as an aesthetically ambivalent form, and as a locale for a new kind of quixotism. Combining these perspectives, the book's interest lies in gauging the ways and the extent to which these dystopias contribute to the historical hopelessness that seems to define the terms of our relationship with new media technologies — as well as our position within and towards contemporary capitalism.

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THINKING THROUGH HIGH-TECH HELL

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Miguel Sebastián-Martín

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Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.
The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography;
detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sebastián-Martín, Miguel, 1995- author.

Title: Thinking through high-tech hell: a theory of the new media dystopia
/ Miguel Sebastián-Martín.

Description: Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2024. | Series: Ralahine
utopian studies, 1661-5875; 35 | Includes bibliographical references
and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024012582 | ISBN 9781803744629 (paperback) | ISBN
9781803744636 (ebook) | ISBN 9781803744643 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Dystopian television programs--Great Britain--History and
criticism. | Dystopian television programs--United States--History and
criticism. | Digital media on television. | LCGFT: Television criticism
and reviews.

Classification: LCC PN1992.8.D97 S43 2024 | DDC
791.450941--dc23/eng/20240402

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024012582>

Esta publicación ha contado con el apoyo económico del "Programa propio V: Difusión de
resultados de investigación" (Vicerrectorado de investigación y transferencia, Universidad de
Salamanca).

This publication has had the economic support of "Programa propio V: Difusión de
resultados de investigación" (University of Salamanca).

Esta publicación ha sido realizada al amparo de un contrato de investigación predoctoral
cofinanciado por la Junta de Castilla y León y el Fondo Social Europeo (ORDEN EDU/601/
2020).

This publication was realized under a pre-doctoral research contract co-funded by the Junta
de Castilla y León and the European Social Fund (ORDEN EDU/601/2020).

Cover image: "Digital mise-en-abyme," by Miguel Sebastián-Martín,
digitally edited photograph, 2024.

Cover design by Peter Lang Group AG

ISSN 1661-5875

ISBN 978-1-80374-462-9 (print)

ISBN 978-1-80374-463-6 (ePDF)

ISBN 978-1-80374-464-3 (ePub)

DOI 10.3726/b21834

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Published by Peter Lang Ltd, Oxford, United Kingdom

info@peterlang.com - www.peterlang.com

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This publication has been peer reviewed.

A mi tía y más que tía, Leonor Martín Vicente, esa persona tan fuerte y constante en mi vida, que tanto me cuidó, y que supo transmitirme su humor y su espíritu crítico desde que era niño.

Leo: creciste en pleno franquismo con todo lo que ello conlleva para una mujer de clase trabajadora, viviste la precariedad de una familia de periquines charros que volaron por toda España, y por esas y otras circunstancias, no estudiaste formalmente. No obstante, hay algo que hiciste mejor que casi cualquier profesor, investigador o académico: me animaste (o, mejor dicho, me picaste) a dudar y preguntar. A imaginar e indagar. A interesarme por la historia, y por supuesto por las historias.

Gracias por todo eso, y por tanto más que no viene a cuento, pero que igualmente cuenta.

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Acknowledgments

The research required for this book was realized as part of a research contract with the English Department of the University of Salamanca, granted and co-funded by the Junta de Castilla y León and the European Social Fund (ORDEN EDU/601/2020) within the framework of the research project *El Quijote Transnacional* (Ref. PGC2018-093792-B-C21, <<https://quijotetransnacional.es>>). Were it not for that contract, obtained in mid-2020 after a year of juggling with part-time jobs, I might have joined the ranks of aspiring researchers who are frustrated (or directly excluded) by the structures of neoliberal academia. So let this be a thank you note to all those who fought for a more inclusive academia and to those who fought for the existence of funding opportunities like the ones I have enjoyed. Without them, the offspring of the working classes wouldn't stand a chance—even if, of course, grants and scholarships alone may be nothing but tiny band-aids on deeper social wounds. For this reason, let this also be a reminder—for those in a condition to do so—to keep on working towards democratizing access to higher education, towards democratizing the learning process itself and—more generally—to keep on resisting fighting against the commodification of everything and everyone, in academia and beyond. Things may look rather dystopian—as they indeed do from a book like this one—but even so, the simple but radical ideal of *public education* is still worth fighting for and worth pursuing in deeper ways.

As a young researcher under the infamous “publish or perish” imperative, I also want to express my gratitude for the anonymous work of those reviewers and editors who helped me to pursue and polish my ideas. This book is inseparable from the careful feedback that I received in the journals *Science Fiction Studies*, *Utopian Studies* and *Science Fiction Film and Television*, as well as in the Spanish journals *Hélice* and *452°F*. Even when these and other journal articles and conference papers were—initially, partly, undeniably—written out of the necessity to get practice on the field,

throughout these many experiences I have learnt to value even more the importance of sharing ideas and criticisms in constructive and respectful ways. For if anything is contained in blind review processes and open conferences, it is the utopian potential of an academia constructed upon *open dialogue*—a place where one can grow and learn from and with a plurality of voices. Because of this, I can only hope to contribute towards working conditions where we all have *more quality time* for dialoguing and thinking collectively and I can only thank and celebrate all those people who, in their daily practices, favor a *slower, collectively-minded* academia: one where publishing and conferencing are not done compulsively or just out of necessity, but for the sake of having some meaningful dialog, some stimulating exchange of ideas which might contribute to collective human knowledge.

More personally, this book is also the long-term product of ongoing conversations with many teachers and colleagues and I should thank them all here for being part of the journey. Firstly, Javier Pardo, my doctoral supervisor at Salamanca, who a long time ago introduced me to the field of SF studies and who has since then supervised much of my work, from undergraduate to doctoral. Thank you for inspiring this academic project and for accompanying me to its completion. Thank you too to the admired colleagues, teachers and researchers who evaluated this book when it was still a PhD thesis: Alfredo Moro, Paula Barba and Maite Conde, in person, as well as Jesse J. Ramírez and Liz W. Faber, remotely. Thank you all for your kind appreciation and your useful suggestions. Another thank you goes to all the colleagues-turned-friends who accompanied me in the years of researching and writing and often read my work, encouraging me and commenting on my ideas. Specifically, thank you, Lucía Bausela, Lucía López and Marta Bernabéu, for being that odd, more-than-academic group of colleagues. Thank you, too, teachers of the English Department at Salamanca and teachers of the Centre for Film and Screen at Cambridge, for being part of the most formative and intellectually stimulating periods of my life. Thank you, too, mamá, papá, for the political common sense and the sense of humor that I inherited from you both, because that too is visible in this work and has helped me live and laugh through it. And thank you too, Sara, above everyone else, for being my first and most critical reader, my most patient supporter and the best life companion.

Abbreviations

AI Artificial intelligence

GLH *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*

MHC *The Man in the High Castle*

SF Science fiction/speculative fiction

VR Virtual reality

Introduction: Feeling Dystopian?

It's all gone sour. It's all gone a bit "Black Mirror," in fact. Which is bad for human civilization, but publicity for our little TV show. Every cloud, eh? I sometimes wonder if I'm well equipped to cope with our terrifying dystopian present because having worked on the show for all this time, I've already repeatedly experienced what it's like when *Black Mirror* stories slowly manifest themselves in the real world. Not sure that's going to be much comfort when I'm being chased by an autonomous robot bum-on-legs with the Facebook logo etched on its perineum and a Make America Great Again hat perched up top, but you can't have everything.

—Charlie Brooker, *Inside Black Mirror* (6)

It has become a cliché to say that reality has become dystopian, to say that we live in science-fictional times, or that "it's all gone a bit 'Black Mirror,'" as *Black Mirror*'s co-creator Charlie Brooker ironically puts it.¹ Taking this logic to a caricaturized extreme, one anonymous meme proposes that You Are Here, at the center of a Venn diagram, in the very

- 1 Writing in the mid-1980s, in a historical situation where making this claim was (perhaps) more transgressive and provocative than today, Donna Haraway based her "Cyborg Manifesto" upon the premise that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" ("A Cyborg Manifesto" 149). Throughout the years, echoes of these claims have been heard among SF scholars especially, as in Sherryl Vint's 2010 claim that we now "inhabit a cyberpunk future" ("Afterword: The World Gibson Made" 228). And today, this analogy continues (and will probably continue) to be echoed by theorists who invoke SF to critically re-imagine the present and, at the same time, the analogy also has (and will probably continue having) echoes in corporate marketing and aesthetics—perhaps to a point in which one can speak of a "futures industry" (see Vint, "Introduction to 'The Futures Industry'") or of "business SF" (see Ramírez). Thus, given the comparison's reduction to a formula that can fit into almost opposite discourses—as Charlie Brooker cynically acknowledges—it seems necessary to reconsider the ambivalent potentials of taking this SF look at the present, especially when the estranging effect of re-imagining reality as SF is now (partially) undercut by the sheer omnipresence of "science-fictionality" as "a mood or an attitude" that informs contemporary cultures (Csicsery-Ronay Jr, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* 2).

worst place of all, where several famous dystopias overlap and converge (Figure 1). Even in our everyday life, many of us have surely heard complaints about new technologies or the media which evoke—or even explicitly refer to—dystopian narratives and imagery. Whether we are talking about the numberless amount of conspiracy theories online, or about the occasional witticisms of some acquaintance of ours, it seems that we now live in what could be called a new media dystopia—a world in which new media technologies appear as one of the most popular scapegoats for broader socio-political problems.² With this popular imaginary in mind, my proposition here is the following: what if we took this collective feeling as the point of departure for a critical theory of the present? What if, more specifically, we proceeded by examining fictional new media dystopias such as Brooker's *Black Mirror* and, through them, we tried to arrive at a better understanding of the high-tech hell that we supposedly inhabit?

- 2 My words here might be taken as an implicit suggestion that this popular logic is neo-Luddite in a sense and, in some instances, this might very well be the case. Nonetheless, I would want to avoid the term Luddite for the derogatory connotations of a (supposedly) inherently reactionary and mystifying form of critical thinking. As opposed to that common caricature, it would be worthwhile to consider Cory Doctorow's argument that SF is inherently Luddite literature, but in a way that recognizes the ambivalences of Luddism. In Doctorow's account, Luddism is to be re-evaluated as much more than a reactionary mystification of the power of technology, but rather a form of politics that, like SF, asks "not merely *what* the technology does, but who it does it *for* and who it does it *to*" ("Science Fiction Is a Luddite Literature" n.p.).

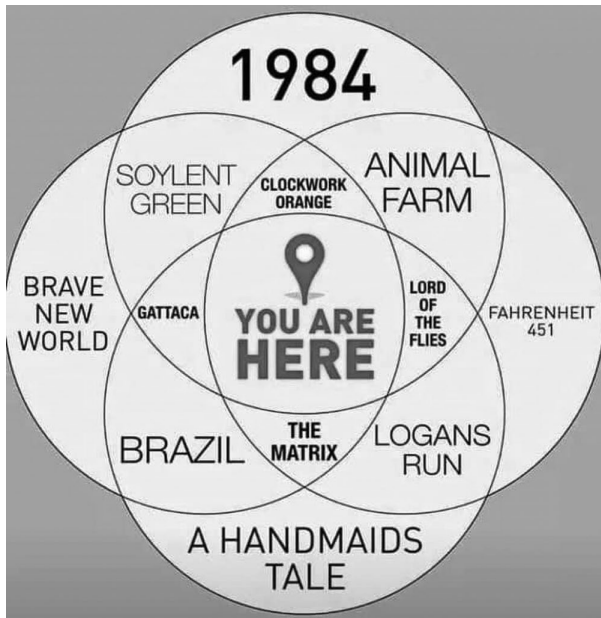


Figure 1. Anonymous meme widely circulated online, with an untraceable origin.

On the one hand, there is a degree of truth and a seed of critical thinking in the truism that the present is a dystopia; yet, on the other hand, to reiterate this clichéd complaint can contribute to reinforcing and further reifying hegemonic ideas and ideologies. To say that we live in a dystopia can be a subversively critical gesture, but it can also be a cynically disempowering one—and this is probably the core ambivalence of a popular logic that, as of yet, does not seem to be losing traction. During the 2010s in particular, the decade of the emergence and consolidation of what has alternatively been called “surveillance,” “platform,” or “digital capitalism” (see, respectively, Zuboff; Srnicek; Pace), the words “dystopia” and “dystopian” have grown in use considerably, becoming trendy buzzwords just as the world witnessed how “new media” technologies were becoming irreversibly interwoven with the fabric of everyday life. The rise in usage of “dystopia” and “dystopian” may be observed precisely (and ironically) thanks to one digital platform, Google Ngram: here we find that the occurrence of both noun and adjective has been growing even faster than

before, at some points quasi-exponentially, after around 2007–8. Therefore, with their rising popularity and the deepening ambivalence that comes with such popularization, “dystopia” and “dystopian” could and should be examined as “keywords” of the present, in Raymond Williams’s sense of the term. Thus seen, the dystopian may be approached as a common-sense but contested imaginary, one which reflects and reifies certain contradictions and conflicts of contemporary capitalism.³

The working hypothesis of this book is that popular dystopian series such as *Black Mirror*, *Westworld*, *Devs*, *Mr Robot*, *Maniac* and others can be grasped as crystallizations of hegemonic (and, to an extent, counter-hegemonic) ways of imagining recent developments in new media technologies, as well as of the broader social dynamics related to such developments. Also adopting Williams’s terminology, Tom Moylan has proposed to think that we now dwell within a “dystopian structure of feeling,” which highlights the central role of dystopian imaginaries in how we map our position as individuals within the whole of contemporary reality.⁴ Specifically, Moylan’s argument is that “the currently popular dystopian structure of feeling tends to foster passive resignation rather than stimulate engagement [...] in the sense of the diminution of the ‘political’ as linked to an increased interest in commodified entertainment” (Moylan, “The Necessity of Hope

3 Raymond Williams’s *Keywords* proposed and demonstrated the idea that the “keywords” of a certain historical moment should be examined as sites of contested, shifting meanings, as crystallizations of broader historical trends.

4 Although Moylan’s essay was published at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and there is an undeniable temptation to read it as prophetic, Moylan’s critique is more of a decidedly *longue-durée*, systemic view that considers the present’s dystopian structure of feeling as something derived from the pre-existing trends of global neoliberal capitalism and the impending climate crisis.

In Raymond Williams’s *Marxism and Literature* (128–35), “structure of feeling” is defined in opposition to static and monolithic notions of “ideology” and instead, defined as a complex of

meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt [...] over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences. [...] a ‘structure of feeling’ is a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence. (132–3)

in Dystopian Times” 182). Probing into Moylan’s hypothesis from a Marxist perspective, this book theorizes and analyzes *new media dystopias* with an eye on *their ambivalence within and against* that structure of feeling.⁵ Whether or not one agrees with this hypothesis on the social function of popular dystopias, it nonetheless seems clear that “the fantastic” has definitively moved “from counterpublic to public space,” as Jesse S. Cohn puts it (449), so, for better or for worse, SF narratives and images weigh heavily upon the popular imagination. Paraphrasing Karl Marx (“The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” 482), now it is not only the tradition of all dead generations, but also the dreadful futures of all dystopias which weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

Out of the innumerable, intertwined elements of this seemingly hopeless global situation, which could include the anthropogenic climate crisis, the deepening of inequalities on a global scale, or the revival of reactionary political programs, the central focus of this book lies on one dimension, the “new media” dimension of this dystopian structure of feeling.⁶ Specifically, this book examines how the conflicts and contradictions of

- 5 This book is conceived as a contribution to Marxist thinking, in sympathy with both the theoretical framework and the political motivations, although this should not be mistaken with an endorsement of everything done in the name of Marxism. My book is, in some ways, very orthodox, at least in the sense that it often relies directly on the writings and concepts of Marx himself, but this is, evidently, not necessarily antagonistic to re-interpreting and re-contextualizing. If I am dogmatic in following something that Marx ever said, it’s in respecting his claim that “All I know is that I am not a Marxist” (Engels). Thus, being “orthodox” means approaching everything critically, including Marx.
- 6 This book’s focus is on new media dystopias is not meant to overshadow the fact that the reasons why our societies may be considered dystopian (in the broadest, popular sense of the word) transcend considerations of media technologies *sensu stricto*. On the contrary, my belief is that the reasons for speaking about the contemporary moment as a new media dystopia are *intersectional*—in Patricia Hill Collins’s broadest and most politicized sense of the term—and these reasons would also require thinking about our global “media ecology” in Sy Taffel’s sense—that is, we would also have to consider how “digital media are deeply politically, materially and culturally implicated in the production of contemporary ecological crises and are necessary components of collective mobilizations designed to substantively address them” (Taffel 2; see also Parikka, *A Geology of Media*).

digital capitalism have been imagined through the lens of *new media dystopias* produced by the Anglo-American culture industry.⁷ With the concept of “new media dystopia,” I refer to certain dystopian narratives that both (1) represent (and problematize) the emergence and spread of new media technologies and (2) are themselves produced, distributed and/or consumed within new media platforms. Although dystopias that conform to this definition could be found in a diversity of media, this book centers its attention on audio-visual series, considering these as an art form that—especially in the SF genre—synthesizes the narrative complexity of literature with the spectacular aesthetics of cinema, allowing us to grasp certain dialectics between the two.⁸ Besides, audio-visual series could also be taken as an emblematic site of the “media convergence” characteristic of the epoch (Jenkins), especially when these products, still conventionally called “TV” series, are now most commonly produced for, distributed through and/or consumed in digital platforms like Netflix, HBO, Disney+ or Amazon Prime and, therefore, they can indirectly shed light upon the spectatorial and consumer logics of the contemporary culture industry.⁹

- 7 Even if Hollywood’s power has been to some extent affected and renegotiated after the emergence of new corporate actors that originated in Silicon Valley (such as Netflix), these are mostly intra-national conflicts and the US is still by far the hegemonic cultural producer on a global scale, so it can be safely assumed (as this book does) that its productions are broadly representative or at least symptomatic of hegemonic cultural trends. For overviews of how Hollywood and television have been reshaped by the emergence of digital capitalism, see Smith-Rowsey or Jenner.
- 8 In this theorization of the audio-visual series, I am essentially operating on the observation that contemporary “complex TV” (Mittell) of the dystopian kind illustrate the “aesthetics of ambivalence” of audio-visual SF (Landon), as a genre that has always had a problematic, if not directly conflictual relationship between its literary and its cinematic expressions. Thus, although in a more genre-specific way, this book could be read in dialog with other contemporary approaches to the “TV” series that emphasize both/either their narrative complexity and/or their aesthetics (see the volume by Winckler and Huertas-Martín; or the *Open Philosophy* special issue on TV series, esp. Shuster).
- 9 In this sense, this book echoes and engages with critiques of the capitalist culture industry across historical epochs: from the Frankfurt School’s landmark critique (see Adorno and Horkheimer; Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered”), going through the Situationists’ critique of the society of the spectacle (see Debord,

Hence, although my corpus is medium-specific, my theorization is clearly oriented towards a larger transmedia field and my concept of the “new media dystopia” has, I believe, relevance and resonance beyond the study of digitally-distributed “TV” series.

From that definition, this book’s exploration of the fictional sub-genre pays special attention to the *reflexivity* of new media dystopias—that is, to the formal means whereby these narratives reflect upon their medium, which is usually the digital platform, itself accessible through a multiplicity of devices that are often thematized by these narratives.¹⁰ From this formal perspective, the Anglo-American culture industry’s “content” is, in turn, ideologically examined as *both symptomatic and subversive of its own platforms of distribution and consumption*. In other words, I approach this kind of medially reflexive “entertainment” *both* as a form of commodified, ideological mystification that is enabled by capitalist media technologies *and* as an SF form of (self-)critique that goes against capitalism’s ideologies of technological progress. In taking this dialectical approach, I aspire to move beyond a theoretical standstill whereby the omnipresent reflexivity of postmodern culture tends to be seen as either radically subversive—as in some theories of so-called metafiction—or as thoroughly symptomatic of the logics of a capitalist culture industry—as in some Marxist theories.

Instead, my assumption is that—just like most postmodern audio-visual culture, but perhaps more acutely—new media dystopias should be examined with a clear eye on their *ambivalences*, which emerge not only from their ironic contextual position, but also from their narrative reflexivity, their visual aesthetics and their ideological implication. In essence,

Society of the Spectacle) and all the way to critiques of the culture industry in the age of digital new media (see Beller; Fuchs, *Critical Theory of Communication*; Briziarelli and Armano).

- 10 In speaking of “reflexivity,” I am following Pedro Javier Pardo’s definition of it as “the process or at of reflecting upon the medium” (Pardo, “Hacia una teoría de la reflexividad filmica” 47, my translation) and I am also following in the steps of several scholars of SF film have argued that audio-visual SF is at least potentially (if not essentially) reflexive. Annette Kuhn, for instance, posits that SF is “the most cinematic of all film genres” and “a perfect example of the medium fitting, if not exactly being, the message” (*Alien Zone* 6–7).

I regard new media dystopias as both semi-autonomous artworks and fetishized commodities.¹¹ On the one hand, these are the products of an age in which even radical anti-capitalism is commodified. However, on the other hand, these are also tiny rebellious gestures against the logics of an age in which the consequences of expanded commodification and technological “progress” are becoming tragically obvious—as the worsening climate crisis of the Anthropocene (or Capitalocene) demonstrates.¹² We might be dwelling in a global new media dystopia, as some popular logics have it, but it is clear that we cannot afford to stay there any longer—at least not without causing irreversible human and environmental damage on unprecedented and unpredictable scales.

In pursuing such a holistic mode of analysis, it should be made clear that my intention is *absolutely not* to simply convey the idea of a “super-structural” mechanism—capitalism’s media-technological apparatus—that would subordinate and subsume all aspects of cultural life, but rather to unveil the ways whereby contemporary hegemonies—like all hegemonies in the Gramscian sense—are subject to constant contestation and require re-negotiation if they are to maintain their legitimacy and sway over populations.¹³ In any approach to dystopian apparatuses of power—fictional or real—one would do well to remember that, as Fredric Jameson warns us,

- 11 My approach sits within a strand of Marxist cultural theory that above all emphasizes ambivalence. Beyond the above-cited Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson, Sianne Ngai’s recent *Theory of the Gimmick*, for instance, revolves around the dialectics of—in her terms—“an *ambivalent* judgment tied to a *compromised* form” (Ngai 1, her emphasis).
- 12 For a comprehensive overview of critical approaches to the Anthropocene, the proposed new geological era in which human action becomes a central factor in environmental change, see Wark. Variations on the term abound, such as “capitalocene” (Moore), meant to stress the importance of capitalist dynamics for this geological turning point, or even “anthrobscene,” meant to highlight “the environmentally disastrous consequences of planned obsolescence of electronic media, the energy costs of digital culture, and, for instance, the neocolonial arrangements of material and energy extraction across the globe” (Parikka, *The Anthrobscene* n.p.).
- 13 Antonio Gramsci indeed emphasized how, in liberal-bourgeois democracies, hegemony is established by securing the consent of the majorities and this requires that the ruling classes are flexible enough to adapt to any challenges and critiques coming from below. In his words: “The ‘normal’ exercise of hegemony [...] is

the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic—the Foucault of the prisons book is the obvious example—the more powerless the reader comes to feel. Insofar as the theorist wins, therefore, by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralyzed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself. (*Postmodernism* 5–6)

As opposed to the possibility that this theorization may further contribute to the dominant hopelessness, my intention here is to insist on how even this structure of feeling is composed of innumerable ambivalences that may potentially be taken in utopian or subversive directions. Metaphorically speaking, my idea is that—despite well-founded fears of some emerging form of algorithmic “neo-fascism”—the whole networked machinery of our own global dystopia is still made up of potentially malfunctioning hardware and profoundly malleable software.¹⁴ This machine may control us, but it can also be reprogrammed, or even broken. Thus, although this book immerses itself in an *a priori* disempowering imaginary, it is ultimately a “technoclastic” attempt to break with the widespread assumption that we live in an inescapable inferno.¹⁵ On the contrary, even the seemingly “totalitarian” new media dystopia of some

characterised by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent” (Gramsci 80). Of course, this is not to say that force is absent from the picture and one should not read Gramsci in that overly “culturalist” manner.

14 It is by now well-known and widely demonstrated that algorithms have tended to reinforce pre-existing axes of domination and inequality, as certain data-driven, seemingly “objective” uses of such technologies (in the US but also globally) end up reifying racism, police violence and the prison-industrial complex (see Noble; Wang). Besides, it is also clear that use of algorithmic technology by financial institutions (and speculators) have also tended towards an entrenchment of elite unaccountability and a growth of economic volatility (see Pasquale; Martin; Durand, *Fictitious Capital*).

15 I am borrowing this provocative neologism from Jesse J. Ramírez, who defines “technoclasm” as a Roland Barthes-style critique of capitalist myths about technology, a mode of critique that is ultimately intended as “a declaration of the [working classes] right to exist as co-creators of the social world” (9).

fictions is shown to be—as any social formation—imperfect, instable and susceptible to transformation (even destruction) by diverse historical agents—human, or non-human. A better understanding of new media dystopias could humbly contribute to the intellectual efforts required in order to begin imagining the large-scale transformations demanded by our historical moment, because—although in a complexly mediated form—the narrative and aesthetic ambivalences of these kinds of fictions are in many ways echoes of the social contradictions and political challenges that confront this epoch.¹⁶

Overall, despite their technologically determinist and cynical appearances, my underlying hypothesis in this book is that new media dystopias *at least partially* challenge—or allow room for readings that challenge—the hegemony of pessimistic and defeatist ways of imagining past, present and future. Although contemporary capitalism—especially after the post-2008 Great Recession—has been the object of severe critiques and popular mobilizations, in practice, we still seem to bow to Margaret Thatcher's infamous dictum that “there is no alternative.” There is little room for doubt that capitalism is still the world's dominant mode of production—and besides, the system seems to be thriving in its expansion into (or colonization of) the digital sphere. This is perhaps one key reason why—at least in the “global North,” or in those regions where hegemony operates by consent more than by coercion—the contemporary epoch is characterized by a pervasive end-of-history fatalism with many names: “capitalist realism” (in Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*), “left melancholy” (in W. Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy”), “the age of impotence” (in Berardi, *Futurability*) or “dystopian structure of feeling” (in Moylan, “The Necessity of Hope in Dystopian Times”). In fact, we do not lack ways of referring to the apparent inability of the whole political spectrum (anti-capitalist left included) to imagine alternatives to capitalism and, although naming this situation is

16 Of course, Marxist criticism, as Barbara Foley acknowledges, can “hardly occupy the frontline of the battle against the capitalist juggernaut,” but it “can assist, however modestly, in developing an understanding of culture and society that has political value” (Foley xviii).

an invaluable step, overcoming it is a much tougher challenge, one that seems daunting even to the imagination.¹⁷

Overall, then, the main ambivalence to be pondered in this book is the following: even though it is undeniable that new media dystopias are riddled with ideological mystifications, especially insofar as they are, to all effects, *commodities* of the almighty Anglo-American culture industry, they can also function as SF allegories of contemporary capitalism that, to a certain extent, follow the logic of the “critical dystopia” (Moynan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*; Baccolini and Moynan). Contrary to the common-sense use of the word, a critical dystopia is not the same as an “anti-utopia”—the radically reactionary negation of the desirability and even the possibility of utopian transformations—; instead, it is a critical exercise of speculation that, despite its façade of negativity, is still guided by a “Utopian impulse” (Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* 1–9). By this definition, when the worst aspects of a historical epoch are denounced and satirized, it is often—though not always—by means of an implicit comparison with some utopian horizon of transformation that is implicitly inscribed in the text. The critical dystopia is, metaphorically speaking, like the photographic negative of utopia: a dialectical inversion, rather than a simple negation. Thus seen, what is to be gauged in this book is the extent to which and the ways whereby new media dystopias may function (or not) in this ideal way. My working hypothesis is that they do function as critical dystopias, but that this functioning is ambiguated and mediated by their medial reflexivity, their narrative-aesthetic ambivalences and their commodification

17 The sentence “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” is perhaps as popular (and clichéd) a saying as any version of the “we live in dystopia” trope, probably due to the influence of Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism*. The sentence origins are shrouded in mystery, however: Fisher attributes it to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek (*Capitalist Realism* 2) and Žižek himself seems to attribute it to Jameson (Žižek, *Mapping Ideology* 1), but then Jameson quotes it as something “someone has observed” (*Archaeologies* 199). And to muddle the puddle further, there is speculation that it could have originated from “remarks given by Donna Haraway during a 1995 talk” with David Harvey (Sadowski 207; cf. N. Smith).

within the circuits of digital capitalism—and all of these dimensions are our objects of theorization and analysis.

