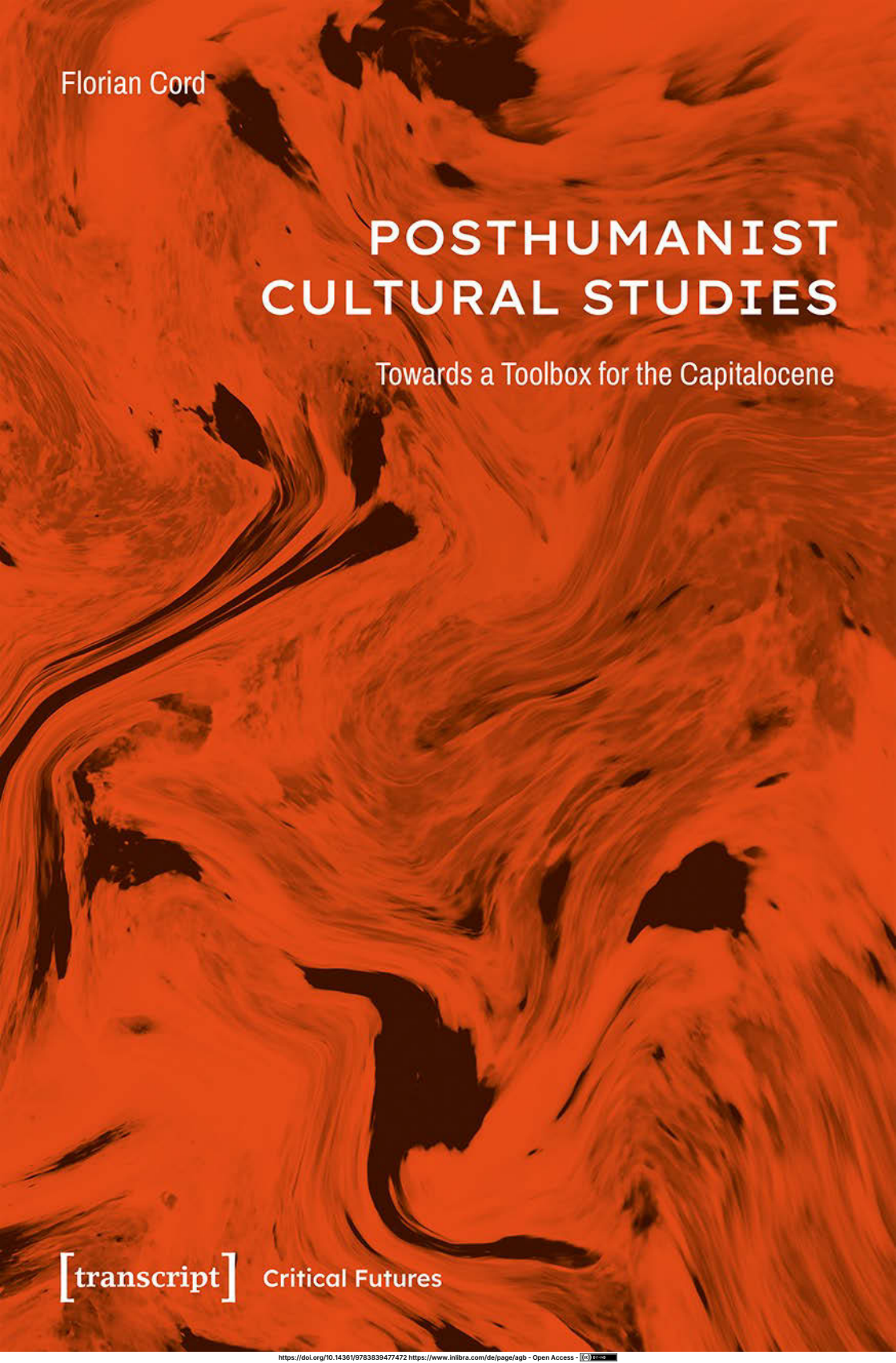


The background of the entire cover is a vibrant orange color with a complex, marbled pattern. The pattern consists of swirling, vein-like structures in various shades of orange, from light to dark, creating a sense of movement and depth.

Florian Cord

POSTHUMANIST CULTURAL STUDIES

Towards a Toolbox for the Capitalocene

[transcript]

Critical Futures

Florian Cord
Posthumanist Cultural Studies

Editorial

This book series brings together critical perspectives on the discourses, narratives, and cultural practices that shape imaginaries of "the future." Positioning futures as *critical* asks us to recognize the role of worldmaking in the face of multiple planetary crises as a matter of urgency and risk. At the same time, critical futures signify a turn towards complexity beyond the rhetoric of utopia and dystopia. At the intersections of the environmental humanities, speculative fiction, and science & technology studies, *Critical Futures* offers opportunities to explore the potential of literature and the arts to shift habitual ways of ordering the world and strives to promote epistemologies, pedagogies, and ethics suited to the messy realities of more equitable and ecologically viable futures.

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Florian Cord is lecturer for English literatures and cultures at Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn. He held positions in Dresden, Leipzig, and Würzburg. His research focuses on cultural studies, especially the theory and analysis of crisis and the intersections of culture, power, and subjecthood.

Florian Cord

Posthumanist Cultural Studies

Towards a Toolbox for the Capitalocene

[transcript]

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Acknowledgments

If, as the following essays try to do, we hold to an ontology that is relational and processual, then we must draw the necessary conclusions for the act of writing and the written work as well. Everything flows, and everything is multiple (at least until the moment of 'arbitrary closure'). I am many, and so is this study – all assemblages of assemblages, nodes in a mesh, elements in wider networks of a multiplicity of relations, in which agency is distributed and emergent. I acknowledge and express my appreciation to the multitude of actants, both human and non- or more-than-human, through whose entanglement with 'me' this study was made possible. None of what follows could ever truly be mine.

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Finally, my heartfelt thanks to my family, above all to Anna, Lotti, Anton, and Heike.

For Uwe.

You first gave me Orwell.

Previous Publications

This book is a collection of essays, all written between 2020 and 2024. Several of them have previously appeared as journal articles, in some cases in a different and/or shorter form. Although each text stands on its own, I nevertheless hope that, taken together, they form a cohesive whole, much like a monograph. I would like to thank all publishers for the kind permission to reproduce the material in this collection.

Chapter 1 first appeared in *Open Cultural Studies*, Volume 6, 2022, pages 25–37.

Chapter 2 first appeared in *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, Volume 14, Issue 1, 2022, pages 1–26.

The postscript first appeared on the online blog *Critical Habitations*, 2022.

Chapter 3 first appeared in *Interconnections: Journal of Posthumanism*, Volume 1, Issue 2, 2022, pages 1–23.

The excursus first appeared in *SubStance*, Volume 53, Number 2, Issue 164, August, 2024, pages 3–20. Copyright © 2024 Johns Hopkins University Press and Substance Journal, Inc.

Chapter 4 first appeared in *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, Volume 30, Issue 2, 2023, pages 231–51.

Chapter 6 first appeared in *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, Volume 113, 2024, pages 51–70.

The coda first appeared in *Alienocene: Journal of the First Outernational*, Stratum 9, 2021, pages 1–40.

Introduction. Into the Muddle

Is Cultural Studies in crisis? For sure, a quick glance at some of the publication and conference titles of the recent past can give this impression: *What's Become of Cultural Studies?* (Turner 2012), *Quo Vadis Cultural Studies?* (conference, Berlin, 2012), *Cultural Studies and Its Discontents* (conference, Berlin, 2013), *What's Happening to Cultural Studies?* (conference, Brighton/online, 2022). Is the discipline in decline then? Alexander Dunst, Elahe Haschemi Yekani, and Anja Schwarz are certainly right when they observe that complaints “about cultural studies’ assumed lack of political relevance, its alleged jargon-driven writing or a supposed absence of disciplinary and methodological grounding” are actually “voiced with great regularity” (2014: 195). And they are surely correct to argue that such worries are to some degree part and parcel of the self-reflexivity that has always been a hallmark of the field, and to caution against desires to define and ‘fix’ it, as these often entail an occidentocentric bias and in fact run counter to the openness and inter- or post-disciplinary orientation that is equally characteristic of it. And yet, I would argue that when scholars such as Graeme Turner or Lawrence Grossberg lament that much Cultural Studies work of the last years has been “wearily predictable, with many of the same old theoretical vehicles [...] being driven around small sectors of familiar terrain”, and that the field to a certain extent has lost the “connection with its original political, ethical and pedagogical mission” (Turner 2012: 3, 2) and fallen into something of a “dogmatic slumber” (Grossberg 2010: 4), they do have a point. While self-criticism can indeed be seen as an integral element of Cultural Studies per se, I believe there is something *conjuncturally specific* about the concerns of the recent past. In fact, I would argue that these concerns should not so much be considered as just another iteration of an old crisis discourse which has ‘always’ been part of Cultural Studies, but rather as standing in continuity with a very particular set of criticisms which have their origins in the 1990s, critiques associated with terms such as ‘banality in cultural studies’ (Morris 1990) or ‘cultural populism’ (McGuigan 1992). Stuart Hall, too, repeatedly expressed similar concerns, perhaps most notably in his celebrated essay “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies”, first delivered as a talk in 1990, in which he famously admonished that Cultural Studies at all times needed to “hol[d] theoretical and political questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension” and warned of

an excess of “theoretical fluency” (1996a: 272, 274) within the field, at that time especially in the language of deconstruction. This fluency, he argued, meant the increasing substitution of serious intellectual work with “mere repetition, a sort of mimicry or deconstructive ventriloquism”, and entailed an “overwhelming textualization of cultural studies”, to the effect that “the critical questions of power, history, and politics” more and more came to be “formalize[d] out of existence” or constituted “as exclusively matters of language and textuality” (1996a: 274). Hall returned to such misgivings as late as 2007, when he declared in an interview that he “really [could not] read another cultural studies analysis of Madonna or *The Sopranos*” (in MacCabe 2008: 29). Not, he explained, that such phenomena should be excluded from the discipline per se – the problem as he saw it was rather that the study of them did no longer “interconnect with any wider formations” (in MacCabe 2008: 29).

Though the criticisms articulated by Hall, Meaghan Morris, Jim McGuigan and many others should certainly not simply be conflated, what, I think, is essentially at stake in many of them is the concern that Cultural Studies may be more or less abandoning what Hall called its vocation as a “political project”, “developing intellectual and theoretical work as a political practice”, its calling as a ‘worldly’ endeavor whose primary focus is the “crude exercise” of power and which ultimately “aims to make a difference in the world” (Hall 1996a: 271, 268, 274, 264). For these scholars, Cultural Studies should never confine itself to the “clean air of meaning and textuality” but instead, as Hall memorably put it, always focus on “the something nasty down below” (1996a: 264). The principal worry of these practitioners, in other words, was that the discipline might lose its essentially *materialist* orientation and morph into more or less a mere academic finger exercise. And indeed, much work within the field of the time by and large discarded political economy and more ‘systemic’ forms of critique and, through its often affirmative view of popular culture as a site of semiotic warfare and its celebration of the productive and resistant capacities of audiences and consumers, tended, even if unintentionally, towards an overall acceptance of consumer capitalism (cf., e.g., Curran 2006; McGuigan 2006; McRobbie 2008; Moran/Littler 2020). That is to say: Cultural Studies largely abandoned its earlier ambitions of mapping the ‘whole’ of a given social formation – precisely the ‘wider formations’ central to Hall’s understanding of the field, and at the heart of a methodology such as conjunctural analysis, so critical for research at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and beyond during the 1970s and 80s.

As I indicated, this development can to a large degree be explained contextually or conjuncturally itself. As Hall (1986) explained, the emergence of the field of Cultural Studies was the result of a set of ‘breaks’ or of an epistemic ‘caesura’ in the course of which, to quote Raymond Williams, “what began as cultural criticism turned into social and political criticism” (qtd. in Marchart 2008: 58; my transl.). Developing into what is essentially “a species of political sociology” (Gilbert 2019b: 6), Cultural Studies effectively pushed forward into the vacuum left by a then predom-

inantly functionalist British sociology which primarily worked quantitatively and empirically and, as Perry Anderson (1968) pointed out, was thus unable to develop a conception of the social totality (cf. Hall 1996b: 402f). This scientific-historical context, the epistemic break, in turn needs to be located within a larger, properly conjunctural context, to the extent that the rise of Cultural Studies must also be seen as deeply entangled with the British New Left and with the larger, socio-political 'break' constituted by the gradual erosion of the post-war consensus (inaugurated, among other things, by the events of 1956). This erosion came to be driven by multiple and interrelated processes and phenomena of 'crisis' such as economic stagnation, rising inflation, massive unemployment, and high national debt, the mobilizations of the 'new social movements', or the counter-culture in its varied manifestations, all of which were in turn entangled with larger processes including postindustrialization and the shift towards a post-Fordist, cognitive-cultural economy, an accelerating globalization, a general liberalization of mores and values, changing class structures, and the emergence of the consumer society. The post-war settlement gradually came apart and an organic or hegemonic crisis ensued, in which a 'new right' formed and eventually, with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 (and, in the US, of Ronald Reagan in 1980), successfully made a bid for power. This was the victory of the 'neoliberal revolution' (Hall 2011; Harvey 2007). It was the complexities of the social force field in this situation that many practitioners of Cultural Studies dissected at the time, often by the means of conjunctural analysis (cf. esp. Hall 1988; Hall et al. 1978).