A Note on Methodology

In accordance with its historicizing hypotheses, the beginning of this book is an abstract survey of certain historical dynamics that were unfolding during “the long 2010s,” broadly conceived as the period after the 2008 Great Recession, a decade that witnessed the consolidation of digital capitalism. More specifically, I begin by examining how the emergence and spread of new media technologies during those years connects and coheres with the pre-existing cultural logics of postmodernism, the socio-political logics of neoliberal economics and the newer “technologies” of the digital age. The first task of this book is necessarily to clarify what these phenomena amount to and how they relate to one another. Furthermore, such an initial survey is necessary insofar as one should avoid taking for granted such abstract notions as “postmodernism,” “neoliberalism” or “the digital age”—and, perhaps, even the notion of “capitalism”—and all this is even more necessary when one aims at establishing a critical distance with such abstract hegemonies and with their cultural manifestations.¹⁸ Accordingly, this book begins by *estranging*—in the manner of SF itself—those taken-for-granted but nonetheless unavoidable abstractions of historical dynamics in order to later descend into the hidden abode of textual and cultural ambivalences with a historically conscious perspective. Using a cinematographic analogy, one may say that

18 Regarding the concept of capitalism, McKenzie Wark provocatively asks: “Why have we become so comfortable with a way of describing an uncomfortable reality?” (*Capital Is Dead* 22)—and then proposes to entertain the possibility that “this is not capitalism anymore, it’s something worse” (*Capital Is Dead* 29). Specifically, Wark’s hypothesis is that there is an emergent mode of production based on the commodification of information and that this “vectoral mode of production” is subordinating pre-existing modes of production like capitalism.

this book begins with an aerial take of capitalism as *the real new media dystopia*, only to then zoom into the narrative-aesthetic details of *fictional new media dystopias*. Following Jameson, before probing any cultural phenomenon, one must “Always historicize!” (*The Political Unconscious* ix).

Methodologically, therefore, this book combines the contextual and ideological macro-analyses most associated with Marxist SF and utopian studies and the formal and textual micro-analyses most associated with narratology and audio-visual aesthetics, which gradually gains importance throughout this book’s chapters, all in order to better understand ideological hegemonies through their fictional mediations. My approach, despite appearances, is not meant to imply that narratology and/or film aesthetics should be straitjacketed into a superstructure-infrastructure mode of analysis that would see culture and ideology as straightforward “representations” of capitalist logics, but rather to contribute to a better understanding of how and why there are many formal and ideological ambivalences in the act of representing.¹⁹ Instead, I here attempt to treat each level of analysis with its own relative autonomy: that is, considering each level to be *inseparable* from the totality’s dynamics, but also *never entirely subordinated or subsumed* by hegemonic logics.²⁰ If this book is interested in the narratological concept of *reflexivity*, it is precisely in order to arrive at a better understanding of the complexities of “reflecting” upon

19 This seems to me like an unfair *reductio ad absurdum* of Marx’s philosophy, but since it is still commonly heard, some clarification cannot be avoided. Even if such objections may make sense to criticize the economic determinism of those Marxists derogatively categorized as “vulgar,” I would here concur with McKenzie Wark’s idea that we should *avoid shaming the vulgar*, especially since that argumentative move—frequently made by Western “genteel” Marxism—tends to turn Marxism into an academic niche, thus potentially impeding much-needed dialogs with other theoretical fields and seriously hampering its popularization as a mundanely political way of thinking (see *Capital Is Dead* 143–63 especially).

20 Louis Althusser famously schematizes the relationship between base and superstructure and specifically acknowledges two ways in which, for the Marxist tradition, “determination” can exceed the “traditional” from-base-to-superstructure unidirectionality: “1) there is a ‘relative autonomy’ of the superstructure with respect to the base; 2) there is a ‘reciprocal action’ of the superstructure on the base” (238).

new media platforms through fictional new media dystopias, especially insofar as these narratives tend to be (at least implicitly) self-conscious and/or self-referential with regard to their medium. Thus, although this book begins and ends with abstract historical speculations, at its core it consists of close analyses and meditations upon how the narrative and aesthetic ambivalences of new media dystopias echo (without equating) the ambivalences of neoliberal capitalism and postmodern digital culture. Across chapters, my focus moves from narrative reflexivity to ideological ambivalences, from audio-visual aesthetics to SF theory and from modes of characterization to modes of subjectivity, but always within the broader picture of such dystopias in their context. Like Marx once did in *Capital*, my hope is to eventually obtain a more lucid look into the present through a deep descent into inferno. Marx's (and Jameson's) favorite reference was Dante—so, now, why not descend into our own high-tech hell?²¹

On the whole, as a work of cultural, literary and film scholarship, this book evidently prioritizes the aesthetic, the narrative and the cultural over the social, the political and the economic—but, in spirit, it is still conceived as a critical theory of the present, one that speculates about the contradictions of our times via the imaginaries of the new media dystopia. However, this book is *not* meant to provide an exhaustive corpus nor a detailed history of a fictional sub-genre, *not* meant to examine in full detail every audio-visual narrative in its corpus and *not* meant to provide a sociological analysis of the present stage of capitalism. This book is meant to sketch *a theory of the new media dystopia* that allows an interdisciplinary dialog between all such dimensions and others that the concept may evoke—a theory that, hopefully, may be of academic *and* political interest for readers. Like the SF narratives that it examines, this book cannot be “totally totalizing” in its speculations, but, however tentative it may be, it should be read as a search for new utopian horizons of theory and—although more implicitly—praxis.

- 21 Jameson's recent work on allegory is probably the clearest case of the theorist's fondness for Dante (*Allegory and Ideology*), but then it has also been argued (B. Brown) that there were also significant echoes of the Florentine in Jameson's earlier *Postmodernism*, where passages describing postmodern disorientation invoke the Dantean *selva oscura*.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter, “Our Hopeless SF Times: Contemporary Capitalism as a New Media Dystopia,” serves as historicizing prelude and theoretical entrance into the central concept. Here, the new media dystopia is approached in its broadest sense: not so much as an audio-visual sub-genre, but more as a science-fictional conceptualization of the present epoch—and, more specifically, as a conceptualization of the epoch’s structure of feeling within cultural, economic and technological dynamics. In other words, here the term “new media dystopia” names *not a fictional construct, but an epochal reality*—a global situation in which new media technologies are pivotal within the generalized perception of the real as dystopian. If contemporary reality seems science-fictional and if new media play a hegemonic role in that perceived science-fictionality, then the logical next step is to theorize that new media are the hegemonic *novum* of our dystopian imagination. Therefore, besides delving deeper into the historical dynamics behind this structure of feeling, my main proposition is to conceptualize “new media”—an umbrella term that encompasses the ever-evolving global infrastructure of digital information technologies—as *the historical counterpart of fictional new media dystopias’ nova*.

In these ways, this chapter is a historically holistic meditation focused on the role of new media technologies within the dynamics of digital capitalism, which necessarily requires examining the intertwined, semi-autonomous dynamics of postmodern culture and neoliberal political economy. Thus, in a sense, I here offer an overview of how “new media” are not so new, as they function by—borrowing Wendy Chun’s phrase—*updating to remain the same*. This seems true especially insofar as the development and spread of new media has generally followed (and often intensified) both postmodern and neoliberal logics—perhaps to such an extent that one could be tempted with theorizing the former as a technologization of the latter. However, it is also conceivable that new media have led to the emergence of radically different logics—or at least, that they have generated some parallel, semi-autonomous dynamics. Thus, this chapter concludes by commenting upon McKenzie Wark’s *Capital*

is Dead: Is This Something Worse? In many ways interpretable as a non-fictional new media dystopia, this recent work of critical theory speculates with the possibility that digital technologies may be fostering the emergence of a *new and worse* mode of production that operates *on top of*—not in replacement of—capitalism. Therefore, Wark’s hypothesis is here taken as *both* a paradigmatic illustration of the ideological ambivalences of thinking about reality as a new media dystopia *and* as an emblem of the pervasiveness of these kinds of imaginaries, which have echoes beyond fiction. Considering this and other critiques of the present situation, it appears that even when we dare imagining the end of capitalism, we are still left in a new media dystopia—or worse.

After this meditation on “the real new media dystopia,” Chapter 2 is titled “New Media Reflexivity: Self-Referentiality and Self-Consciousness in the Audio-Visual SF of Digital Platforms.” This second chapter serves as the theoretical bridge towards a closer examination of *fictional* new media dystopias, as it begins to approach them from a narratological perspective. Drawing from a range of theories of so-called metafiction and metareferentiality, but especially from Pedro Javier Pardo’s theoretical model for the formal study of *reflexivity* in a broad, transmedia sense, in this chapter I conceptualize certain dynamics of *new media reflexivity*. Just as one might think, with Wark, that a new mode of production is emerging on top of capitalism, my proposition here is that new modes and levels of reflexivity are enabled within the new media architecture, especially if one considers how digital interfaces act as a mediating layer between the user and the diegetic worlds of those audio-visual narratives on offer in the platform. Although this interface or user layer is not a diegetic level in a traditional, literal sense, my proposition is that it might make sense to theorize the new media platform as though it were another diegetic level: as an all-encompassing digital-paratextual layer that contains and correlates a range of commodified fictions. Borrowing an SF concept recently re-appropriated by one infamous character, perhaps we should think of new media as an emerging *metaverse* in which any technical and cultural specificities are subsumed within a self-referential virtual space of constant consumption.

In parallel to this theorization of new media reflexivity, this chapter takes a closer look at two audio-visual dystopias that provide a textual grounding for my theorization: Amazon's serialized adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (created by Frank Spotnitz, 2015–19) and *Black Mirror*'s interactive film *Bandersnatch* (directed by David Slade, 2018). *The Man in the High Castle*, first, serves as an illustration of the possibilities—and the problematics—of projecting the notions of literary reflexivity onto moving-image media, especially as the series attempts—and partially fails—to translate the novel's reflexive structure into an audio-visual language and imagery. Secondly, *Bandersnatch* stands as an emblem of the potentials—and the paradoxes—of emergent new media reflexivity, since this is an interactive film that both satirizes and reproduces the dynamics of digital capitalism within the interface of a video-on-demand platform (Netflix, in this case). Throughout the two analyses, my interest lies in gauging the functioning of reflexivity in new media platforms from a dialectical perspective, with the guiding hypothesis that the technologically enabled omnipresence of reflexivity need not necessarily cancel out the critical and utopian potentials of art and culture—but perhaps, at times, reinforce them, entering a symbiosis with SF's own means of estrangement. New media may have paved the way for a widespread commodification of once-subversive reflexive devices, but they have also provided a platform for new forms of (self-)critique from within the culture industry.

Chapter 3, “Between Critique and Mystification: The Aesthetic and Ideological Ambivalences of New Media Dystopias,” carries on investigating the ambivalences of new media dystopias, but focusing on the inherent tensions that derive from their narrative and visual dimensions—as well as from the interrelation of both. On the one hand, our sub-genre inherits and redoubles the ambivalences of SF and dystopian narratives and it combines them with the double-edges of audio-visual series' narrative complexity. On the other hand, as a specific kind of SF spectacle that is both estranging and mystifying, critical and beautifying, new media dystopias are structured around what I propose to call *a techno-ambivalent gaze*, a way of seeing technology that is integral to the epoch's dominant ideologies. In these ways, the ambivalences of our sub-genre are studied with attention to both narrative and spectacle, where there are, inevitably, both aesthetic

and ideological ambivalences. In schematizing all these ambivalences, the underlying assumption of this chapter is that—because of their reflexive qualities and their status as commodities—new media dystopias both criticize and symptomatize the ideologies and dynamics of digital culture and media. As self-conscious critical allegories of the contemporary moment, new media dystopias oscillate between dystopian (self-)critique and anti-utopian mystification—and, indeed, most often they resist any kind of either/or binary categorization.²²

Subsequently, as in Chapter 2, my theorization is illustrated by a more focused commentary of two dystopian series in particular: Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan's *Westworld* (2016–22) and Alex Garland's *Devs* (2020). My preference for these two serves the purpose of illustrating the sub-genre's ambivalences, but it is also meant to underscore how neither the "narrative" nor the "spectacular" side of these dystopias are free from ambivalences—instead, in my view, both sides deserve an equal valuation (and an equal skepticism) in any rigorous study of audio-visual SF. *Westworld*, on the one hand, is taken as a reflexive dystopia in which narrative complexity allows a myriad of subversive and critical interpretations, but also as a series in which narrative complexity is perhaps even more commodified than the usual suspect of commodification (that is, cinematic spectacle). *Devs*, on the other hand, is examined with a greater emphasis on its suggestive audio-visual aesthetics, which are the cornerstone of a deeply ambivalent narrative about the pseudo-religiosity of our techno-ambivalent gaze. To some extent, both series partake in both sides of the ambivalences, but together, they show how there is no "good" or "bad" side of the equation in the many dialectical tensions that undercut new media dystopias. On the contrary, often their value lies precisely in the tension, the short-circuits and the sparks that arise from the many conflicts and contradictions of

- 22 In this regard, my approach coheres with recent theorizations of utopian and dystopian fiction that propose to re-conceptualize the two as poles within a spectrum, rather than as locked in a binary opposition (see Ostalska and Fisiak). In this volume, Gregory Clays argues that "utopia and dystopia understood both as fiction and reality must be understood as lying on a spectrum which runs from friendship to fear and from consent to coercion" ("Foreword: A Utopian/Dystopian Spectrum: From Friendship to Fear, from Consent to Coercion" xxi).

the sub-genre, caught as it is between narration and spectacle, critique and beautification, estrangement and mystification.

Chapter 4, “New Media Quixotism: Satiric and Utopian Characterizations of Digital Subjectivity,” takes a final, deeper dive into fictional new media dystopias by focusing on a peculiar mode of characterization that reflects and further problematizes the narrative, visual and ideological ambivalences discussed in previous chapters. Here, I develop my concept of *new media quixotism* as a way of theorizing a character type, with related narrative motifs, which seems of central importance in new media dystopias, especially for re-imagining the interaction between the human and the technological. Drawing from Pedro Javier Pardo’s theorization of *the myth of Don Quixote*, understood not as Cervantes’s novel but as an architext that was forged throughout the centuries since its publication, it is possible to trace quixotism across a wide range of narratives that do not openly adapt or rewrite the original *Don Quixote*, but nonetheless reproduce the defining, essential traits of the myth’s quixotic subject. With the advent of postmodernity, what Pardo calls “accidental quixotes” now abound across media and cultures and, in my view, SF and digital culture are no exception to this “mainstreaming” of the quixotic. Therefore, in this chapter I explore how the ambivalences of new media dystopias are often refracted through the ambivalences of this kind of quixotic characterization, especially as both dystopias and the myth oscillate between satirical and utopian impulses. In so doing, my goal is not only to study a character type specific to our sub-genre, but also to sketch a theoretical basis for further studies of quixotism in contemporary culture more generally.

To flesh out these theoretical meditations, the chapter offers close analyses of three new media dystopias in which quixotism is central, although it also begins by acknowledging two works of postmodern SF that paved the way for such characterizations. Firstly, Philip K. Dick and Douglas Adams are identified as representations of two contrasting ways of re-imagining the quixotic subject: respectively, as the tragic, mediocre everyman of postmodern capitalism in Dick’s *Time Out of Joint* and as the laughable stock character of postmodern reflexive fiction in Adam’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Of course, all quixotic figures are at least implicitly tragicomic, but Dick and Adams illustrate how specific

representations may feel the gravitational pull of one pole more than the other. Subsequently and most importantly, this chapter pays close attention to new media quixotism in three dystopian series, examining *Black Mirror*'s episode "USS Callister" (2017), Sam Esmail's series *Mr Robot* (2015–19) and Cary Joji Fukunaga and Patrick Somerville's miniseries *Maniac* (2018). In closely analyzing these three examples, which illustrate a range of possibilities for new media quixotism, this is proven to be a mode of characterization that suggests that—for good or bad—the use of new media fosters and reinforces quixotic personality traits. Just as it seems logical, within our hegemonic common sense, to believe that we live in a dystopia, it may be just as logical to believe that new media are making us all a bit quixotic, especially in the digital dimensions of our lives. In the end, therefore, the deeper, ideological question to be asked in this chapter is the following: how is new media quixotism mobilized with regards to our dystopian structure of feeling? Is new media quixotism presented as a symptom of the epoch's worst tendencies, or is it also, potentially, a vehicle for imagining utopian transformations from within deep in the digital milieu?

On the whole, throughout all these four chapters, I am valuing new media dystopias as a continuation of what Fredric Jameson most admired of cyberpunk: its functioning as a "representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself" (*Postmodernism* 38). Thus, I am positioning new media dystopias under the shade of (post-)cyberpunk's legacy and influence, considering how that sub-genre's tropes and images have, in a sense, dissolved into cultural ubiquity, died of success. As opposed to cyberpunk, however, the key difference is that new media dystopias are much more directly and overtly about the present epoch, especially insofar as cyberpunk imaginaries have been re-appropriated—and some of its *nova*, materialized—with the advent of digital capitalism. Therefore, this book proposes a journey through a new, specific kind of dystopian narratives that allow us to re-assess our everyday use of new media technologies, as well as the broader historical dynamics in which these technologies partake. Like the narratives that it examines, this book too is conceived as a much-needed exercise of estrangement—an exercise of thinking not only

about SF but also *through* SF in order to rethink our technologically mediated experience of reality and the social and political challenges that the present moment poses. The world may look hopelessly and irremediably dystopian, but how we think and what we do about it still matters and we should still care.

Our Hopeless SF Times: Contemporary Capitalism as a New Media Dystopia

We are living through strange days. Across Britain, Europe and America, societies have become split and polarised, not just in politics, but across the whole culture. There is anger at the inequality and the ever-growing corruption and a widespread distrust of the elites. Yet, at the same time, there is a paralysis, a sense that no one knows how to escape from this. [...]

This paralysis is also fuelled by a technology, driven by the aim of giving you today another version of what you had yesterday ... and never a different tomorrow.

—Adam Curtis, *Can't Get You Out of My Head*, episode 1 (“Bloodshed on Wolf Mountain” 0’26”-1’18”).

Audio-visual series like *Black Mirror*, *Westworld*, *Devs*, *Mr Robot*, or *Maniac* are—from the standpoint of this book—the most interesting instances of what I will theorize as *the fictional new media dystopia*, but the ideologies and imaginaries that they evoke are, as I shall keep insisting, not exclusive to them. The fictional new media dystopia is a prismatic crystallization in an audio-visual SF form of broader ideological and historical dynamics that are explored in this chapter. They are all part of an epoch that I here call *the real new media dystopia*—a dystopian structure of feeling that is hegemonically haunted by the ghost of new media technologies.

Adam Curtis’s documentary series *Can't Get You Out of My Head* (2021), for example, could be read as one attempt at narrating this structure of feeling.¹ A self-styled “emotional history of the present,” it offers a view

1 At the time of writing, this series is, by virtue of its length and its production date, perhaps the work of Curtis that best synthesizes and elaborates his vision of the present’s hopelessness, although his previous documentaries already meditated upon the role of media technologies in such a situation, most notably

into the hegemonic sense of hopelessness and defeat in the face of new technologies, the rise of anti-democratic politics and the defeat of progressive popular movements. Throughout its chapters, Curtis's voice-over narration of doom and gloom (cited above) is accompanied with footage of police violence against street protesters across the globe, as well as short shots of drone-delivered bombings in a number of warzones, among other images of violence and repression. But more interestingly, some of the images that open and thus symbolically frame the series are eerily silent, long takes of massive, empty server rooms, as though networked media technologies were indeed the ghastliest ghost of the present epoch. Even though the series begins and ends by citing David Graeber's hopeful words that "the ultimate truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily make differently" ("Bloodshed on Wolf Mountain" 15"-23"; "Are We Pigeon? Or Are We Dancer?" 1h54'39"-51"), one can seriously doubt that viewers would feel hopeful after eight hours of Curtis's storytelling.

Another interesting example is Russell T. Davies mini-series *Years and Years* (2019), which condenses the contemporary mood in a similarly explicit manner. Specifically, this SF series proceeds by extrapolating from 2019 into the future from the perspective of a British family and it primarily operates by assuming that the worst will happen and that there is not much to be done about it, except finding consolation in our closest friends and relatives. Indeed, the protagonist family is the collective spectator of a series of undesirably plausible future tendencies: neo-reactionary and authoritarian politicians shall continue seizing power; climate-related catastrophes shall become more intense and frequent; and media technologies shall allow more panoptic and intrusive kinds of surveillance upon our everyday. But ironically, as the family matriarch puts it in a moment of frankness, "it's a terrible, terrible world, but I want to see every second of it" (Mulcahy 18'01"-18'05")—a two-sided attitude, cynically casual and anxiously concerned, which concisely captures the ambivalent feelings

HyperNormalisation (2016) and *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* (2011). The latter, in particular, is tellingly introduced as "a story about the rise of the machines and why no one believes you can change the world for the better any more" ("Love and Power" 04"-19").

of the age. Of course, Davies's series has a utopian counter-narrative and it ends with utopian twists, with the dethronement of a neo-fascist UK government and the achievement of disembodied "digital immortality" by a terminally ill relative. However, these final drops of hope seem but two droplets that easily dissolve in an ocean of future-fearing hopelessness.

However, one need not go to series or documentaries in order to find signs of the epoch's structure of feeling: these signs abound and it suffices to be around the internet until finding certain kinds of memes. Although many could be mentioned, there is one, recently circulated online (Figure 2), which illustrates the present's dystopianism in a strikingly clear way.² A variant of the "Galaxy Brain" or "Expanding Brain" meme, which is often used to mock an assumed progression towards greater intellectual complexity, this meme focuses on ways of dealing with "all the bad things in the world going on around [us]."³ The simple realization of the world's wrongness apparently leads to confusion, indignation, reformism, revolution, fatalism, mysticism and, finally, back to confusion. Thus, in this caricature of such a wide range of affective-ideological approaches to reality, it seems like the beginning and end of any attempt is confused screaming, a historicized version of the so-called primal scream—a helpless cry of desperation in the face of a seemingly unchangeable and ungraspable reality. Therefore, it would seem that even in cases in which dystopianism is approached with a degree of irony and/or with a critical intent, the epoch's structure of feeling is (inevitably?) reproduced and reinforced. We started

2 Tellingly, this meme was found in an online forum devoted to Mark Fisher's ideas—in particular, in a Facebook group that was already referenced by critic Mike Watson (54) as an example of how Fisher's critical diagnostics in *Capitalist Realism* have been popularized through memes. The "memeification" of Fisher's ideas stands as another index of the pervasiveness of this anti-utopian mood, a structure of feeling that is clearly not confined to the realms of "high" culture, fiction or theory.

3 The most popular wiki-site on the matter, *Know Your Meme*, defines the "Galaxy Brain" meme as "a multi-panel exploitable image series comparing the brain size of a person relative to other variables. Though the expanding brain is usually implied to showcase intellectual superiority over various objects, it is more often used in an ironic sense to imply the opposite, where objects of derision are implied to be of higher standard than objects that are usually highly regarded" ("Galaxy Brain").

with confused screaming and we shall end with confused screaming. But shall we, really?

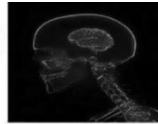
Notwithstanding the nuances and ambivalences that one can find in each of these three cases, the underlying logic seems to be that historical “progress” keeps leading us into a dystopia of one kind or other. This is, therefore, a markedly *anti-utopian* logic that is characterized not only by a deep discontent with the present state of things, but also by an equally strong skepticism towards any future improvement. It appears as if, having renounced all pretensions to steer the wheel of history in order to avoid a catastrophe, the only believable historical narrative today is that the catastrophe is upon us.⁴ Thus, while the postmodern distrust of utopia—based on a critique of the presumably “totalizing” teleology of Enlightened and/or Marxist notions of progress—often amounted to the idea that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, perhaps today one should rewrite and reverse this to claim that *the road to hell is paved with indifference or cynicism*.⁵ Why bother? This is already high-tech hell, so there is not much

- 4 In this line of thought, Mark Bould’s *The Anthropocene Unconscious* proposes that the present’s political unconscious is dominated by the climate crisis, with potentially all culture being about the imminent collapse (in a more or less implicit way, of course). Because of course, some form of collapse is imminent and we are in all likelihood in the autumn (or rather—pun intended—in the fall) of capitalist civilization, as Bordera and Turiel put it.
- 5 Indeed, writing in the 1970s, Jameson diagnosed that “Utopia is a transparent synonym for socialism itself, and the enemies of Utopia sooner or later turn out to be the enemies of socialism” (“Of Islands and Trenches” 3). But this, of course, a reductionist understanding of both Utopia and Marxism as “teleological.” Deconstructing a false caricature of Marx (and Marxism) that reduces his theories to certain propositions of *The Communist Manifesto*, Terry Eagleton’s words are deeply clarifying in this regard:

Marx had nothing but scorn for the idea that there was something called History which had purposes and laws of motion quite independent of human being. To imagine that Marxism is a teleology in this sense, which many postmodernists appear to do, is just as lurid a travesty as imagining that Jacques Derrida believes that anything can mean anything else, that nobody ever entertained an intention and that there is nothing in the world but writing.

Socialism does indeed posit a telos of a kind the possibility of a more just, free, rational and compassionate social order. But so of course do radical postmodernists. Indeed some post-modernists seem to posit a teleology of a much more ambitious kind: the

confused screaming



I am upset with
all the bad things
going on in the
world around me



Complaining won't do:
the problems we face
as a society require
serious political and
economic reform



Reform is not enough;
it can't solve problems
intrinsic to the system.
we must organize and
bring about a mass
revolution to overthrow
the old society and
build a better one



Revolution and reform
are two sides of the
same utopian coin.
There is no political
program that can save
us from the current
crisis; we must prepare
for inevitable collapse



Awaiting "the Collapse" as if
it were a singular event, the
final end point of history,
is merely a crude inversion
of utopia. It's an immense,
drawn-out process each one
of us is already experiencing,
diffracting across every moment
of being; yet none will ever live
to see the totality of its fruition



confused screaming



Figure 2. Meme circulated in <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/2269060710041068/>>.

we can do as human individuals in the face of the Machine (or the Earth). No matter what we do, what is already bad shall only get worse anyway. Of course, this is a self-consciously polemical caricature, but it nonetheless reflects a widespread mode of thinking and feeling—a mood fueled by an “output of dark narratives [that] has congealed in a ‘dystopia porn’ (as SF writer Vandana Singh puts it) that suppresses humanity’s social anxieties through a fatalist, anti-utopian inoculation that normalizes pessimistic indulgence in this terrifying reality” (Moylan, “The Necessity of Hope in Dystopian Times” 166).⁶

Thus, if this is indeed an epoch in which new media technologies are “giving you today another version of what you had yesterday and never a different tomorrow,” as Adam Curtis puts it, it seems that we live in the “end of history,” though not in Francis Fukuyama’s famously hopeful sense of the phrase.⁷ Or, maybe, re-using Herbert Marcuse’s old phrase, where

idea, for example, that the Enlightenment led inevitably to the concentration camps. But neither party believes that there is anything historically guaranteed about the goal of a more just society, or that it is somehow even now stealthily at work as the secret essence of the present. (Eagleton 45–6)

- 6 A similar hypothesis has been brought forward by Urraco Solanilla, who contends that young-adult dystopias encode certain “messages that, under a crude veneer of rebelliousness, reinforce the basic principles of twenty-first-century fluid capitalism.” This hypothesis, however, as Urraco Solanilla himself acknowledges, is premised on focusing exclusively on “the messages intended to be conveyed,” even though the audience can “rework or reinterpret them in a way that is completely different from the intentions of the creator of the work in question” (156–9, my translation). However relevant his hypotheses may be, Urraco Solanilla’s study forcefully brackets narrative ambivalences and spectatorial autonomy within an ideologically one-sided focus on popular culture as a quasi-manipulative force. In this way, young adult dystopias are presented as deceitful, ideologically reactionary products that are marketed to confused young minds who mistakenly believe themselves to be rebels but are the system’s puppets. There is a ring of truth in this, the partial truth of the polemicist, but academically and politically it would be better to examine dystopia (and popular culture generally) in a dialectical way, as both reification and utopia, following Jameson (“Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”).
- 7 At the very end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama famously proposed that “a remarkable consensus concerning the legitimacy of liberal democracy as a system of government had emerged throughout the world over the past few years, as it conquered rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism, and most recently

we are is in the “end of Utopia.”⁸ Or, maybe, where we are is trapped in the “eternal present” of the “integrated spectacle” that was once theorized by Guy Debord.⁹ Weighed down by both past and future—or at least by images of them—the present epoch continues to attest to the dominance of what could be called “the reduction to the present in postmodernity” (Jameson, “The End of Temporality” 709) or more concisely “presentism”

communism” (xi). In this sense, Fukuyama suggested that what “had come to an end was not the occurrence of events, even large and grave events, but History: that is, history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process,” because this history had culminated, as Hegel had once speculated, in the global victory of liberal democracy (xii). For obvious reasons, Fukuyama’s teleological and utopian narrative of the End of History has become the strawman antagonist of much leftist thinking, insofar as it unashamedly forecloses the possibility that there might be any political ideals better than those of neoliberalism. It is still interesting, however, to recall Fukuyama’s proposition as one last rhetorically powerful attempt at breaking with how “The twentieth century ... has made all of us into deep historical pessimists” (3).

8 This “end of utopia” is the opposite of what Herbert Marcuse meant when he used the phrase in the 1960s: for him, the end of utopia was the historical moment in which utopia ceased to be a future horizon because it became realizable. In his view, the mid-twentieth century was already the moment “when the material and intellectual forces for the transformation are technically at hand although their rational application is prevented by the existing organization of the forces of production [...] in this sense, [...] we can today actually speak of an end of utopia” (*Five Lectures* 64).

9 Debord’s idea of the “integrated spectacle” functions as a synthesis of “two rival and successive forms of spectacular power, the concentrated and the diffuse” that he associates with communist and capitalist media, respectively, during the Cold War era (Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* 8). Specifically, Debord suggests that

reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien. When the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it; when diffuse, a small part; today, no part. The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality. [...] The society whose modernisation has reached the stage of the integrated spectacle is characterised by the combined effect of five principal features: incessant technological renewal; integration of state and economy; generalised secrecy; unanswerable lies; an eternal present. (*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* 9–12)

(Hartog).¹⁰ Besides the many possible names given to this narrowing of any utopian imagination, it might help to think that this whole predicament often has a readily graspable affective dimension: if confronted with a worsening dystopian future, one can only feel anxious and, confronted with a past of failed utopias, one can only feel depressed, then one's attention would "naturally" tend to focus on the terrible (but tangible) present.¹¹ This is precisely what fictional new media dystopias seem to do, insofar as—considerably more than speculating with the future—they examine their medium and their moment with a clear conscience of their horror and a fair fear of looking beyond.

Accordingly, the objective of this chapter is to offer a critical analysis and a schematic survey of the multi-dimensional dynamics and the core contradictions of the historical situation that gave birth to this hopeless mood. Striving towards conceptual clarity, I first pause to consider three

- 10 Jameson hypothesizes that "the end of temporality" is an existential part of the postmodern condition, which he contrasts with the modernists' sensibility towards time:

I want to conjecture that the protagonists of those aesthetic and philosophical revolutions were people who still lived in two distinct worlds simultaneously; born in those agricultural villages we still sometimes characterize as medieval or premodern, they developed their vocations in the new urban agglomerations with their radically distinct and "modern" spaces and temporalities. The sensitivity to deep time in the moderns then registers this comparatist perception of the two socioeconomic temporalities, which the first modernists had to negotiate in their own lived experience. By the same token, when the premodern vanishes, when the peasantry shrinks to a picturesque remnant, when suburbs replace the villages and modernity reigns triumphant and homogeneous over all space, then the very sense of an alternate temporality disappears as well, and postmodern generations are dispossessed (without even knowing it) of any differential sense of that deep time the first moderns sought to inscribe in their writing.

- 11 Although it falls beyond the scope of this book, one should note the indirect influence of affect theorists upon certain of my formulations here, namely Sara Ahmed, who places a crucial emphasis on the socio-political matrix within which affects come to be and (more often than not) become instrumentalized by the structures of power (see Ahmed). I thank my colleague Marta Bernabéu Lorenzo for bringing this field to my attention and for her explanations of Ahmed's and others' theories of affects—not least of them her own concepts, developed for her recently completed doctoral thesis.

contemporary conceptualizations of hopelessness: *left melancholy*, *capitalist realism* and *dystopian structure of feeling*. These three, in turn, provide an entryway into the twin periodizing concepts of *neoliberalism* and *postmodernism*, themselves windows into deeper dynamics. Subsequently, my attention turns towards considerations of *new media technologies*, specifying my conceptualization of them as this dystopian epoch's SF *novum* and examining their role as the infrastructural basis of so-called digital capitalism. Finally, after an analysis of McKenzie Wark's *Capital is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* as a paradigmatic "new media dystopia of theory," this chapter concludes with an initial definition of the new media dystopia, both real and fictional.

1.1. Three Ways of Thinking through Hopelessness

In order to begin comprehending this epochal predicament, the three concepts to be examined now have been selected because of the ways whereby they offer a glimpse into the historical becoming of the present mood: in chronological order, "left melancholy," coined in the late 1990s, "capitalist realism," from the late 2000s, and "dystopian structure of feeling," from the late 2010s. Some of their implications overlap and their concerns are interrelated, so they often supplement one another. My intention is to review them and to eventually subsume them into an expanded definition of the most relevant for my purposes, Tom Moylan's notion of the dystopian structure of feeling.

1.1.1. *Left Melancholy*

Although it rose to prominence with Wendy Brown's 1999 essay "Resisting Left Melancholy," the term was borrowed from Walter Benjamin, who coined it in his 1931 "Left-Wing Melancholy," a scathing review of a poetry book by Erich Kästner. Benjamin's usage of the term, which Brown would later follow, is meant to refer to a kind of left-wing or anti-capitalist

radicalism that, despite an awareness of systemic suffering, has renounced the possibility of revolutionary-utopian transformations. In his words, this would be a kind of left radicalism that “has little to do with the labour movement,” whose “political significance was exhausted by the transposition of revolutionary reflexes [...] into objects of distraction, of amusement, which can be supplied for consumption” (“Left-Wing Melancholy” 29). More specifically, Benjamin proposes that

this left-wing radicalism is precisely the attitude to which there is no longer in general any corresponding political action. It is to the left not of this or that tendency; but simply to the left of what is in general possible. For from the beginning all it has in mind is to enjoy itself in a negativistic quiet. The metamorphosis of political struggle from a compulsory decision into an object of pleasure, from a means of production into an article of consumption—that is this literature’s latest hit. (“Left-Wing Melancholy” 30)

Subsequently, left melancholy is further clarified (and further ridiculed) through a powerful bodily metaphor that closes the piece. Referring again to Kästner, Benjamin sentences that

the fatalism of those who are most remote from the process of production and whose obscure courting of the state of the market is comparable to the attitude of a man who yields himself up entirely to the inscrutable accidents of his digestion. The rumbling in these lines certainly has more to do with flatulence than with subversion. Constipation and melancholy have always gone together. But since the juices began to dry up in the body social, stuffiness meets us at every turn. Kästner’s poems do not improve the atmosphere. (“Left-Wing Melancholy” 31)

Elaborating upon Benjamin’s caricature would amount to adding insult to injury, as his words suffice to explain the term—giving left melancholy a stench. What should be clarified is that here I am not interested in a moralizing use of the term, as a bullet to be shot at an unfortunate individual like Kästner. Rather, I am interested in how the notion of left melancholy can be used to characterize an epoch’s structure of feeling. And this is precisely how Wendy Brown uses it.

Building upon Stuart Hall’s previous diagnoses of the contemporary “crisis of the left” (in *The Hard Road to Renewal*; see also his later “The Neo-Liberal Revolution”), Wendy Brown proposes to explore one dimension

of it: left melancholy. Brown first introduces the concept as being “attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal—even to the failure of that ideal—than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present” (“Resisting Left Melancholy” 20). And as Brown herself makes clear, being attached “even to the failure of that ideal” clearly points towards a specific historical situation: the immediate aftermath of the Soviet bloc’s collapse and the subsequent subordination of virtually all nation-states by the structures of neoliberal capitalism (so-called globalization). Surveying the landscape, Brown elaborates:

Certainly the losses, accountable and unaccountable, of the Left are many in our own time. The literal disintegration of socialist regimes and the legitimacy of Marxism may well be the least of it. We are awash in the loss of a unified analysis and unified movement, in the loss of labor and class as inviolable predicates of political analysis and mobilization, in the loss of an inexorable and scientific forward movement of history, and in the loss of a viable alternative to the political economy of capitalism. And on the backs of these losses are still others: we are without a sense of an international, and often even a local, left community; we are without conviction about the truth of the social order; we are without a rich moral-political vision to guide and sustain political work. Thus, we suffer with the sense of not only a lost movement but a lost historical moment; not only a lost theoretical and empirical coherence but a lost way of life and a lost course of pursuits. (“Resisting Left Melancholy” 22)

The implications of this situation are complex, especially if one were to unpack how it affects any specific context—like the United Kingdom during and after Margaret Thatcher’s tenure as PM, which is the paradigmatic example for both Hall and Brown. However, more globally and generally, the hegemony of left melancholy can be explained with one key: a shift towards defensiveness in the left, which (at least according to these theorists) no longer proposes a radically different future but instead struggles for the maintenance of rights and liberties that were already achieved in the past. Thus, although a defense of certain aspects of the status quo—such as the welfare state or liberal democracy—need not be incompatible with anti-capitalism, for better or for worse the fact is that

the left is now on a mostly defensive position *vis-à-vis* historical change.¹² Because of this, Brown criticizes that

the Left has come to represent a politics that seeks to protect a set of freedoms and entitlements that confronts neither the dominations contained in both nor the limited value of those freedoms and entitlements in contemporary configurations of capitalism. And when this traditionalism is conjoined with a loss of faith in the egalitarian vision so fundamental to the socialist challenge to the capitalist mode of distribution, and a loss of faith in the emancipatory vision fundamental to the socialist challenge to the capitalist mode of production, the problem of left traditionalism becomes very serious indeed. What emerges is a Left that operates without either a deep and radical critique of the status quo or a compelling alternative to the existing order of things. But perhaps even more troubling, it is a Left that has become more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness, a Left that is most at home dwelling not in hopefulness but in its own marginality and failure, a Left that is thus caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing. ("Resisting Left Melancholy" 26)

In a way, perhaps, while nineteenth-century capitalism was haunted by "the spectre of communism" and twentieth-century one by "actually existing socialism," the twenty-first century is again haunted by a specter—the specter of a specter, a specter of something that (depending on perspective) is either dead or was never born. In any case, it is clear that an alternative to capitalism does not appear so much as a future horizon anymore, but more as an irretrievably lost future past. As opposed to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, each of them shaped in the wake of the French and Russian revolutions, "the twentieth-first century is born

- 12 Here I am echoing the argument made by Luis Alegre Zahonero and Carlos Fernández Liria's *El orden de El capital*, as well as by Antoni Domènech's earlier *El eclipse de la fraternidad*. These thinkers propose that Marxism as a political project should not be opposed to the Enlightenment's liberal-democratic project *tout court*, but rather seek to expand it by creating the economic preconditions for liberty, equality and fraternity. Thus, they reject the (only apparently radical) idea that "if capitalism was to be ended, the rule of law had to be overcome at the same time. The condemnation of capitalism had necessarily to go hand in hand with the rejection of 'bourgeois law' and the 'individualism' that lay at its basis" (Alegre Zahonero and Fernández Liria 21, my translation).

as a time shaped by a general eclipse of utopias. [...] The utopias of the past century have disappeared, leaving a present charged with memory but unable to project itself into the future" (Traverso 5–7).

Nevertheless, while the once-again-spectral quality of communism helps explain left melancholy and the broader mood of hopelessness and paralysis, the former does not automatically assure the latter. Indeed, as Jacques Derrida had proposed earlier in the 1990s, the end of the Soviet world meant that there was again a possibility for raising new "spectres of Marx," once again internationalist, potentially multiple and heterogeneous. In a correction to melancholics (and to Fukuyama's End of History), Derrida emphasizes the opportunity (and the imperative) of remembering and re-interpreting Marx(ism) in the new scenario of global capitalism:

When the dogma machine and the 'Marxist' ideological apparatuses (states, parties, cells, unions and other places of doctrinal production) are in the process of disappearing, we no longer have any excuse, only alibis, for turning away from this responsibility. There will be no future without this. Not without Marx, no future without Marx, without the memory and the inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx, of his genius, of at least one of his spirits. (32)

Similarly and more recently, there are now voices that, explicitly rebelling against left melancholy, have been actively pushing for the re-imagination of a new "communist horizon" (Dean, "The Communist Horizon") or, in a more academic vein, for the development of "critical future studies" (Goode and Godhe). But clearly, these are all programs that propose to fight against hegemonic tendencies—so their very existence as *counter-hegemonic* projects attests to the enduring sway of what they oppose. Therefore, even if, in Derrida's own words, "no disavowal has managed to rid itself of all of Marx's ghosts," we are still in the "new world disorder" of "neocapitalism and neoliberalism" (34). Despite certain challenges, one can thus assume that, on the political left and elsewhere, melancholy still reigns—or at the very least, it weighs heavily upon this epoch's imagination.¹³

13 Enzo Traverso, in his 2016 book *Left-Wing Melancholia*, offers a complementary explanation of this post-Cold-War hegemonic mood, imagining left melancholy

1.1.2. *Capitalist Realism*

Even though left melancholy helps explain hopelessness within the anti-capitalist side of the political spectrum and, thus, it offers us a key about the ideological limits of anti-capitalist sentiments in contemporary culture, there is another concept that may clarify our dystopian structure of feeling in a way that is less associated with a political orientation. The melancholic situation in the left could and should be located within a broader phenomenon: what Mark Fisher theorizes as “capitalist realism.” With this phrase, Fisher refers to “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (*Capitalist Realism* 2).

One must insist, however, that unlike in the case of left melancholy, capitalist realism is not to be associated to the beliefs of an individual or a political collective—it is, therefore, not an ideological endorsement of or an affective attachment to the system. It is rather, as Fisher later explained in an interview with Jeremy Gilbert, to be understood as a “structure of feeling” in Raymond William’s sense—or as a “political unconscious” in Fredric Jameson’s sense—and this implies that

as the colonization of left-wing consciousness by a pre-existing anti-communist narrative:

The dialectic of the twentieth century was broken. Instead of liberating new revolutionary energies, the downfall of State Socialism seemed to have exhausted the historical trajectory of socialism itself. The entire history of communism was reduced to its totalitarian dimension, which appeared as a collective, transmissible memory. Of course, this narrative was not invented in 1989; it had existed since 1917, but now it became a shared historical consciousness, a dominant and uncontested representation of the past. After having entered the twentieth century as a promise of liberation, communism exited as a symbol of alienation and oppression. The images of the demolition of the Berlin Wall appear, *a posteriori*, as a reversal of Eisenstein’s *October*: the film of revolution had been definitely “rewound.” (2–3)

The main problem, then, is the void left in the collective imagination: where there was once an imaginable alternative, now there is nothing, perhaps only attachment to a bygone ghost.

capitalist realism has effaced not only its own historicity and contingency, but also its own existence as an ideological constellation. You could say that effacement is what defines capitalist realism. The hegemonic field which capitalist realism secures and intensifies is one in which politics itself has been ‘disappeared.’ What capitalist realism consolidates is the idea that we are in the era of the post-political—that the big ideological conflicts are over, and the issues that remain largely concern who is to administrate the new consensus. (Fisher and Gilbert 90)

Subsequently, in a more self-aware way, Fisher continues by warning that

there’s something misleading about describing capitalist realism, as I myself often tend to, as the belief that capitalism is the only viable political economic system. Capitalist realism could perhaps better be seen as a set of behaviours and affects that arise from this ‘belief’. The dominance of capitalism, the inability to imagine an alternative to it, now constitute a sort of invisible horizon. Few explicitly think about ‘capitalism’ as such—the disappearance of alternatives, even if only imaginary alternatives, make it much harder to apprehend capitalism as a specific, contingent system. Capitalist realism as I have understood it entails this deep embedding in a world—or set of worlds—in which capitalism is massively naturalised.

Capitalist realism doesn’t appear in the first instance, then, as a political position. It emerges instead as a pragmatic adjustment—‘this is the way things are now.’ This sense of resignation, of fatalism, is crucial to the ‘realism’. (Fisher and Gilbert 90)

Effacement and naturalization, together with resignation and fatalism, are thus the keys to grasp our imaginative entrapment in the here-and-now of global capitalism.

However, the most perverse and most crucial consequence of the all-pervasive atmosphere of capitalist realism is that even explicit expressions of opposition against the system can contribute to its perpetuation. To make this argument, Fisher draws from Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, where the latter concept is redefined. As opposed to “the classic concept of ideology as ‘false consciousness,’” which “implies a kind of basic, constitutive naïveté” whereby the dominated would be, so to speak, “fooled” by the elites, Žižek invites us to ponder whether this definition is tenable today. Acknowledging Peter Sloterdijk’s argument that “ideology’s dominant mode of functioning is cynical, which renders impossible—or more precisely, vain—the classic critical-ideological procedure” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 25), Žižek invites to re-consider ideology in the following way:

If our concept of ideology remains the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge, then today's society must appear post-ideological: the prevailing ideology is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way—one of many ways—to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*. (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 30)

This definition of ideology as a fantasy structuring reality—and not as a set of personal positions—is what allows Fisher to argue that capitalist realism relies on “the overvaluing of belief—in the sense of inner subjective attitude—at the expense of the beliefs we exhibit and externalize in our behaviour. So long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange” (*Capitalist Realism* 13). In this regard, Fisher uses Žižek's framework to propose that even expressions of opposition can contribute to capitalism's perpetuation, especially insofar as ideology's power is not dependent upon an explicit ideological endorsement by the majorities, but rather upon unsaid presuppositions, naturalized habits and even ironic behaviors.

Interestingly for us here, Fisher refers to a dystopian film to insist on how

capitalist realism is very far from precluding a certain anti-capitalism. [...] Time after time, the villain in Hollywood films will turn out to be the ‘evil corporation.’ Far from undermining capitalist realism, this gestural anti-capitalism actually reinforces it. Take Disney/Pixar's *Wall-E* (2008). The film shows an earth so despoiled that human beings are no longer capable of inhabiting it. We're left in no doubt that consumer capitalism and corporations—or rather one mega-corporation, Buy n Large—is responsible for this depredation; and when we eventually see the human beings in offworld exile, they are infantile and obese, interacting via screen interfaces, carried around in large motorized chairs, and supping indeterminate slop from cups. What we have here is a vision of control and communication much as Jean Baudrillard understood it, in which subjugation no longer takes the form of a subordination to an extrinsic spectacle, but rather invites us to interact and participate. It seems that the cinema audience is itself the object of this satire, which prompted some right wing observers to recoil in disgust, condemning Disney/Pixar for attacking its own audience. But this kind of irony feeds rather than challenges capitalist realism. A

film like *Wall-E* exemplifies what Robert Pfaller has called ‘interpassivity’: the film performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity. (*Capitalist Realism* 12)

Here, Fisher’s arguments fall dangerously close to that extreme of critical theory in which “the theorist wins [...] by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine” but “to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralyzed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 5–6). If capitalist realism is like a “pervasive atmosphere [...] constraining thought and action” (*Capitalist Realism* 16), how could we escape the air we all breathe?

Of course, it is undoubtable that Fisher’s intention—like that of any critical theorist with hopes of emancipation—is to provoke a kind of political praxis that would lead to a social scenario in which his critiques no longer hold: that is, a post-capitalist world. Fisher’s critique is not timeless, but a historical response to the (still enduring) hegemony of neoliberalism, which

has sought to eliminate the very category of value in the ethical sense. Over the past thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a ‘business ontology’ in which it is simply obvious that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business. [...] It is worth recalling that what is currently called realistic was itself once ‘impossible’: the slew of privatizations that took place since the 1980s would have been unthinkable only a decade earlier, and the current political-economic landscape (with unions in abeyance, utilities and railways denationalized) could scarcely have been imagined in 1975. Conversely, what was once eminently possible is now deemed unrealistic. (*Capitalist Realism* 16–17)

Thus, even if the idea of capitalist realism suggests that there is an extremely limited horizon of possibilities for the contemporary imagination, the idea is also meant to highlight that what is “realistic” or “possible” is historically construed—and therefore open to contestation.¹⁴ Nonetheless,

¹⁴ In this regard, Fisher’s critique seems to live up to Alain Badiou’s observation that “Emancipatory politics always consist in making seem possible precisely that which, from within the situation, is declared to be impossible” (121).

Fisher's concept is, probably, above all, an ambivalent emblem of our epoch: on one level, because of how—in criticizing it—the book often symptomatizes what Fisher himself calls “reflexive impotence” and, on another level, also because *Capitalist Realism* itself has been frequently “memed” as fuel for the cynical fires that it tried to put out.¹⁵ As an ironically self-fulfilling prophecy, the popular prestige of *Capitalist Realism* thus shows how anti-capitalism can proliferate under capitalism, as even critical theory can be fed into its commodifying circuits. And in fact, I should say that the first time I came across *Capitalist Realism* was when Amazon's algorithm recommended buying it, at a time when I was especially discontent with labor prospects—and I did indeed buy it then. So let whoever is without sin cast the first stone: this is not a matter of anyone's individual hypocrisy, it is a matter of capitalism's structural contradictions.

1.1.3. *Dystopian Structure of Feeling*

It is a truth universally acknowledged that there has been a dystopian turn in SF, as scholars have been observing for decades. *Longue-durée* histories

- 15 Mike Watson's *The Memeing of Mark Fisher* repeatedly suggests how Fisher's authority in certain online communities (especially among so-called “doomers”) attests to the enduring validity—and to the ironic co-optation—of *Capitalist Realism*. The potentially self-defeating character of Fisher's diagnoses, especially when decontextualized and quoted only at their most hopeless, was famously seen in the 2021 media “sensation” caused when US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) wore a white dress to the Met Gala—with the inscription “TAX THE RICH” painted in red over and around it. Even though AOC was evidently successful in attracting attention to the cause of fiscal justice, there was a proliferation of memes that superimposed excerpts of *Capitalist Realism* on top of AOC's pictures. Such memes, which quoted those parts of *Capitalist Realism* that most cynically emphasize the potential uselessness of anti-capitalist gestures, seemed to be deployed in order to denounce the hypocrisy or pointlessness of AOC's act. Mark Fisher thus came to appear in fashion magazines (see Cartter) and the whole polemic led to curious headlines such as “Es más fácil imaginar un meme de Mark Fisher que el fin del capitalismo de plataformas” (Espluga).

of the genre have mostly narrated this turn by reference to the three most canonical modern dystopias and their paradigm-shifting influence—Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. Besides, more contemporary-oriented studies have narrated the turn by reference to the proliferation of dystopian narratives across media and throughout popular culture generally.¹⁶ So perhaps there is more than one dystopian turn—or perhaps, like capitalist modernity, the dystopian turn has arrived in succeeding waves, until the waters of hopelessness eventually submerged the whole beach.¹⁷ When and where utopianism persisted or revived—as in the case of certain Soviet SF or certain American SF of the 1970s—it is now virtually gone, or at least overshadowed by the hegemony of dystopian narratives and imaginaries across media and cultures.¹⁸

- 16 For reference studies of dystopian literature, see Stock's *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought* (2018); Baccolini and Moylan's *Dark Horizons* (2003); Moylan's *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000); or Booker's *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* (1994). Beside these, for a more transmedia-oriented study of contemporary dystopias, with sections for literature, cinema and theater, see also Vieira's *Dystopia(n) Matters* (2013). Predating these, Elliott's *The Shape of Utopia* (1970), already devoted a chapter to the growing "fear of utopia" during the Cold War (84–101) and, in that same decade, Chad Walsh's *From Utopia to Nightmare* (1972) already placed the turn at the very title of his study.
- 17 Baccolini and Moylan do suggest this idea in passing, noting that "the contemporary historical moment is interrogated by critical positions that necessarily work within a dystopian structure of feeling (and perhaps that "moment" has recurred, as has the dystopian genre, in one form or another since the onset of twentieth-century capitalism—beginning in its monopoly and imperialist phase, taking another form in the 1940s and 1950s, and yet another in the 1980s and 1990s)" (Baccolini and Moylan 4). This observation could be read in parallel to Jameson's insights about waves of modernization: speaking of an "existential uneven development," he calls modernism "a culture of incomplete modernisation" while postmodernism would be a culture of the time when "the premodern [definitively] vanishes" ("The End of Temporality" 699). It is with Jameson's schemas in mind that I am suggesting the existence of two main waves of dystopianism: a modernist and a postmodernist one, although it is beyond the scope of this work to probe into the validity of this speculation.
- 18 Certain media—especially visual media (cinema, television or videogames) that are subject to commercial pressures more intensely than literature under the

Thus seen, Moylan's notion of a "dystopian structure of feeling" emerges as a way to theorize the broader atmosphere entailed by the so-called dystopian turn in fiction, thus historicizing the turn and suggesting the use of "dystopia(n)" as a valid concept for cultural-materialist theorization.¹⁹ Of course, there is something potentially tautological in taking this hypothesis too mechanically: we have historically witnessed a rise of dystopian fiction because history itself has become dystopian—so problem solved! But clearly, the present narrowing of the imagination to its most hopeless, cynical and pessimistic—or the "slow cancellation of the future," in Franco Berardi's phrase—is not so simple a phenomenon.²⁰ After all, a

publishing industry—seem to have been even more irremediably dystopian than literature (still the object of most studies). As Simon Spiegel has recently argued, in fiction films, utopias "seem to be non-existent" because "a classic positive utopia lacks some of the basic elements required for a narrative film" and he suggests that if we want to find film utopias, "we turn to non-fiction films" such as Peter Joseph's *Zeitgeist: Addendum* (2008). But clearly, these are still a minority that is clearly drowned by the outflow of blockbuster dystopian films.

With regard to the American exceptions, one should refer to the critical utopias of Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy and Samuel R. Delany, studied by Moylan's *Demand the Impossible* (1986, edited and re-published in 2014). Besides, for a reflection of the dialectical relationship that can be theorized between First-World and Second-World utopias, see Jameson's "Progress Versus Utopia"; as well as, for more detailed studies of Soviet utopias, his *Archaeologies*.

- 19 Predating and perhaps influencing Moylan's "The Necessity of Hope," Gregory Claeys's *Dystopia* (2017) is one of the first monographs to have used centrally and consistently the notion of "dystopia" within a context that is not primarily cultural or fictional, but mostly political and historical. Another recent example with a more sociological than cultural use of "dystopia" can be found in Eva Paus's *Confronting Dystopia* (2018), although the term is then scarcely and vaguely employed, as it is used just twice throughout the book (5, 18) and then twice again, in the volume's and another chapter's titles (115).
- 20 This is a term that could be located mid-way between Brown's use of left melancholy and Fisher's use of capitalist realism, as it narrates the slow decline of "the psychological perception, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity, the cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilization, reaching a peak in the years after the Second World War. Those expectations were shaped in the conceptual frameworks of an ever progressing development, albeit through different methodologies: the Hegelo-Marxist mythology of *Aufhebung* and instauration of the new totality of Communism;

structure of feeling is, in Raymond Williams's definition, a complex set of "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt [...] over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences." And, methodologically speaking, a structure of feeling is "a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence" (R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 132–3).²¹

Having thus defined structure of feeling, it nonetheless remains necessary to define the other element of Moylan's formula: the dystopia(n). Although this concept is further explored in Chapter 3 (as an audio-visual genre), it is already necessary to make a distinction between *anti-utopia* and *dystopia*, as the two terms (along with others like *cacotopia*) have been often used interchangeably as the simple opposite of utopia—and when they are differentiated, there is not a clear consensus on the difference (see McAlear; as well as Blaim). For present purposes, however, it seems much more productive and clarifying to propose that *dystopia* would be an ambivalent *narrative genre* within which contrasting *ideological impulses, the utopian and the anti-utopian*, are put into dialog, resulting in a complex interplay of hopefulness and cynicism. In other words, dystopia would be a genre in which a critical and/or satirical attitude towards an undesirably

the bourgeois mythology of a linear development of welfare and democracy; the technocratic mythology of the all-encompassing power of scientific knowledge, and so on" (*After the Future* 18–19). This idea is in fact cited by Fisher in the introduction to his later book (*Ghosts of My Life*).