Yet, it was arguably not until the early 1990s that something like a stable neoliberal hegemony was finally established. Here, again, two elections, that of Bill Clinton in the US in 1992 and that of Tony Blair in the UK in 1997, may be seen as both critical and symptomatic events. Clinton's Democrats and Blair's New Labour effectively eliminated all residues of older, more socialist positions from their party and government programs by embracing a novel, 'center-left' approach to politics – what was propagated as a 'third way' beyond the now allegedly obsolete fronts of left and right. What this new 'way' meant was essentially a more or less complete commitment to the continuation and, as it turned out, intensification of the neoliberal project begun by their predecessors in office. As Hall and other critics remarked, this was, for all intents and purposes, a 'Thatcherism with a human face', whose effect, as Anderson observed, was "to suppress the conflictual potential of the pioneering regimes of the radical right, and kill off opposition to neo-liberal hegemony more completely" (2000: 7; cf. also Gilbert 2004; Hall 2003). As Thatcherism's peculiar and, indeed, always contradictory and tenuous, articulation of neoliberalism and social conservatism proved increasingly outdated and out of sync with the demands and deterritorializing dynamic of late 20th-century global capital, it was the new 'chain of equivalence' between neoliberal economics and social liberalism fashioned by the social-democratic parties of the 'third way' that turned out to be, as Lenin might have

said, the best ‘ideological shell’ of neoliberalism (cf. Anderson 2000: 7; Hall 2003: 20). It was this shift from a socially and culturally conservative and, as such, highly self-contradictory and authoritarian version of neoliberalism, which still had to coerce large parts of the population into submission (organized labor, left-wing activism, anti-racist movements, the counterculture, etc.), to a ‘progressive’ (Nancy Fraser), that is, socially liberal and cosmopolitan one, able to mobilize a far more wide-reaching consent, that made possible the consolidation of the new neoliberal consensus.¹

What ensued were what Jeremy Gilbert has called the ‘long 1990s’ (Gilbert 2015; Gilbert/Williams 2022), a period running up as far as the more recent past, in which social, political, and, according to many critics (e.g., Fisher 2014; Gilbert 2015; Reynolds 2011), cultural relations effectively remained more or less unchanged and which was hence characterized by a pervasive sense of stasis. This was a time marked by proclamations such as those of the end of history and the imminent global victory march of the ‘Western’ model of liberal democratic capitalism after the end of the Soviet Union (Francis Fukuyama); the triumph of multiculturalism and the postracial society; the onset of the age of simulation and hyperreality signaling the exhaustion of politics (Jean Baudrillard); the end of the grand narratives (Jean-François Lyotard); or the reign of the postmodern ‘anything goes’. It was also, incidentally, a period of widespread economic stabilization and growth, aided by momentous developments in media and technology (internet, digitalization, ‘network/information society’). These and other developments, or ‘conjunctural forces’, strengthened the neoliberal hegemony, which now infused capitalism with a ‘new spirit’ (Boltanski/Chiapello 2005) and turned entrepreneurialism and the ‘enterprise form’ into a generalized principle of functioning for the entire social fabric (cf., e.g., Bröckling 2015; Brown 2005, 2017; Dardot/Laval 2014). This new conjunctural settlement of the 1990s was stabilized (in spite of Lyotard) by a new grand narrative of progress and a powerful ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher 2009). Under its sway, neoliberalism increasingly came to appear as ‘without any alternative’ and to more or less seamlessly occupy the horizon of the possible, the thinkable, and the sayable. This situation has since given rise to critiques of ‘post-democracy’ and the ‘post-political’ (Brown 2019; Crouch 2005, 2011; Rancière 1999). Experientially, as a dominant ‘structure of feeling’, a sense of living in an endless present set in, and the future appeared to be ‘canceled’ (Berardi 2011; Fisher 2014). As Jeremy Gilbert and Alex Williams emphasize, these long 1990s “were as much the ultimate epoch of global finance capital as they were the period of Silicon Valley’s ascendancy” (2022: 30) – it was above all the interests of this coalition of class fractions, big tech and finance, that were and are served by the neoliberal settlement. It appears to me that it was precisely in this climate and under these conjunctural conditions that

1 The following two paragraphs were in large part co-written with Ronja Waldherr, whom I sincerely thank for her contribution.

Cultural Studies largely came to give up on its prior attempts at ‘seeing it whole’ (Toscano 2012) and mapping the social totality. And I would contend that the more recent criticisms of the current state of the field discussed at the beginning point to the continuance of just this situation as well as to the persistence of the conjunctural settlement with which it is entangled.

And at the same time, there are now multiple signs of change. For as a number of thinkers have argued, neoliberal hegemony is today in a state of crisis (e.g., Bruff/Tansel 2021; Davidson 2017; Davies 2016; Davies/Gane 2021; Fraser 2019; Gilbert/Williams 2022; Harvey 2014). William Davies, for one, has observed an increasingly haphazard rhetorical and political defense of the neoliberal status quo, a state of affairs he labels ‘contingent neoliberalism’, which is devoid of any “appeal to common humanity, but [operates] purely via contingent acts of preservation” (2016: 154). Broadly speaking, the context of this erosion of hegemony is what could be called a state of *permanent or chronic crisis* which ‘Western’ societies (and beyond) seem to have entered since the late 2000s. With the financial crisis of 2007/08, the international rise of a new right-wing populism, the accelerating climate and the biodiversity crisis, the so-called ‘migration crisis’ of 2015/16, the Corona pandemic, or the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, the societies of the ‘West’ increasingly appear to be experiencing an (often painful) ‘end of illusions’ (Reckwitz 2021; cf. also Bratton 2021). Evidently, social reality reasserts itself as something far more complex, contradictory, and precarious than the liberal narrative of progress and dominant socio-political imaginaries and forms of common sense suggest(ed). We have entered a new, transitional phase, an ‘*interregnum*’ (Antonio Gramsci), whose outcome is open but will inevitably be the result of social contestation and struggle.

Of course, we need to be wary of too neat a narrative and too easy explanations. In fact, one of the fundamental tenets behind the following essays is that nothing is ever simple – in my understanding, this, precisely, is one of the core principles of Cultural Studies. That being said, it nevertheless seems fair to say that it is in this changed context that a number of scholars have recently (re)turned to the more overtly political and materialist orientations of earlier Cultural Studies work, visible, for instance, in the growing reception of the writings of Hall, even well beyond the field, or in the increasing prominence of the method of conjunctural analysis²,

2 Since 2010, the approach has been used by an increasingly large number of scholars working in different fields and on a variety of different issues. For a helpful overview, cf. the articles collected in three special issues of the journal *New Formations* on the topic of *This Conjuncture* (Gilbert 2019a, 2020). Several of the contributions gathered there also provide reflections on conjunctural analysis on a more general and methodological level. For more in this regard, cf., e.g., Carley 2021; Clarke 2010, 2014, 2017; Ege 2021; Featherstone 2017; Gallas 2017, 2025; Jefferson 2021. In the context of Cultural Studies in Germany, cf. only Huck 2021: 87–96; Kramer 2018. For the use of conjunctural analysis in particular contexts, cf., e.g., among many others, on neoliberalism and the financial crisis, Flohr/Harrison 2016; Hall/Massey 2010; Hall/

which is once again proving to be an exceedingly powerful tool for a better, more nuanced understanding of the present and its overlapping crises, and about which I will have more to say in the final chapters of this study. To me, this is a welcome development as it holds the potential for a reinvigoration of the ‘political project’ that, following Hall, is Cultural Studies. Once more, practitioners of the field are to-day (re)turning to what I would call the defining ‘five Cs’ of *Cultural Studies*, that is, an emphasis on *contextuality*, *contingency*, *complexity*, and *the concrete*, as well as political *commitment* – in other words, to Cultural Studies as an analytics dedicated to ‘dirty, messy business’ (Cord 2018).

And yet, a Cultural Studies investigation of the present historical moment can certainly not simply mean a revival of the theories and concepts of old. It was Lawrence Grossberg who pointed out that Cultural Studies should never allow itself to become ‘lazy’: “lazy because it assumes its objects of study and the politics that follow from them, and lazy because it assumes its methods and theories” (2010: 2). Instead, it should remain committed to *thinking conjuncturally* – that is, to thinking *in terms of* conjunctures (conjunctural analysis), but also to a thinking that understands *itself* as conjunctural, contextual, and provisional. In that vein, it ought to remain “risky”, willing to “questio[n] the questions themselves”, and prepared to “reinvent itself – its theories, politics, and questions – in response to conjunctural conditions and demands” (Grossberg 2010: 66, 65). The reflections that follow are undertaken in precisely this spirit.

The present book is primarily concerned with questions of cultural theory and methodology. At its core, it asks what a Cultural Studies for the Anthropocene or Capitalocene could or should look like. At this point, it has probably become clear that by Cultural Studies – a term that naturally allows for a variety of interpretations – I understand the very specific intellectual tradition of ‘British Cultural Studies’ or the ‘Birmingham school’, in which this study positions itself. This is a tradition associated with names such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, Paul Gilroy, and Lawrence Grossberg and that is characterized by the ‘five Cs’ mentioned above. It involves a decidedly political approach to questions of culture, traditionally focusing in particular on the complex interrelations between culture, subjecthood, and power. The book argues for the centrality of the so-called ‘nonhuman turn’ (Grusin 2015) for Cultural Studies today, a turn that may be taken to signal a programmatically postanthropocentric phase of posthumanism, which decenters the human in favor of a turn towards the non- or more-than-human (understood,

Massey/Rustin 2015; on austerity, Bramall 2015; on Trumpism, Brexit, and the crisis of liberal democracy, Babic 2020; Clarke 2019; Grossberg 2018; Jefferson 2021: 157–214; Yeramimovich/Ritz/Zaritas 2018; on the ‘migration crisis’, Danewid 2021; on housing development, Inch/Shepherd 2020; on Chinese capitalism, Peck 2023; and on the Corona pandemic, the special issue entitled *Our COVID Conjuncture* of the journal *TOPIA* (Ironstone/Bird 2020).

e.g., as animals, plants, affectivity, bodies, geophysical systems, matter, or technology). The central question around which the following chapters revolve is how the various theoretical developments associated with this turn affect, or could affect, Cultural Studies as an intellectual and political practice. In essence, I make the case for an 'encounter' in Donna Haraway's sense or a 'diffraction' in Karen Barad's sense, in which the different sides or parties are read with and through each other (reciprocally, as it were).

The book traces the contours of and begins elaborating such an encounter and shows that it is immensely fruitful as it considerably enriches Cultural Studies by opening up new areas and possibilities of analysis and expands the theoretical-methodological 'toolbox' of the discipline by a whole range of perspectives, concepts, and ideas. Not least, with its focus on ontology and materiality, its radical relationism, and its emphasis on more-than-human forms of agency, the nonhuman turn offers a very helpful corrective to analytical and theoretical work that often remains rather anthropocentric, too focused on issues of textuality and of epistemology, and more or less bound to the dualistic thinking connected with the 'Great Divide' (Bruno Latour) between nature and society. For their part, approaches associated with the nonhuman turn benefit from this encounter through greater politicization and a stronger emphasis on the importance of context. The chapters thus explore the analytical potentials of the nonhuman turn for Cultural Studies, trace possibilities for dialogue, connection, and cross-fertilization, but also discuss tensions and contradictions (prominently, e.g., between proponents of actor-network theory or new materialism on the one hand and Marxist-oriented thinkers on the other). One of my arguments, however, is that Cultural Studies is particularly well-suited to bridging these divides or mitigating these tensions and can thus act as something like a hinge or platform for linking such different theoretical currents.

The book is divided into three main parts. Part I develops its central premise, namely that in order to be able to come to terms with the complexities of the present moment and the Anthropocene world, the discipline of Cultural Studies needs to be 'posthumanized' through a theoretical dialogue with the nonhuman turn. The chapters of this part thus principally operate on a meta-level – they engage with Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn as discursive formations, elaborate an encounter between both, and explore the consequences of such an encounter, particularly for the field of Cultural Studies. The key argument is that this results in a profound reorientation that makes the discipline less anthropocentric and more attuned to the nonhuman (ch. 1) and that entails a rethinking of its central categories (ch. 2, postscript).

After this general argument for a realignment of Cultural Studies has been made, part II then marks a shift to more specific investigations. Its chapters effectively constitute a theoretical mapping of and vagabonding in the current landscape of posthumanist thought, the purpose of which is to identify especially useful tools

for Cultural Studies. In particular, part II identifies concepts and ideas associated with what is called the 'reparative' (ch. 3, excursus), with 'escalative' theorizing (ch. 4), and with a thinking of the impure (ch. 5) as exceptionally rich resources for the discipline.

Finally, part III then turns to the question of practice, that is, of what it means to actually *do* posthumanist Cultural Studies. While the first chapter (ch. 6) builds on all the preceding theoretical reflections to propose the method of 'posthumanist conjunctural analysis' as a most promising approach for a reorganized discipline, the second one (ch. 7) puts this method to work in the form of an elaborate case study. Here, the productivity of posthumanist Cultural Studies is illustrated through the (conjunctural) investigation of a concrete phenomenon: the Corona pandemic. The case study takes the form of a montage which effectively consists of numerous interdependent smaller analyses, in which all of the arguments and concepts of the previous chapters are put to use.

What do the chapters cover specifically? The first one, "Posthumanist Cultural Studies: Taking the Nonhuman Seriously", unfolds the central hypothesis of the book. It begins by picking up on the pronounced (re-)turn to questions of ontology, matter, and realism in the humanities and social sciences of the last two decades or so. What all these theoretical formations – actor-network theory (ANT), new materialism, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and more – have in common is their profound challenge to human exceptionalism. Taken together, they have therefore been described as constituting the above-mentioned nonhuman turn. The chapter sets out on a theoretical exploration of the relationship between the intellectual and political practice of Cultural Studies on the one hand and the nonhuman turn on the other. For this purpose, it brings both 'into encounter', investigating points of affinity, compatibility, and tension. The essay argues that such a theoretical encounter could prove to be tremendously fruitful, both intellectually and politically, and that Cultural Studies should thus take a genuine interest in these new approaches, engage with them, put them to the test, and, when needed, 'translate' and 're-articulate' them. In essence, it thus makes the case for a stronger 'posthumanization' of the discipline. It suggests that the result could be a Cultural Studies for the Anthropocene which would have a lot to contribute to the critical (cultural, political, social, economic, ecological) struggles being fought today.

Chapter 2, "(Re-)Assembling Cultural Studies", builds on this argument and specifically proposes the concept of the 'assemblage' – a notion meant to challenge accepted views of reality by significantly complicating, indeed, *complexifying* being, and one central to many approaches associated with the nonhuman turn – as an alternative onto-epistemic commitment for Cultural Studies and a very productive hinge for the encounter sketched in the previous chapter. Primarily drawing on the work of the philosopher Manuel DeLanda, the article distills the most important features of this concept – heterogeneity, emergence, and contingency – and then

goes on to explore how it calls for a rethinking and revision of some of the central assumptions and categories of Cultural Studies once it is 'translated' into the discursive horizon of the discipline. In particular, the essay delineates how the three key concepts of *culture*, *power*, and *identity* undergo a reconceptualization, one that more strongly opens them up to the nonhuman.

The short postscript, "Political Ontologies: Cultural Studies and the Nonhuman Turn", which concludes the first, programmatic part of the book then specifically addresses one key facet of the encounter with the nonhuman turn by outlining a 'diffraction' of Cultural Studies and the new materialisms. The article explores the effects of this on both sides and particularly emphasizes the resulting politicization of questions of matter and ontology. It argues that what transpires is something like a *hegemony theory of ontology*, where ontology emerges as a realm of power relations.

The next chapter, "Critique, Repair, Escalation: Three Modes of Posthumanist Theorizing", then opens the second part of the book. Chapter 3 is an attempt to chart the field of contemporary posthumanist theory. Inspired by the work of Rita Felski, it identifies three principal 'modes' of theorizing which are central to it: *critique*, *repair*, and *escalation*. I conceive theoretical modes as particular styles of thought, involving specific epistemological, ontological, and political orientations as well as distinctive sensibilities, dispositions, and moods, and forms of speech, tone, and argument. As such, a mode constitutes a unique approach to and manner of doing theory. The essay successively characterizes and discusses each of these modes, and argues that for a posthumanist Cultural Studies today, the task should not so much be to choose or side with one of the currents of contemporary posthumanism, but rather to combine them. To this end, it emphasizes the significance of the work of *articulation* and advocates an orientation that would be essentially a pragmatic one. Here as elsewhere in the book, Cultural Studies is essentially (re-)conceived as an open, heterogeneous, and dynamic theoretical 'toolbox' or assemblage, not a closed and clearly defined 'discipline' (a term in which we should always hear echoes of Foucauldian thinking).

The following excursus, "In Repair: The Reparative as Theoretical Mode and Structure of Feeling in Times of Crisis. An Outline", then argues that the reparative actually has a somewhat prominent, perhaps pre-eminent, position insofar as it not only constitutes a broader theoretical shift of the past two decades in the humanities, social sciences, and even beyond, but that this shift is also expressive of a more general change in cultural sensibility, of a novel 'structure of feeling'. At heart a 'broken world thinking' (Steven Jackson), combining a focus on pain and possibility, destruction and creativity, and consisting of strategies whereby subjects salvage sustenance from the world, the essay contends that repair emerges expressly in the face of the multiple crises that mark the present moment and proceeds to trace the main contexts of its emergence – the material, the ordinary, and the futural – and to survey its chief characteristics.