- 21 In his 2020 novel *The Ministry for the Future*, SF writer Kim Stanley Robinson expands upon this definition, very didactically, with the present moment in mind: "how you feel about your time is partly or even largely a result of that time's structure of feeling. When time passes and that structure changes, how you feel will also change—both in your body and in how you understand it as a meaning. Say the order of your time feels unjust and unsustainable, but also falling apart before your eyes. [...] it feels that way to us. But a little contemplation of history will reveal that this feeling too will not last for long. Unless of course the feeling of things falling apart is itself massively entrenched, to the point of being the eternal or eternally recurrent individual human's reaction to history" (124).

oppressive society would never fully overshadow the possibility of transforming the world for the better and it may, therefore, be seen as a synthesis of anything that is more one-sidedly utopian or anti-utopian. Contrary to the concept of *anti*-utopia, which names a radical opposition to the utopian—both as imagined place and as ideological impulse—dystopia would thus name a bad place in which utopian possibilities may linger. This is the schema that Moylan appears to follow when he proposes that

Dystopias negotiate the social terrain of Utopia and Anti-Utopia in a less stable and more contentious fashion than many of their eutopian and anti-utopian counterparts. As a literary form that works between these historical antinomies and draws on the textual qualities of both subgenres to do so, the typical dystopian text is an exercise in a politically charged form of hybrid textuality, or what Raffaella Baccolini calls ‘genre blurring.’ Although all dystopian texts offer a detailed and pessimistic presentation of the very worst of social alternatives, some affiliate with a utopian tendency as they maintain a horizon of hope (or at least invite readings that do), while others only appear to be dystopian allies of Utopia as they retain an anti-utopian disposition that forecloses all transformative possibility, and yet others negotiate a more strategically ambiguous position somewhere along the antinomic continuum. (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky* 147)

In these ways, dystopia is not a simple negation of what Jameson (following Bloch) calls the “Utopian impulse”—that is, a universal human wish for a better state of things, which may be found “governing everything future-oriented in life and culture; and encompassing everything from games to patent medicines, from myths to mass entertainment, from iconography to technology, from architecture to eros, from tourism to jokes and the unconscious” (*Archaeologies* 2). Thus, one would assume that even within a dystopian structure of feeling such as is theorized by Moylan, utopian desire and dreaming is not simply negated. The utopian impulse is, more specifically, repressed, submerged, or co-opted—but it nonetheless remains alive. This is no trivial qualification, insofar as Moylan, in speaking of a dystopian structure of feeling, is not confronting us with an unchangeably negative (anti-utopian) totality—such as the picture painted by Fisher’s “capitalist realism”—; he is ultimately advocating for a negation of negativity, for an anti-anti-utopianism that would let us rekindle the utopian impulse within and against the present’s

hopelessness.²² Just as within the dystopian genre, within a dystopian structure of feeling there can still be hope.

In Moylan's life-long work, the notion of a "dystopian structure of feeling" seems to have organically evolved from a more text-oriented concept towards a more holistic hypothesis.²³ In fact, Moylan's latest monograph, *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation* (2021), begins by counterposing his well-established theorization of (critical) dystopias as a narrative genre to his newer understanding of dystopia as a structure of feeling. Moylan helpfully clarifies that "As opposed to the recognized capacity of dystopian narrative not only to warn but also to stimulate transformative political action, this neoliberal dystopian structure of feeling functions as an ethical and political inoculation that normalizes a passive indulgence in our terrifying reality, thereby paralyzing radical challenges to its terms and conditions" (*Becoming Utopian* 2). In that volume, however, the concept is scarcely used (understandably, given its focus on utopianism), and it was Moylan's 2020 essay "The Necessity of Hope in Dystopian Times" that primarily prompted my interest in the term, insofar as it is, self-consciously and centrally, "the first part of a project addressing the current dystopian structure of feeling and the possibilities for a refunctioned utopianism" ("The Necessity of Hope in Dystopian Times" 190).

22 In the introduction to his 2005 *Archaeologies* collection, Fredric Jameson already made a call for anti-anti-utopianism (using that term precisely), proposing that "we may now have recourse to that ingenious political slogan Sartre invented to find his way between a flawed communism and an even more unacceptable anti-communism. Perhaps something similar can be proposed to fellow-travelers of Utopia itself: indeed, for those only too wary of the motives of its critics, yet no less conscious of Utopia's structural ambiguities, those mindful of the very real political function of the idea and the program of Utopia in our time, the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism might well offer the best working strategy" (*Archaeologies* xvi).

23 The concept was employed twice in *Dark Horizons* (2003), although with a meaning that is evidently more restricted than the one Moylan would later give the term, as it seems to denote a structure of feeling that is more directly emanating from dystopian fiction (see Baccolini and Moylan 4, 150).

Moylan's article opens by historicizing the present's dystopian structure of feeling in the following way, as a markedly anti-utopian moment that sets great challenges on any attempt at reviving utopianism:

The current global order threatens humanity and all of nature. Harm abounds everywhere. Economically, the worldwide incursion of neoliberal capitalism produces alienation and exploitation in all aspects of everyday life. Politically, the overdetermined array of corporate power, superpower aggression, and the failure of democratic politics to uphold the utopian potential of justice and peace increases the privileges of the rich and powerful and unevenly subjects people around the world to lives of intensifying vulnerability and immiseration. Culturally and existentially, accelerated by these social depredations, virulent hatred feeds a spreading wave of xenophobia (attacking on grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, or any other mode of perceived difference that appears to threaten an already vulnerable populace). And environmentally, with the downward spiral of climate catastrophe, planetary life is facing total destruction. In the face of these dire conditions, for those of us (in our diverse intersectional situations) who aim to transform this current reality in the spirit of a just, equal, and healthy existence for all of humanity and nature, it is clearly time for the political exercise of the hopeful, transformative utopian impulse. Yet, even as we engage the utopian problematic and praxis, we need to recognize the ways in which capitalism's retrieval mechanism "subsumes and consumes" the radical potential of utopianism. ("The Necessity of Hope in Dystopian Times" 165–6)

Thus seen, utopian impulses are not dead today—and can never be—but they clearly swim upstream against the strong, overflowing currents of left melancholy, capitalist realism and a more general hopelessness in the face of mounting catastrophes. Our dystopian structure of feeling is, in a sense, today's (capitalist) realism and, even if utopianism is not dead within it, Moylan's apocalyptic picture is far from an exaggeration. One could go through something like the IPCC's reports to weigh (and to be weighed down by) the overwhelming amount of scientific evidence that suggests a global collapse soon, but for my present purposes it would be pointless to, in a positivistic way, list all the events that feed into to this structure of feeling.²⁴ What is clear is that what makes this a dystopian

24 The latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability (Working Group II Report)*, indeed attests to the unsustainability and the irreversibility of the multiple and multi-dimensional harms that await human and natural ecologies. If one were to survey

structure of feeling is the might of anti-utopian tendencies, as expressed in a dominant mood of hopelessness *vis-à-vis* historical events, which goes hand in hand with the daunting difficulties faced by any utopian impulses, which remain but struggle.

Having defined this mood, however, we cannot dismiss one crucial question yet, still only partially answered: how did we get to this “dystopian structure of feeling” in which reality seems to behave like (and, to an extent, outmanoeuvre) dystopian fiction? Much remains to be said about the larger dynamics that led here and we should continue to unpack the structural contradictions of *the epoch as a whole*, the broader conditions that made possible this hegemonic sense of hopelessness. In this sense, besides conceptualizing dystopian ways of thinking and feeling in the abstract, there is the need to periodize properly, to define historical specificities. As Kim Stanley Robinson explains, “periodization makes it easier to remember that no matter how massively entrenched the order of things seems in your time, there is no chance that they are going to be the same as they are now after a century has passed, or even ten years” (121). And what do we periodize with? To understand contemporary culture, one finds the term *postmodernism* and, to understand contemporary political economy, there is the concept of *neoliberalism*. These two are, without a doubt, indispensable to grasp the present epoch. Accordingly, in the next section, I survey the two phenomena, emphasizing their dialectical inseparability and their semi-autonomy within the epoch’s whole. Clearly, one should not forget, as it often happens, that in talking about neoliberalism and postmodernism, one is still inscribed within the *longue-durée* history of capitalist modernity. These are, merely, the latest “-isms” to describe the latest period of the globally dominant social formation.²⁵

its findings, predictions and suggestions, the impression of living in dystopian times would not dissipate—on the contrary, it would be like falling considerably deeper into a rabbit hole of pessimism. And for good reasons.

- 25 Here I am using “social formation” as opposed to the more strictly economic concept of “mode of production,” but it should be clear that my use of “social formation” is intended to encompass both the cultural and the economic dimensions of capitalism, which are, after all, not fully separable, even though capitalist self-perception would tend to make us think so. Furthermore, when I specify that capitalism is the

1.2. Periodizing with Two Late Capitalist-isms

Giving us a clear toolkit for the task of periodization, the Marxist theorist Bertell Ollman helpfully sketches the seven “levels of generality” that are implied in historical-materialist analysis (86–99), which can indeed be used in literary and cultural theory, as Barbara Foley suggests. As she summarizes them, the seven levels are:

(1) the immediate circumstances surrounding unique individuals; (2) the particular epoch in capitalism informing the moment under examination, a period of some 20–50 years; (3) the era in which capitalism has been the dominant mode of production, some 300–500 years; (4) the still longer timespan constituted by class society, some 5000–8000 years, depending on location; and (5) the timespan common to all humans since their evolution into *Homo sapiens*. The two remaining levels of generality can take us beyond history to ontology [...]: (6) denotes the features that all forms of human and animal life have in common; while (7) comprises the material qualities that humans share with all other existing matter, organic and inorganic. (Foley 31–2)

Ollman himself clarifies that even though “each of these levels brings into focus a different time period, [...] they are not to be thought of as ‘slices of time,’ since the whole of history is implicated in each level, including the most specific” (Ollman 89). In this sense, one should be especially wary of explaining anything by exclusive reference either to the specific situation of individuals (level 1) or to a timeless human nature (level 5). Clearly, such a move would amount to reinforcing the status quo’s naturalizing mechanisms—and more importantly, it would intensify our hopelessness in the face of history, insofar as cultural, social, political or economic phenomena would appear as the result of an individual’s or a species’ fate.²⁶

“dominant” social formation, the implication is not that there are no others, but rather that there is a conflictual co-existence with “residual” and “emergent” social formations. This conceptual triad (dominant, residual and emergent) is borrowed from Williams (see *Marxism and Literature*).

- 26 In this regard, I would stand with Barbara Foley’s observation that such a theoretical move would problematically allow “to deny, or at least minimize, the types of causality operative on levels two through four—that is, the levels where class analysis, especially of capitalism, figures prominently. [...] [Instead,] causality comes to

Therefore, in order to avoid a naturalizing reduction to levels 1 and 5, while speaking of postmodernism and neoliberalism I overemphasize levels 2 and 3 of Ollman's schema, regarding these as two semi-autonomous, epochal phenomena that are, in turn, inscribed within the longer era of capitalist modernity. In so doing, the main difficulty lies in that their dynamics are not self-evident, especially because their hegemony is sustained by the capitalist-realist fantasy that our historical predicament is just "natural" or "post-historical"—and this gives us all the more reason to periodize properly. What is here examined, therefore, is, on the one hand, the underlying logics of postmodernism and neoliberalism and the ways whereby they have naturalized their own dynamics (level 2)—and, on the other hand, I also examine how these two phenomena have continued (and naturalized) certain dynamics set off by the longer capitalist era (level 3).²⁷ In

be construed either as, on the one hand, the exercise of distinct individuality or, on the other, the fatalistic pressure of an unchanging human condition. [...] some of the most influential schools [of literary criticism] have proven prone to bypassing historically based causal analysis and positing abstract notions of human nature and language, often premised upon the belief that the most general statements about what it means to be human are for that reason the most valuable and profound (31).

- 27 It is beyond my scope to delve into the nature—and even less the history—of capitalism. Nonetheless, I should acknowledge that my understanding is profoundly indebted to Ellen Meiksins Wood's definition of it as a social formation characterized by the population's generalized *market dependence*. Commodification *per se* predates capitalism, as commerce existed since antiquity and capitalism emerges only *after the majority becomes market dependent*—first and foremost, *to eat*, as Wood's analysis of early-modern English agrarian capitalism shows. In her words, "capitalism was born when market imperatives seized hold of food production, the provision of life's most irreducible necessity" (81)—so it is only after basic subsistence was commodified that a system oriented towards profit-maximization (or surplus extraction) could emerge. Thus, capitalism is a system in which more and more would be commodified: natural resources, manufactured goods of all kinds and, of course, human bodies—in the generalization of waged labor, but most brutally in the case of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. As Marx himself put it, "the veiled slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal" (*Capital Volume I* 925). Now, with the inestimable aid of digital technologies, commodification continues its seemingly endless, ever-expanding subsumption of increasing aspects of life: most notably, culture and sociability.

these ways, my schematization of both postmodernism and neoliberalism is mediated by the phenomenon of *commodification*, which—as Marx’s *Capital* demonstrates in its very first chapter (*Capital Volume I* 125–77)—is a cornerstone to understanding capitalist societies.²⁸ Postmodern cultures and neoliberal economics are no exception and, notwithstanding their semi-autonomous specificities, one can observe (and one should emphasize) that there is a clear continuity: both can be explained primarily by reference to commodification’s intensification and expansion into increasing spheres of life. In other words, this epoch is to be approached as a step further in the dominance of exchange-value over use-values, in the primacy of abstract, homogenizing quantification over the heterogeneous qualities of subjects and objects.²⁹ The on-going process of capitalist commodification leaves

- 28 The very first line of *Capital* tells us: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form” (K. Marx, *Capital Volume I* 125). The commodity or, perhaps more importantly, *the process of commodification* is thus what lies at the structural basis of the capitalist mode of production.
- 29 For a deeper approach to the dialectical nature of the commodity, it is worth revisiting one of Marx’s most suggestive passages:

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs, or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that [people change] the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful [...]. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (*Capital Volume I* 163–4)

Beyond Marx’s evocative-provocative language, the key here is that, as he elaborates in succeeding pages, a commodity is a thing—anything, be that a wooden table, the latest smartphone, or any work of art—that acquires a kind of supra-sensuous second nature: it acquires an abstract value that does not have any relation to that thing’s objective properties, a value that is based on the commodity’s capacity to be exchanged and, thus, a value based on a simple question: how much of something else (not necessarily money) can I obtain through this thing? In short, anything

nothing untouched and postmodernism and neoliberalism both shed light upon different aspects of this.

1.2.1. *Postmodernism*

Postmodernism is now an irremediably worn off, vaguely catch-all term, not only because of its nuanced and variegated uses in academia, but also because of its more recent popularization as a slur. Indeed, a considerable number of TV personalities and popular thinkers of the right (as well as certain fringe communities of the left) frequently refer to postmodernism as something like an intellectual plague—even, a presumed “neomarxist” takeover of universities and/or Hollywood, thus treating postmodernism almost as a conspiracy theory.³⁰ Evidently, this reactionary, paranoid usage is not what interests me here—although it is worth keeping it in mind, as it speaks of the epoch’s (dystopian and quixotic) propensity for imagining systemic trends as secret conspiracies (see Dean, *Aliens in America*; Bratich; Gulyas; Costantini). What interests me here is the use of postmodernism as a periodizing label, one that has been used in an endless number of disciplines. “Postmodernism” may, indeed, be used to refer to certain aesthetics, philosophies, or politics.³¹

that is commodified is treated as though its principal value is not in itself but in the market and its value, in the eyes of its owner, becomes a matter of exchange-value. The qualitative uniqueness of any given commodity is thus dissolved, or turned on its head, by an alchemy of abstract equivalence. Commodification makes everything the same in the eyes of capital.

30 Treating postmodernism as a cabal-like conspiracy is the ludicrous position of Canadian psychiatrist Jordan Peterson, who has gone as far as to post online “a list of writers he considers ‘Postmodern NeoMarxists,’ which ran as follows: ‘Ibram X Kendi, Ta-Nahesi-Coates, Robin DiAngelo, Kimberle Crenshaw, bell hooks, Andrea Dworkin, Michel Foucault, Naomi Klein, Catherine McKinnon, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida and, perhaps above all, Michel Foucault’” (qtd. in Savage). It is in this sense that is now possible to argue that postmodernism has started to function as an alt-right conspiracy theory (see Nevado Encinas), which does not *per se* undermine its conceptual validity but it does certainly compromise it.

31 In this regard, there is an endless number of essays, monographs and introductions to postmodernism available, ranging from early theorizations in the 1970s, academic

However—although I later return to elements of postmodern aesthetics in Chapter 2 (primarily, reflexivity)—my emphasis here lies on the more abstract, historicizing uses: on postmodernism understood as an epistemology and a cultural hegemony.³²

Postmodernism is generally assumed to be a Western phenomenon that emerged in the decades after World War II, but it would not become hegemonic until approximately the 1970s. By the early twenty-first century, however, a range of thinkers, including some of its earliest theorizers, have proclaimed it dead (e.g. Hassan, “Beyond Postmodernism”). And after its presumed demise, there seems to be a growing host of proposed successors: “digimodernism” (Kirby), “metamodernism” (Vermeulen and van den Akker), or even “post-postmodernism” (Nealon).³³ But are we ready to abandon the term? I cannot aspire to provide an answer to these terminological conundrums here and my assumption is that at least two of the essential characteristics of the postmodern still retain their explanatory potential within the present situation: the distrust of master narratives and the commodification of culture.

The single most popular account is Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, originally published in 1979. According to this book, the distrust towards and/or rejection of “grand” or “master” narratives—those totalizing narratives that provide coherence to our otherwise

monographs and introductions produced between the 1980s and the early 2000s and even polemics published as recently as 2021 (see Hassan, “POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography”; Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*; Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*; McRobbie; Bertens; C. Butler; McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*; Connor; Jeffries; Anderson).

- 32 It would have been possible here to observe a difference, namely that “The word *postmodernism* generally refers to a form of contemporary culture, whereas the term *postmodernity* alludes to a specific historical period.” Nonetheless, as Terry Eagleton does, I have here “tended to stick to the more familiar term ‘postmodernism’ to cover both of these things, since they are clearly closely related.” This is because, like Eagleton himself, I am more interested in the broader “culture or milieu or even sensibility of postmodernism as a whole” rather than with “the more *recherché* formulations of postmodern philosophy” (Eagleton vii–viii).
- 33 For a recent survey that engages with these three and a number of other “post-postmodern” alternatives, see Bolaño Quintero.

fragmented positive knowledge of the world—would be a defining feature of postmodernity, if not its key epistemological characteristic. Lyotard pays considerable attention to the state of the sciences and, in this regard, he argues that “The decline of narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of actions to its means” (Lyotard 37). Thus, postmodern epistemology favors a focus on technique rather than on telos, which is to say that it overvalues specific, specialist truths while distrusting any overarching, totalizing purpose of knowledge, which is a significant hindrance to the construction of any kind of collective, politicizing narratives. Therefore, the most politically relevant implication of Lyotard’s proposition is that postmodernism entails a deep distrust towards any teleological vision of history—a generalized skepticism towards visions that would assume that History is (or can be) guided by some form of progress, or that it advances (or may consciously be oriented) towards any kind of utopian horizon. Thus, postmodern epistemology favors a depoliticizing climate in which only the fragmented, diverse truths of individual experiences can be significant, whereas attempts to provide unifying political narratives would be met with distrust—if not outright rejection.

In these ways, the whole intellectual and affective panorama seems overdetermined by a generalized *fear of progress*—or a *fear of utopia*, one might say, both political and technological—due to (among other things, but centrally within the Western imagination) the traumas of the Second World War, which tragically illustrated Walter Benjamin’s maxim that civilization is inseparable from barbarism. Indeed, as Terry Eagleton slyly notes, certain postmodern intellectuals seem to overhastily indulge in “the idea [...] that the Enlightenment led inevitably to the concentration camps” (46)—and ironically, in so doing, postmodernism proposes its own reversed teleology: the idea that totalizing attempts to “move history forward” ultimately lead to catastrophe.³⁴ Thus, in postmodern epistemology

34 In this manner, it would seem as though this catastrophist teleology is based upon a radical simplification of Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, reducing their dialectical theorization to its most negative side. As opposed to this, perhaps the best formulation wherefrom one can dialectically think history is still Walter Benjamin’s maxim that “There is no document of civilization which is not at

one finds the pre-history of some of the same anti-utopian logics already considered, in the sense that alternatives to the status quo seemed less and less imaginable already *before* the post-Cold-War emergence of left melancholy and capitalist realism.

Do these attitudes endure? If, as argued above, the present's structure of feeling is hopelessly trapped in a seemingly eternal present, it would appear that this older distrust towards master narratives is not gone, but rather more naturalized. Lyotard's postmodern condition, of course, may not necessarily manifest as skepticism per se: it might as well manifest itself as cynicism, melancholy, anxiety, or hopelessness—but the void left by the eviction of grand narratives remains. And now, not only do we seem to have abandoned (or forgotten) about imagining a more utopian alternative to the present mode of production; we also seem to have stopped believing in capitalism's own teleology of progress, especially after seeing how capitalist "progress" is literally leading to catastrophe. In this way, the safest assumption may be that our dystopian structure of feeling is an intensified postmodern climate—a climate in which *climate* itself has validated the postmodern fear of progress. Today, the most believable destiny of history is wholesale planetary collapse, but because we are still postmodern, we cannot (yet) put our faith in any radically alternative vision of the future.³⁵

Of course, none of this is to say that the postmodern epoch does not allow for subversive or oppositional practices: in fact, these practices flourish, but they often remain on the level of a defense of differences, identities and particularities—especially of those disfavored by the status quo—and such practices tend to fall short of constructing an alternative hegemony, because that would involve a "grand narrative" of collective

the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another" ("Thesis on the Philosophy of History" 256).

- 35 All in all, perhaps Lyotard's main claim needs to be qualified and, as Jameson suggests in his preface to *The Postmodern Condition*, we should take "a further step that Lyotard seems unwilling to do in the present text, namely to posit, not the disappearance of the great master-narratives, but their passage underground as it were, their continuing but now unconscious effectivity as a way of 'thinking about' and acting in our current situation" ("Foreword" xii).

solidarity and the plotting of an alternative, utopian course of history. Thus, the key in this case is that, if subversive and oppositional politics partake of postmodern epistemology, then any anti-establishment movement “could only ever be a strategic skirmish or fleeting subversion, a rapid guerrilla raid on the fortress of Reason, since for it to become systemic would be for it to fall victim to the very logic it threw into question” (Eagleton 7). Furthermore, it even seems that

There are those radical thinkers who genuinely believe that a belief in totality is just a mesmerizing hindrance to real political change, as with the kind of mentally blocked student who feels unable to say anything unless he or she has grasped everything. Anti-totality may here be more of a strategic than a theoretical point: there may well be some sort of total system, but since our political actions cannot dent it as a whole we would be better advised to trim our sails and stick to more modest but more viable projects. (Eagleton 11)

Indeed, the main critique raised against so-called identity politics—another abused term, often caricatured as postmodernism’s political expression—is precisely this rejection of utopian, collective aims that would transcend particular interests, however legitimate those may be. In other words, the problem would be that postmodern politics, as Nancy Fraser argues about some liberal branches of feminism, seems to be “aimed more at valorizing cultural difference than at promoting economic equality” (Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism* 4), even though much feminism has been, can be and still often is about more than “simply culture.”

In these regards, the shift undergone by feminist movements, as criticized by Nancy Fraser, can be seen as a clear example of how such post-modern tendencies may affect a specific political movement:

Unable to transform the deep gender structures of the capitalist economy, [feminists] preferred to target harms rooted in androcentric patterns of cultural value or status hierarchies. The result was a major shift in the feminist imaginary: whereas the previous generation had sought to remake political economy, this one focused more on transforming culture. The results were decidedly mixed. On the one hand, the new feminist struggles for recognition continued the earlier project of expanding the political agenda beyond the confines of class redistribution; in principle they served to broaden, and to radicalize, the concept of justice. On the other hand, however, the figure of the struggle for recognition so thoroughly captured the feminist

imagination that it served more to displace than to deepen the socialist imaginary. The effect was to subordinate social struggles to cultural struggles, the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition. (*Fortunes of Feminism* 4)

Of course, as Fraser acknowledges, all of this “was not, to be sure, the original intention” (*Fortunes of Feminism* 4) and her comments are not meant to discredit the movement to which she belongs: this is rather a cautionary diagnosis of dominant tendencies within the broader climate of postmodernism and neoliberalism. And besides, certain of the critical concepts developed during this era—such as “intersectionality” (coined by Crenshaw)—clearly have the potential to forge an alternative hegemony in a way that acknowledges the heterogeneous complexity of interlocking axes of oppression (gender, race, sexuality, class, etc.), while at the same time allowing for the construction of a counter-hegemonic force that may give a common political purpose to diverse identity-positions.³⁶ To put it more simply: talk of intersectional oppression allows talk of intersectional solidarity and, in this way, the concept of intersectionality—hastily dismissed as a divisive “trap of diversity” by some critics (Bernabé)—shows one possibility for plotting a utopian, counter-hegemonic “grand narrative” of progress that is also conscious of diversity.³⁷ Thus seen, the

³⁶ One attempt at theorizing an intersectional counter-hegemony is provided by Nancy Fraser’s herself, in her most recent work (“Climates of Capital”), where she constructs a critique of capitalism in the age of climate change that accounts for and synthesizes the insights of ecocriticism, feminism and anti-colonialism within a critique of the system’s inherent tendency to be parasitical upon divisions of gender, race, class and nature-economy.

³⁷ As one of the earliest proponents of the concept of intersectionality (see her *Black Feminist Thought*), Patricia Hill Collins took a decisive step towards an emphasis on what one could call “intersectional solidarity,” emphasizing the potential of intersectionality as a totalizing concept that may allow for the construction of an alternative hegemony. In Collins’s words,

intersectionality is far broader than what most people, including many of its practitioners, imagine it to be. We have yet to fully understand the potential of the constellation of ideas that fall under the umbrella term intersectionality as a tool for social change. As a discourse, intersectionality bundles together ideas from disparate places, times, and perspectives, enabling people to share points of view that formerly were forbidden, outlawed, or simply obscured. [...] Intersectionality is well on its way to becoming a critical social theory that can address contemporary social problems

anti-utopian trap of postmodern epistemology seem to be based on a falsification, since recognition and redistribution, diversity and equality were never opposites: on the contrary, they dialectically inform one another, just like the concepts of individual and totality, or identity and universality.³⁸ In this regard, the anti-totalizing, fragmenting bias of postmodern thinking is far from unchallenged—and as Fraser puts it, more utopianly, “the young feminists of this generation seem poised to conjure up a new synthesis of radical democracy and social justice,” a synthesis of “redistribution [and] recognition” (*Fortunes of Feminism* 16).

Considering the hegemony of this radically anti-utopian epistemology, one might legitimately ask *how* it came to be. In this regard, another key factor behind the emergence of postmodern culture that may help us account for the endurance of this de-politicizing, anti-totalizing distrust of grand narratives is *the commodification of culture*, a phenomenon that has been the object of multiple Marxist studies. In the post-war context of the emergence and consolidation of a (hegemonically Anglo-American) capitalist culture industry structured around cinema and television (and other “newer” media later), the dynamics of expanded cultural commodification show crucial parallels—and in many ways explain—the fragmenting and the leveling of forms of knowledge that is so characteristic of the epoch. However, this realization is not to be turned into a one-sided denunciation of postmodern culture as a “degraded” or “totally capitalistic” culture. Instead, the expansion of cultural commodification in the postmodern epoch must be examined dialectically, as a phenomenon composed of contradictory tendencies, utopian and anti-utopian. As Fredric Jameson’s

and the social changes needed to solve them. But it can do so only if its practitioners simultaneously understand and cultivate intersectionality as a *critical* social theory. (*Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* 2)

- 38 On this matter, one could refer to Nancy Fraser’s two-dimensional theory of justice as an attempt to break with these false oppositions within feminist politics (“Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition”) and it is also worth consulting Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek’s collective reflection on the challenges and possibilities for (re)constructing an alternative hegemony and a sense of universality, in a way that incorporates *and* transcends the postmodern sensibility towards difference and contingency (see Butler *et al.*)

Postmodernism tells us, “In place of the temptation either to denounce the complacencies of postmodernism as some final symptom of decadence [...], it seems more appropriate to assess the new cultural production within the working hypothesis of a general modification of culture itself with the social restructuring of late capitalism as a system” (*Postmodernism* 61). Following Ernest Mandel’s periodization of capitalist technological developments, Jameson proposes to think of nineteenth-century realism, early-twentieth-century modernism and late-twentieth-century postmodernism, as cultural reflexes of

three fundamental moments in capitalism, each one marking a dialectical expansion over the previous stage. These are market capitalism [Mandel’s age of “steam-driven motors”], the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism [Mandel’s age of “electric and combustion motors”], and our own, wrongly called postindustrial, but what might better be termed multinational capital [Mandel’s age of “electronic and nuclear-powered apparatuses”]. [...] [L]ate or multinational or consumer capitalism, far from being inconsistent with Marx’s great nineteenth-century analysis, constitutes, on the contrary, *the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas*. This purer capitalism of our own time thus eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way. One is tempted to speak in this connection of a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious: that is, the destruction of precapitalist Third World agriculture by the Green Revolution, and the rise of the media and the advertising industry. (*Postmodernism* 35–6, my emphasis)

Thus seen, postmodernism emerges in an epoch marked by “a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas,” including, most crucially for this book’s purposes, culture, art and communication.