After this discussion of the reparative, chapter 4, “‘Humanity recedes like a loathsome dream’: Nick Land, *Ahuman Becoming*, and Cultural Studies”, then engages with the theoretical mode that is arguably most alien to Cultural Studies: escalation, which always works through excess and overdrive. It does so by exploring the trajectories of *ahuman becoming* in the theoretical work of the philosopher Nick Land. A key figure in the development of what has come to be known as accelerationism, Land’s thinking has been a crucial influence not only on critical and cultural theorists, but also on a number of writers, artists, musicians, and film-makers. Disregarding academic conventions and deliberately provocative, not least for many on the political left, his writings have been subjected to oftentimes fierce criticism. While this paper agrees with much of this critique, particularly regarding his nihilistic embrace of the runaway circuits of cyber-capitalism and his more recent appalling turn to neoreaction, it argues that Land’s thought nevertheless offers a set of very helpful theoretical resources for a posthumanist Cultural Studies facing the challenges of the Anthro- or Capitalocene. The essay first briefly introduces and provides an overview of Land’s work and then proceeds to open up a reading of it that discards its hyperbole and (a-/anti-)political conclusions and stresses its critical, emancipatory dimensions. It principally focuses on Land’s powerful critique of ‘securocratic’ humanism and its frequently quasi-fascistic ‘immuno-political’ manifestations and argues that this critique can at once inspire a useful ‘anti-naturalist’ orientation, draw our attention to alternative becomings, and sharpen our awareness for the hybrid, composite character of power structures and socio-cultural formations. Already here, the Covid-19 pandemic, which is the main topic of chapter 7, serves as a case study to illustrate these arguments.

The following chapter, “Cyclonoplicity: Impurity Politics for the Anthropocene”, addresses some issues that are often raised in debates around the theories of the nonhuman turn, namely questions of ethics, agency, responsibility, and subjectivity. It enters and tackles these issues through the field of complicity studies. One of the central arguments frequently made within this field is that our thinking about complicity should not be restricted to an atomistic understanding focused on personal moral agency, but needs to be broadened to take into account the structural forms of complicity. We may think of this important shift of focus from the individual to the social and from the exceptional to the ordinary in terms of a theoretical shift from humanism to (post-)structuralism. The essay claims that in view of the material realities and the theoretical discourses surrounding the notion of the Anthropocene, yet another conceptual shift may be warranted today, one that extends the (post-)structuralist ‘decentering’ of the subject into a posthumanist one. For this purpose, I once again engage with different theoretical formations associated with the nonhuman turn, such as ANT, speculative realism, and especially new materialism, and examine in which ways they suggest a reconfiguration of our understanding of the subject and of agency. As I argue, such reconfiguration challenges us to

complement our investigation of the individual and social dimensions of complicity with an attention to the level of ontology. The chapter concludes by making the case that living today inevitably means ‘compromised living’, that ethico-politically as well as ontologically, complicity and impurity unavoidably define our condition, and that consequently, this fact of being inescapably caught up in multiple ‘enfoldings’ has to be our starting point for action. I argue for a politics which ‘stays with the trouble’ (Donna Haraway) and is hence not concerned with individual purity, authenticity, or non-complicity, but with the material and collective work of building alternative attachments and assemblages – a posthuman solidarity aimed at multi-species wellbeing.

The aim of the two final chapters – which constitute the third part of the book – is to translate the preceding theoretical reflections into practice by outlining what, methodologically speaking, a posthumanist Cultural Studies could concretely look like. Hence the title of part III, which references Paul du Gay et al.’s classic textbook *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*: What I am concerned with here is *how to do* Cultural Studies today, or rather, with *one way* of doing Cultural Studies, without claiming that this is the right, true, or only way. Chapter 6, “Soft Totalities: Conjunctural Analysis and/as Assemblage Analysis”, is essentially methodological in character and champions conjunctural analysis, already mentioned above, as a most useful tool for contemporary Cultural Studies. In this context, I particularly return to the vexed question of the social totality and the apparent tension regarding this issue between Cultural Studies (and other ‘critical’ formations) on the one hand and intellectual formations such as ANT on the other. My main concern is to argue for a more nuanced relationship between the concepts of totality, conjuncture, and assemblage. Once again, I maintain that a cross-fertilization or ‘diffraction’ of conjunctural analysis and assemblage theory, of Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn, holds significant analytical potential with regard to the complex messiness of the present, promising to update conjunctural analysis vis-à-vis the analytical demands and challenges of the Capitalocene. What thus emerges are the contours of a *posthumanist conjunctural analysis*.

Chapter 7, entitled “A Case Study of Covid-19: Towards a Montage of the Pandemic Assemblage”, functions as a concluding or synthesis chapter, which brings together the previous theoretical and methodological considerations, bundles them, and translates them into analytical practice. Here, the method of posthumanist conjunctural analysis developed in chapter 6 is applied in the form of a case study of a concrete phenomenon – the Corona pandemic. The chapter investigates a variety of aspects of the pandemic, taking up all the central concepts and arguments of the previous chapters and making them analytically fruitful. In doing so, it makes a number of further substantial theoretical interventions, including a revision of moral panic theory and a rethinking of the ‘circuit of culture’ for the 21st century. Formally, the chapter breaks with some conventions of academic writing. The starting point

for this is the conviction that the separation of form and content is an artificial one and that modes of writing have onto-epistemological relevance, that is, that they are co-constitutive for the phenomena under investigation themselves. Instead of a conventional narrative ('story'), the format of the chapter is based on the model of a pinboard. In this way, pitfalls of the narrative are to be avoided, in particular its excess of coherence, its unidirectional, linear chronology, the centrality of the discursive, and its tendency to center the narrator or the speaking (human) subject. In contrast, the pinboard operates in the mode of montage and places a multitude of 'smaller' narratives next to each other in a juxtapositional, less totalizing manner. These are relatively, but not completely unconnected – 'partial connections' (Marilyn Strathern) or 'fractional coherence' (John Law). In this way, the chapter ties in with the considerations on unity-in-difference in chapter 6 and attempts to find a method or form that does justice to both: unity and difference, stability and change, wholeness and multiplicity. It is a mode of representation beyond the contrast between the 'grand narratives' of modernity on the one hand and the 'small language games' of postmodernity on the other – in other words, a form in which the 'will to totality' finds expression, but at the same time totalization and holism, reductionism, teleology, and simple determinism are avoided. Accordingly, the chapter consists of various vignettes, 'snapshots' (Annemarie Mol) or, precisely, pins – like sketches attached to a pinboard with thumbtacks.

Finally, the book is concluded by a long coda with the title "Towards an Insurgent Zombie Collective (or, Welcome to the Zombiecene!)". This section is set slightly apart from the rest of the study, both in terms of content, since it is not directly concerned with posthumanist Cultural Studies, and of form, as it is stylistically somewhat more associative and playful. Yet, it is at the same time deeply connected with all that came before, insofar as it takes up the themes of relationality and impurity, power and resistance, and the emancipatory potentials of alternative forms of kinship and different worldings that have threaded their way through the preceding chapters. In that sense, it effectively represents something like an essayistic, manifesto-like conclusion, closing the book with a combative, prefigurative gesture that signals ongoing commitment to the struggle for more just and equal world-making. To that end, the coda fashions a narrative that is self-consciously teetering on the brink of becoming 'too big' (Haraway 2016: 50), but which accepts this risk because, thus the hope, the narrative may have something vital to tell about the present moment. The coda reads this moment not as the Anthropocene, but as the Zombiecene. Conceived as a figure of undecidability and the confusion of boundaries (between life and death, mind and body, self and other, etc.), the zombie is mobilized for an inquiry into the onto-political conditions of existence in the early 21st century. The article begins with a discussion of bio-/necropower and the contemporary escalation of the production of bare life, as well as geontopower, and subsequently proceeds to explore processes of zombification across the social spheres of politics, the

economy, culture, theory, and the academy. In the second part, the essay then makes the case for a recoding of the zombie into a figure of resistance. Through an in-depth analysis of Alex Garland's 2018 science fiction horror film *Annihilation*, the essay explores the zombie's radical potential, arguing that the present also holds possibilities for new becomings and novel kinds of emancipatory, collective politics.

In the past, there has been much antagonism between critique and repair, old and new materialism, Marxism and posthumanism. While a critical engagement with alternative epistemologies and methodologies is certainly crucial, and while there are no doubt significant points of friction and contradiction between different approaches that need to be taken seriously, the essays gathered here were written in a spirit – one which may be said to be characterized by a strong reparative orientation itself – of intellectual curiosity, openness, and generosity. If, as I argue in this book, Cultural Studies should cultivate a pragmatic and syncretistic theoretical ethos – if it is at heart a beachcombing Kraken (cf. chs. 3 and 4) – then theory is a toolbox, not a system, for it (cf. Reckwitz 2023, esp. 23–26). As Andreas Reckwitz, whose understanding of theory has a lot in common with the outlook of Cultural Studies as I see it, explains: “Whereas ‘theories-as-systems’ survive by building up a strong internal identity, by differentiating themselves clearly from the outside, and thus seem to rival other similarly constructed theories, ‘theories-as-tools’ can be connected to one another without any problem at all. Networks, in other words, can be linked together.” (2023: 26) With such an orientation, the encounter with the new and the different is not initially characterized by the search for faults and conflicts and by defensive refusal, but always by the desire to get to know and to learn something, and by a sincere interest in potential tools which may “expand or reinterpret the scope of what is sociologically visible” (Reckwitz 2023: 84). The new is viewed not as a threat or an attack, but as an offer or invitation and a potential opportunity, and theory is understood as a workshop or an experiment, not a tribunal (Reckwitz 2023: 90–94). I am convinced that such a stance is fully in keeping with the position of some of the key thinkers of the field of Cultural Studies, most notably Stuart Hall, who explicitly rejected “absolutist” ways of approaching theory, “where you either advocate everything [...], in the manner of the convert or disciple, or you have to repudiate everything” (1996b: 394), and who declared that “there are no theoretical limits from which cultural studies can turn back” (1996a: 268). Hall emphasized that he had an essentially “strategic relation to theory” and that he was hence “not afraid to borrow this idea and try to match it up with this idea borrowed from another paradigm”, all the while being fully “aware of all the dangers of eclecticism and lack of rigor” (2019: 250, 251) which such an orientation entailed. Gregor McLennan has therefore called Hall a ‘peerless mediator’ (2021b), whose “distinctive characteristic [...] [was] a complete lack of sectarianism” and who was always “working to prevent any easy polarization” and instead strove “to find an appropriate place for all valid emphases – not whole *positions*” (2021a: 169).

I believe that this is still, or once again, a highly productive approach. For sure, Cultural Studies today does not need to *turn into* some version of, say, ANT or new materialism. And I do not claim that posthumanism is the sole thing that is needed today, that it is the most important thing, or that it is the answer to all our questions. However, what I do contend is that, epistemological and political tensions notwithstanding, the intellectual formations associated with the nonhuman turn offer a host of productive tools for a Cultural Studies in the early 21st century. If, as Grossberg avers, the present moment is one in which we should “become more self-conscious of the project” of Cultural Studies, in which we should allow ourselves to be challenged “to think beyond the institutional constraints and habits to which we have become accustomed” and thus “reinvent” (2010: 67, 65) the theories and methodologies of our field, then, I argue, the nonhuman turn constitutes one important resource – though not the only one – to do that. I am wary of all declarations (as well as the fetishization) of the radically new, and, indeed, of the announcement of ‘turns’ in the humanities and social sciences, and I do not consider the ‘non-human turn’ as a revolution of thought which changes everything. Like some of its critics, I feel that the claims to novelty of, say, the new materialisms, can be overstated. And yet, I think that these recent intellectual formations do indeed enable us to address new sets of issues as well as to raise old questions anew in a fresh and different way. What Hall (1996c: 232) said about the assessment of historical periods, namely that we need to move beyond an all-or-nothing logic according to which either everything is new or nothing at all has changed, applies to theory as well. Here, too, a ‘conjuncturalist’ approach compels us to reconsider theoretical shifts in terms of a ‘cultural logic of hybridity’ (Reckwitz 2006: 19) instead of such either/or’s and, rather than getting hung up on arguing for one of two sides, to engage in the much more productive labor of ‘translation’ and ‘articulation’.

While not a *revolution*, the nonhuman turn may in fact constitute another *interruption* of the field of Cultural Studies, in the sense in which Hall (1996a) has used that term to talk about the earlier impact of feminism, critical race theory, and the linguistic turn. In fact, for Hall, interruption represents a metaphor for theoretical work itself (1996a: 268), one he places alongside two others: ‘struggle’, or ‘wrestling with the angels’, and responding to the ‘conundrums of theory’ (1996a: 265f, 266). Theory, then, of course has its clarifying, explicatory function – but it also means “always [...] going on theorizing about the world” (Hall 2019: 250f), in an ever ‘unfinished conversation’, and continuously going on grappling with the ways at hand of making the world mean. It interrupts entrenched orders of the visible and sayable, but it also remains open to interruption itself. In that sense, I believe that, though it should certainly be taken with a grain of salt, there is nevertheless some truth to the assertion that a new “Copernican revolution” (Tuana 2008: 209) is underway with the nonhuman turn, since many of the novel paradigms, concepts, and terminologies do indeed suggest deeply altered ‘ways of seeing’ (John Berger) for socio-political analysis,

a very different manner of ‘making intelligible’ or of onto-epistemological ‘mattering’, with the key notion of the assemblage and other recent theoretical innovations rendering visible/constructing wholly new types of entities and processes – an alternative ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Jacques Rancière). To some extent, the world emerges as a very different place. J.G. Ballard was right: Earth is the alien planet. Commentators have observed the affinity between the intellectual movements associated with the nonhuman turn and the wave of (new) ‘weird’ fiction, cinema, and art of the more recent past (Luckhurst 2017: 1053), both of which seem to be “peculiarly suited to addressing the hybrid world of the Anthropocene” (Luckhurst 2017: 1056). Both of them en-weird, veer, and twist away from established frameworks, denaturalizing and showing up the contingency of some of even our most entrenched onto-epistemological commitments, especially the individualism, substantialism, essentialism, binarism, and purism entangled with what Bruno Latour (1993) called ‘the modern Constitution’ – and, importantly, its anthropocentrism. It opens up a thinking of relationality, processuality, of the continuum, and of multiplicity. If, as I noted at the beginning, contemporary publications and conferences are once again raising the question of *quo vadis*, of where Cultural Studies is or should be going, then I think the answer ought to be what, with the best work within the field, it has always been: into the dirt, the mess, the muddle, the unknown.