Although, of course, culture, art and communication were never fully free from market pressures throughout the capitalist era, “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (*Postmodernism* 4). Thus seen, one can hypothesize that this structurally determined incentive to innovation and productivity has very likely exerted an influence

upon postmodernism's valuation of differences, particularities and identities, insofar as that tendency is analogous to any advertiser's overvaluing of their product's pseudo-uniqueness—although that does not in itself discard the (occasional) emergence of genuine difference and novelty. Structurally speaking, then, the post-war emergence and consolidation of a *culture industry*—a term that I here favor over “mass culture” or “popular culture” in order to emphasize culture's status as a commodity—is also the most likely cause of another commonly observed characteristic of the postmodern epoch.³⁹ Specifically, I refer to the “effacement of the older distinction on which modernism depended for its specificity, [...] the securing of a realm of authentic experience over against the surrounding environment of middle- and low-brow commercial culture” (*Postmodernism* 63).⁴⁰

39 In this regard, I am following Theodor Adorno's own observation in “Culture Industry Reconsidered” that, in his and Horkheimer's earlier *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they first “spoke of ‘mass culture’ [but then] replaced that expression with ‘culture industry’ in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves” (“Culture Industry Reconsidered” 12). Besides, regarding the use “popular culture,” I would agree with Jameson's related proposition that it is “essential to distinguish between the emergent forms of a new commercial culture—beginning with advertisements and spreading on to formal packaging of all kinds, from products to buildings, and not excluding artistic commodities such as television shows (the ‘logo’) and best-sellers and films—from the older kinds of folk and genuinely ‘popular’ culture when the older social classes of a peasantry and an urban artisanat still existed and which, from the mid-nineteenth century on, has gradually been colonized and extinguished by commodification and the market system” (*Postmodernism* 63). Even if there is now a greater degree of consumer feedback and semi-autonomous participation in the culture industry, as scholars like Henry Jenkins have shown, this does not change the fact that it is still a culture mediated by an industry's productions or platforms. It is, however, beyond my scope to engage in the polemics surrounding popular culture studies, now an established field and it is absolutely not my intention to imply that all scholars in the field are insensitive to the commodifying forces of contemporary culture (see Storey, for instance).

40 Of course, this is not to say that there was a total opposition between modernist “high” culture and commercial “low” culture; rather, theirs was more like a dialectical relationship, one with bi-directional influences. Thinking about classical Hollywood, for instance, one should entertain the hypothesis that the culture

Commodification thus significantly explains both the proliferation of cultural differences and the levelling of cultural hierarchies.

But what does commodification entail beyond this heterogeneity and de-hierarchization? Reviewing Adorno and Horkheimer's landmark critique of the culture industry, Jameson helpfully schematizes the broader effects of commodification as follows:

In a world in which everything, including labor power, has become a commodity, ends remain no less undifferentiated than in the production schema—they are all rigorously quantified, and have become abstractly comparable through the medium of money, their respective price or wage—yet we can now phrase their instrumentalization, their reorganization along the means/ends split, in a new way by saying that by its transformation into a commodity a thing, of whatever type, has been reduced to a means for its own consumption. [Thus] the various forms of activity lose their immanent intrinsic satisfactions as activity and become means to an end. (“Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” 131)

In this sense, it seems at the very least ironic that in an age where, as Lyotard put it, emphasis shifts from ends to means, commodification makes everything oriented towards a single end, a teleology that remains unsaid because of its universality: market valorization, the realization of exchange-value over and above any use-value. Along this line of thought, Jameson then focuses his attention on commodified art and culture:

The force of the Adorno-Horkheimer analysis of the culture industry [...] lies in its demonstration of the unexpected and imperceptible introduction of commodity structure into the very form and content of the work of art itself. Yet this is something like the ultimate squaring of the circle, the triumph of instrumentalization over that “finality without an end” which is art itself, the steady conquest and colonization of the ultimate realm of non-practicality, of sheer play and anti-use, by the logic of the world of means and ends. (“Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” 132)

The consequences of this process are thus squarely anti-utopian: it would seem that, under commodifying pressures, culture is always a means to an end—its own circulation as a commodity. In this sense, culture is

industry's productions perhaps were not the “vulgar” antagonist of modernism, but rather a kind of “vernacular modernism” (see Hansen).

necessarily semi-autonomous with regard to capital. Even if the cultural object in question were an artwork (a novel or a film or a videogame, say) with strong subversive connotations, postmodern culture cannot pretend to be autonomous like the high modernisms once did—or rather, like theorists such as Adorno prescribed (see *Aesthetic Theory*). In fact, so-called high-culture, where it remains today, has been definitively “rebranded” as a luxury commodity, as a piece of “cultural capital” to be exploited by corporations (see Wu).

Nevertheless, the culture industry’s seemingly endless expansion *does not necessarily subordinate* postmodern culture to the commodity’s logic: above all it makes it *always semi-autonomous*, dialectically inseparable from market compulsions. Commodified culture retains the potential of functioning differently, in parallel or in excess of dominant logics. In this sense, it is not only postmodern epistemology and politics that can be self-defeating, the capitalist culture industry can also be self-defeating. As anti-capitalist documentary filmmaker Michael Moore puts it in an interview for the documentary *The Corporation* (2003),

You know I’ve always thought it’s very ironic that I’m able to do all this and yet what am I on? I’m on networks. I’m distributed by studios that are owned by large corporate entities. Now why would they put me out there when I am opposed to everything that they stand for? And I spend my time on their dime opposing what they believe in, okay? Well, it’s because they don’t believe in anything.

They put me on there because they know that there’s millions of people that want to see my film or watch the TV show, and so they’re going to make money. And I’ve been able to get my stuff out there because I’m driving my truck through this incredible flaw in capitalism: the greed flaw. The thing that says the rich man will sell you the rope to hang himself with if he thinks he can make a buck off it? Well, I’m the rope. I hope. I’m part of the rope.

And [the rich] also believe that when people watch my stuff, or maybe watch this film, or whatever, they think that [...] [people]’ll watch this and they won’t do anything because we’ve done such a good job of numbing their minds and dumbing them down [...] People aren’t going to leave the couch and go and do something political. They’re convinced of that.

I'm convinced of the opposite. I'm convinced that a few people are going to leave this movie theatre or get up off the couch and go and do something, anything, to get this world back in our hands. (Achbar and Abbot 2h2o'22"-2i'44")

Cases of overtly anti-capitalist culture notwithstanding, it still seems that, generally, within a postmodern world of commodified culture, depoliticization and fragmentation are built-in tendencies, as even subversive and oppositional cultures can be thrown into the furnaces of commodification. But this is perhaps a dangerously anti-utopian conclusion, just like Mark Fisher's hypothesis of capitalist realism, which can lead one into fatalism or cynicism when interpreted non-dialectically.

On the whole, therefore, understood as part of a dystopian structure of feeling, postmodernism should not be defined as a monolithic movement or moment, but rather as a cultural climate that is rife with contradictions between anti-utopian and utopian impulses. Of these, I have highlighted two main dialectical contradictions: an unresolved tension between the negation of grand narratives and their underground persistence and another unresolved tension between the expanse of commodifying sameness and a flourishing of cultural differences. Thus, whether or not one is comfortable with the term, this epoch is still postmodern for at least two reasons: because (1) it is haunted by the void left by the grand narratives of the past, which still need to find an (as of yet) hard-to-imagine alternative, and because (2) its culture still struggles with the commodifying pressures exerted by an ever-mightier culture industry—now not just an industry, but an all-encompassing society of the spectacle that could even be an entirely new mode of production, as McKenzie Wark argues.⁴¹ Of course, none of these tendencies make sense in isolation, as postmodernism emerges within

41 Debord's "society of the spectacle" is a step forward in conceptualizing the more pervasive reach of the culture industry after the invention of television, given that Adorno and Horkheimer mostly aimed at classical Hollywood, but "society of the spectacle" may itself need updating for the digital age, as recent theorists acknowledge (see Briziarelli and Armano). Nonetheless, this is not to say that neither of the concepts have lost validity and their proponents offered revisions (Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered"; Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*). The idea that this expansion may amount to a qualitatively new mode of production, Wark's hypothesis, is explored at the end of this chapter.

a larger, dynamic totality, so we now turn to another periodizing concept, postmodernism's necessary sibling in political economy: neoliberalism.

1.2.2. *Neoliberalism*

Following a roughly parallel timeline to that of postmodernism, neoliberalism begins to emerge as an intellectual doctrine in the post-war years, but it does not become hegemonic until the 1980s, beginning with Ronald Reagan's US presidency and Margaret Thatcher's UK premiership—although one should not forget that, before arriving to liberal democracies, neoliberal policies were first “tested” by Augusto Pinochet's criminal Chilean dictatorship (see Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; as well as Klein). Although most often associated with the beliefs of economists like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, neoliberalism is, by one definition, the political philosophy of a global, interdisciplinary group of thinkers who were loosely organized around the Mont Pèlerin Society, one private think-tank founded in 1947 in Switzerland, which is still active today. The Society's statement of aims reads as follows:

The central values of civilization are in danger... The group holds that these developments have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and by the growth of theories which question the desirability of the rule of law. It holds further that they have been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved. (Hartwell 41–2)

Beyond the Cold-War-apocalyptic and anti-communist undertones of this declaration, one can easily discern the ideological coordinates of this group. Plainly, this is a staunch defense of the capitalist “free” market, presenting it (utopianly) as a decentralized (with “diffused power”) and dynamic (with “initiative”) system that safeguards “freedom”—and in this sense, it is no surprise that neoliberalism has been called the epoch of “capital resurgent” (see Duménil and Lévy).

Neoliberalism's main tenets, as synthesized by Philip Mirowski based on the Mont Pèlerin Society's history, are

- (a) that “‘the market’ is an information processor more powerful than any human brain,” a kind of efficient super-computer that “always surpasses the state’s ability to process information;”
- (b) that “market society must be treated as a ‘natural’ and inexorable state of humankind,” an idea often conveyed by pseudo-scientific evolutionary and genetic metaphors;
- (c) that one must “redefine the shape and functions of the state,” thus favoring “formats of techno-managerial governance that protect ideal market from what they perceive as unwarranted political interference” and, in turn, also “treating politics as if it were a market;”
- (d) that “freedom” must be seen “as trumping all other virtues,” but crucially, this is exclusively understood as “negative” freedom;⁴²
- (e) that “capital has a natural right to flow freely across national boundaries,” while “the free flow of labor enjoys no similar right;”
- (f) that “pronounced inequality” is not “an unfortunate by-product of capitalism,” but rather a “necessary functional characteristic of [the] ideal market system;”
- (g) that “[c]orporations can do no wrong, or at least they are not to be blamed if they do,” even in the case of monopolistic concentrations of power (like Big Tech’s), which are (contra classical liberalism) not to be demonized nor prosecuted;
- (h) that “[t]he market (suitably reengineered and promoted) can always provide solutions to problems seemingly caused by the market in the first place,” precisely because it is deemed the most efficient information processor (Mirowski 434–40).

42 As defined in “Two Concepts of Liberty,” positive freedom would be that kind of *freedom that is enabled by* rights or resources to which one has access, while negative freedom would be primarily *freedom from* interference by other actors (see Berlin).

In these tenets, we can see that neoliberalism as an ideology revolves around utopian conceptions of the free market that deem it the most efficient social mechanism—simultaneously envisioning the market as an artificially created, complex computing system, while also naturalizing it as a biologically determined formation. Following these ideas, neoliberalism in practice entails a series of policies by now well known to most populations globally: market deregulation (meaning less restrictions to the global financial flows of capital, at the expense of local labor rights), the privatization of public services (meaning the de-nationalization of once publicly owned companies) and a reduced and less progressive income taxation (meaning less taxes, but especially and disproportionately for corporations and for the most affluent).

These policies are often challenged, but they still largely set most political agendas and their consequences are also well known to most populations globally. Primarily, neoliberal policy has caused a widening income gap between (both global and local) rich and poor and—in countries with something like a welfare state—it has also caused a decline in the quantity and the quality of public benefits and services due to so-called austerity measures (a neoliberal euphemism for budget cuts, privatization and/or outsourcing of services).⁴³ Thus, in this epoch what is being commodified *en masse* is not only culture, but also a growing number of public services that were once considered to be (at least on paper) *human rights*. As Marx once said of commodification, “[n]othing is immune from this alchemy, the bones of the saints cannot withstand it, let alone more delicate *res sacrosanctae, extra commercium hominum*” (*Capital Volume I* 229). Indeed, for neoliberalism, nothing is sacred enough as to be exempt from commodification.

One question arises automatically: how is it conceivable that suchlike policies, which plainly only benefit a miniscule elite, have become the by-default playbook for politicians across the spectrum? How is it possible that neoliberal politics are still, by and large, “the new way of the world”

43 For a comprehensive, *longue-durée* and statistically documented analysis of the inequalities entailed by neoliberal policies, see Thomas Piketty’s bestselling *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

(see Dardot and Laval), even though (ironically) neoliberalism has been proclaimed dead in numberless crises (see Plehwe et al.), most notably during the 2010s Great Recession?⁴⁴ One answer to this question is that neoliberal policies have often been imposed technocratically—as “structural adjustment programmes” by institutions like the IMF, the WTO or the ECB—and by military force in the case of Western-backed “regime changes” across the Global South—as in the above-mentioned case of Chile, or in the case of US-backed Iraqi regimes. It is thus clear that neoliberalism, in theory and in practice, is nothing less than a project aimed for the global “restoration of class power” (Harvey, “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction” 29), which is stealthily undermining democratic institutions (see W. Brown, *Undoing the Demos; In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*) and resulting in the collapse of redistributive, egalitarian policies on both sides of the old Cold War, “gradually in the West” and “[e]xplosively in the East” (Kaldor 26). Of course, in the 2010s, grassroots movements such as the Spanish 15-M movement, or Occupy Wall Street in the US—as well as certain “left-wing populisms” later in the decade—have contributed to popularizing crucial criticisms against neoliberal policies and there is, moreover, a whole “world literature” of resistance against the neoliberal order (see Deckard and Shapiro), but, by and large, such policies are still being implemented around the globe.⁴⁵

44 During this crisis, even the British magazine *The Economist*, a worldwide reference for (neo)liberal thinking since the nineteenth century, took a moderately critical stand against neoliberal policies, as observed in Alexander Zevin’s history of the magazine. Although previous crises such as the dotcom bubble and IMF interventions in the global south were dismissed as “small bumps on the road to globalized capitalism” (345), after 2008 “the Economist—hurricanes, cliffs, ruins, free-falling globes on the cover—suddenly declared it ‘time to put dogma and politics to one side and concentrate on pragmatic answer.’ There was no such thing as laissez-faire in a foxhole, for ‘when global finance stops only governments can start it again’” (360).

45 On the matter of populist opposition to neoliberalism, one could mention the rise of “left populist” parties in Southern Europe such as Podemos or Syriza, as well as the rise in power and popularity of leftist leaders such as Jeremy Corbyn in the UK or Bernie Sanders in the US, among others (see Mouffe; Damiani; Tamames).

To better grasp this situation, one must examine neoliberalism not only as a political-economic praxis of a small elite, but also as a covertly totalizing philosophy, one that has become, in many regards, *a common sense* that feeds into our dystopian structure of feeling.⁴⁶ Some of the above-listed tenets of neoliberalism have implications beyond the realm of policy, suggesting a grander worldview that naturalizes (and idealizes) the workings of capitalism and, in this sense, Fisher's "capitalist realism" may be seen as a conceptual supplement to neoliberal hegemony, as he himself acknowledged (see Fisher and Gilbert). So how does this common sense operate? Given the discredit of grand narratives, neoliberalism seems to operate in a symbiosis with the broader climate of anti-utopian hopelessness and depoliticization. Based on Friedrich Hayek's radical epistemology, which considers the whole of society unknowable (except, of course, for the market) and thus renders all individual perspectives equal (and equally impotent), neoliberalism can easily appeal both to radical individualism and to anti-totalizing sentiments. Therefore,

neoliberalism masquerades as a radically populist philosophy, which begins with a set of philosophical theses about knowledge and its relationship to society. It seems to be a radical leveling philosophy, denigrating expertise and elite pretensions to hard-won knowledge, instead praising the "wisdom of crowds." It appeals to the vanity of every self-absorbed narcissist, who would be glad to ridicule intellectuals as "professional secondhand dealers in ideas." In Hayekian language, it elevates a "cosmos"—a supposed spontaneous order that no one has intentionally designed or structured—over a "taxi"—rationally constructed orders designed to achieve intentional ends. But the second, and linked lesson, is that neoliberals are simultaneously elitists: they do not in fact practice what they preach. When it comes to actually organizing something, almost anything, from a Wiki to the Mont Pèlerin Society, suddenly the cosmos collapses to a taxi. (Mirowski 425–6)

46 Of course, there could be many other ways to approach neoliberalism: "as an aggregation of ideas, a discursive formation, an over-arching ideology, a governmental programme, the manifestation of a set of interests, a hegemonic project, an assemblage of techniques and technologies, and what Deleuze and Guattari call an 'abstract machine'" (Gilbert, "What Kind of Thing Is 'Neoliberalism'?" 8)

In this manner, the first thing to be avoided when examining neoliberalism's logic would be to take at face value its appeals to "individualism" and "freedom." Instead, one should remember that the neoliberal's clear goal is, ironically, to *construct* free markets—no longer conceiving of the market as a space of spontaneous relations between free actors (as Adam Smith's liberalism), but rather as something to be actively engineered, promoted and expanded. As Michel Foucault observed long ago, "Neoliberalism should not therefore be identified with laissez-faire, but rather with permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention" (Foucault 132). And in fact, one can go as far as to say, like Mark Fisher, that neoliberalism has brought a kind of "market Stalinism," given the blooming and bloating of bureaucracies—not just the states' but also the corporations', or a Kafkaesque mix of both (*Capitalist Realism* 39). Once again, then, in a rather Freudian twist, we find that the disavowal of grand narratives paves the way for a tragic return of the repressed.

Thus, neoliberalism has one grand narrative of progress that consists in the relentless expansion of the so-called free market. But what is its implicit conception of the totality and the individual? Wendy Brown proposes the concept of "neoliberal rationality" as a way of thinking about the spread of commodifying logics beyond the market as such.⁴⁷ What this implies is that, in parallel to the expanse of commodification *per se*, non-commodified spheres of life are also conceived according to market logics—thus installing what Mark Fisher calls a "business ontology" (*Capitalist Realism* 17). In Brown's words,

neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized. In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*, which itself has a historically specific form. Far from Adam Smith's creature propelled by the natural urge to "truck, barter, and exchange," today's *homo oeconomicus* is an

47 Brown's approach follows and expands upon Foucault's earlier analysis of neoliberalism as a common-sense and many others have taken similar approaches, in particular when conceptualizing the neoliberal refashioning of individual subjectivity as a *homo oeconomicus* (see Read; Layton; Fleming).

intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues. These are also the mandates, and hence the orientations, contouring the projects of neoliberalized states, large corporations, small businesses, nonprofits, schools, consultancies, museums, countries, scholars, performers, public agencies, students, websites, athletes, sports teams, graduate programs, health providers, banks, and global legal and financial institutions. (*Undoing the Demos* 10)

Here, Brown's core idea is that neoliberalism is not only remaking economies: it is also remaking "city and soul" in the image of the economy. Her two leading examples are, on the one hand, academia's prioritizing of quantifiable metrics, which remakes higher education into a competition for the production of so-called cognitive or human capital; and on the other hand, the state's prioritizing of economic growth, which re-frames non-commodified public services and justice as incentives to consumption and investment (*Undoing the Demos* 22–7). Thus, "neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities, even where money is not at issue," because, very importantly, "economization may not always involve monetization" (*Undoing the Demos* 31)—something that is crucial in order to understand digital media's relationship with capital as well.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that the subsumption of all spheres of life by neoliberal rationality was ever fully realized—that is, that the neoliberal's "utopia" was taken seriously and at face value by the majorities in all cases—or to assume that this hegemony was built merely upon mere conviction and/or deception. Writing at the end of the 2010s—the decade of the Great Recession—Annie McClanahan offers a corrective and a warning against wrongly imagining that these are "shifts driven primarily by a change in discourse." Instead, McClanahan argues that neoliberal rationality is primarily fueled by "the introduction of economic exigencies into the lives of people once shielded from them" (118). Given the rising poverty and spreading precarity of this epoch, which reached the so-called middle classes,

Capitalism resolved, temporarily, the crisis in the reproduction of the working class via the provision of credit, offering us just enough debt—and, for those eligible

for mortgages, just enough asset equity—to compensate for decades of wage stagnation. The maintenance of a population willing to take on increasing amounts of debt necessitated an ideology of investment and a conception of the subject as canny speculator. The decimation of the social safety net that attended a crisis of capitalist profitability, in turn, required an exculpatory discourse of personal responsibility as its political alibi. [...] Yet [these discourses] are not the cause of [neoliberal] economic processes. Nor are they as universal or as effective as critics claim. The vast majority of people living under capitalism struggle to keep their heads above water, and while the belief in the entrepreneurial self may briefly salve the pain of putting the cost of groceries on one's almost-maxed-out credit card, the urgent need for the food in the cart is probably more decisive. For these reasons, then, [...] we ought not to rest so easy on terms like human capital and entrepreneur. Better, I think, might be terms like *precarious*, *dispossessed*, *surplus*, and *wageless*. (McClanahan 123)

Thus, in light of this more materialist, class-based analysis, McClanahan concludes that “contrary to Gramscian accounts of ‘common sense,’ exclusion is still managed via coercive material violence more than ideology and mystification, which means that ‘common sense’ today may look something more like ‘All cops are bastards’ or ‘Fuck debt’ than like a deluded homo economicus” (McClanahan 124). The hegemony of neoliberalism is also to be defined by its possible and constant *negation*—by the possibility of resistance to its violent, neo-imperialist logics seeking to dispossess the majorities around the world (see Harvey, “The ‘New’ Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession”). As McClanahan argues, with collective political mobilization, it would only take a simple logical step to realize that “what unites us today is not the ‘neoliberal’ fantasy of entrepreneurial ambition and self-appreciation but the ever more common knowledge of that fantasy’s historical end” (McClanahan 127).

At least for the purpose of analyzing contemporary culture, therefore, it is undoubtedly best to conceive of neoliberal hegemony dialectically: as much defined by its totalizing rationality as by resistance against it; as much by its economic euphemisms as by the people’s mockery of them; as much by its discourse of efficiency as by its realities of exclusion, exploitation and extraction; as much by its praise of individual freedom as by its spread of precarity; as much by the discourses of pioneering entrepreneurship as by the proliferation of “bullshit jobs” (see Graeber). Moreover, however complex neoliberal discourse may seem, which to a great extent it is, one also

needs to keep in mind that public and private institutions today, with their technocratic conception of governance, have often excused their abuses by overemphasizing the complexities of an ever abstracter financial market, as in 2008. In these cases, the neoliberal “appeal to complexity displaces accountability” (Dean, “Complexity as Capture” 148)—that is, because reality as a whole is unknowable in Hayekian epistemology and only the market may approach total knowledge, there are no individuals or institutions to be held accountable. In this sense, one should add one final dialectic of neoliberalism: that it is as much defined by its real complexity as by its false complexity; as much by its pretense of sophistication as by the shameless simplicity of its apologies.

Overall, then, just like postmodernism—or like any other cultural hegemony and social formation—the neoliberal order too contains the seeds of its own undoing. Like Marx and Engels once said of capitalism itself, the neoliberal order is in many ways “like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.” Thus, if we are to truly grasp these phenomena as part of an undoubtedly bleak, *but still ambivalent* dystopian structure of feeling, it is necessary to grasp their dynamics dialectically. That is, one must understand the contrasts established between the epoch’s anti-utopian imposition of increasing commodification by all means possible and the epoch’s utopian valuation of individual freedom and difference—as well as the contrasts between anti-utopian denials of any alternatives to capitalism and the remaining utopian longings for their realization. Of course, this is not to say that the “ideological” side of these contradictions is a mere lie to be “unveiled,” but rather to propose that both neoliberalism and postmodernism are not only “conceptual abstractions” but above all “real abstractions” (see Soren-Rethel 160–7)—that is, they are both disembodied phantoms, haunted by contradictory impulses, *but they have palpable material consequences*. None of these are inconsequential “lies,” they are “fantasies structuring reality,” as Žižek would put it: they are embedded and entwined within the system’s dynamics, so “lifting the veil of ideology” is never enough. Besides, as I have been suggesting, neoliberalism and postmodernism are primarily mediated by their belonging to an epoch of expanded commodification and it is this distinctively capitalist phenomenon that in the last instance explains their

interrelated contradictions—but their contradictions, as I have also suggested, are also becoming the target of growing resistance and opposition, even if for the time being we remain in a global neoliberal order.⁴⁸

Or maybe not. Maybe the global neoliberal order is already morphing into something else. Maybe this dominant social formation is being subsumed (or has already been subsumed) by an emergent order—by something worse, as McKenzie Wark suggests. Perhaps, the neoliberal understanding of the market as a computer network is now more than just a metaphor and is literally true. And maybe, both postmodern epistemology and neoliberal ideology have only paved the way for the much more radical individualism that looms over digital culture. For an answer, my attention turns now to new media technologies, considering the extent to which they correlate with the dynamics of both postmodernism and neoliberalism—as well as more broadly, with the dynamics of commodification. Do these technologies make our dystopian structure of feeling even more dystopian? That is the question now.

1.3. Understanding New Media: The Extensions of Capital

Hiding greyly behind that sexy rock star, technology, is a much more sinister and powerful figure. It is the entire social system that surrounds us; hence the sense of

48 Besides the evident existential risk posed by the climate crisis, it is also likely that capitalism may collapse by its own internal contradictions. This has been the argument of a group of leading historians and economists: asking whether or not capitalism has a future, Immanuel Wallerstein, Randall Collins, Michael Mann, Georgi Derluguian and Craig Calhoun together wrote in 2013 that “something big looms on the horizon: a structural crisis much bigger than the recent Great Recession, which might in retrospect seem only a prologue to a period of deeper troubles and transformations” (1–2). Furthermore, along similar lines, the economist Wolfgang Streeck gives capitalism “a diagnosis of multi-morbidity in which different disorders coexist and, more often than not, reinforce each other” (*How Will Capitalism End?* 13) and, more specifically, he names five major systemic disorders that threaten its future: “stagnation, oligarchic redistribution, the plundering of the public domain, corruption and global anarchy” (*How Will Capitalism End?* 28).

being at the mercy of an all-encompassing, autonomous process which we cannot control. If you add the monster's location in time (during and after the Industrial Revolution) I think you can see what is being discussed when most people say 'technology.' They are politically mystifying a much bigger monster: Capitalism in its advanced, industrial phase. (Russ 256)

Neoliberal capitalism and postmodern culture cannot be fully understood without also grappling with the media technologies that both enabled and were enabled by their dynamics. And, relatedly, one cannot fully understand the expansion of commodification that characterizes this epoch without also grappling with the media technologies that enabled and were enabled by such expansion. David Harvey—following Karl Marx's observation of "the annihilation of space by time" (*Grundrisse* 524)—has repeatedly emphasized the role of new technologies in enabling the "time-space compression" that has enabled and driven the emergence of a global market (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 4), observing how these decades' developments have contributed to an "accelerating turnover time in production [that] entails parallel accelerations in exchange and consumption" (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 285). This commodified acceleration of both cultural and economic life, however, does not entail an acceleration of any kind of historical "progress," especially not in this epoch in which the only utopian horizon imaginable is the neoliberal expansion of markets, with their nefarious social and environmental consequences. On the contrary, the time-space compression enabled by media technologies should be seen as another crucial contribution to what Fredric Jameson described as "the reduction to the present in postmodernity" ("The End of Temporality" 709) and Guy Debord as the "eternal present" of the "integrated spectacle" (*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* 9–12).

Furthermore, the spread of media technologies is also crucial to understanding the very shift *from ends to means* that was described by Jean-François Lyotard (37), which may be now better understood as a shift from political deliberation to technical expertise—as well as, in many places, as a gradual, stealthy shift from social democracy to neoliberal technocracy. Besides, in contributing to such an epochal shift, it has been proven again and again that new media technologies have generally contributed to disguise

and to deepen pre-existing injustices and inequalities.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, even though new media clearly contribute to reifying postmodern and neo-liberal dynamics, one should avoid “the sense of being the mercy of an all-encompassing, autonomous process which we cannot control,” as Joanna Russ warns us. Thus, I here rewrite Marshall McLuhan’s famous motto of considering networked media as “extensions of man” —that is, as somewhat neutrally supplementing “human nature” by extending “our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing time and space as far as our planet is concerned” (“Introduction to the First Edition” n.p.). Instead, the goal in this section is to consider new media as extensions *of capital*.⁵⁰ Of course, they are *never only that*: but at the same time, they are *always that*: computational tools of control and commodification.

- 49 In this regard, there is a growing literature that critically examines contemporary technologies (so-called new media and, particularly, algorithms) as tools of intersectional exploitation and oppression (see Vaidhyathan; Crary, 24/7: *Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*; Fuchs and Mosco; Browne; O’Neil; Eubanks; Apprich et al.), as tools of intensified resource extraction (see Parikka, *A Geology of Media*; Moore; Taffel; Crary, *Scorched Earth*) and as tools that undermine rights, most notably free speech (see Suzor; York).
- 50 Using the mercilessly polemical style that is so characteristic of him, the theorist of the spectacle Guy Debord once denounced the naïveté of MacLuhan’s formulations, calling him

the spectacle’s first apologist, who had seemed to be the most convinced imbecile of the century, changed his mind when he finally discovered in 1976 that ‘the pressure of the mass media leads to irrationality,’ and that it was becoming urgent to modify their usage. The sage of Toronto had formerly spent several decades marvelling at the numerous freedoms created by a ‘global village’ instantly and effortlessly accessible to all. Villages, unlike towns, have always been ruled by conformism, isolation, petty surveillance, boredom and repetitive malicious gossip about the same families. Which is a precise enough description of the global spectacle’s present vulgarity, in which it has become impossible to distinguish the Grimaldi-Monaco or Bourbon-Franco dynasties from those who succeeded the Stuarts. However, MacLuhan’s ungrateful modern disciples are now trying to make people forget him, hoping to establish their own careers in media celebration of all these new freedoms to ‘choose’ at random from ephemera. And no doubt they will retract their claims even faster than the man who inspired them. (*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* 33–4)

1.3.1. *The Concepts of Technology and New Media*

First, we must ask: how exactly is it that the concept of technology is (or can easily be), in Russ's words, "politically mystifying a much bigger monster"? In order to be careful with the notion of "new media," it is first necessary to unpack the ambivalences of the broader, umbrella term of technology. In this regard, the cultural historian Leo Marx provides a historical and ideological overview of the relatively recent (in a timespan of centuries) term "technology," a word that only began acquiring its contemporary meaning around the turn of the nineteenth-to-twentieth centuries and "did not gain truly wide currency until after World War I, and perhaps not until the Great Depression" ("The Idea of 'Technology'" 248).⁵¹ In the time of the Enlightenment and the early industrial revolution, what was then known as the "mechanic arts" were commonly seen as a practice *subordinated* to scientific and political progress, as well as (perhaps shockingly to us now) subordinated to the fine arts—a hierarchy of values that is nonetheless easy to grasp insofar as it mirrors the ideological overvaluation of intellectual over manual labor. The mechanic arts of that time, inherently associated with discrete tools and machines, thus had a "belittling" connotation when "compared to the tacit uniqueness and unity" and "the more abstract, cerebral [and] neutral" qualities of the word technology as we understand it today (L. Marx, "The Idea of 'Technology'" 242).

Gradually, with the arrival of inventions that were not strictly mechanic (electrical and chemical, for instance) and the construction of large-scale systems such as the railroad, the telegraph, the electrical lines, or the Taylorist factories, the more abstract, systemic and totalizing conception of technology that is dominant today could and would begin to replace older ideas and imageries.⁵² Delving into this shift, Leo Marx explains that

- 51 Of course, the term has a pre-history before acquiring its contemporary meaning: it "had been available since the seventeenth century" but "it had referred specifically and almost exclusively to technical discourses or treatises" and "it was seldom used before 1880" (L. Marx, "The Idea of 'Technology'" 247)
- 52 The gradual nature of this terminological and ideological change can be seen in the fact that, despite being clearly concerned with "technological matters," Karl Marx never used the term. In this regard, Leo Marx observes that "though he described

the crucial difference is that the concept of “technology,” with its wider scope of reference, is less closely identified with—or defined by—its material or artifactual aspect than was “the mechanic arts.” This fact comports with the material reality of the large and complex new technological systems, in which the boundary between the intricately interlinked artifactual and other components—conceptual, institutional, human—is blurred and often invisible. [...] By virtue of its abstractness and inclusiveness, and its capacity to evoke the inextricable interpenetration of (for example) the powers of the computer with the bureaucratic practices of large modern institutions, “technology” (with no specifying adjective) invites endless reification. The concept refers to no specifiable institution, nor does it evoke any distinct associations of place or of persons belonging to any particular nation, ethnic group, race, class, or gender. A common tendency of contemporary discourse, accordingly, is to invest “technology” with a host of metaphysical properties and potencies, thereby making it seem to be a determinate entity, a disembodied autonomous causal agent of social change—of history. Hence the illusion that technology drives history. (“The Idea of ‘Technology’” 249)

In this manner, a tendency towards technological determinism is inevitably embedded in the very notion of technology, which is mystifying for its abstractedness and thus “invites endless reification.”⁵³ This is not a mere conceptual clarification, as it has broader implications for a time in which technology and media are virtually everywhere.⁵⁴ Nowadays, it even seems that ideologies of technology function as a contemporary pseudo-religion—and more specifically, as a US-nationalist “American theology” (see Dinerstein) with its own prophets (see Aschoff, *The New Prophets of Capital*). In any case, the concept of technology is both sign and symptom of a grander, gradual series of changes in dominant ideologies:

industrial machinery as embedded in the social relations and the economic organization of an economy dominated by the flow of capital, he still relied, as late as the first (1867) edition of *Capital*, on ‘machinery,’ ‘factory mechanism,’ and other relics of the old mechanistic lexicon” (“The Idea of ‘Technology’” 244)

53 In a broader sense, Timothy Bewes’s work argues that the anxieties triggered by reification “have become virtually universal in advanced capitalist societies” (xii).

54 Indeed, in the present epoch, “many remain attached to the fallacious image of the internet as a free-standing technological assemblage [...], and the prevalence of hand-held devices amplifies this illusion” (Crary, *Scorched Earth* 5).

the advent of the concept of technology, and of the organization of complex technological systems, coincided with, and no doubt contributed to, a subtle revision of the ideology of progress. [...] the simple [Enlightened] republican formula for generating progress by directing improved technical means to societal ends was imperceptibly transformed into a quite different technocratic commitment to improving “technology” as the basis and the measure of—as all but constituting—the progress of society. This technocratic idea may be seen as an ultimate, culminating expression of the optimistic, universalist aspirations of Enlightenment rationalism. But it tacitly replaced political aspirations with technical innovation as a primary agent of change, thereby preparing the way for an increasingly pessimistic sense of the technological determination of history. (“The Idea of ‘Technology’” 250–1)

Thus, in parallel to the postmodern discrediting of utopian master narratives of progress, the contemporary conceptualization of technology also reinforced contemporary hopelessness, further displacing the political in favor of the technical and fostering an imaginary in which there seems to be no room for agency in the face of technology.⁵⁵ This reified understanding of technology, together with historical traumas with specific inventions such as the nuclear bomb and other military “wonders,” thus fostered what Leo Marx calls “postmodern technological pessimism,” which is “a fatalistic pessimism, an ambivalent tribute to the determinative power of technology” as opposed to an “inevitably diminished sense of human agency” (“The Idea of ‘Technology’” 257).

This was Leo Marx’s diagnosis in 1994 and his work clearly synthesized the role of technology in postmodern epistemology as well as, indirectly, in the neoliberal re-imagination of the market as the most powerful networked technology. Today, a strikingly similar diagnosis could be made and the migration of corporate and state power from politics to technology partly explains the resilience of neoliberalism’s global hegemony, despite

55 As Herbert Marcuse denounced in the 1960s, “technology [...] provides the great rationalization of the unfreedom of man and demonstrates the ‘technical’ impossibility of being autonomous, of determining one’s own life. For this unfreedom appears neither as irrational nor as political, but rather as submission to the technical apparatus which enlarges the comforts of life and increases the productivity of labor” (*One-Dimensional Man* 164).

mounting challenges.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, the story is, again, not so simple, for in between the early 1990s of Marx's essay and the late 2010s of the so-called "techlash" (the backlash against tech), there existed something else called cyber-utopianism. In this sense, the arrival of new technologies has been accompanied by their own, semi-autonomous cultural dynamics—what Colin Milburn aptly calls "technogenic culture," which is not entirely explicable through postmodern or neoliberal frameworks. But before these issues, there is another more pressing question: what are new media and how can one define them?

There are, evidently, several similarities with the concept of technology. "New media" is just another real abstraction, a conceptual shorthand for a complex system that is inseparably intertwined with the broader social order wherefrom it emerges and, as such, it is another term that invites endless reification and mystification. Just like technology, talk of new media is significantly flexible, especially as the "new" element of the phrase is profoundly relative and potentially misleading. For the purposes of this book, I am generally equating new media with *networked, digital devices* such as the smartphone, thus drawing a line that would exclude any "new medium" before them.⁵⁷ However, new media cannot be exemplified by one device, which might have led to attempts at, instead of defining, listing

56 What I here call "the migration of power from politics to technology" may just be another aspect of the transition from "disciplinary societies" to "control societies" observed by Gilles Deleuze in the 1990s, enabled by technologies like computer networks that allow "ultrarapid forms of free-floating control that replaced the old disciplines operating in the time frame of a close system" (4). In a way that anticipates recent talk of algorithms, Deleuze claims that power operates by "modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other" (4). For more elaborate explorations of the logics of contemporary "control," see Galloway's *Protocol*, Chun's *Control and Freedom*, or Franklin's *Digitality*.

57 Other "older" media often listed as pivotal to the emergence of what we now understand as new media include the telegraph, the radio and perhaps the most important of them: the television (see S. C. Murphy). More recently, other examples of new media obviously include videogame consoles, virtual- or augmented-reality technologies, social media platforms and digital media more generally, with the internet or "the digital" thus standing as the underlying infrastructure of all of them (see Creeber and Martin; Flew and Smith).

new media exhaustively (Creeber and Martin 170–8). Thus, for reasons of my focus on dystopias that offer a totalizing view of societies with diverse science-fictional devices, I here conceptualize new media not through any specific technology or list of technologies, but as *the ever-changing totality of networked, digital devices*. Of course, writing in the early 2020s it seems that, of all media, this is now “the smartphone society” (see Aschoff, *The Smartphone Society*), but this situation may not last, as even Big Tech and *The Economist* begin to recognize (“After the Smartphone: Silicon Valley’s Search for the next Big Tech Platform”). Tying our theorization to a specific, fleeting device would tend to obscure the structural and epochal dynamics that underlie it and, therefore, smartphones (or any other specific devices) are but the paradigmatic example of a larger complex of digital devices that Jonathan Crary theorizes as “the internet complex” of “24/7 capitalism” (see 24/7; *Scorched Earth*) or Benjamin Bratton as “the stack.” It is thus not trivial to remember that “New media are always changing. They are, by their very nature, fluid in ways that traditional media—tied to a technological form—are not. As such, new media are difficult to define if we confine our view to the physical tools that produce them” (Flew and Smith 270). But define them we must.

Benjamin Bratton’s model of a “planetary-scale infrastructure” (xvii) is profoundly clarifying in this regard, insofar as it offers a view of the totality of new media in their global interconnectedness, inseparable from the physical infrastructures that sustain them and the digital platforms that unite them. In Bratton’s words, this “model does not put technology ‘inside’ a ‘society,’ but sees a technological totality as the armature of the social itself.” Thus, Bratton proposes to think of “an accidental megastructure called The Stack,” a concept that “is informed by the multilayered structure of software protocol stacks in which network technologies operate within a modular and interdependent vertical order” (xviii). From this perspective, Bratton theorizes six layers for this (emergent and fractured) global stack, which are synthesized elsewhere by McKenzie Wark (*Sensoria* 175–92):

- (a) The *earth layer*, which refers to the mass resource extraction and energy consumption required for the whole. As the model’s science-fictional language puts it, “the stack is a hungry machine”

and it “terraforms the earth [...] according to a seemingly logical but haphazard geodesign” that, as per Wark’s sources, makes it “the fifth largest energy suck on the planet” and rising higher up the ranking (188–9).

- (b) The *cloud layer*, which is the geopolitical or “governing nexus” of any stack—whether primarily corporate (i.e. Google) or statal (i.e. China). The cloud is thus what “produces and polices” the flows of information and thus operates by “extracting rent or profit” on the basis of “asymmetries of information” (185–7).
- (c) The *city layer*, which is “the old-fashioned topography” of the polis, but now “absorbed into the stack” and turned into “a platform for sorting users in transit.” As Wark aptly puts it, it is the layer where “cement meets computation” and “architecture becomes interface design” (184).
- (d) The *address layer*, which is the layer where information of any kind is stored, coded and interconnected as abstract, quantifiable data and, thus, this is also the place for “endless metadata: about objects, then metadata about the metadata about those objects, and so on” (183).
- (e) The *interface layer*, which “mediates between users and the technical layers” just sketched. “The interface connects and disconnects, telescopes, compresses, or expands layers, routing used actions through columns that burrow up and down through the stack,” as is it the layer that “turns tech into images and images into tech” (181).
- (f) The *user layer*, finally, which “is not where the rest of layers are mastered by some sovereign consciousness, it is merely where their effects are coherently personified” in a “stylized persona” that is not even necessarily human (179).

Of course, Bratton’s multi-layered model of the stack is self-consciously “speculative and projective as well as analytical” and it even refers to itself as “science fiction” (Bratton xvii–xix). Thus, if we take his suggestion seriously, Bratton’s *The Stack* can be seen as a theoretical new media dystopia: a speculative, estranged representation of the present’s

media-technological structures.⁵⁸ And, of course, I do not say this to disqualify the model. On the contrary, Bratton gives us a versatile theory in which ecology, economy, society and psychology are all inseparably intertwined by the mediation of new media; a model of the present (and of present perceptions of the future) in which media are not imagined as mere neutral tools, but rather as part of an emergent technological order that is inseparable from global history and geography.⁵⁹ This model, evidently, has implications well beyond the scope of this book and it shows the limits of my engagement with new media, as I am mostly concerned with the layers that are most visible in my corpus of new media dystopias—the interface and user layers, primarily. However, it is still helpful to take Bratton’s model as a reminder of the potential profundities of any study of new media and, most importantly, the stack is essential to my understanding of *new media as the historical counterpart of our sub-genre’s nova*.

But what does it mean in SF theory to talk about the *novum*? In Darko Suvin’s life-long theorization of the genre, beginning with *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), “the minimal generic difference of SF [is] the presence of a narrative *novum* (the dramatis personae and/or their context) significantly different from what is the norm in ‘naturalistic’ or empiricist fiction” (*Metamorphoses* 3). Thus, in other words, “SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional ‘novum’ (novelty,

58 I am not the first to entertain the possibility of analyzing works of theory as works of SF beyond certain authors’ flirtation with SF concepts and one of the first to have done so seriously was Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr’s “The SF of Theory: Baudrillard and Haraway,” published in a 1991 special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* on the interrelations of SF and postmodernism.

59 In this sense, Bratton warns us that it can be misleading to equalize stack platforms with analogous social formations like market or state, as they

possess an institutional logic that is not reducible to those of states or markets or machines, as we normally think of them. They are a different but possibly equally powerful and important form. [...] Part of their alterity to normal public and private operations is the apparently paradoxical way that they standardize and consolidate the terms of transaction through decentralized and undetermined interactions. Platforms can be based on the global distribution of Interfaces and Users, and in this, platforms resemble markets. At the same time, their programmed coordination of that distribution reinforces their governance of the interactions that are exchanged and capitalized through them, and for this, platforms resemble states. (41–2)

innovation) validated by cognitive logic" (*Metamorphoses* 63). One key to grasp Suvin's understanding of the *novum*, which diverges from Ernst Bloch's earlier theorization, is the much-debated notion of *cognition*.⁶⁰ In this regard, one should clarify that Suvin's use of "cognition"—at least in my working understanding of it—is not meant to refer (exclusively) to scientific, non-ideological forms of knowledge, but rather to *the semblance of cognitive logic*.⁶¹ That is, Suvin's cognition refers to a common-sense version of "the logical" that is *historically produced* and therefore partially ideological.⁶² Suvin himself insists upon historicity as an essential feature of the SF *novum*, which is more specifically defined as

- 60 In a triad with the notions of *Front* and *Ultimum* (see *The Principle of Hope, Volume One* 195–205), Bloch defined the *novum* as "the real possibility of the Not-Yet-Conscious, Not-Yet-Become" (*The Principle of Hope, Volume Three* 1371); in other words, the *novum* would be the emerging novelty, generated by a vanguard of change in the already-existing (the front), which is, in turn, leading towards the utopian horizon of the ultimum. Transcending Bloch's rigid Marxist-Leninist conception of historical movement, however, "In Suvin's refunctioned sense—informed by the likes of Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams—the ineffective metaphor of the Front gives way to a meaning closer to Williams's notion of a structure of feeling, which allows for the naming of a variety of historically specific sites and instances (often contradictory but nevertheless oppositional) in which radical *novums* are to be found." Therefore, "Suvin's novum is not the reified 'novelty' produced by capitalism, or indeed the vanguard privileged by orthodox Marxism; instead, it is the dialectical force that mediates the material, historical possibilities and the subjective awareness and action engaged with those possibilities" (Moylan, "Look into the Dark': On Dystopia and the Novum" 58).
- 61 Here I have in mind, though not exactly follow, Carl Freedman's notion of the "cognition effect," which slightly modifies Suvin's notion of SF cognition. In Freedman's view, "What is rather at stake is what we might term (following a familiar Barthesian precedent) the cognition effect" (18). In Chapter 3, I comment upon China Miéville critique of both notions (Suvin's cognition and Freedman's cognition effect).
- 62 In a later work, Suvin himself would make this argument again with greater clarity and conciseness: "Born in history and judged in history, the novum has an ineluctably historical character. So has the correlative fictional reality or possible world which, for all its displacements and disguises, always corresponds to the wish-dreams and nightmares of a specific sociocultural class of implied addressees" (*Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* 76).

a mediating category whose explicative potency springs from its rare bridging of literary and extraliterary, fictional and empirical, formal and ideological domains, in brief from its unalienable historicity. [...] it is possible to distinguish various dimensions of the novum. Quantitatively, the postulated innovation can be of quite different degrees of magnitude, running from the minimum of one discrete new “invention” (gadget, technique, phenomenon, relationship) to the maximum of a setting (spatiotemporal locus), agent (main character or characters), and/or relations basically new and unknown in the author’s environment. [However,] this environment is always identifiable from the text’s historical semantics, always bound to a particular time, place, and sociolinguistic norm, so that what would have been utopian or technological SF in a given epoch is not necessarily such in another—except when read as a produce of earlier history; in other words, the novum can help us understand just how SF is a *historical* genre. (*Metamorphoses* 64)

It is from this theoretical perspective that the contemporary moment is—at least as imagined by new media dystopias—profoundly marked by the hegemony of a *novum* that reaches into all spheres of life with an unprecedented depth and scale: the network of new media technologies that serve as the infrastructure of today’s global capitalism—that is, Bratton’s stack. Thus, the *novum* in this sense is not to be mistaken for the commodified “newness” of a device in isolation—the “novelty” of the latest iPhone model, for example—since, as Wendy Chun aptly puts it, such devices are in effect constantly updating to remain the same.⁶³ Instead, my argument is that *new media are now re-imagined as a science-fictional novum when they are understood as a totality and a totalizing force that seems to be taking history in a dystopian direction*.⁶⁴ In this sense, just

63 Chun’s argument goes beyond her provocative title formula, as she interestingly proposes that new media are not only by design reliant on constant updates (of software and hardware) to be competitive in a market of accelerated obsolescence, but they are also in effect constantly disturbing and revolutionizing our habits so long as they remain a habitual, seemingly essential part of our lives. Thus, new media foster a climate of “enduring ephemerality” and “obsolescent ubiquity” (*Updating to Remain the Same* 15). This, clearly, may be seen as yet another factor reinforcing the sense of inhabiting a perpetual present of the spectacle, as Guy Debord once put it.

64 In this sense, I am here using *novum* in its strongest sense, as opposed to what Suvin calls the *pseudo-novum*: the inconsequential and superficial novelty produced by marketing. Thus, Suvin counterposes “the yearly pseudo-novum of “new and improved” (when not “revolutionary”) car models or clothing fashions to a really

like most *nova* in speculative narratives, new media are here understood as an essential part of system-wide dynamics that have impinged upon every aspect of—provocatively speaking—“the SF world that we inhabit,” from our reality’s “setting” and “characters,” all the way to broader social relations.⁶⁵ In other words, it now appears (in the collective imagination at least) as though new media technologies are the hegemonic force that is driving history, which explains their centrality in fictional and non-fictional accounts of the present. The open question here is whether new media—in a sense, “the SF *novum* of our times”—are felt as a utopian or an anti-utopian force within our already hopeless structure of feeling. New media, as we shall now see, have functioned, dialectically, in both ways—though they are far from neutral.

1.3.2. *Dialectics of the Digital*

There are probably as many names for the present epoch as there are brands of smartphones, beginning with, obviously, “the smartphone age,” as well as the more vaguely inclusive “the digital age.” But besides these, one could endlessly add modifiers like “network,” “information,”

radical novelty such as a social revolution and change of scientific paradigm, making, say, for life-enhancing transport or dressing.” And further, he argues that “a novum is fake unless it in some way participates in and partakes of what Bloch called the ‘front-line of historical process’—which for him (and for me) as a Marxist means a process intimately concerned with strivings for a disalienation of people and their social life. Capricious contingencies, consequent upon market competition and tied to copyright or patent law, have a built-in limit and taboo defined precisely by the untouchable sanctity of competition” (*Defined by a Hollow* 87). Elsewhere, Tom Moylan succinctly summarizes Suvin’s distinction as “the open, political organ of the New and the economically or politically reified product” (“Look into the Dark’: On Dystopia and the Novum” 60).

- 65 Providing a more detailed examination of the degrees of magnitude of the *novum*, Suvin recently elaborated a graphic schematization of the degrees of modification that are entailed by a *novum*, which range from the mere semblance of novelty of the commodity all the way to singularity-level events (“On Communism, Science Fiction, and Utopia” 147).

“cognitive,” “internet,” or “postindustrial” to the nouns “age,” “society,” or “capitalism”—to name but a few.⁶⁶ For reasons of scope and to avoid this mystifying alphabet soup, here I am most reliant on those theorizations that centrally acknowledge the enduring dominance of the capitalist mode of production: primarily, on Shoshanna Zuboff’s “surveillance capitalism” and certain critiques of it and, more secondarily, on Nick Srnicek’s “platform capitalism”—although I also use the much widely accepted “digital capitalism” as a more neutral, umbrella term.⁶⁷ Thus, to understand the so-called digital age, I now examine how the spread and implementation of new media technologies—the emergence of a global stack—has deepened the dialectics of postmodernism and neoliberalism, to a great extent cohering with both their utopian and their anti-utopian undercurrents.⁶⁸ “For all its historical novelty, the internet complex is a magnification and consolidation of arrangements that have been operative or partially realized for many years,” as it is “a patchwork of elements from different eras” that is “traceable back to the configurations for financializing flows of electricity devised in the 1880s” (Crary, *Scorched Earth* 6). Because of this, here I am not periodizing *per se*; that is, I am not implying that “the digital” is a new age that comes after (or because of)

66 There is an large amount of literature on the subject, but a few landmark studies illustrate the centrality of these concepts: Beniger’s *The Control Revolution*, Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity*, Castells’s *The Rise of the Network Society*; Moulier Boutang’s *Cognitive Capitalism*, or Schwab’s *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*. Echoing these and other models, Seb Franklin begins his own study of the period by critically noting that “The desire to account for the present socioeconomic moment has led to what can only be described as a frenzy of periodization” (xiii).

67 Although there are many others, two paradigmatic studies of digital capitalism would be Dan Schiller and Christian Fuchs (“Capitalism or Information Society”), which Jonathan Pace critiques, complements and synthesizes elsewhere.

68 One of the first monographic studies of digital capitalism (Schiller) indeed focused on how neoliberal reforms went hand in hand with the deployment of new media technologies and computer networks. As Pace synthesizes Schiller’s use of the term, “digital capitalism alternately signifies a historical period, in which digital technology makes possible transnational production chains; a property regime, in which digital infrastructure is privately owned; and a management style, in which digital media permeates major capitalist enterprises” (3).

the postmodern and the neoliberal, since it is probably safer to assume that they developed symbiotically, for reasons already outlined. What I am proposing is to explore an aspect of the same epoch that is as much overdetermined by the expansion of commodification as postmodernism and neoliberalism—or perhaps even more so.

The many inventions that enabled the creation of a global network of media technologies have transnational roots, but digital capitalism was undoubtedly born in the United States of America during its (still ongoing) neoliberal epoch.⁶⁹ Even more specifically, one can safely say that digital capitalism is a Californian product of the late 1980s and 1990s, since, still today, “globalized” digital capitalism remains heavily anchored in California. Indeed, the US corporations popularly known as Big Tech—primarily, Apple, Alphabet, Microsoft, Amazon and Meta—are amongst the biggest corporations worldwide by market capitalization and most of them have roots in and around San Francisco’s Silicon Valley, a place that is now metonymic of global technological power.⁷⁰ Therefore, to understand digital capitalism, one must understand what Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron called “the Californian ideology,” which is a profoundly cyber-utopian way of imagining the role to be played by new media in the twenty-first century. The emergence of this ideology thus counterbalances Leo Marx’s earlier

69 Although the political origins of digital capitalism lie in US neoliberalism, the technical origins of the technologies that form today’s global stack can also be found “within the utopian megastructures of 1960s experimental architecture, counterculture cybernetics, Soviet planning schemes, and many other systems of sociotechnical governance, both realized and imagined” (Bratton 46).

70 At the time of writing this note (mid-2022), Apple, Google (Alphabet from 2015), Microsoft, Facebook (Meta from 2021) and Amazon—often referred as the Big Five of Big Tech—are among the minute group of corporations to have exceeded a market capitalization of \$1 trillion and the first of those three have even risen above \$2 trillion (figures in US dollars). However, this is not to say that digital capitalism is an exclusively American phenomenon, as Chinese companies like Tencent and Alibaba, as well as the Taiwanese manufacturer TSMC have all figured among the top 10 most valuable corporations worldwide by market capitalization. If anything, digital capitalism is thus the most valued business model nowadays and its corporations (mostly American but not only) plague the global rankings of market capitalization, which attests to the centrality of the digital for contemporary capital.

theorization of “postmodern technological pessimism,” because—at least in the Californian milieu that nurtured digital capitalism—pessimism seemed to dissipate for a while (or perhaps for a few), although it would later return with a vengeance. As Wendy Chun puts it, “the image of the Internet has shifted radically from the mid to late 1990s, when it was seen as ‘cyberspace,’ an anonymous and empowering space of freedom in which no one knew if you were a dog, to the mid to late 2010s, when the Internet was commonly conceived of as a space of total surveillance or as a privatized space of social media” (*Updating to Remain the Same* ix).