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Part I – Posthumanizing Cultural Studies

1. Posthumanist Cultural Studies: Taking the Nonhuman Seriously

The Nonhuman Turn

In recent years, there has been a pronounced (re-)turn to questions of ontology, matter, and realism in the humanities and social sciences. While theoretical formations such as actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, or new materialism should by no means be conflated, what they have in common – and what they share with other intellectual developments like affect theory, animal studies, or new media theory – is their profound challenge to human exceptionalism. Taken together, these approaches have productively been described as constituting a ‘nonhuman turn’ which “is engaged in decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies” (Grusin 2015: vii). They can thus be said to be continuing and radicalizing the project of ‘decentering the subject’ pursued most consistently by (post-)structuralism, and to have ushered in a new, *postanthropocentric* phase of posthumanism. Now, the liberal-humanist tradition is dealt a finishing blow as the remaining foundational dualisms inherited from modernity such as nature/culture or nonhuman/human are definitely discarded – though this time not primarily through a deconstruction bringing to light their inherent instability and slippage (cf. Derrida 2016), but by revealing the fundamental co-existence, interdependence, ‘intra-action’ (Barad 2007), and ‘entanglement’ of human beings and their living and non-living ‘companions’ (Haraway 2008). As is becoming ever more evident in the present, ‘we have never been modern, individuals, human’ (Gilbert/Sapp/Tauber 2012; Haraway 2008; Latour 1993b). “[N]either biology nor philosophy,” Donna Haraway has pointed out, “any longer supports the notion of independent organisms in environments, that is, interacting units plus contexts/rules” – instead, “sympoiesis is the name of the game in spades” (2016: 33). As Haraway has put it, beings are thus always “knotted beings” (2008: 5), and becoming is necessarily a ‘becoming-with’. Consequently, ‘flat ontologies’ replace the former distinctions between subject and object, human and ‘other(s)’. Toppled from his (sic) self-erected pedestal, the human finds himself caught up in the

'mesh' of things (Morton 2010), hybrid networks in which he is just one being *among* beings. In the provocative words of Timothy Morton: "my being is not everything it's cracked up to be – or rather [...] the being of a paper cup is as profound as mine." (2013: 17) There is a strong ethico-political dimension to much of this work, which can generally be seen as a symptom of and/or response to the socio-ecological crisis widely referred to as the Anthropocene.

How do these important theoretical developments affect Cultural Studies as an intellectual and political practice? What contribution can it make in its turn to the most pressing issues of today, an era marked, among other things, by the generalization of biopolitics and planetary challenges such as global warming? What could a *Cultural Studies for the Anthropocene* look like?¹

These are big and complex questions and I will not attempt to provide answers. Taking my cue from Alexander Dunst, Elahe Haschemi Yekani, and Anja Schwarz (2014), who have encouraged Cultural Studies to allow itself to be challenged and transformed by new theoretical influxes, I will, however, argue that Cultural Studies should take a genuine interest in these new approaches and that it should engage with, put to the test, and, when needed, 'translate' and 're-articulate' them. I believe that such a theoretical 'encounter' or 'contact zone' (Haraway 2008) could prove to be tremendously fruitful, both intellectually and politically: For one thing, I am convinced that it has the potential to significantly enrich Cultural Studies by opening up new areas and means of analysis, adding a whole number of perspectives and concepts to the discipline's theoretical-methodological 'toolbox'². For another, it would seem that such a 'Cultural Studies-in-encounter' would have a lot to contribute to the critical (cultural, political, social, economic) struggles being fought today. The allusion to Stuart Hall's classic essay "Popular-Democratic vs Authoritarian Populism: Two Ways of 'Taking Democracy Seriously'" (1980) in my subtitle is thus no mere play of words. Taking the nonhuman seriously is today an urgent political task and, in fact, one way of, or even requirement for, taking democracy seriously – and this in at least two regards: On the one hand, it seems that a radical rethinking and reconstitution of the *demos* is now in order. As proponents of the notion of 'political

1 In this context, cf. Grzegorz Czemiel's (2019) recent call for 'speculative Cultural Studies'. Czemiel's interest and approach are, however, very different from mine, as he is only concerned with the study of popular culture and focuses chiefly on speculative realism, especially object-oriented ontology.

2 This metaphor, derived from a comment made by Gilles Deleuze in a now-famous interview with Michel Foucault (Foucault 1996: 76), has always seemed to me to be a productive one, especially with regards to the heterogeneous, inter- or transdisciplinary, syncretistic character of a (non-)discipline such as Cultural studies. Cf. also Gregory Lobo, Jeffrey Cedeño, and Chloe Rutter-Jensen's description of Cultural Studies (in the Latin American context) as "an admittedly mixed but terribly useful bag of critical tools" (2012: 3).

ecology' such as Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and Levi Bryant have argued, the theory and practice of democracy need to be revised so as to make room for nonhumans as members and participants in the polity. This process is explicitly cast in terms of a struggle for empowerment: Thus, Bennett maintains that "surely the scope of democratization can be broadened to acknowledge more nonhumans in more ways, in something like the ways in which we have come to hear the political voices of other humans formerly on the outs" (2010: 109). For Latour, to eschew this process is to thwart democracy itself: "*By defending the rights of the human subject to speak and to be the sole speaker, one does not establish democracy; one makes it increasingly more impracticable every day.*" (2004a: 69)

On the other hand, for Cultural Studies to take the nonhuman seriously also means gaining a fuller understanding of democracy regarding hitherto largely neglected aspects such as its affective and material dimensions. While, for instance, there has of course always been a strong materialist current in Cultural Studies, more often than not this only meant a focus on 'history' and 'practices' (and frequently *discursive* history and practices), but not an actual concern with 'stuff', 'physicality', 'things', and with the ways in which they contribute to structuring social relations (cf. Bryant 2014: 1–4). In contrast, recent materialist theorizing has convincingly unsettled the idea that political systems are primarily shaped by discourses, ideologies, attitudes, and ideas and instead treated them as "socio-technical worlds" (Mitchell 2011: 8), shaped by material agencies. Thus, democracy or capitalism, for example, need to be rethought as 'carbon democracy' (Mitchell 2011) and 'fossil capitalism' (Angus 2016; Malm 2016), a process that not only significantly extends and alters our analytic work but can also in various ways affect political struggle.

Finally, the reference to Hall's article reminds us that, as in the late 70s and early 80s, once again a powerful 'new right' is presently on the rise, trying to exploit the overdetermined crises of the present in order to continue its already partly successful project of manufacturing consent for the erection of a new statist authoritarianism. Taking the nonhuman and democracy seriously today is not least also linked to the fight against this populism of the right.

Cultural Studies-in-Encounter

At first sight, a productive encounter between Cultural Studies on the one hand and the approaches associated with the nonhuman turn on the other may seem highly unlikely. After all, the former, heavily influenced by (post-)structuralism in the wake of the 'linguistic turn' and itself a major influence in the late 20th-century 'cultural turn', has for a long time now championed social constructivism, which, however, has of late become a target of critique. For most speculative realist and new materialist critics, constructivism is really a form of an undead, "ethereal idealism" (Bryant/

Srnicek/Harman 2011: 3), a variant of what Quentin Meillassoux has termed ‘correlationism’, that is, “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (2009: 5). Many contemporary thinkers thus distance themselves from the (more radical) constructivist discourses of the cultural turn and their “allergy to ‘the real’” (Coole/Frost 2010: 6). In their eyes, this anti-realist stance has lost its radicalism and is now largely exhausted. In particular, they argue that the constructivist paradigm is generally inadequate for tackling the crucial matters of the present, be it the (ontological, epistemological, ethical, political) challenges thrown up by recent technoscientific developments, the contemporary context of biopolitics, the complexities of global capitalism, or the looming ecological catastrophe. To be able to face up to such issues, these critics maintain, what is needed is a theoretical rapprochement with realism and materialism. As they see it, such new approaches would also be able to avoid further shortcomings of the focus on language, text, discourse, ideology, and subjectivity entailed by the cultural turn. Chief among these is the paradox that, in spite of constructivism’s often anti-humanist orientation, that is, its resistance to the privileged status of the sovereign, unified subject of the ‘Western’ liberal tradition, it nevertheless frequently ends up reaffirming the central position of the human. For, as Diana Coole and Samantha Frost point out, “to claim that something is constructed often has the unintended effect of recentering the human subject as the locus of agency despite the intention to undermine such claims” (2010: 26). The nonhuman here only ever appears as a site of inscription or projection for *human* meaning, never as a locus of value, meaning, or agency in its own right.³

In view of this critique, can or should Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn really be brought into the contact zone? I believe so. While Cultural Studies scholars may tend to respond in an antagonistic manner to the criticisms levelled at the cultural turn and to the realist and materialist arguments of the new approaches, we would do well to remember that constructivism, even as there were – and still are – good theoretical as well as political reasons for it, is by no means essential or inherent to Cultural Studies. In fact, even when its institutionalization gained pace in the

3 In this context, the update of Raymond Williams’ classic *Keywords* project (1976/1983) for the 21st century, edited by Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris (2005), can perhaps be considered as somewhat symptomatic. Even though the humanism of Williams’ original work is here distinctly qualified or even displaced by the influence of, among other things, poststructuralism, critical race studies, gender and queer theory, and disability studies, there are no entries on, say, ‘animal’, ‘plant’, ‘climate’, ‘object’, or ‘thing’, and the notes on ‘nature’ and ‘environment/ecology’ – the latter newly added – remain largely discursivist. The book, a ‘vocabulary of culture and society’, can therefore be said to largely remain within the conceptual hold of what Bruno Latour (1993b) has called the ‘Great Divide’.

1980s and 90s, Cultural Studies has always tried to preserve its status as an ‘anti-discipline’, in the sense of resisting the ‘disciplinary’ power of academic disciplinarity (cf. Foucault 1972, esp. 222–24, and 1995). “[I]t refuses,” said Hall, “to be a master discourse or a meta-discourse of any kind.” (1996a: 263) As I understand it, its goal, to borrow Michel Foucault’s words, has always been “a sort of autonomous and noncentralized theoretical production, or in other words a theoretical production that does not need a visa from some common regime to establish its validity” (2004: 6). Importantly, this intellectual independence and refusal of the form and content of established traditions has involved a willingness to be unfixed, an embracing of fluidity, a dedication to becoming. Cultural Studies, in other words, has always remained delightfully undogmatic, open to new theoretical and methodological influxes, and ready to self-critically reconsider and, if need be, revise its own approaches, willing to adopt or adapt new ideas and concepts whose origins lay elsewhere. The result has at all times been a markedly plural, dynamic, and hybrid intellectual formation – “theoretical noise” (Hall 1996a: 263). Cultural Studies, Hall insisted, “is not one thing; it has never been one thing” (1990: 11).⁴

Considering all of this, an encounter between Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn may turn out not to be so counter-intuitive or difficult after all. Indeed, there are a number of further factors that facilitate and, perhaps, even call for such an encounter: One of these, related to the heterogeneity of the field just pointed out, is the fact that, from quite early on, different, even conflicting, theoretical trends coexisted and vied with each other within Cultural Studies. In an important essay from 1980, Hall identified what he considered to be the two most important ones: the ‘culturalist’ paradigm, largely derived from the work of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E.P. Thompson, on the one hand, and the ‘structuralist’ paradigm on the other. Hall went on to contrast the respective strengths and limitations of the two approaches, concluding that, by itself, neither one of them was sufficient for the study of culture and that what was needed was “to *think forwards*” (1986a: 48) from the best elements of both of them. In the work of many succeeding scholars, this is certainly what has happened. What is important in our context is that the culturalist influence within Cultural Studies, in its productive antagonism with post/structuralism, has fueled a more or less persistent skepticism towards social constructivism, especially in its more radical varieties. That is to say, even as Cultural Studies generally came to adopt many of the tenets of the constructivist paradigm, it still mostly kept its distance from the latter’s “idealist, neo-Kantian, distinctly postmodernist brand” (Malm 2020: 27). Not least, this is evident in the work of Hall himself,

4 While my reflections on ‘Cultural Studies’ can consequently not claim to adequately describe *everything* that has been happening within the field, I would claim that it nevertheless pertains to *a lot*, in particular to strands and manifestations that have often been considered as defining (cf., e.g., Marchart 2008; Turner 2003).

who, on numerous occasions, criticized what he saw as the exaggerated textualism or discursivism of many deconstructivist thinkers or the later Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.⁵ While aware that such categories could no longer be employed in a naïve, straightforward manner, many Cultural Studies scholars nevertheless refused to give up notions such as ‘experience’, ‘agency’, or ‘material reality’. Instead, along the lines of the fruitful tension between the two paradigms envisaged by Hall, these concepts were struggled with⁶, reworked, put ‘under erasure’ (Derrida 2016), or used ‘strategically’ (Spivak 2009).

A good illustration of this tendency is Angela McRobbie’s instructive 1997 essay “The Es and the Anti-Es: New Questions for Feminism and Cultural Studies.” The text skillfully negotiates the friction between the anti-essentialism (the ‘anti-Es’) of feminist critics such as Judith Butler or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on one side and the ‘three Es’ of the *empirical*, the *ethnographic*, and the *experiential* on the other. McRobbie explicitly makes the case for “a reconciliation of sorts” (1999: 75) by, on the one hand, “grounding” poststructuralist theorizing and urging it “to loo[k] outside theory and as[k] some practical questions about the world we live in” (86, 75), and, on the other, by recasting the ‘three Es’ in the light of constructivist arguments. The essay argues that Cultural Studies itself should “be deconstructed to show how poststructuralist work has occupied a position of authority” (88), and makes a powerful – albeit qualified – call for going ‘back to reality’ (83) by once again embracing the ‘three Es’, though now in a non-totalistic and non-essentialist way. McRobbie’s defense of a focus on “more materialist matters” and of a “more applied or practical feminist cultural studies” (76, 84f) is representative of a lot of work done within Cultural Studies. This line of work stresses the interventionist character of the discipline (cf. paradigmatically Hall 1996a), arguing that the purpose of theory, as Hall once put it, is merely that of “a detour” – though a necessary one (Hall 1996a: 270) – “on the way to something more important” (1997: 42) – working on the ‘real world’.

The overemphasis on textuality, representation, and discourse has thus never been as severe in Cultural Studies as in other fields. Instead, the semiotic and the discursive were frequently considered in their complex interrelations with the material. A case in point is the now famous model of the ‘circuit of culture’, developed in 1997 by Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay, and Keith Negus in

5 It is of course no contradiction that Hall also admired and was greatly influenced by both, Jacques Derrida and Ernesto Laclau. Interestingly, as he once said while discussing his relation with the thought of the latter, he tended to “prefer people’s less complete works to their later, mature and complete ones”, the texts, that is, in which “their thought has not yet hardened into a system” (in Grossberg 1986: 56) – a remark that not only itself seems to be made in the spirit of deconstruction or poststructuralism, but that is also revealing with regards to the nature of the oeuvre of Hall himself.

6 As Hall (1996a: 265f) once declared, theory should always involve, indeed, *mean*, struggle.

the context of a series of textbooks based on a course taught at the Open University, at which most of the authors were then working. They argue that whenever a cultural artifact is to be analyzed, there are five major processes, as well as their always specific articulation, that need to be taken into account: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (du Gay et al. 1997). Taken together, these processes constitute the aforementioned ‘circuit of culture’. Though questions of signification and meaning are characteristically central to the book in which the model is introduced, what is significant in our context is precisely the insistence that to focus on just one aspect of the circuit – whether it is the process of production, as in Marxist economism, or of representation or identity, as in varieties of the cultural turn – is never enough. Here, as elsewhere, it thus becomes clear that the neglect of the economic realm of which many contemporary materialist critics accuse post-cultural turn Marxism (cf., e.g., Bryant/Srnicek/Harman 2011: 4) was not so pronounced in Cultural Studies. In fact, to dedicate an entire book to the analysis of one particular object, as du Gay and his colleagues did with the Sony Walkman as the subject of their exemplary case study, might in some ways even be seen as congruent with the more recent ‘turn towards things’ in material culture studies, thing theory, and object-oriented ontology.