Writing in 1996, Barbrook and Cameron theorized “the Californian ideology” as a “new faith has emerged from a bizarre fusion of the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the hi-tech industries of Silicon Valley,” an “amalgamation of opposites” that is “achieved through a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies” (44–5). But this is not simply a technophile creed: the Californian ideologues are also “passionate advocates of what appears to be an impeccably libertarian form of politics—they want information technologies to be used to create a new ‘Jeffersonian democracy’ where all individuals will be able to express themselves freely within cyberspace” (45). In this manner, the Californian ideology taps into the postmodernist longing for a flourishing of diversity and into the neoliberal anti-government rhetoric of radical individualism, combining their most utopian energies and projecting them into cyberspace. “Crucially, influenced by the theories of Marshall McLuhan, these technophiliacs thought that the convergence of media, computing and telecommunications would inevitably create the electronic agora—a virtual place where everyone would be able to express their opinions without fear of censorship” (48). Thus, the Californian ideology effects a radical reversal of the dystopian connotations of cyberspace,⁷¹ a term that predates digital capitalism and was first coined in William Gibson’s 1980s cyberpunk literature, where cyberspace was imagined as an invasively corporatized

71 Mark Zuckerberg’s more recent attempt at reversing the connotations of the term “metaverse” could be seen in parallel to this, as another example of a dystopian notion—one originally coined in Neal Stephenson’s novel *Snow Crash* (1992)—which is re-imagined as a corporate utopia. I return to this concept in Chapter 2, where I propose recuperating it for the study of new media reflexivity.

space, a space of violence, exclusion and exploitation that nonetheless also functioned (utopianly) as a compensatory escape from corporeal reality.⁷²

Quite tellingly, the same year of Barbrook and Cameron's essay also saw the publication of John Perry Barlow's manifesto, *A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace* (1996), which—together with similar documents—stands as a testimony of the ideology of the digital age's Founding Fathers.⁷³ Barlow's text passionately expresses that "We must declare our virtual selves immune to your sovereignty, even as we continue to consent to your rule over our bodies. We will spread ourselves across the Planet so that no one can arrest our thoughts. We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before" (Barlow n.p.). Barlow's libertarian cyber-utopia, however, betrays itself, insofar as it exemplifies a fetishization of the digital world and self—in particular, of the interface and user layers, which are falsely imagined as separate from the global reality

72 The term "cyberspace" first appeared in Gibson's 1982 short story "Burning Chrome," although it would later become most popular by association with his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. Thorough studies of Gibson's oeuvre can be found in most of the academic literature devoted to the cyberpunk sub-genre, where Gibson is regarded as canonical (see Vint, "Afterword"; McFarlane et al., *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*). Besides, it is interesting to note how Gibson, after the advent of the digital age proper (post-1990s) began to shift the setting of his novels away from cyberpunk futures and much closer to contemporary reality, though he has maintained his critical-dystopian approach to technological power (see Nilges). In Chapter 2, I return to this phenomenon, proposing that reflexivity has significantly displaced speculation within the fabric of SF narratives.

73 A similar text in both form and content, published in 1994, would be "Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age" (Dyson et al.), which also conflates cyber-utopian and neoliberal discourses while giving them a marked US-nationalist flavor.

Besides, if I do not use gender-neutral language in "the digital age's Founding Fathers," it is not only because of the historic reference, but also to point at the fact that digital-capitalist elites are overwhelmingly masculine, to such extent that Silicon Valley is called a "brotopia" (see Chang). But furthermore, digital culture as a whole—like the whole of Western society but in some ways more intensely—is dominated by patriarchal dynamics, as a number of studies have proven and criticized (see Salter and Blodgett; S. Scott).

of extraction, expropriation and exploitation that enables the stack's existence. The digital dream of ubiquity and disembodiment is thus nothing but a high-tech version of the older Cartesian binary—a hierarchy where the mind comes before and above corporeal reality. Moreover, the utopian libertarianism of Barlow is only partial, for even though it openly rejects state dependence, it seems to naturalize market dependence—a textbook neoliberal gesture often used for undermining local state power in order to subordinate it to global corporate power.⁷⁴ In these ways, more generally, Barlow's manifesto illustrates how the Californian ideology is a "contradictory mix of technological determinism and libertarian individualism" (Barbrook and Cameron 49), which expects liberation by subordinating individual and collective agency to the network.

Nevertheless, to understand these cyber-utopian ideologies, it is not enough to notice their discursive fetishes and disavowals, one must also comprehend how digital individualism has been *materialized* in the stack's design. Cyber-libertarianism is not just an ideology, it is another real abstraction, or, one might say, a technologized abstraction. As Bratton's model makes clear, the stack generates *an implied user*. So, who is this implied individual who interacts with the digital interface? Most studies on digital subjectivity and selfhood seem to coincide on the fact that a kind of radical individualism is the default, that a new kind of *homo economicus*—now a "quantified self" in a profounder sense—is favored by the system's design

74 Nonetheless, as we saw upon considerations of neoliberalism, anti-government rhetoric does not entail anti-government policy: neoliberalism has not consisted of replacing or eliminating the state, but of refunctioning and subordinating it to the market. And besides, not all states have been weakened equally from the rise of transnational corporations. As Evgeny Morozov argues about the rising power of US and Chinese Big Tech,

This [debilitation of states] may be the case for weaker European or Latin American countries, all but colonized by American firms in recent years. But can the same be said for the United States itself? What of the longstanding links between Silicon Valley and Washington, with Google's former CEO, Eric Schmidt, leading the Defense Innovation Board, an advisory body to the Pentagon itself? What about Palantir, the company co-founded by Thiel which provides essential links between the us surveillance state and American tech? Or Zuckerberg's argument—apparently effective so far—that breaking up Facebook would embolden the Chinese technology giants and weaken America's standing in the world? ("Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason" 121–2)

(see Arnold; Cheney-Lippold; Bernard; Della Ratta et al.). Thus, although this is not only a product of technology, digital capitalism has nonetheless further solidified the ironic truth that *individualism is now the dominant mode of conformity* (see Kelly), generating a “reputation economy” that is driven by quantifiable metrics of personal worth and recognition (see W. Davies).⁷⁵ As Eli Pariser famous phrase puts it, algorithmically personalized platforms tend to enclose individuals in a self-replicating, self-referential “filter bubble” that, despite the Californians, does not then enable an “electronic agora,” but rather splinters social cohesion by reinforcing biases and prejudice along intersectional axes. Therefore, some have observed that the internet complex functions as an anger-venting “twittering machine” (Seymour), while others criticize that—in so-called cyberspace—“a sociality outside of individual self-interest becomes inexorably depleted, and the interhuman basis of public space is made irrelevant to one’s fantastic digital insularity” (Crary, 24/7 89).⁷⁶ Although for now it suffices to observe the renewed dominance of individualism in the digital sphere, in Chapter 4 I return to these ideas, arguing the digital age seems to have turned users into *new media quixotes*, metaphorically (if not literally) deluded by their (our) immersion in the digital interface, as certain new media dystopias suggest.

75 Focusing on the intersections of new technologies and neoliberalism, Byung-Chul Han’s *Psychopolitics* also explores how the individual(ist) self is intensely impinged by both.

76 Jonathan Crary’s claim here should be seen in the context of his 2013 critique of “24/7 capitalism,” where he denounces that

if and when [new media] devices are introduced (and no doubt labeled as revolutionary), they will simply be facilitating the perpetuation of the same banal exercise of non-stop consumption, social isolation, and political powerlessness [...]. And they will too occupy only a brief interval of currency before their inevitable replacement and transit to the global waster piles of techno-trash. The only consistent factor connecting the otherwise desultory succession of consumer products and services is the intensifying integration of one’s time and activity into the parameters of electronic exchange. Billions of dollars are spent every year researching how to reduce decision-making time, how to eliminate the useless time of reflection and contemplation. This is the form of contemporary progress—the relentless capture and control of time and experience. (24/7 40)

Of course, none of this is meant to imply that digital networks have entirely disabled the possibility of political mobilization, since digital individualism—just like neoliberal rationality—is the technologically predisposed and culturally hegemonic tendency, but *it is still a tendency*. As an example of the enduring possibility of collective solidarity, the 2010s are full of examples of so-called cyber-activism, although, arguably, many of those cases show that mass mobilization effectively begins after leaving the “electronic agora” and moving into the public square.⁷⁷ Furthermore, the 2010s have also been the decade of the so-called “techlash,” as there has been an outpour of scholarly studies and critical essays directly targeting the problems entailed by the digital age, as exemplified by the majority of the works that I cite in this section as well as an unmanageable host of other publications.⁷⁸

77 For studies of “hacktivist” movements such as Anonymous or WikiLeaks, the works of Gabriella Coleman provide a multi-layered, cultural and anthropological account that holistically considers these movements’ digital and corporeal lives (*Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking; Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous*).

With regard to the move from virtual to physical mobilization, one can observe how anti-austerity movements such as the Spanish 15-M or Occupy Wall Street, for instance, heavily relied on social media platforms as mobilizing tools, but their most visible and effective actions were those effected on public spaces. Theorizing the embodied nature of mobilization in the wake of such movements, Judith Butler (a public supporter of Occupy) theorizes along these lines in her *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*; which expands upon previous work like “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance.” Relatedly, the so-called Arab Spring, often taken as paradigmatic of a “social media revolution,” is perhaps best seen as only supported by new media and reliant on transcending the online sphere (see Soengas; Eaton).

78 Some of the first techlash works that I read while I was working on my MPhil thesis were two books with titles that clearly capture the zeitgeist: *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life* (Greenfield) and *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (Bridle). But besides these, “For almost every year since 2013, a defining feature forecast or declared in retrospect by at least one major publication—*Economist*, *Guardian*, OED, FT—has been the ‘techlash.’ If we were to locate an origin-point for this discourse, it would probably be Edward Snowden’s 2013 revelations, but the tech giants really became a matter for establishment concern with the political upsets of 2016” (Lucas 132).

Nonetheless, despite these challenges, one should bear in mind that cyber-utopianism today remains heavily influential and perhaps hegemonic, at least in certain elite circles. One of its most visible manifestations today is what Sherryl Vint and others call “the futures industry,” or what J. Jesse Ramírez calls “business SF.”⁷⁹ With these terms, said authors refer to the future projections of corporations, which generally keep trumpeting utopian scenarios of full automation and/or complete digitalization regardless of their feasibility or desirability.⁸⁰ One only needs to think of mainstream banks’ promises of automated investment or digital attention—while they close in-person offices and implement worker lay-offs—or, alternatively, of governments’ promises of a “fair and green digitalization,” as though the currently existing global stack was not by default unfair and environmentally destructive.⁸¹ In the end, then, all such cyber-utopian mythologies

79 On this matter, see the special issue of the journal *Paradoxa*, entitled “The Futures Industry,” with an introduction by Sherryl Vint, who expertly explains the recuperation of SF tropes, narratives and symbols by capitalist corporations—something enabled by the fact that SF “has always been bound up with ideologies of progress through technology and industry” (“Introduction to ‘The Futures Industry’” 8)

80 Such corporate utopianism could also be linked to the frequently foretold “technological singularity”—that is, the presumed arrival (within a safely distant number of years) of AI systems with superhuman intelligence. Vernor Vinge’s 1993 prediction that “within thirty years” we will have access to such technologies and thus “the human era will be ended” (11) can be seen as yet another cyber-utopian manifesto of the 1990s and an early example of a prediction that has been repeated *ad nauseam*. As opposed to these “apolitical” and technophilic discourses of some unimaginable AI system, I would here side with Steven Shaviro’s sly suggestion that “the flows of Capital have now become autonomous—and strictly speaking unimaginable. They have liberated themselves from any merely human dimensions, and from whatever feeble limits Fordism and Keynesianism might previously have placed upon the single-minded pursuit of capital accumulation. In that sense, the Singularity is already here” (“The Singularity Is Here” 115–16). Similarly disproving such discourses but from a macro-economic perspective, no singularity seems to be near, since even the relatively more modest project of productive automation has stagnated in the majority of economic sectors globally (see Benanav).

81 Although he is not alone in making this argument, Jonathan Crary’s works go along these lines and his stands as the most maximalist critique of the digital age:

are, as Ramírez puts it, “boringly unimaginative” (85), as they fetishize technological *pseudo-nova* while disavowing any systemic, truly utopian (or, at least, significant) *novum*. Thus seen, the digital age not only confines users within a “personalized” cyberspace of individualist illusions, but it also further entraps the epoch’s collective imagination within an end-of-history, hopeless mood of capitalist realism.⁸²

Although more could be said of the subjective and ideological dimensions of the digital age, one must now move onto another question: what about digital capitalism *as capitalism*? Having sketched its cultural dynamics, its commodifying dynamics now call for clarification. The single most influential account of the phenomenon is Shoshanna Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), both a critical theorization and a historical overview of the digital economy as it developed since the turn of the millennium. Her account, though mostly analytical, is also marked by a disenchanted, dystopian tone—almost left melancholic—as she herself frames her narrative as “the darkening of the digital dream and its rapid

Ever since the late 1990s we’ve heard repeatedly that the dominant digital technologies are “here to stay.” The master narrative that world civilization has entered “the digital age” promotes the illusion of a historical epoch whose material determinations are beyond any possible intervention or alteration. One result has been the apparent naturalization of the internet which many now assume to be something immutably installed onto the planet. The numerous mystifications of information technologies all conceal their inseparability from the flailing stratagems of a global system in terminal crisis.” (Crary, *Scorched Earth* 7)

82. In his latest critical essay on the digital age, Jonathan Crary makes a similar argument, with much more depth, clarity and conciseness:

The initial claims of the internet’s permanence and inevitability coincided with various “end of history” celebrations, in which free market global capitalism was declared triumphant, without rivals, dominant in perpetuity. Even though, in geopolitical terms, this fiction quickly exploded in the early 2000s, the internet seemed to validate the post-history mirage. It appeared to introduce a uniform, default reality defined by consumption, unhinged from a physical world and its mounting social conflicts and environmental disasters. The advent of social media, with all its apparent opportunities for self-expression, briefly suggested a debased fulfillment of Hegel’s horizon of autonomy and recognition for everyone. But now, as a constitutive component of twenty-first-century capitalism, the internet’s key functions include the disabling of memory and the absorption of lived temporalities, not ending history but rendering it unreal and incomprehensible. (Crary, *Scorched Earth* 8)

mutation into a voracious and utterly novel commercial project that I call surveillance capitalism” (chapter 1, n.p.).⁸³ So what is surveillance capitalism? At the very basis of Zuboff’s theory lies the concept of “behavioural surplus,” which refers to how corporations exploit user data—not only by selling micro-targeted attention to advertisers, but also by manufacturing large amounts of “raw” stored data into behavioral predictions through the employment of diverse computing mechanisms.⁸⁴ In turn, such predictions can be sold to external parties (corporate and statal) in “behavioral future markets,” or they can also be used within the corporation’s platform “to nudge, coax, tune, and herd behavior toward profitable outcomes.” Zuboff’s maximalist position is that “automated machine processes not only know our behavior but also shape our behavior at scale. With this reorientation from knowledge to power, it is no longer enough to automate information flows about us; the goal now is to automate us” (chapter 1, n.p.). Therefore, corporations such as Google (for Zuboff, the pioneer surveillance capitalist), Meta (the old Facebook) and Microsoft “are now locked into the continuous intensification of the means of behavioural modification” (chapter 1, n.p.).

In all these ways, Zuboff’s model paints a world in which profoundly anti-democratic, illiberal practices are both facilitated and normalized by the instrumentalization of digital technologies—in short, a world in which

83 In a critical review of Zuboff’s monograph, Rob Lucas gives a biographical flavor to Zuboff’s disenchantment, posing that “If *Support Economy* [Zuboff’s 2002 book] was a management consultant’s utopia, *Surveillance Capitalism* is the dystopia that emerges when prophecy fails” (135). See also Evgeny Morozov’s review of Zuboff’s monograph in relation to her previous works (“Capitalism’s New Clothes”).

84 Zuboff herself wisely recommends vagueness about the specific mechanisms employed:

Surveillance capitalism employs many technologies, but it cannot be equated with any technology. Its operations may employ platforms, but these operations are not the same as platforms. It employs machine intelligence, but it cannot be reduced to those machines. It produces and relies on algorithms, but it is not the same as algorithms. Surveillance capitalism’s unique economic imperatives are the puppet masters that hide behind the curtain orienting the machines and summoning them to action. (chapter 1, n.p.)

mass surveillance and manipulation is just business as usual.⁸⁵ However, notwithstanding Zuboff's enlightening portrayal of the nefarious consequences for users' privacy and autonomy, this mode of critique—at an extreme that is often echoed by new media dystopias—verges on a paranoid conspiracy theory of “a mind control ray out of a 1950s comic book, wielded by mad scientists whose supercomputers guarantee them perpetual and total world domination” (Doctorow, *How to Destroy Surveillance Capitalism* n.p.). Zuboff's model of a “parasitic” and “rogue mutation of capitalism”—a system that has built a “global architecture of behavioural modification” and “seeks to impose a new collective order based on total certainty” (Zuboff “The Definition,” n.p.)—is perhaps conceding too much to the system's self-proclaimed powers of manipulation and prediction—and Zuboff's claims do give too much credit to Big Tech's patents and marketing literature, as Doctorow observes. In this sense, Zuboff's dystopia comes to feel overwhelmingly anti-utopian, leaving little room for resistance after “turning us into a behavioural psychologist's lab rats” (Lucas 132).

Compensating for this, Cory Doctorow's own critique of surveillance capitalism corrects and expands Zuboff's perspective: “If our concern is how corporations are foreclosing on our ability to make up our own minds and determine our own futures, the impact of dominance far exceeds the impact of manipulation” (*How to Destroy Surveillance Capitalism* n.p.).⁸⁶

85 If one is reminded of Adorno and Horkheimer's denunciation of the mid-twentieth-century culture industry as an instrument of “mass deception,” then surveillance capitalism would appear as a confirmation of the Frankfurt School's worst fears in a scale unimaginable to them. Indeed, a number of studies have attempted to update the culture industry model for the digital age (see González De Ávila, “La teoría crítica ante la cultura visual”; Fuchs, *Critical Theory of Communication*). But one need not go back to critical theory to realize how surveillance capitalism is commodifying practices once thought-of as “totalitarian”: it can suffice to look at the recent example given by the Pegasus scandal, whereby a private company was shown to have aided hundreds of governments worldwide (notably Spain) to conduct espionage against political targets (see Farrow).

86 More specifically, Doctorow criticizes Zuboff's uncritical attitude towards certain sources, arguing that “the surveillance capitalism critique makes an exception for the claims Big Tech makes in its sales literature—the breathless hype in the pitches to potential advertisers online and in ad-tech seminars about the efficacy of its products: It assumes that Big Tech is as good at influencing us as they claim they are

That is to say, the bigger problem is Big Tech's monopoly power, which was allowed to grow out of all proportion with the connivance of succeeding US governments—which is only logical given their dogmatic acceptance of neoliberal doctrine and their “strategic” need for allies in developing the technologies needed for post-9/11 surveillance.⁸⁷ Such concentration of wealth and power is, to Doctorow, the most crucial factor, since “monopolies can capture their regulators, crush their competitors, insert themselves into their customers’ lives, and corral people into ‘choosing’ their services regardless of whether they want them—it’s fine to be terrible when there is no alternative” (Doctorow, *How to Destroy Surveillance Capitalism* n.p.).⁸⁸ Thus seen, the dystopia is not only surveillance, it’s also an extreme concentration of power in a few hands.

An expanded conception of surveillance capitalism—one that incorporates both Zuboff’s and her critics’ insights—sheds light on some of the most readily graspable consequences of this system, in the sense that it clearly captures the prejudicial consequences for users’ rights and freedoms.⁸⁹ However, as Bratton’s stack model makes clear, the user is just the tip

when they’re selling influencing products to credulous customers” (*How to Destroy Surveillance Capitalism* n.p.)

- 87 In his review of Zuboff, Rob Lucas summarizes this strategic alliance with great clarity: “The political climate after 9/11 led to a ‘surveillance exceptionalism’ that facilitated Google’s metamorphosis, as it discovered its elective affinities with the CIA; for their part, US security apparatuses were happy to avoid constitutional checks by handing off the task of data collection to a weakly regulated private sector” (Lucas 136). For a study of the ways in which technological innovations were driven by “national security” interests, see Linda Weiss’s *America Inc.?*
- 88 In a way that coheres with Doctorow’s observations, Srnicek’s own theorization of “platform capitalism” makes clear that “a tendency towards monopolization is built into the DNA of platforms: the more numerous the users who interact on a platform, the more valuable the entire platform becomes for each one of them. Network effects, moreover, tend to mean that early advantages become solidified as permanent positions of industry leadership” (56).
- 89 In an account of the state of free speech in the age of surveillance capitalism, Jillian C. York describes today’s internet as a space “in which groups already marginalized by society are further victimized by unaccountable platforms, and the already powerful are free to spread misinformation or hate with impunity”—to which she adds: “Welcome to dystopia” (15).

of the iceberg. Indeed, despite Zuboff's "Marxish" undertone (Lucas 132), "for user-ism, the problem with 'surveillance capitalism' is the surveillance of user-consumers, not capitalism as such" (Morozov, "Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason" 112). Thus, as a supplement, there is the idea of "platform capitalism," Nick Srnicek's alternative concept. Above all, Srnicek's insistence on the centrality of the "platform" highlights that digital capitalism "is something broader than just the tech sector defined according to standard classifications"; it is a system in which corporations "across traditional sectors—including manufacturing, services, transportation, mining, and telecommunications" are all caught in the same data-driven dynamics.⁹⁰ Essentially, the platform is a space—but against cyber-utopianism, it is a commodified space, a corporate colony of sorts.⁹¹ Srnicek's concept thus provides an account that goes beyond user-centric surveillance, emphasizing instead the role of all kinds of data extraction:

the platform has become an increasingly dominant way of organising businesses so as to monopolise these data, then extract, analyse, use, and sell them. The old business models of the Fordist era had only a rudimentary capacity to extract data from the production process or from customer usage. [...] The platform, on the other hand, has data extraction built into its DNA, as a model that enables other services and goods and technologies to be built on top of it, as a model that demands more users in order to gain network effects, and as a digitally based medium that makes recording and storage simple. [...] For companies like Google and Facebook, data are, primarily, a resource that can be used to lure in advertisers and other interested parties. For firms like Rolls Royce and Uber, data are at the heart of beating the competition: they enable such firms to offer better products and services, control workers, and optimise their algorithms for a more competitive business. [...] In every case, collecting massive amounts of data is central to the business model and the platform provides the ideal extractive apparatus. [...] Far from being mere owners of information, these companies are becoming owners of the infrastructures of society. (Srnicek 48–50)

90 Again, Bratton's stack model—itsself fashioned after the platform model but significantly expanding it—should remind us of the depth and reach of the digital beyond the digital sector *per se*.

91 This not merely a metaphor and there are, in fact, a considerable number media theorists who are explicitly thinking the digital economy through the terms of colonialism (see Couldry and Mejias) and imperialism (see Jin).

Nonetheless, concentration of power is never total since, paradoxically, “the tendency of major platforms to grow to immense size thanks to network effects, combined with the tendency to converge towards a similar form, as market pressures dictate, leads them to use enclosure [of digital platforms] as a key means of competing against their rivals.” Thus, at the same time as there is a growing monopolization, “capitalist competition is driving the internet to fragment” (Srnicek 64).

In all these ways, the global stack of digital platforms and surveillance is, indeed, one mighty apparatus, well beyond the dreams of past corporations and the nightmares of past critical theorists. In this epoch, mass commodification operates symbiotically with mass computation, as both are quantifying machines that “magically transform the local, contingent and individual into the general, universal and global” (Joque 13).⁹² And besides, through the quasi-omnipresent spread of audio-visual interfaces, digital capitalism also instrumentalizes cinematic language to the point of functioning as a “cinematic mode of production” (see Beller), which mediates not just our ideological-affective sense of reality, but also our pre-conscious sensory perception (and thus our aesthetic enjoyment)—an aspect of digital power to be explored in subsequent chapters.⁹³ Computational code and digital image are thus pivotal to the ongoing expanse of commodification.

Nonetheless, the digital age is also haunted by the unresolved (and probably rising) tension between lingering dreams of individual self-determination and cyber-utopianism on the one hand and the ever more concentrated, quasi-panoptic power of a small cluster of corporations on the other. Furthermore, the power of digital capitalism is built upon

92 For meditations of the symbiotic functioning of computation, control and commodification, see Cathy O’Neil’s *Weapons of Math Destruction*, or Justin Joque’s *Revolutionary Mathematics*. For a longer history (or prehistory) of digital logics, see also Seb Franklin’s *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* and, for a thorough report of the increasing interrelationships between Big Tech and Big Finance, see Fernandez et al.

93 In a work that could be considered an early antecedent of the techlash, Beller’s *The Cinematic Mode of Production* (2006)—following Guy Debord—insisted on the affinities between the abstracting logics of commodification and the abstracting logics of the cinema, suggesting that audio-visual spectacle may now be more determining than commodification.

abstract speculations and calculations, which makes it even more prone to bursting like a bubble relative to capitalisms of the past. Indeed, digital capitalism “has created an economy where statistics and algorithms are *more efficient at creating new realities* (e.g. the virtual world of derivatives trading, the platforms of social media and contract labor, and the private social world of filter bubbles) *than they are at representing a world*” (Joque 7 emphasis added). Therefore, as shown in Adam McKay’s 2021 apocalyptic satire *Don’t Look Up*, this is a system that might very well continue single-mindedly speculating and calculating the potential surplus value to be extracted from a meteor about to destroy the planet—up until Earth is literally destroyed. And at least so far, this does not sound entirely unrealistic, as digital capitalism keeps fully focused on its drive towards data and capital accumulation all the way through a climate catastrophe that it itself is fueling. It would be entirely unrealistic conclude with a “power to the user” here, since individual agency is clearly outmanoeuvred by the stack’s scale, but what should be clear is that the hegemony of capitalism is politically enabled—and it may soon be politically (or environmentally) disabled.

All in all, borrowing a powerful phrase from Gregory Claeys, this historical epoch may be considered as “the dystopia which dwarfs all others” (Claeys, “Foreword: A Utopian/Dystopian Spectrum” xxi). Fictional new media dystopias be humbled. However, one should not simply dismiss technology as bad: any dystopia is ambivalent and the stack, as such, is a cursed blessing: “Ours is an era in which startlingly powerful forces of production are ripping the planet to pieces at a faster rate than ever before, but the very same technology driving the disaster is also the basis of sophisticated ways of knowing the extent of the damage. This is Cassandra with augmented reality, and it leads to all sorts of ugly feelings” (Wark, *Capital Is Dead* 123). Whether we are turned into Cassandras or Don Quixotes—or a bit of both—would be a matter of debate, but it is nonetheless clear that the stack is a cursed blessing in the sense that it is both what enables the endurance (or the worsening) of already existing inequalities and injustices and, also, what potentially helps us to develop a profoundly nuanced, critical view of the totality. Indeed, this book would be nothing without the internet, but not thanks to its commodified circuits—not thanks to corporate social media or of for-profit publishing platforms, but thanks

to its capacities for fostering transnational communication and for democratizing access to information.⁹⁴

1.3.3. *New Media Capitalism, or Worse?*

The basic intuition that everything seems bad and probably worsening was at the very basis of this epoch's structure of feeling and I have tried to sketch the cultural, politico-economic and technological dynamics that seem to be generating it, with an emphasis on how and why new media are imagined as the hegemonic *novum* of these "science-fictional times." Under the complex historical matrix of left melancholy, capitalist realism, postmodernism, neoliberalism and digital capitalism, we have come to perceive our times as dystopian and our future as, most likely, more dystopian—in other words, we have come to inhabit a dystopian structure of feeling. Within this structure of feeling, there are lingering utopian impulses—not to be dismissed, as they are the seeds of resistance, opposition and even an emerging alternative hegemony⁹⁵—but the

94 Indeed, notwithstanding the predominantly anti-utopian tendencies of the internet complex as it functions under the present mode of production, cyberspace is still the place where one can find incredibly valuable channels of divulgation that are relatively independent of the systemic pressures of digital capitalism. Four crucial sources of inspiration for me during my years of research for this book were Paris Marx's podcast *Tech Won't Save Us* (2020–), which regularly interviews contemporary critical thinkers on technology; Paul Walker-Emig's podcast *Utopian Horizons* (2017–), whose guests are utopian-studies academics who explore utopian and dystopian fictions; Carlos Fernández Liria's YouTube channel *La filosofía en canal* (2020), which offers expert critical surveys of key philosophical figures from Plato to Marx; and David Harvey's podcast *Anti-Capitalist Chronicles* (2018–), which introduces key concepts of Marx's theory in relation to contemporary issues.

95 Of course, one should resist the temptation of idealizing any alternative hegemony as an inherent good, as it is perfectly possible that the end of neoliberal capitalism is brought about not by the emergence of some democratic, intersectional eco-socialism (Fraser, "Climates of Capital"), but by a reactionary, anti-democratic and authoritarian regression (see Stiegler; Mair; Streeck, *Buying Time*; W. Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*). Indeed, this reaction is already underway (and in power) in many places, given the growing host of alt-right nationalisms such as

dominant dynamics are still markedly anti-utopian: still today (or *even more* today), Walter Benjamin's angel of history keeps seeing "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" ("Thesis on the Philosophy of History" 257). In this context, it seems that even works of critical theory that seek to challenge this structure of feeling—including this book—to an extent also contribute to this mood, even if only by acknowledging its dominance, as well as perhaps by unconsciously reproducing it. This seems to be the case with several theorists who are making the "this is bad and getting worse" argument on a systemic scale, proposing that this is not capitalism anymore, but something worse, as McKenzie Wark and others propose.⁹⁶

This tendency can be first illustrated by a growing literature on "techno-feudalism," "neo-feudalism" or "re-feudalization" (see Supiot; Durand, *Techno-Féodalisme*; Dean, "Neofeudalism").⁹⁷ Very schematically, such accounts—of a more or less Marxist tenor—tend to rely on an implicit distinction between (feudal) expropriation and (capitalist) exploitation—with

Trump's, Bolsonaro's, Modi's, Orbán's and Putin's—not to mention the authoritarian digital capitalism of China. Thus, the possibility that the alternative is worse is precisely what McKenzie Wark proposes in her work, analyzed just below, which interestingly (or perhaps, worryingly) suggests that we are already living in something worse than capitalism. Wark's argument is of a different kind—focused on the dominant mode of production rather than on political systems—but it clearly supplements those better-known, well-founded fears of rising authoritarianism.

96 Before the techno-feudal theories and Wark's own model, David Graeber made a similar, prescient suggestion in 2007, when he argued that "capitalism as an engine of infinite expansion and accumulation cannot, by definition, continue in a finite world. Now that India and China are buying in as full players, it seems reasonable to assume that within forty years at most, the system will hit its physical limits. Whatever we end up with at that point, it will not be a system of infinite expansion. It will not be capitalism; it will be something else. However, there is no guarantee that this something will be better. It might be considerably worse" ("qtd. in Crary, *Scorched Earth* 53).

97 These accounts, in turn, may be seen in parallel to another growing body of literature that emphasizes the importance of rents within the digital economy, which similarly suggests a non-capitalist logic (see Moreno Zacarés).

the former relying on rents, while the latter relies on productivity.⁹⁸ And in a crucial sense, both surveillance and platform models seem to prove techno-feudal theories right, insofar as they emphasize control over spaces and subjects—a form of domination that seems closer to “direct” feudal subjection than to “indirect” market dependence.⁹⁹ These theories speak of an uncanny intuition that the present system is qualitatively worse than capitalism as generally imagined, that somehow its control is more “total.” Analytically, however, speaking of techno-feudalism is perhaps

98 David Harvey’s account of neoliberalism—although not engaging directly with feudal notions—does emphasize the centrality of “accumulation by dispossession” (that is, violent, politically enabled extraction and enclosure) over and above productivity-oriented exploitation (see “The ‘New’ Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession”; “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction”). Speaking of the techno-feudalist debate, Morozov notes that “Harvey muddled the waters some more, making ‘accumulation by dispossession’ the main driver of neoliberalism, which he defined as a political project, redistributive rather than generative in outlook, that aimed to transfer wealth and income from the rest of the population to the upper classes within nations or from the poor countries to richer ones internationally” (“Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason” 103)

99 Evgeny Morozov suggests this explicitly: “Reading Zuboff’s vivid descriptions of the symbolic and emotional violence, deception and expropriation that propel the Google-driven digital economy, one might wonder why she dubs it ‘surveillance capitalism,’ rather than ‘surveillance feudalism’” (“Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason” 109).

In turn, these polemics clearly echo the distinction between political/state dependence and economic/market dependence proposed by Marxist historians like Robert Brenner and Ellen Wood, essential to their understanding of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In Wood’s account, “market dependence gives the market an unprecedented role in capitalist societies, as not only a simple mechanism of exchange or distribution but the principal determinant and regulator of social reproduction.” Further clarifying the specificity of capitalism, she continues:

This unique system of market dependence has specific systemic requirements and compulsions shared by no other mode of production: the imperatives of competition, accumulation, and profit-maximization, and hence a constant systemic need to develop the productive forces. These imperatives, in turn, mean that capitalism can and must constantly expand in ways and degrees unlike any other social form. It can and must constantly accumulate, constantly search out new markets, constantly impose its imperatives on new territories and new spheres of life, on all human beings and the natural environment. (97)

counter-productive to a good understanding of the present, at least according to Evgeny Morozov's critique. In his words,

the great outstanding question is whether Google and its peers are like that non-capitalist owner of the waterfall who 'need not lift a finger' in order to share in the surplus value generated somewhere else. [...] if so—if the tech giants really are lazy rentiers who are ripping everyone off by exploiting intellectual-property rights and network effects—why do they invest so much money in what can only be described as production of some kind? What kind of rentiers do that? Alphabet's R&D spending in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 was \$16.6 billion, \$21.4 billion, \$26 billion and \$27.5 billion respectively. Does that not count as 'lifting a finger'? [...]

If these are lazy waterfall-owning rentiers, they are peculiarly masochistic ones: why not just rest on their laurels, fire everyone and stop spending? And who, looking at these numbers, could really believe [...] that capitalists are now external to production? What then are they spending all this R&D money on? More telling still, a close analysis of the balance sheets of Google, Amazon and Facebook shows that they have fewer intangible assets than other big corporations—in fact, today they own relatively fewer intangibles than they did ten to fifteen years ago. It is easy to see why: all this data requires extensive physical networks and vast data centres—but such trends create a big hole in arguments that overemphasize the intangible assets. ("Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason" 118)

Thus seen, perhaps the present is only "feudal" if one overemphasizes a corporate-colonized cyberspace—if one looks through the "virtual window" (Friedberg) into an online space fully controlled by a Big Tech overlord—but not if one realizes the competitive market dynamics that call for the constant development and maintenance of the stack's physical infrastructure. The techno-feudal imaginary seems to say: if this seems worse than capitalism, could this be a reactionary return to capitalism's premodern other? Especially now that capitalism's modern other—the once-utopian ghost of communism—is vanished, why not revive the anti-utopian ghost of feudalism? It is easy to see how such a derogatory conception of the present's power structures channels frustration and anger with increasingly almighty, undeniably parasitical elites—and their growing reliance on monopolistic rent-extraction is an undoubtedly fair critique posed by these theories. However, to think that, rather than techno-capitalism, we live in techno-feudalism does not offer any

consolation and, “by vainly invoking the latter, we risk whitewashing the former’s reputation” (Morozov, “Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason”). In the end, then, perhaps the two social formations are not mutually exclusive and, even if one is dominant, there is no reason to think that they cannot co-exist within a “multi-layered dystopia”—something that both proponents and critics of the techno-feudal model seem to acknowledge despite their polemics.¹⁰⁰ Although it is beyond my scope and expertise

- 100 Evgeny Morozov ends his critique of techno-feudal theories by debunking the false oppositions that supposedly underlie these models and proposing that

Marxists would do well to acknowledge that dispossession and expropriation have been constitutive of accumulation throughout history. Perhaps the luxury of employing only the economic means of value extraction in the ‘properly’ capitalist core was always due to the extensive use of extra-economic means of value extraction on the non-capitalist periphery. Once we make that analytical leap, we no longer need to bother with invocations of feudalism. Capitalism is moving in the same direction it always has been, leveraging whatever resources it can mobilize—the cheaper, the better. In this sense, Braudel’s one-time description of capitalism as ‘infinitely adaptable’ is not the worst perspective to adopt. But it does not adapt continuously and, when it does, it’s not a given that the upward-redistributive tendencies win out over the productive ones. (Morozov, “Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason” 126)

However, in a direct response to Morozov’s critique, Jodi Dean seems to agree there can be no simple return to feudalism and (implicitly) that perhaps there should be a third term (for which McKenzie Wark’s theory, examined here, could be useful):

Dependent on the market for access to our means of subsistence, we become dependent on the platform for access to the market. If we are to work, the platform gets its cut. If we are to consume, the platform gets its cut as well.

As it produces new social-property relations, new intermediaries and new laws of motion, the ongoing process of separation is not a ‘going back’ to historical feudalism, as Morozov would have it, but a reflexization, such that capitalist processes long directed outward—through colonialism and imperialism—turn in upon themselves. With advances in production seemingly at a dead end, capital is hoarded and wielded as weapon of destruction—its wielders new lords, the rest of us dependent, proletarianized servants and serfs. If feudalism was characterized by relations of personal dependence, then neofeudalism is characterized by abstract, algorithmic dependence on the platforms that mediate our lives. (“Same as It Ever Was?” n.p.)

At the time of writing this and presumably long after, this debate still goes on and further responses to Morozov’s polemics will probably continue to appear in the pages of *New Left Review* and elsewhere; a more recent example is Ström.

to settle any such dispute, the very term “neo-feudalism” perhaps betrays itself in suggesting that, even if things are worse, they are at least familiar, a high-tech version of “good old,” premodern oppression. However, even if there is, indeed, a return of certain pseudo-feudal dynamics, couldn’t we do with a better term to name the specificities and complexities of the digital dystopia?

In this context, McKenzie Wark’s *Capital Is Dead: Is this Something Worse?* (2019) stands as one of the boldest speculative theorizations on the possibility of the end of capitalism as the dominant social formation—and crucially, although there are affinities, Wark hypothesizes this scenario without relying on any binary opposition of feudalism and capitalism. In the pages that follow, I examine Wark’s model as a paradigmatic new media dystopia in the realm of critical theory, as a work whose speculations revolve around the hegemony of one *novum*: Bratton’s global stack of new media technologies.¹⁰¹ Wark’s theory is an ambivalent emblem of the times, insofar as it is *both* a radical rebellion against *and* a proud product of our dystopian structure of feeling. But why proud? In pursuing her speculation, Wark self-consciously embraces a dystopian imagination and she interestingly defends it as an antidote against hopelessness: “So the bad news is: this is not capitalism anymore, it’s something worse. And the good news is: Capital is not eternal, and even if this mode of production is worse, it is not forever. There could be others. That’s the struggle today. OK, so that’s not particularly good news. But there is also this: an end to left-melancholia, that eternal sadness about eternal capitalism.” And to this, she adds: “To think that we live in an illusory world of capitalist realism still might concede too much reality to the belief in eternal Capital” (*Capital Is Dead* 29). Thus, Wark’s speculation seems to self-consciously assume the task of SF itself—critical estrangement—as well as the task of the critical dystopia—reviving hope in dark contexts. What if ... this is

101 Wark explicitly references and often thinks through Bratton’s stack model, although she prefers to call this infrastructure “the vector of information.” Nonetheless, she seems to acknowledge that they are roughly equivalent, twice saying “what Benjamin Bratton calls the stack, [or] what I call the vector” (*Capital Is Dead* 113–18).

worse than capitalism? How would that dystopia play out in theory? And where could utopian impulses emerge in that context?

Wark begins with a critique that may be very well read as a caution against the kind of capital-centric schematization that I have attempted throughout this chapter—but most importantly, this is a critique that applies not only to leftist thinking, but also to hegemonic perceptions of the social totality:

One thing that the left and right now seem to agree on is that the society on which we live is called capitalism. And strangely enough, both now seem to agree that it is eternal. Even the left seems to think that there is an eternal essence to Capital and that only its appearances change. The parade of changing appearances yields a series of modifiers: this could be necro capitalism, communicative capitalism, cognitive capitalism, platform capitalism, neoliberal capitalism, or computational capitalism. But short of an increasingly allegorical or messianic leap into something other, it is as if this self-same thing just went on forever. [...]

This capitalism that we have all agreed to live in, has it not become too familiar, too cozy, too roomy an idea? Why are we so *devoted* to its name? The reality the term tried to describe is, of course, far from comfortable. Capitalism is a world of exploitation, domination, and oppression. Capitalism, if this is what this still is, appears to be like a steam-hammer smashing not only the social but also the natural conditions of its existence to pieces. But then maybe this is the thing to ask about. Why have we become so comfortable with a way of describing an uncomfortable reality? Do we want a certainty in language that can't be had anywhere else? [...] Capitalism atomizes and alienates. It renders everything precarious—except its own hold on the imagination. (*Capital Is Dead* 21–2)

Among other things, here Wark is unwittingly teaching a lesson about the functioning of the critical dystopia: that speculating with the worst-case scenario can be, in the end, profoundly liberating—at least for the imagination. So, what is the worse social formation that is emerging? The core hypothesis of *Capital Is Dead* is that

There's a whole political economy that runs on asymmetries of information as a form of control. It may even amount to a new kind of class relation. Sure, there is still a landlord class that owns the land under our feet and a capitalist class that owns the factories, but maybe now there's another kind of ruling class as well—one that owns

neither of those things but instead owns the vector along which information is gathered and used. (*Capital Is Dead* 3)

In this manner, Wark does not rely on any binary opposition of political economies, but instead proposes a sort of layered co-existence: the idea that “there are new forms of exploitation, inequality, and asymmetry as a layer on top of the old ones we’re more used to” (*Capital Is Dead* 9). In her model, neither capitalists nor landlords—that is, neither the “capitalism” nor the “feudalism” of the neo-feudal models—are the dominant ruling class, even though neither of them have disappeared (that is, they are not literally dead, as the title could suggest). Instead, both have been accidentally displaced by a new kind of ruling class, which Wark calls the “vectoralist” class, which commands a “vectoralist” mode of production.¹⁰² In a three-fold matrix of class antagonisms, both land-based and labor-based relations of domination—the landlord-farmer relation and the capitalist-worker relation—have been subsumed by a new global structure that not only commodifies land and labor, but also commodifies information, creating a third kind of class antagonism, between “vectoralist” and “hacker” classes. Thus, Wark’s highly heterodox account nonetheless continues to assume the centrality of commodification—just like Marx’s *Capital* in this regard, but in a new, more abstract form.¹⁰³

102 Wark explains the emergence of this new social formation as an accident, a dynamic originating in capitalism but spiralling out of it: “what at first appeared to assist capital to defeat labor in the overdeveloped world was also a defeat for capital. The novel forces of production that enabled this outflanking of labor became themselves the new dominant forces of production. Power over the value chain moves from the ownership and control of the means of production to ownership and control of the vectors of information. Whole new industries arose, as did whole new corporations—the so-called tech sector. But actually all corporations become increasingly organized around the ownership and control of information” (*Capital Is Dead* 57)

103 Wark herself suggests that her account of co-existing social relations is based on an orthodox reading of Marx: “As is much clearer from Marx’s political writings than from *Capital*, there are always may subordinate classes, just as here can be more than one ruling class. Modes of production are multiple and overlapping” (*Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* 14)

So how does her theory's main *novum*—the global stack, or the vector of information, as Wark calls it—shape this new social order? The key is that digital “technologies made information very, very cheap and very, very abundant. They gave rise to a strange kind of political economy, one based not only on a scarcity of things but also on an excess of information” (Wark, *Capital Is Dead* 5). Crucially, “Making information a force of production produces something of a conundrum within the commodity form. Information wants to be free but is everywhere in chains. Information is no longer scarce, it is infinitely replicable, cheap to store, cheap to transmit, and yet the whole premise of the commodity is its scarcity” (*Capital Is Dead* 42). Therefore, because of the challenge posed to commodification by information, a new property regime is necessary in order to perpetuate power and wealth asymmetries in a context of abundance:

Like the enclosures or the joint-stock company before it, intellectual property law becomes the form of a new kind of relation of production, more abstract than its predecessors, and one that makes not land or physical plant, but rather information itself, a form of private property. Like those preceding forms of private property, this one crystalizes into a class relation. As an absolute form of private property, it creates classes of owners and nonowners of the means of realizing its value. Land as private property gave rise to the two great classes of farmer and landlord. Capital as private property gave rise to the two great classes of worker and capitalist. Is there a new class relation that emerges out of the commodification of information?

For this thought experiment, let's say it does. I call those classes the hacker class and the vectoralist class. The hacker class produces new information. But what is “new” information? It is whatever intellectual property law recognizes as new. It's a strange kind of production. Where the farmer grows crops through a seasonal cycle and the worker stamps out repetitive units of commodities, the hacker has to use their time in a different way, to turn the same old information into new. Getting this done is not like the seasonal repetitions of farming or the clocking-on of the worker. It happens when it happens, including time spent napping or pulling all-nighters. The workplace nightmare of the worker is having to make the same thing, over and over, against the pressure of the clock; the workplace nightmare of the hacker [including us academics] is to produce different things, over and over, against the pressure of the clock. (*Capital Is Dead* 42–3)

In this sense, the age's ironic pressure to conform by being unique—with roots in postmodern epistemology, neoliberal rhetoric and digital

individualism—can be explained by the nature of “hacker work,” which is under constant pressure to produce qualitatively distinct new information. The hacker’s alienation would therefore derive not from the meaninglessness of routine and repetition, but from the pressure to produce “difference” and “novelty” for their own sake—or rather, for the sake of the vectoral class’s project of endless data accumulation. In this manner, even the semblance of difference and novelty is valuable as commodifiable information—and so the internet is flooded with all kinds of noise and nonsense, from fake news and disinformation all the way to hate speech and conspiracy theories. Because that’s the data economy, folks! So, above all,

One thing that is distinctive about an information political economy is the way it instrumentalizes difference rather than sameness. The farmer and worker produce units of commodities that are equivalent within their kind. What I call the hacker class has to produce difference out of sameness. It has to make information that has enough novelty to be recognizable as intellectual property, a problem that landed property or commercial property does not have.

By hacker class I mean everyone who produces new information out of old information, and not just people who code for a living. Part of the struggle of our time is to see a common class interest in all kinds of information making, whether in the sciences, technology, media, culture, or art. What we all have in common is producing new information but not owning the means to realize its value. And yet the way we go about this is not quite the same thing as labor, just as being a worker is not the same thing as being a farmer. (*Capital Is Dead* 13–14)

In these ways, Wark is taking a theoretical step that again echoes SF. Borrowing the hacker, the often-oppositional protagonist of cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk fiction, this model broadens and re-politicizes its meaning. Continuing her previous work (*A Hacker Manifesto*), Wark re-imagines hackers as the subordinate class of the new “vectoral” mode of production, thus encompassing anyone who produces information—be that for a wage, as in research institutions, the media or the tech industry, or “for free,” as in the case of users, consumers and spectators. And again, within this new class relation, “Forms not only of class but also of gendered and racialized discrimination have migrated from relations of

property, authority and expertise and have been encoded as technical (or algorithmic) forms of power” (*Capital Is Dead* 89), which amounts to saying that the hacker class remains caught within a matrix of intersectional oppression. The old dystopias live on through the new. Nonetheless, despite the anti-utopian advance of ever-abstracter commodification and of new forms of domination, in this dystopian model of a post-capitalist world there is also a new potential agent of utopian transformations: the hacker class.¹⁰⁴

Finally, although much more could be said of *Capital is Dead*, one should note that Wark’s model also offers a possible socio-historical explanation of the widespread reflexivity of new media culture, which is precisely the issue to be explored in the next chapter. Because of their data-driven abstraction, new media technologies and the kind of commodification that they enable tend towards self-referentiality as an easy means of producing more “new” and “different” information in the absence of truly new and different things. As Wark puts it, “Information technology is a sort of meta-technology, designed to observe, measure, record, control, and predict what things, people, or indeed other information can or will or should do” (*Capital Is Dead* 5). Thus, as ever more abstract metadata flourish, commodification seems free to flee physical reality, functioning as a purely self-referential reality—that is, as pure self-valorizing value, as Karl Marx once defined capital itself.¹⁰⁵ Thus seen, one can still doubt if this

104 Wark, of course, is not the first to imagine hackers as revolutionaries, as there are examples from the 1980s (Steven Levy’s *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*) and more contemporary examples (Colin Milburn’s *Respawn. Gamers, Hackers, and Technogenic Life*)—not to mention the host of cyberpunk narratives that feature hacker heroes, beginning with Gibson’s *Neuromancer*.

105 Marx uses the expressions “self-valorization” and “self-valorizing value” on a few occasions throughout volume 1 of *Capital* (roughly twenty times in my English edition), but the concept is crucially used as a synthetic synonym for the functioning of capitalism. In fact, Marx once refers to self-valorization as a phenomenon “at the very roots of the capitalist mode of production” (*Capital Volume I* 612). In this sense, if the capitalist economy is profoundly self-referential, it would be a mistake to attribute the spread of reflexivity exclusively to the rise of Wark’s vectoralist mode of production, as its seeds seem to have been planted before the present epoch. In fact, Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* already denounced the assimilation of culture by the logics of advertisement,

whole system is a new and worse mode of production, or if it is just “the purest form of capital yet to have emerged” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 36), or even “capitalism in its terminal, scorched earth phase” (Crary, *Scorched Earth* 34). In any case, self-referentiality seems to be the norm, insofar as the abstract, quantifying functioning of commodification now also targets information, itself an abstract, quantifying thing. Digital capitalism—or rather, the “vectoral” mode of production—thus creates a new world where commodification can continue on its own, without physical and planetary limits—although obviously, this disembodied limitlessness is just an illusion, but still an illusion with potentially disastrous consequences. It is along this line of thought that Wark provocatively answers her central question:

how is this worse than capitalism? The vectoral infrastructure throws all of the world into the engine of commodification, meanwhile modifying the commodity form itself. There is nothing that can't be tagged and captured through information about it and considered a variable in the simulations that drive resource extraction and processing. Quite simply, we have run out of world to commodify. And now commodification can only cannibalize its own means of existence, both natural and social. It's like that Marx Brothers film where the train runs out of firewood, so the carriages themselves have to be hacked to pieces and fed to the fire to keep it moving, until nothing but the bare bogies are left. (*Capital Is Dead* 48)

Thus, the destructive and self-destructive tendency of ever more self-referential commodification is probably the most anti-utopian tendency of this epoch's structural dynamics—and, against this, what is the remaining utopian force of the hacker class? It is perhaps best to conclude here with one of Wark's most hopeful and self-conscious passages:

I opted to call us the hacker class. Twenty years ago, that was perhaps too romantic a term, on the border of legality, outside the logic of commodification. Now it has exclusively criminal associations. If anything, it's an index of how much the vectoralist class has succeeded. It is all but inconceivable now that there could be an open-ended,

profoundly self-referential. Wark herself acknowledges a continuity and a debt with the critique of the culture industry, as she suggests that the vectoralist mode of production “descends from what was formerly the culture industry. But it is no longer an industry apart, commodified leisure. It's now integrated into the whole of production and consumption” (*Capital Is Dead* 56).

playful, experimental approach to making the new appear out of the old in techniques of information that would be entirely contained with the commodification and control of the information vector.

But just as the industrial working class retained a utopian feeling about what labor should be like from craft labor, so too it is possible to hold onto a feeling about what it's like to make elegance appear that wasn't there before with a technique for transforming information, and to do it on one's own time, with one's own goals and objectives. This is what it might mean to hack. (*Capital Is Dead* 51)

Thus understood, hacking in Wark's broad sense, which encompasses intellectual labor, artistic production, or even user interaction through watching, gaming, or browsing, still allows for uncommodified, semi-autonomous experimentation and play and, perhaps, for counter-hegemonic, utopian world-building. But this is, of course, over-emphasizing hacking's utopian potential and presupposing collective class solidarity, because "the hacker"—if imagined as a lone hero or part of a vanguard elite, as in certain new media dystopias—is clearly nothing in *vis-à-vis* the global stack, perhaps just a ridiculous Quixote absurdly tilting at the stack.¹⁰⁶ And, besides, "Class consciousness is always a rare and difficult thing. Unlike other identities, it has to be argued contrary to appearances" (*Capital Is Dead* 50). Therefore, even if Wark's notion of "the hacker class" does name a potential collective agent of utopian transformation, this means nothing without the existence of a renewed, multi-dimensional, intersectional class consciousness. Without that, dystopia goes on.

106 Indeed, it is one thing to speak of the hacker class and an entirely different thing to speak of "the myth of the lone hacker," which—as Jonathan Crary notes—"perpetuates the fantasy that the asymmetrical relation of individual to network can be creatively played to the former's advantage" (24/7 46). And elsewhere, Crary specifically denounces that "Edward Snowden's spurious claim that network technology is 'the great equalizer' perpetuates an elitist hacker fantasy that has little relevance to most people's lives or to the building of mass movements and new communities" (*Scorched Earth* 23–4). However, I would tend to think that Wark's collective conceptualization of the hacker class compensates for at least a part of what Crary denounces, although his critique does point at the need for broader forms of solidarity between the multiple ruled classes.

1.4. Defining the New Media Dystopia, Real and Fictional

Throughout this chapter, I have surveyed the historical dialectics that underpin the present epoch—specifically theorizing it as a dystopian structure of feeling in which hegemonic hopelessness seems to emerge and thrive in a symbiosis with the dynamics of new media technologies (understood as the totality of Bratton’s stack, or as Wark’s vector). In approaching the present’s structure of feeling, I have attempted to provide a totalizing survey, sketching epochal dynamics that cut through spheres as distinct as culture, ideology, policy, economics, or technology. Of course, I am aware that “the construction of a historical totality necessarily involves the isolation and the privileging of one of the elements within that totality [...] such that the element in question becomes a master code or ‘inner essence’ capable of explicating the other elements or features of the ‘whole’ in question” (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 12) and, in this sense, this totalizing theorization—like any other—is inevitably a partial totality, shaped by the interpretative hegemony of new media. Thus, I must insist that my guiding presupposition has been that new media technologies play a hegemonic role in this dystopian structure of feeling and this is a non-verifiable hypothesis (at least in any empirical or quantifiable manner), but it is my hope that a solid case has been made for its plausibility, its reasons and its dynamics.

And how could we synthesize the multiple dialectics of this dystopian structure of feeling? What are the main utopian and anti-utopian forces at play within this structure? Notwithstanding many of the above-examined nuances, my main observation is that, on the utopian side, this epoch has witnessed a flourishing of individualistic heterogeneity and intersectional diversity, as well as a valuation of autonomous self-determination, all of which are visible across postmodern epistemology, neoliberal rationality and digital cyber-utopianism. At the same time, on the anti-utopian side of the story, this epoch has witnessed an advance of commodification through political, economic and technological means, which has entailed the subordination of increasing spheres of life to a global machine of power—one that feeds off pre-existing injustices and inequalities as well as creating new ones.

This abstraction-producing machine—itself a very real (or technologized) abstraction, epitomized by Bratton's stack but not reducible to it—is (probably) still predominantly capitalist, but (if we trust Wark's account) it is plausibly morphing into a something else that is maybe worse. Furthermore, what looms in the not-so-distant horizon—global eco-social crises triggered by climate change—is, indeed, the biggest dystopia of all, perhaps the political unconscious of all culture today (see Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious*). Thus, it remains true that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism—but perhaps that is changing by sheer force of necessity. Perhaps such a profoundly dystopian reality does not necessarily lead in a hopeless, anti-utopian direction; on the contrary, perhaps this is the challenge that re-kindles the utopian impulse worldwide. Or perhaps not, of course.

So far, however, we still seem to dwell in a global new media dystopia.

Fictional new media dystopias, which are the focus of the remainder of this book, are therefore narratives that are *not only formally reflexive* regarding their medium of distribution and consumption (mostly video-on-demand platforms), as the next chapter examines, but also share *profound ideological parallelisms* with an epochal structure that is deeply haunted by new media and its associated dynamics, as this chapter has established. These new media dystopias—as products and critiques of the epoch's technoculture, consumed through digital interfaces but often satirical towards them and their users, dystopian in an age in which such genre is less and less unrealistic (if it ever was)—are thus, above all, *ambivalent* in how they relate to the real new media dystopia. Reality may be stranger (and worse) than fiction, but the latter may still provide tools of “cognitive mapping” for us to understand the former.

Of course, it is evidently difficult for character-centric narratives to provide a totalizing view and the new media dystopias here analyzed generally focus on the user and interface layers, thus overemphasizing an individual's (and generally, a hacker-class) experience of new media technologies—not to mention that, as Anglo-American productions, they only show a local, relatively privileged view of the whole. But still, rewriting Adorno (*Minima Moralia* 50), one might say that the whole is the dystopia, but a tiny crack in your screen is the best magnifying glass. Even in their partiality and

their ambivalence, new media dystopias are still valuable as culture of the epoch—and despite dominant tendencies, such value must be defined through something other than quantification. Even if these are some of the top-rated SF series of the past decade, let us say: online ratings be damned, for they belong to the data dystopia.

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