Beyond this, another factor encouraging and facilitating an encounter between Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn is the former’s preference for a type of analysis dedicated to the concrete rather than the abstract and to the complex, differentiated, and contextual rather than the general. I have already pointed out that Cultural Studies has always had a rather “strategic relation to theory” (Hall in Scott 1997: 152). Hall, for one, once said in an interview: “I don’t regard myself as a theorist in the sense that that is my work. I am interested always in going on theorizing about the world, about the concrete, but I am not interested in the production of theory as an object in its own right. [...] I think my object is to think the concreteness of the object in its many different relations.” (in Scott 1997: 152) This ‘radical contextualism’ which, as Lawrence Grossberg (2010: 20–43) has pointed out, is at the heart of Cultural Studies, distinctly chimes with certain strands of the more recent theoretical developments. Thus, for instance, Levi Bryant declares that “the first and most important principle of [his] onto-cartography lies in the dictum: ‘avoid abstractions!’,” and that it is hence “motivated by a plea for the *concrete*” (2014: 257, 282). To give just one other example, this call to attend to the concrete rather than dealing with reified abstractions is also evident in the brilliant anthropological work of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015). The attention to the concrete in such work manifests itself in a number of ways, each of them illuminating in the way it reconfigures analytical practice, but one of the most instructive cases is perhaps the mode in which capitalism is studied. Instead of treating it as a unified, homogeneous, and total system, these authors prefer “to tackle capitalism with a theory that stresses ephemeral assemblages and multidirectional histories” (Tsing 2015: 61). What is thus brought to

light is, for one thing, the actual complexity and heterogeneity of 'capitalism', really a sort of 'assemblage'⁷ or, as Tsing has it, a "translation machine" that connects diverse economies, "producing capital from all kinds of livelihoods, human and not human" (133). For another thing, by imbuing our understanding of the economy with what Tsing calls 'arts of noticing', we sharpen our awareness for the 'patches of livelihood', that is, the enormously varied concrete rhythms, dynamics, and ways of life that are part of the global economy but are usually hidden from sight by the dominant capitalist imaginary and the abstractions of political economy (cf. 131–35). In both regards, "a world of difference" (134) emerges.

I would argue that such new approaches are eminently compatible with Cultural Studies, which likewise has typically rejected abstract generalizations about capitalism and instead concentrated on the analysis of specific 'conjunctures', which are similarly conceived in terms of an always just temporary "articulation of multiple, overlapping, competing, reinforcing, etc., lines of force and transformation, destabilization and (re-)stabilization, with differing temporalities and spatialities" (Grossberg 2010: 41). Thus, underlying the thought of someone like Hall, we can detect an analogous conviction that capitalism can be considered "one thing" only "at the simplest level" (Hall in Hall/Massey 2010: 67). In contrast, always aiming at historical specificity, Hall, for instance, argues with regards to neoliberalism that it "has many variants. It is not a single system. And by no means all capitalisms are neoliberal. [...] It combines with other models, modifying them. It borrows, evolves and diversifies. It is constantly 'in process'." (2011: 708) In the same way, in view of the "triumph of finance capital over industrial capital", Hall wonders: "can we still speak of Capital as a unified entity?" (in Hall/Massey 2010: 66, 63) Similarly, particularly the culturalist strand within Cultural Studies has always encouraged attention to the diversity and lived concreteness of what Tsing calls 'livelihood patches', to the associated practices, affects, the "stories about life and livelihood" (Tsing 2015: 132), and their relation to the kinds of stories connected with what Michel de Certeau would refer to as the abstract "space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions" (1988: 93). In fact, Tsing's concern with 'lifeways' (2015: 23) resonates in stimulating ways with Raymond Williams' interest in 'ways of life' – an interest that Tsing and others extend to include non-human and non-living 'ways of being'.

Finally, I would argue that the 'special relationship' Cultural Studies has generally had with Marxism constitutes another factor enabling a rapprochement with certain variants of speculative realism and new materialism. On the one hand, Marxism has always been a very important theoretico-political force within Cultural Studies, whose influence can hardly be exaggerated. On the other hand, as Hall has pointed out, there was never a straightforward, "perfect theoretical fit" (1996a: 265) between the two. On the contrary, "the encounter between British cultural studies

7 On this point, cf. ch. 6.

and marxism has first to be understood as the engagement with a problem” (Hall 1996a: 265), not a solution. That is to say, Cultural Studies, like Hall himself, “came into marxism backwards” (Hall 1996a: 264). In fact, it could be said that it was precisely through a *critique* of particular elements of Marxist theory – its economic determinism, the model of base and superstructure, its understanding of ideology, etc. – that Cultural Studies first began to constitute itself as a distinct project. As Hall has put it, Cultural Studies has always been “working within shouting distance of marxism, working on marxism, working against marxism, working with it, working to try to develop marxism” (1996a: 265). Thus, in a series of often long and dense theoretical meditations, Hall himself continued to ‘wrestle’ with Marxism⁸, rethinking and reworking a number of its theoretical formulations. The result was what he famously termed a ‘Marxism without guarantees’ (1996c), a Marxism, in other words, which decidedly embraced *contingency* (cf. Cord 2018) – regarding both, content and form, that is, in terms of its assumptions and analyses concerning reality as well as its own theoretical models. This is a distinctly open, non-dogmatic mode of theorizing, which includes a willingness to critically examine, adapt, translate, and revise its own concepts and categories.

This, I think, makes it a suitable candidate for the kind of “revised”, “open Marxism” (Coole/Frost 2010: 30, 29) some contemporary materialist critics call for. As several commentators have pointed out, the Anthropocene should perhaps more appropriately be termed ‘Capitalocene’ (cf., e.g., Bonneuil/Fressoz 2017: 222–52; Haraway 2016: 47–51, 184fn50; Moore 2015, 2016).⁹ For it was precisely not some abstract, universal ‘man’ that brought about the drastic changes in geology, climate, etc. we are now observing, but ‘Western’ capitalism. As this world-system continues to lay waste to the planet and systematically produce ever starker inequalities, close and critical analyses of global capitalism are today more urgently needed than ever. For this task, Marxism remains indispensable. Yet, this has to be a Marxism that does not rigidly repeat received verities and simply ‘apply’ established concepts. Above all, this must not be a “fundamentalist Marxism, with all its trappings of Modernity, Progress, and History” (Haraway 2016: 50). Instead, it needs to be adaptable, ready to modify itself in view of new theoretical as well as historical developments. This, as Donna Haraway, drawing on the work of James Clifford, has argued, involves telling ‘big-enough stories’, stories, that is, which are neither ‘too big’ nor ‘too small’. What we need, says Haraway, are “stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections” (2016: 101). It seems to me that one could hardly find a better fit for all of this than the programmatically “open’ marxism” (Hall 1986b: 6) of a Cultural Studies

8 Hall 1977, 1985, 1996c, and 2003 are only some of the most incisive examples. Key texts are now collected in Hall 2021.

9 For a helpful critical analysis of the discourse of the Anthropocene, cf. Crist 2016.

scholar like Hall: shifting and flexible, rejecting the false ‘guarantees’ of any simple determinism and teleology, and – as a distinct form of ‘low theory’ (cf. Halberstam 2011: 15–18) – constantly operating at “different levels of abstraction” (Hall 1986b: 7), aiming at analyses that would always be neither too big nor too small, but ‘big enough’.¹⁰ It is therefore not surprising that, in a brief endnote to her 2016 book on the Anthropocene, Haraway has explicitly named Hall, along with Marx and Gramsci, as the “most likely Western Marxist allies [...] for nurturing the Chthulucene [her counter-concept] in the belly of the Capitalocene” (2016: 185fn56).

One concrete example of how Cultural Studies and the ‘critical’ varieties of new materialism (cf. Coole/Frost 2010: 24–36) could productively be brought into dialogue concerns methodology. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost have suggested that what is required in order to be able to adequately address the complex realities of 21st-century global capitalism is a “multimodal methodology” (2010: 32). In particular, they argue, such a methodology needs to make possible an analysis of the manifold and intricate ways in which the micro-level of the everyday and the macro-level of structures are today interlinked in the continuous reproduction of the social order. I believe that Cultural Studies can safely be said to be one of the richest theoretical sources when it comes to developing multimodal methods of analysis. Among other things, the reasons for this lie in the already mentioned coexistence of a culturalist and a structuralist paradigm within the discipline as well as in the import and combination of diverse theoretical agendas, such as a post-Foucauldian attention to ‘micro-politics’ and a Marxist focus on political economy and the state. Even though Cultural Studies has – in part rightly – been criticized for ‘cultural populism’ (McGuigan 1992), that is, for exaggerating the micro-political potential for resistance, and for overemphasizing the micro- at the expense of the macro-level, even in those areas of research in which this has been most pronounced, especially the study of subcultures and the media, other examples are easily found which more or less consistently draw both levels together.¹¹ In fact, within Cultural Studies, there is a rich tradition of such combined analysis of “the capitalist economy, the juridico-political domain, and the material quotidian” (Coole/Frost 2010: 34), so much so that it can even convincingly be argued that the joint exploration of the various levels of the social formation and of their shifting interrelations constitutes the signature mode of Cultural Studies analysis (cf. Kramer 2018). This can to some extent be traced back

10 Importantly, in the essay quoted from here, virtually all of Hall’s remarks in his interpretation of the thought of Antonio Gramsci also characterize his own work. In fact, the first part of the essay reads almost like a ‘program’, laying out the basic principles for a ‘low, open Marxism’ (cf. 1986b: 5–8).

11 Here, I am thinking for instance of the long, programmatic introduction to *Resistance through Rituals* (Clarke et al. 1993) or Hall’s rich work on the media (e.g., 1981, 1999), for both of which the study of their respective object – subcultures and the mass-media – is part of a larger study of the conjuncture.

to the very ‘beginnings’ of Cultural Studies in the 1950s and early 60s, but an early high point is certainly the 1967/68 *May Day Manifesto*. In the brief methodological second chapter of this text, the authors explicitly reject ‘monomodal’ forms of study and instead opt for an inquiry that starts with “the social realities, in day-to-day living” and then “move[s] out from that, in a widening analysis and description, until we can see the outlines of [...] a world-system” (Williams 2018: 6). The aforesaid circuit of culture could be mentioned here as another model for multimodal methodology, yet, the *locus classicus* for this type of analysis is surely the brilliant, collectively authored *Policing the Crisis* from 1978, which programmatically refuses “to abstract individual effects from the contradictory structures which produce them” (Hall et al. 1978: x), and whose extremely complex investigation moves from a minor social incident, a ‘mugging’, to the social formation as a whole, the crisis of hegemony and the gradual emergence of a ‘law-and-order society’ in Britain in the 1970s. As Grossberg, whose study *Caught in the Crossfire* (2016) is yet another good example, has pointed out, in works such as these, “small moments” are always treated as “point[s] of crystallization” that need to be connected “to the contradictions at work in the various domains of the social formation [...] and the relations among them” (2010: 26).

There are, thus, a number of points of contact which could be used as starting points for bringing Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn into encounter. While skepticism and critique are doubtlessly always important, I believe that Cultural Studies should be open to these novel developments – not because they are fashionable, but because both theoretically and politically, they possess the potential to enrich the discipline. As Hall asserted, “historical conjunctures insist on theories: they are real moments in the evolution of theory” (1996a: 270). Consequently, in the Anthropocene, as the “Titanic of modernity hits the iceberg of hyperobjects” (Morton 2013: 19) such as global warming, our models for theory and politics (should) change.¹² Which is of course not to say that all older models are now obsolete – far from it! But there are new issues today that need to be addressed – partly because they really are new, partly because they previously could not properly be thought within older theoretical horizons and languages – new frameworks for understanding and interpreting phenomena, new points of application, strategies, and, indeed, forms for political struggle.

Cultural Studies has always been a discipline dedicated to critical self-examination. In the brief genealogy of the field developed in his celebrated essay “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies”, Hall explains that “[a]gain and again, the so-called unfolding of cultural studies was interrupted by a break, by real ruptures, by exterior forces; the interruption, as it were, of new ideas, which decentred what looked like the accumulating practice of the work” (1996a: 268). Like the theoretical

12 McKenzie Wark (2016: 169) and Andreas Malm (2020: 16) have even claimed that climate change constitutes something like the ‘litmus test’ for theory in the Anthropocene.

'moments' discussed by Hall – feminism, the 'question of race', the linguistic turn – and like others that followed later, I believe that the nonhuman turn has the capacity to become another such interruption, and to reorganize the field in some significant ways. Not least, this will involve a critical engagement with the 'question of anthropocentrism', that is, the question of how far, in spite of its critique of the self-enclosed Cartesian subject, the discipline has nevertheless tended to reaffirm humanity's central place in the world. Cultural Studies, in other words, will further be 'posthumanized', becoming a driving force of the emerging 'posthumanities' (cf. Badmington 2006).¹³ It has to be stressed that the posthumanism I have in mind here is not of the kind which dreams of the 'enhancement' or 'transcendence' of the human and in this way effectively perpetuates the notion of the autonomous liberal subject and the anthropocentrism of the humanist tradition (cf. Hayles 1999). The 'post' of the posthumanism I am thinking of could not possibly mean a simple break or straightforward succession, a self-positioning 'after' humanism or the human. Rather, like the 'post' in postmodernism discussed by Jean-François Lyotard (1993), the meaning of the prefix would above all signify a critical 'working through'. This, in other words, would be a 'critical posthumanism'¹⁴, which "inhabits humanism deconstructively" (Herbrechter 2013: 7) and subscribes, not to an *anti-human* ontology, but to one "where humans are no longer monarchs of being but are instead *among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings" (Bryant 2011: 40). Whereas the 'human' "functions to domesticate and hierarchize difference within the human (whether according to race, class, gender) and to absolutize difference between the human and the nonhuman," the 'posthuman' thus understood "participates in re-distributions of difference and identity" (Halberstam/Livingston 1995: 10). While such redistribution has long been on the agenda of Cultural Studies with regards to the human, an engagement with the relations with the nonhuman has largely been missing.

13 Clearly, this encounter with the nonhuman turn has the potential to remake Cultural Studies in fundamental ways. In no way can it be a question of merely *importing* certain concepts and ideas into its established theoretical horizon. Rather, to be-in-encounter means being entangled, knotted, and co-shaped in inter- and intra-actions. Thus, many of the central notions and assumptions of the field will need to be reworked (yet again), not least the key concept of culture itself, which has largely remained anthropocentric until today (cf. Badmington 2006) and will now have to be rethought, among other things, with regards to the assemblage of the human and the nonhuman and the continuum of the material and the immaterial. Concerning the latter aspect, cf. especially the important debates within media theory regarding recent information and communication technologies, social media, digitalization, etc., but also 'medianatures', 'media ecologies' and 'archaeologies', or 'digital materialism'. For some reflections in this direction, cf. ch. 2.

14 On 'critical posthumanism', cf. especially Braidotti 2013, 2019; Herbrechter 2013; and Nayar 2014.

In engaging and ‘wrestling’ (Hall 1996a: 270) with the nonhuman turn, we should be fair to these new approaches and take them as what they are: forays into largely un- or underexplored theoretical territory, first investigations and probings, not finished solutions. In fact, the challenge speculative realist or new materialist critics are facing today is in some ways not unlike the one thinkers like Jacques Derrida were confronted with at an earlier moment in the history of ideas, namely the necessity of having to think against and beyond many of the received categories and ‘truths’ not just of common sense, but also of theory, and, since lots of these ‘truths’ are inscribed into our very linguistic codes, of having to struggle with language itself.¹⁵ These “difficulties of employing inherited epistemological and ontological terms and vocabularies in order to describe realities whose complex, multiply stranded constitution, [sic] is simply not rendered sensible or understandable by them” (Joyce/Bennett 2010: 11) are evident everywhere today. Hence, as in the case of Derrida, the frequent coining of neologisms in contemporary theory, the resignification of existing terms, the rather heavy use of metaphor. Hence also the willingness of some authors to appear naïve or foolish, and to engage with and take seriously what seems to be silly (cf., e.g., Bennett 2010: xiii; Morton 2017: 159f). After all, one of the things we have learned from Foucault is certainly that the ‘foolish’ or ‘silly’ is only that which is *made or designated as* foolish or silly by dominant discourses, by the “discursive ‘policy’” (Fr. *‘police’ discursive*) (Foucault 1972: 224) anxious to enforce its constructions of reality.

To some extent, the ‘political’ could well function as a ‘relay’ for the theoretical encounter between Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn. While some critics associated with the latter have accused continental philosophy, and Marxism in particular, of having become largely depoliticized in the wake of the cultural turn (Bryant/Srnicke/Harman 2011: 4), and while Cultural Studies too may perhaps to some extent be charged with having fallen into a kind of “dogmatic slumber” (Grossberg 2010: 4), in which it has somewhat lost its commitment to social change, Cultural Studies has nevertheless never really ceased defining itself in terms of what Hall called its “worldly” vocation, seeing itself as a “political project”, which “aims to make a difference in the world” (1996a: 272, 271, 264). On the other side, scholars have similarly been worried about whether the intellectual developments of the nonhuman turn do not “evacuate the ground for all intentional action, thereby proposing a sort of political quietism” (Bryant/Srnicke/Harman 2011: 16). As Richard Grusin has pointed out, particularly practitioners of politically emancipatory disciplines, often motivated in

15 As, for instance, Jane Bennett writes towards the end of her book on ‘vital materiality’: “In composing and recomposing the sentences of this book – especially in trying to choose the appropriate verbs, I have come to see how radical a project it is to think vital materiality. It seems *necessary and impossible* to rewrite the default grammar of agency, a grammar that assigns activity to people and passivity to things.” (2010: 119, emphasis added)

part by social constructivism, tend to believe that any appeal to reality or nature, especially if the latter is seen as possessing agential force, “could only operate in service of a defense of the status quo” (2015: xviii). “But”, he continues,

this does not have to be the case. A concern with the nonhuman can and must be brought to bear on any projects for creating a more just society. If following Latour and others we take society as a complex assemblage of human and nonhuman actors[,] [...] then the question of political change becomes a question of changing our relations not only to other humans but to nonhumans as well. To extend our academic and critical concern to include nonhuman animals and the nonhuman environment [...] should be a politically liberatory project in very much the same way that earlier, similar turns toward a concern for gender, race, ethnicity, or class were politically liberatory for groups of humans. (2015: xviii)¹⁶

I think that Cultural Studies scholars, who may well intuitively tend to consider the nonhuman turn as regressive or reactionary, would do well to heed these words and look closely: For much of the intellectual work connected with the nonhuman turn, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, is in fact (at least to some extent) political in nature and committed to emancipatory change.¹⁷ Even a field such as object-oriented ontology (OOO), which may not at first seem amenable to liberatory projects, or even to politics generally, has been developed in just such a way. Thus, OOO theorists such as Timothy Morton or Levi Bryant have explicitly understood their thinking in political terms. As Morton has pointed out: “Ontology [...] is a vital and contested political terrain.” (2013: 20) More than that, whereas an OOO philosopher like Graham Harman does indeed subscribe to a politics that is very docile and unsympathetic to radical change (cf., e.g., 2014, 2018: 134–46, esp. 146), Morton (2017) and Bryant (2014) have more recently produced works in which they explicitly attempt to make OOO fruitful for emancipatory and decidedly left politics.¹⁸

For Multiple Vision: Theory as Muddle

Even though an important thinker like Bruno Latour has gone beyond so many of the dichotomies that have long characterized the philosophical tradition in the ‘West’, he himself and his followers as well as his (Marxist, constructivist, etc.) critics still doggedly cling to the dualism of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ – whereas I am arguing that it would

16 In this context, cf. also the related, powerful argument made by Cary Wolfe (2003: 7f).

17 Though I will also argue in the following chapters that a still greater politicization is precisely one of the effects of an encounter with Cultural Studies.

18 In this context, cf. also the emergence of an object-oriented feminism (Behar 2016).

in fact be very fruitful, to use Leslie Fiedler's words, to 'cross the border' and somewhat 'close the gap', that is, to look for the points where compatibility exists and to make these productive for theoretical work. In other words, here too, speaking in the idiom of actor-network theory (ANT) itself, we should spend our energies on the work of 'translation' rather than 'purification' and on the creation of new, potentially stronger 'networks'. For instance, as others have already pointed out, regarding the oeuvre of Latour himself, there actually seem to be a whole number of such points at which the task of constructing a plane of encounter may be begun.¹⁹ This is a task of 'articulation'. As has often been the case with such endeavors in the past, this will certainly involve reinterpretation, 'translation', and 'appropriation'. It will also mean, not only tolerating, but working with and through *tension* – epistemological, ontological, conceptual, methodological, and more. Yet, as Hall has pointed out, living and working with tension has always characterized Cultural Studies (1996a: 268, *passim*). Tensions can be (made) productive. Among other things, they encourage a self-reflexive skepticism regarding one's own certainties by obliging us to see from two (or more) perspectives at once. As Haraway has emphasized: "Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision" (2010: 2196).

Such 'double vision' will, for instance, be required when it comes to the vexed question of the status and value of *critique*²⁰. As is well known, many authors associated with ANT, new materialism, or speculative realism have been rather dismissive

19 These are too numerous to be discussed here in detail, and I refer the reader to Matthias Wieser's study on ANT, which, in one short chapter, helpfully lays out some of them (2012: 241–54). In this context, cf. also the work of Tony Bennett (e.g., 2007), who has already significantly furthered the effort of bringing ANT and Cultural Studies into dialogue. A rapprochement is perhaps particularly easy with regards to the parallels between, on the one hand, the diverse theoretical work surrounding the Gramscian notion of 'hegemony' in Cultural Studies and, on the other, Latour's conceptualization of the process of 'gathering' or 'composing' the 'collective', whose incarnations are always just temporary, a result of the combined working of the 'power to take into account' and the 'power to arrange in rank order', and hence always open to change as new entities or 'propositions' clamor to be heard and to be admitted (2004a, esp. 108ff). Here, as elsewhere in Latour's work, collective or political identities are never given, but always the contingent outcome of processes of 'association' and 'articulation'. The latter term, which is so central to Cultural Studies (cf., e.g., Grossberg 1986, esp. 53ff; Slack 1996), is actually used by Latour in *Pandora's Hope* (1999, esp. 142ff), though typically in a way that challenges anthropocentrism by incorporating non-human actants (cf. Bennett 2007: 613). This also applies to other terms, such as 'translation' or 'hybridity', which are likewise crucial both to Latour and Cultural Studies (esp. in the work on 'race', ethnicity, and cultural identity by Hall, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, and others). Bringing the discourse-analytical thought of theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe on the one hand and the realist and materialist work of someone like Latour on the other into an 'encounter' may result, among other things, in the 'materialization' of the former and a stronger politicization of the latter.

20 *The Value of Critique* is the title of a recent collection of essays dedicated to this question (Graw/Menke 2019).

of what has variously been termed 'critique', 'demystification', 'paranoid reading', or the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.²¹ If not quite another 'turn', there is nevertheless a distinct 'postcritical', 'reparative', or 'reconstructive' (as opposed to deconstructive)²² trend today.²³ Needless to say, these attacks on critique have in their turn elicited critical responses – 'a critique of the critique of critique' (Toscano 2011).²⁴ Yet, as several scholars have argued, it does not have to be a question of either/or. Instead, rather than to *choose* the task should be to *combine* both approaches.²⁵ In fact, it's not a question of *being*, but of *doing*. Cultural Studies does not have to *be* critical or postcritical; depending on the situation, it can *perform* both, critical *and* postcritical labor.²⁶ Pragmatism suits Cultural Studies better than dogmatism. Thus, the guiding questions should always be: How can the issue at hand best be tackled? Which approach, or combination of approaches, is most promising to illuminate the subject under consideration? In this sense, to return to the metaphor I invoked earlier, the novel concepts and methodologies should perhaps best be treated like so many new hammers, screwdrivers, and pincers, which can be added to the Cultural Studies 'toolbox'.²⁷ Following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2006) and Angela McRobbie

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- 21 For some of the most influential moments of this 'postcritical' discourse, cf. Bennett 2010: xivf; Felski 2015; Latour 2004b, 2010; Sedgwick 2003: 123–51.
 - 22 As an aside, let me point out that in 1986, Stuart Hall similarly opposed what he saw as the dominant deconstructive approach to Marxism with an essay devoted, as he said, to the "work of 'reconstruction'" (1996c: 30).
 - 23 Emblematically, we can mention the striking proliferation of references to *caring* in much current writing (cf. programmatically in Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). In view of this, it seems safe to say that care has recently, not replaced, but been added to critique as one of the key functions of political theory and practice. In this context, cf. Rosi Braidotti's assertion that what she terms the Critical PostHumanities "combine understanding and knowledge with training and pastoral care, thus fulfilling both a critical and a healing function" (2019: 104). On the theoretical 'modes' of 'critique' and 'repair' (as well as 'escalation'), cf. the chapters of part II.
 - 24 Representatively, cf. the powerful criticism levelled at Latour by Benjamin Noys (2010: 80–105, 2014, 2016, 2019).
 - 25 In this context, cf. David Scott's fascinating book on Stuart Hall, which engages Hall's work through a focus on his 'voice' as disclosing the ethos of his unique 'intellectual style'. In particular, cf. Scott's observation that as both, 'critical self' and 'listening self', Hall to some extent combined a critical sensibility with a postcritical one (2017: 4f).
 - 26 As with the 'postmodern' or 'posthuman', the prefix in 'postcritical' similarly does not have to signify a radical break, but could be taken to signal a continuation of sorts, under different, generally more self-reflexive, conditions.
 - 27 Thus, while it may be true that, as Latour proclaims in his "Compositionist Manifesto", "*what performs a critique cannot also compose*", there is no reason why our theoretical bag of tools should not nevertheless comprise both, instruments like hammers that "break down walls, destroy idols, ridicule prejudices" as well as those that can be used to "repair, take care, assemble, reassemble, stitch together" (2010: 475). Cf. Cord 2026.

(1999), we should, in other words, not be afraid to use concepts ‘strategically’, in response to the requirements of the respective context. While this may involve theoretical friction, it will, more importantly, also yield new insight.

Another source of tension will undoubtedly be the question whether we need a notion of the social ‘totality’. Latour’s rejection of this and his famous injunction to ‘follow the actors themselves’ instead (2005: 179) has, unsurprisingly, earned him the hostility of many, especially Marxist, critics, who have felt that a conception of the totality is indispensable for their varied critical and emancipatory projects. Yet, the categorical pronouncements of Latour and others notwithstanding, it should not be taken for granted that some sense of the totality is necessarily incompatible with elements of ANT.²⁸ Perhaps, both rather need to be somewhat reworked. As a matter of fact, received understandings of totality had already come under attack earlier, by poststructuralism and particularly Derridean deconstruction (cf. esp. Derrida 2001), which had already led to a number of revisions – not least within Cultural Studies itself. Its key notion of the ‘conjuncture’ is certainly central here. I think that these revisions could today be drawn upon and developed further in light of the new criticisms articulated by ANT and elsewhere. It seems appropriate to adopt words Hall once wrote concerning the concept of ‘identity’ and to say that totality is today “an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all” (1996b: 2). I believe that for an intellectual and political enterprise such as Cultural Studies, what Fredric Jameson (1991, esp. 51–54) termed ‘cognitive mapping’ is still crucial, as it is almost “a precondition for identifying any ‘levers,’ nerve-centres or weak links in the political anatomy of contemporary domination” (Toscano/Kinkle 2015: 8). We are in the Anthropocene, in the age of global warming, of global inequality – it would surely be paradoxical to relinquish the thinking of the totality now, of all times. Even an OOO philosopher like Timothy Morton still asserts a need for cognitive mapping (2013: 133) – though for him, what has to be mapped are what he calls ‘hyperobjects’. Yet, maybe this could already be one inspiration for the reconceptualization of the totality that is required today. Among other things, what we need is a thoroughly materialized totality, one that includes the nonhuman in its various manifestations, and that is no longer in any way ‘organic’ or ‘centered’ (Edwards 2010: 286f), a “de-totalized totality” (Coole/Frost 2010: 29; cf. also Wark 2016: 219), so to speak.

Thus, against Latour (1993b: 173), unlike God, capitalism does exist. Yet, as was already indicated earlier, it can no longer be understood along traditional lines. Instead, I would suggest that we conceive of it as an (‘overcoding’ or ‘meta-’) *assemblage*²⁹ – an approach that will allow us to combine political economy with ANT and

28 On this topic, cf. ch. 6.

29 In my view, the concept of the assemblage is central for the task of articulating Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn. I pursue this in more detail in ch. 2.

its focus on performativity³⁰, that is, to link the micro-sociological study of markets, artifacts, and practices – what Latour calls “doing the footwork” (2005: 178) – with that of the macro-dynamics of contemporary capitalism more generally. Benjamin Braun, for one, has advocated just such an approach, pointing out that “a more horizontal analytical framework – or flatter ontology –” involves a significantly extended conception of the political since “the ‘micro-institutions of capitalism’ feature not only as epiphenomena, but as *sites of politics*” (2016: 258). Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle seem to have something similar in mind when, in their engagement with Latour as part of their defense of social theory’s attempts to ‘see it whole’, they explain that “the theoretical desire for totality is not incompatible with a painstaking attention to traces, objects and devices” and that hence, “great dialectical writing would constitute precisely the kind of panorama that would [...] present both the totality and its constituent devices, as well as the attendant gaps and dislocations” (2015: 48, 55). Conceiving of capitalism as an assemblage, without teleology, determinism, reductionism, and the assumption of uniformity or homogeneity, means focusing on ‘partial connections’ (Strathern 2004) and proceeding from the Harawayian maxim “Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something” (2016: 31). It means thinking the totality in terms of complex, dynamic relations and various interlinked levels, layers, practices, and elements, including all sorts of ‘actants’ (human as well as nonhuman), and explicitly as a problem of representation or figuration. I believe that such an approach is eminently compatible with the work of Latour, especially if we opt for a ‘weak’ reading of it (cf. Castree 2002) which ignores his more flippant remarks (such as the one just alluded to) and regards his thought not in terms of a discarding, but rather of a fundamental *reworking* of the concept of capitalism (in fact, Latour never really ceases working with it).³¹ An extended elaboration of the notion of the capitalist totality as an assemblage will have to wait until chapter 6, but let me just indicate that such an endeavor can find important theoretical resources and support in ANT’s understanding of capitalism in terms of an organizing of markets and of long-distance control achieved through interlocking extended networks (Latour 1993a: 173; Latour/Callon 1997); in the work of Marxist geographer David Harvey, who explicitly views capitalism as an assemblage (of what he terms ‘activity spheres’) (2011: 119–39), as well as that of Noel Castree (2002), Erik Swynedouw (2006a, 2006b) and others who, often in dialogue with Harvey’s thought, have developed a radical political ecology programmatically synthesizing Marxism with ANT; in Jason Moore’s (2015) redefinition of capitalism as a ‘world-ecology’; or

30 Cf. especially the influential work on the economy by Michel Callon.

31 In this context, we could also note that Latour’s later work (2017, 2018, 2019; Latour/Schultz 2022) on the Anthropocene or what he calls the ‘new climatic regime’ is much more openly political and seems to represent something of a moderation of his earlier, harsher statements regarding the tradition of critique, the term ‘capitalism’, etc.

in the writings of new materialist critics such as William Connolly (2013) or Anna Tsing (2015), who, each in their own way, likewise approach late capitalism as an assemblage or ecology.³²

Finally, to give just one more important example, ‘double’ or ‘multiple vision’ will also be necessary when it comes to the tension between social constructivism and material realism. Yet, as some commentators have already pointed out, these do in fact not inevitably have to be irreconcilable opposites. Instead, through the work of translation and articulation, Cultural Studies can come to profit from the best of both. What, I think, needs to be realized is that “discursive and material forms are inextricable yet irreducible”. Thus, “society is simultaneously materially real and socially constructed: our material lives are always culturally mediated, but they are not only cultural.” (Coole/Frost 2010: 27) “It is,” as Coole and Frost explain, “entirely possible, then, to accept social constructionist arguments while also insisting that the material realm is irreducible to culture or discourse and that cultural artifacts are not arbitrary vis-à-vis nature.” (2010: 27) I would therefore want to join Levi Bryant, who declares: “What we need is a post-humanist framework that is able to synthesize the findings of the linguistic turn, Marxist thought, Foucaultian thought, media theorists such as McLuhan, Kittler, and Ong, as well as the post-humanist thought of the ecologists, the new materialists, the actor-network theorists, and the work of thinkers such as Diamond and Braudel.” (2014: 286) In this context, Bryant’s *Onto-Cartography*, among others, is particularly helpful, as it not only calls for such a new, hybrid framework, but also already takes some significant first steps in the direction of its development. I am convinced that only within such a framework will we be able to adequately respond to the pressing political demands of our time.

Now, if, in view of my suggestions regarding the joint practice of critique and postcritique, the conceptualization of a ‘de-totalized totality’, and the combination of constructivist with realist and materialist approaches, some readers object that this sounds an awful lot like having your cake and eating it too, then I can only respond: So be it! Low theory is willing and able to tolerate and work with incongruities. It even tries to make them productive. Its orientation is, as I said, pragmatic. It has no truck with old-style *grands récits*, with the production of totalizing, consistent systems of knowledge that are free of contradiction – not only because these are often ‘impractical’, useless for tackling concrete phenomena, but also because, epistemologically and ontologically, they are too far removed from, to

32 In this context, another helpful tool to think with may be the proposed distinction between the ‘globe’ (stable, total, unified, centered, and perceived from without) on the one hand and the ‘sphere’ or the ‘planetary’ (marked by complex, heterogeneous, and dynamic networks of interdependency and interaction, and perceived from within) on the other, as two alternative topologies of environmental awareness (Ingold 2000; cf. Horn/Berghaller 2020: 151f).

use Haraway's (2016) words, the messy 'tentacularity' of 'Terrapolis'. Cultural Studies, by contrast, has always been committed to this messiness (cf. Cord 2018). What counts, therefore, is not perfect theoretical purity and consistency – inappropriate for studying a world everywhere characterized by hybridity – but *practicality*. In other words, the criterion by which a concept, method, or theory is judged is, to steal Graham Harman's (2002) term, its 'tool-being', that is, the question in how far it can be made useful for 'working on' a given issue. This is theory not "as a policing faculty flying high as a drone over all the others," but as "interstitial, its labor communicative rather than controlling. [...] It refracts affects, perceptions, and concepts from one domain of labor to another using whatever apparatus is to hand."³³ (Wark 2016: 218) Such is the theory we need today; not the clear and total vision from the clean air high above – theory as 'seeing like a state' (Scott 2020) – but "theory in the mud, as muddle" (Haraway 2016: 31). Here, in the dirt, the mud, the compost, the humus, beyond speciesism, can we compose a Cultural Studies for the Anthropocene.

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33 Alongside Jack Halberstam's methodological reflections on 'low theory' cited earlier (2011: 15–18), McKenzie Wark's comments on some necessary 'reversals of perspective' regarding Marxism in the present (2016: 213–25) are very helpful in this context of thinking about theory for the Anthropocene as well.

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2. (Re-)Assembling Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies and Messiness

As Lawrence Grossberg has pointed out, Cultural Studies' commitment to radical contextuality also means that the discipline itself has to be willing to remake itself in the face of a different conjuncture. Cultural Studies, Grossberg writes, "takes its shape in response to its context – [...] cultural studies is a response in part to 'experienced' changes, to changing political challenges and demands, as well as to emerging theoretical resources and debates" (2010: 48). Instead of always asking the same questions and working with a set of quasi-universal theories and methods, then, Cultural Studies reconstitutes itself in response to the 'problem-space' of a given historical conjuncture. I am arguing here that the Anthropocene is such a new problem-space, characterized precisely by fundamental changes, new challenges and demands, as well as novel theoretical approaches, and that consequently, Cultural Studies should be open to "transformation through encounter" (Tsing 2015: 28) with the elements of the contemporary conjuncture.

Beyond its origins in stratigraphy, as a proposed term to denote a new geological epoch in Earth history, the 'Anthropocene' is today widely used to refer to the more general fact that "[t]he human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system" (Steffen et al. 2011: 842).¹ The term thus denotes a radical caesura, a human-induced break with the stable ecological conditions of the Holocene, with the Earth now operating in a "no-analogue state" (Moore et al. 2001), manifest in a plethora of phenomena such as global climate change, rapid biodiversity loss, the disruption of fundamental material cycles, acidifying oceans, or the accumulation of toxic and non-biodegradable substances in the air, the soil, and the

1 Both as a term and as an epoch, the meaning of the 'Anthropocene' is contested, there being numerous competing definitions and arguments regarding its causes, origins, and starting points. For a good overview, explicitly from the point of view of the 'humanities', cf. Horn/Bergthaller 2020. Particularly helpful is the authors' suggestion to approach the Anthropocene not in terms of a clearly defined concept or fixed narrative, but rather as a focal point of debates, a problem, an open question, and a research program (2020: 31).

waters. As such, the ramifications of the Anthropocene extend far beyond geology and Earth system science and, indeed, the natural sciences generally. Thus, for instance, Erle C. Ellis has argued that “[t]he significance of the Anthropocene resides in its role as a new lens through which age-old narratives and philosophical questions are being revisited and rewritten” (2018: 4). “What’s at stake”, he writes, “is a new account of our place in nature, our relationship with the rest of the planet”, one that has “the potential to radically revise the way we think of what it means to be human” (144, 4). Similarly, for Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, the Anthropocene is not only a new epoch or, better, a (boundary) event, but amounts to “a new human condition” (2017: 24). For the two historians as for numerous other commentators, this condition is above all characterized by the overcoming of the ‘Great Divide’ (Latour 1993b) between nature and society, and hence the shattering of all the disjunctions connected with it – between human time and Earth time, between human agency and nonhuman agency, etc. As an extension of its more narrow meaning, the term Anthropocene thus also functions as a kind of cipher, signaling the complex entanglement of the human and the (living and non-living – a distinction that is also increasingly blurry) nonhuman.² On the one hand, this state of affairs is indeed something new, insofar as the intermeshing of social and natural orders has today reached an unprecedented degree and, in the global ecological crisis, is now plain for all to see (even though some continue denying it). Yet, on the other hand, insofar as “sympoiesis is the name of the game” (Haraway 2016: 33) and, instead of ‘interactions’ between ontologically independent entities, we are actually always faced with ‘intra-actions’ (Barad 2007) in or through which phenomena are materialized in the first place, ‘we’ have in fact at all times existed as part of a “socio-bio-geosphere” (Bonneuil/Fressoz 2017: 35).

Now that, like progress or the sovereign human subject, so many of the cherished grand narratives and categories of so-called ‘Western’ thought have been exploded, we find ourselves in a world that is (or that we now recognize as) deeply ‘messy’ (Law 2004), characterized in all kinds of regards by a fundamental *impurity* (Shotwell 2016).³ One of the main challenges for both theory and politics in the An-

2 However, while most commentators agree that the Anthropocene requires a rethinking of many of the central categories in which the relationship between humanity and environment has previously been thought, the nature and the extent of this reconceptualization are far from undisputed, with authors such as Kate Soper (1995, 1999), Alf Hornborg (2019) or Andreas Malm (2020) rather fiercely attacking posthumanist theorizing – “[l]ess of Latour, more of Lenin” (2020: 118), as, for instance, Malm puts it. Though there is no room to engage with these debates here, I would generally want to defend the usefulness of such theories against their critics.

3 Both terms are here used to mark a break with the ‘modern Constitution’ (Latour 1993b) and its ordering and ‘purifying’ logics – what Elaine Graham (2002) has called ‘ontological hygiene’. I follow thinkers such as Bruno Latour or John Law (2002, 2004), who have criticized

thropocene is thus being able to deal with *complexity*. As Donna Haraway writes: “In layers of history, layers of biology, layers of naturecultures, complexity is the name of our game.” (2003: 2) What is required are modes of theorizing and forms of political action that are capable of taking the world’s messiness into account, of tackling it and working with and through it instead of downplaying or repressing complexity. Importantly, this includes a need for the combination of different theoretical approaches, both from the so-called social sciences and humanities as well as from the so-called natural sciences – not so much in terms of ‘interdisciplinarity’ than of a hybridizing of science itself, in which diverse theories and methods are not only made to work side by side, but are effectively synthesized, so that they cross-fertilize and their synergies as well as frictions can be made productive. We need to ‘think laterally’, establishing not just dialogues, but connections and fusions between different fields across disciplinary boundaries, and thus forging new perspectives. As I have argued in chapter 1, Cultural Studies is eminently suited to functioning as a theoretical platform for the development of such an approach. For one thing, this is because Cultural Studies has a long history of and is thus rather used to working with concepts and ideas derived from heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting theoretical sources – albeit not yet in a manner as radical as what is arguably required today. For another, Cultural Studies can be said to have always already proceeded from a sense of the ‘messiness’ of reality (though not regarding ontology) (cf. Cord 2018). That is to say, unlike many other disciplines or projects dedicated to the analysis of culture and society, Cultural Studies has more or less consistently refused the lure of grand narratives and all-encompassing systems and abstractions and instead held to a view of the world according to which, to borrow a phrase from Virginia Woolf,

these logics as a problematic type of simplification because they make it impossible to account for the ontological complexity of realities that are “excessive and in flux, not themselves neat, definite, and simply organised” (Law 2004: 14). It is not, of course, as if simplification could ever be avoided – it cannot – or that it is, per se, objectionable – it certainly is not. Nor is it the case that ‘messiness’ is always and necessarily good or desirable (one point on which I disagree with certain new materialist theories). As Law explains: “Whether realities that are fluid, fractional, multiple, indefinite and active are good or not has to be judged circumstance by circumstance. There is no general rule. These are not political goods in and of themselves. But to enact general prohibitions on (the recognition of) realities that display these attributes is to enact a class politics of ontology that is a bad. Greater permeability and recognition of fluidity and all the rest, overall this cannot be a bad.” (2004: 149) What is thus needed is a greater analytic reflexivity, based on an awareness of ontological messiness, “so that the question no longer is, Do we simplify or do we accept complexity? It becomes instead a matter of determining which simplification or simplifications we will attend to and create and, as we do this, of attending to what they foreground and draw our attention to, as well as what they relegate to the background.” (Mol/Law 2002: 11) The map-making I discuss in the conclusion of this paper would have to attempt to be one of such “modes of relating that allow the simple to coexist with the complex” (Mol/Law 2002: 16).

“nothing [is] simply one thing” (1994: 138), nothing is ever simple. For Cultural Studies, in other words, dedicated as it is to focusing on the concrete, to contextualism, and to differentiation, complexity has in fact always been a guiding (epistemological) principle.

Yet, in order to be able to grapple with the kinds and degrees of complexity characteristic of the Anthropocene, I have argued that Cultural Studies needs to be posthumanized, that is, brought into dialogue with the nonhuman turn. Even though some aspects of this turn may in certain regards provoke our critical sensibilities as Cultural Studies scholars, I have made the case that this is not necessarily a bad thing, and that it would be vastly more productive to refrain from knee-jerk dismissals and instead open-mindedly engage with the novel theoretical approaches associated with the nonhuman turn as, to borrow the subtitle of Gary Hall’s and Claire Birchall’s (2006) influential collection, a new ‘adventure in theory’. Just as *New Cultural Studies*, published in 2006, both proclaimed and called for a renewal of Cultural Studies on the basis of a number of developments in theory as well as the world, I feel compelled to make a similar move today. Thus, instead of deconstruction, post-Marxism, ethics, and German media theory, the ‘new adventures in theory’ of the 2006 book, we may today want to engage more closely with, for instance, affect theory, animal and plant studies, new materialism, actor-network theory, and speculative realism; where, in 2006, the ‘new theorists’ were held to be Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek, we may now wish to include the likes of Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Sianne Ngai, Lauren Berlant, Paul B. Preciado, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, Benjamin Bratton, and Jussi Parikka (thus also taking account of [more] women); the ‘new transformations’, instead of anti-capitalism, the transnational, and new media, could today comprise things like platform capitalism, surveillance culture, bio-, necro- and thanato-politics, technoscience, the ‘new right’, and climate change; and finally, whereas 2006’s ‘new adventures in cultural studies’ were deemed to be the Posthumanities, the extreme, the secret, and, somewhat oddly, Rem Koolhaas’ Project on the City, in 2022, we may, for example, want to mention the nonhuman, neoliberal or entrepreneurial subjectivities, conviviality, failure, the queer (in its widest sense), intersectionality, or multiple modernities.⁴

4 Like the ones from 2006, so these examples too are of course highly selective.

A 'New Cultural Studies'⁵ for the present must have analytical and methodological means at its disposal to deal with the fundamental 'messiness' of the present. Indeed, in view of this messiness and of the rapid and wide-ranging changes that have and still are taking place, whether it is with regards to technology, the economy, politics, society, culture, or identities, we may well feel inclined, somewhat analogous to what Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (1989) did over 30 years ago, to proclaim the arrival of 'new times' today. In this moment, how to be able to tackle complexity is arguably one of the most pressing theoretical challenges – for only by addressing it will we be capable to find adequate responses to it. Dealing with, not denying, complexity is today a political task. That this is so further becomes evident when we consider another characteristic aspect of the present conjuncture: the spread of conspiracy theories. As a discursive phenomenon, and as important elements in the contested arena of the politics of signification, and thus in the larger struggle for hegemony, conspiracy theories need to be taken seriously, both, theoretically and politically. The same applies to other contemporary phenomena such as 'post-truth politics' or 'fake news', which in some respects seem closely related to conspiracy theories. While,

5 I repeat the term 'New Cultural Studies' from Hall's and Birchall's book here though I am not really convinced by it. What I find problematic about it is that it implies, or at least can be taken to imply, a naively progressivist understanding of the development of the field, according to which the 'old' is at some point simply replaced by the 'new'. Such a notion is not only inadequate with regards to the complex and convoluted history, not just of Cultural Studies, but of virtually every academic discipline, it also lends itself to functioning as support of what we may characterize as the 'managerial' or 'entrepreneurial' variant of Cultural Studies, which appears to be winning ever more ground today and is gradually cutting its way towards hegemony. This manifestation of the discipline precisely delegates what is frequently referred to as the 'Birmingham tradition' of Cultural Studies to the dead past, claiming that its activist, engaged orientation, its pursuit of intellectual practice as a politics, was really nothing but the product of a particular historical moment and is more or less out of time today. In this view, what, following Foucault, we could call the latter's 'ethos' appears nowadays as highly suspect, incompatible with the standards of 'objective' science. Instead, we are told that, now that virtually 'all the battles have been fought', we should rather dedicate ourselves to a sober, 'disinterested' analysis of cultural phenomena and keep 'partisanship', and politics more generally, out of it. That this type of doing Cultural Studies is, inevitably, *also a politics*, of course, withheld or not even realized. In fact, its advocates are right: this, finally, is Cultural Studies as *discipline*. It is a Cultural Studies adequate to, because supportive of, the neoliberal university, our contemporary, 'modulating' factory, or corporation, of knowledge (Raunig 2013). As such, I believe that this 'New Cultural Studies' still deserves more critical attention, as part of the field's ongoing self-reflection and (Foucauldian) genealogy. In contrast, as has hopefully become evident at this point, my endeavor considers itself part of the tradition that conceives of Cultural Studies as a "political project" (Stuart Hall) and, beyond that, of the struggle for the 'undercommons of the Enlightenment' both within and beyond the university (cf. Harney/Moten 2013: 22–43).

contrary to declarations from within the consensus of the liberal mainstream, conspiracy theories are rather complex phenomena, and while Cultural Studies would do well to retain a post-Foucauldian basic skepticism regarding any such categories which entail a more or less immediate disqualification of certain (types of) statements, and to always clearly see them for what they are, namely interventions in a given ‘order of the visible and the sayable’ (Rancière 1999), despite this, it nevertheless seems safe to say that, as “a vast simplification of social reality” (Butter 2020: 34), one of the central aspects – indeed, I would argue, *functions* – of conspiracy theories is that they *reduce complexity*.

Against this, Cultural Studies must continue to hold on to the messiness of the world. This has always been one of its great strengths. Yet, in order to do so in the Anthropocene, to simply go on using our established theoretical and methodological tools will not do. For even though, in a way, complexity has always been a key principle for Cultural Studies, the Anthropocene marks a ‘turn of the screw’ of a whole new order. For one thing, what we have been witnessing for at least the last 30 to 40 years is a previously unheard-of emergence and proliferation of all kinds of border-crossings, entanglements, and hybridities – whole new forms and degrees of (ontological) complexity. And for another, many now agree that, in line with what Bruno Latour (1993b) already argued 30 years ago, the world has in fact *always* been far messier than we thought or were willing to think. To be able to adequately address these realities, many of the received concepts and assumptions of Cultural Studies need to be rethought and revised, some discarded, and new ones added. As I have argued, it is through an encounter with the nonhuman turn that this can happen. In particular, I would here like to propose the concept of the ‘assemblage’ as a productive tool that can serve as a starting or focal point for such an encounter. I want to argue that the notion of the assemblage can be extremely helpful for the necessary task of rethinking some of the central categories of Cultural Studies and can effectively function as something like a hinge – also in the Derridean sense – between it and the various novel theoretical formations.

Complexified Being: Rethinking the ‘Magical Triangle’ of Cultural Studies

Razvan Aminoresi and Jon Bialecki are certainly right when they argue that “theorists tend not to recognize many of the ontological commitments that underpin and direct their inquiries” (2017: 11). The concept of the assemblage counteracts this tendency. Originally derived from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, this notion has in recent years been appropriated in a large number of different fields, disciplines, and contexts, and informed much innovative and important work. Since Deleuze and Guattari never formulated a clear-cut definition, let alone a fully-fledged theory of the assemblage, the concept is frequently interpreted

differently, used in different ways and for different purposes. Yet, what virtually all applications have in common is that they employ the notion as a decidedly *ontological* category, meant to challenge accepted views of reality by significantly complicating, indeed, *complexifying* being. The philosopher Manuel DeLanda is arguably the thinker who has most systematically and comprehensively pursued the project of developing a consistent ‘assemblage theory’.⁶ DeLanda’s is an ontology that is rigorously materialist and realist, a “multi-level ontology” (2016: 7), designed to capture a “multiscaled social reality” and thus “the irreducible social complexity characterizing the contemporary world” (2006: 38, 6). The notion of the assemblage is thus explicitly a theoretical response to the messiness of the present, a properly posthumanist concept opening thought up to the nonhuman.

What, then, is an assemblage? For our purposes, its most important features, mainly distilled from DeLanda’s work, are:

- 1) *Heterogeneity*: Assemblages are wholes constructed from (sometimes more, sometimes less) heterogeneous components. They typically cut across the nature-culture divide, involving material as well as immaterial, organic as well as inorganic, elements of various kinds and scales (‘techno-geo-nature-cultures’ and more). As such, assemblages are decidedly *not* organic totalities.
- 2) *Emergence*: Every assemblage is an emergent whole, the result of the relations and interactions of its component parts. These relations are ‘relations of exteriority’. Thus, as a synthesis, the assemblage is not reducible to its parts. And the components, for their part, may always be separated from a given assemblage and plugged into another one, where their interactions will be different.
- 3) *Contingency*: Assemblages are always products of historical processes (with history being irreducible to human history). They are historically unique, transient, singular entities. Ontologically speaking, each one is an ‘individual’ (a term here not reserved for human beings or organisms); all are immanent, they populate the same ontological plane – a ‘flat ontology’.

6 More recently, the Deleuze-scholar Ian Buchanan (2020), who has already been working with the notion of the assemblage for quite some time, has also produced a comprehensive study in which he lays out his version of assemblage theory, which is marked by a strong fidelity to the work of Deleuze and Guattari. While this book contains many instructive arguments, DeLanda’s approach – a ‘neo-assemblage theory’ that is not strictly Deleuzian – is the more helpful one for my purposes, as it offers itself as the kind of ‘hinge’ with the theories of the nonhuman I have been talking about. Furthermore, even though I pursue a different line of thinking here, it should also be noted that – not least via the work of Gilbert Simondon, which was a major source of inspiration for Deleuze and Guattari – the concept of the assemblage is also linked with the field of cybernetics, which similarly emphasizes emergence, processuality, complex interplays, contingent and heterogeneous unities, etc. For more on this important dimension of the posthuman, cf. Hayles 1999.

What this means is a farewell to essentialism as well as a serious challenge to abstract totalizations. As Thomas Nail notes, assemblage theory does not ask “‘What is ...?’ but rather, how? where? when? from what viewpoint? and so on” (2017: 24). In the place of sweeping pronouncements on the ‘nature’ of ‘the Market’ or ‘the State’, this theory prompts us to adopt a quasi-empirical approach, and to pay attention to the emergence and shape of *concrete historical assemblages*. In fact, as an ontological ‘bottom-up’ approach (DeLanda 2006: 32) which assumes the existence of a multiplicity of social entities operating at various levels of scale, assemblage theory is explicitly conceived to help solve the micro-macro problem of the social sciences, a problem that has also marked the development of Cultural Studies, for instance in the debates surrounding the opposition of structure (structuralism) vs. individual (culturalism) (Hall 1986), or the question in how far the focus on popular culture and everyday practices, especially in the fields of subcultural and media (appropriation) studies, has for the most part entailed a rather unfortunate neglect of the social macro-level or a problematic erasure of the dividing line between micro and macro (cf. Marchart 2008, esp. 243–50). DeLanda’s ontology is finely grained, assuming many intermediate levels between ‘the person’ and ‘society’ as well as complex interactions, in which all social entities emerge from the assembly of smaller ones, while simultaneously reacting back on their component parts. What this amounts to is “a view of reality in which assemblages are everywhere, multiplying in every direction, some more viscous and changing at slower speeds, some more fluid and impermanent, coming into being almost as fast as they disappear” (DeLanda 2016: 7). Thus, “at all times we are dealing with assemblages of assemblages” (3). In this model, ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ remain valid categories of analysis but must be used in a relative rather than an absolute (individual vs. society) sense (20).

As might be expected, DeLanda’s ontology leads him to reject social constructivism, which he considers to be a form of “conservative idealism” (25), and to be highly skeptical of the possibility of radical social change. He writes: “A new left may yet emerge from these ashes but only if it recovers its footing on a mind-independent reality and if it focuses its efforts at the right social scale, that is, if it leaves behind the dream of a Revolution that changes the entire system.” (48) Unsurprisingly, similar to the case of Bruno Latour, such pronouncements have earned DeLanda harsh critique from the left. And Cultural Studies too may well recoil, feeling the need to hold on to both, social constructivism with its powers of denaturalization, and a sense of the social totality as an assumed prerequisite of the struggle for a fundamental transformation of society. Yet, if we ignore the polemics on both sides, and with some pragmatically oriented theoretical modifications, it seems to me that there is no reason why both should not be brought together, each enriching the other. Of course, the theoretical waters here are quite deep and require much more attention than is possible in a text of a rather programmatic nature like the present one. For now, let me just point out that, as Levi Bryant (2014) has argued,

unless we subscribe to what has never really been anything but a caricature of social constructivism (according to which nothing exists but language), it is perfectly possible to combine linguistic and cultural turn-based approaches with the more recent ones focused on matter, materiality, affect, etc. (as attested to, to give just one prominent example, by the work of Michel Foucault). This involves a reorientation of focus as well as methodology (Coole/Frost 2010: 26–28): For one thing, it means complementing the analysis of discourses, representations, ideologies, and identities with a greater attention to, for instance, socioeconomic conditions, economic structures, the materiality of space, or the operation of power at the level of the state as well as of the quotidian, particularly the embodied, corporeal dimension of ordinary experience. For another, it means a realignment of constructivist epistemologies with a view to an acknowledgment of the irreducibility of the material realm. Following actor-network theory or thinkers such as Haraway and Barad, rather than rejecting the notion of the materially real in favor of the culturally constructed, society should be recognized as always being simultaneously both, discursive and material forms being inextricable yet irreducible.

Similarly, the dramatic declarations of DeLanda and particularly Latour notwithstanding, it is actually difficult to see why attention to the various types of ‘actants’ and assemblages and to their complicated pathways, interconnections, and networks should be incompatible with either a notion of totality or with changes of a radical kind. In fact, when DeLanda, Latour, and others announce that “[l]ike God, capitalism does not exist” (Latour 1993a: 173), they frequently seem to ascribe a thinking to the left, or to the ‘sociologies of the social’, that must largely be characterized as another strawman. Certainly, there are few analysts of capitalism today who would (still) conceive of it in terms of one homogeneous, closed, fully coherent and consistent, organic, seam- and fissure-less system, let alone one run by “some *homonculus* CEO in command” (Latour 2005: 167). I believe that the work of theorists such as DeLanda and Latour can instill a healthy skepticism towards reified abstractions into social science research – a skepticism which, as I have argued, already has a certain tradition within Cultural Studies. However, to go from such skepticism to the relinquishment of all notion of totality would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Instead, bringing into dialogue the new realist and materialist approaches on the one hand and constructivist and ‘old’ materialist ones on the other, I suggest that a *‘de-totalized’ sense of totality* (Coole/Frost 2010: 29) and thus a *combination of empiricist with totalizing research* represents the most promising path of analysis today. In fact, certain parts of more recent materialist thought seem to point in just such a direction, for instance when they, for their part, refocus on the micro-macro relation and reconceptualize the capitalist ‘system’ as itself a kind of assemblage, that is, rethink it in terms of “a multitude of interconnected phenomena and processes”, of “intricate interlocking systems whose interactions and dynamic processes are variable and, for the most part, unpredictable”, and in

which “more or less enduring structures and assemblages” are hence taken to “sediment and congeal” (Coole/Frost 2010: 29). Such a notion of a complex, ‘center-less’ totality is understood as involving, among other things, the close study of material practices, understood as “regular forms of behavior that are norm-governed, and that involve one’s relation to one’s body and to other bodies, as well as to objects of experience” (Edwards 2010: 287). Here, as perverse as it may sound to some, a rapprochement between actor-network theory and Marxism becomes possible⁷ – the totality conceived in terms of complex, dynamic relations and various interlinked levels, layers, practices, and elements, including all sorts of ‘actants’, and explicitly regarded in terms of a problem of representation or figuration (or ‘assembling’). This, in fact, seems to be similar to what Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, in their engagement with Latour as part of their recent defense of social theory’s attempts to ‘see it whole’, have in mind as well when they explain that “the theoretical desire for totality is not incompatible with a painstaking attention to traces, objects and devices” and that hence, “great dialectical writing would constitute precisely the kind of panorama that would [...] present both the totality and its constituent devices, as well as the attendant gaps and dislocations” (2015: 48, 55). “Don’t focus on capitalism”, Latour tells us, “follow the connections, ‘follow the actors themselves’” (2005: 179). However, rather than thus understanding these two approaches as irreconcilable alternatives, I would propose that the latter can actually be *a form or part* of the former. That is to say: It is precisely by means of exact descriptions of the countless concrete assemblages existing at various social levels that we can come to a better understanding of the totality that is capitalism – including, *nota bene*, the sites and forms of struggle needed to transform it. For, against DeLanda, Graham Harman, and others, there is no reason why an ontology of assemblages should preclude radical change. (After all, history is full of it.) What needs to be discarded is not the idea of revolution *per se*, but rather a certain conception (or caricature) of it. Great, systemic change is possible – but it should be reconceived in terms of numerous interlocking ‘local’ changes, at different social scales, in the course of which scores of diverse assemblages become reconfigured. What I suggest, in other words, is that assemblage theory be placed in the service of ‘cognitive mapping’ (Jameson 1991, esp. 51–54).

So, let’s heed Donna Haraway’s call for new and unexpected connections, heed it also methodologically, and let us be more Deleuzo-Guattarian: not either/or, but

7 Cf. Castree 2002. As I already noted in chapter 1, it is interesting that Latour’s late works (2017, 2018, 2019; Latour/Schultz 2022) seem to show a certain moderation of his earlier, harsher statements on the tradition of critique, the term ‘capitalism’, etc. Conversely, there are now several leftist and Marxist theorists whose work is more or less heavily indebted to Latour’s thinking (Benjamin Noys [2019: 38] speaks of a ‘left Latourianism’, Alf Hornborg [2020] of a ‘posthumanist Marxism’). Cf., e.g., Mitchell 2011; Moore 2015.

“and ... and ... and ...” (Deleuze/Guattari 1987: 25). In the Anthropocene, more than ever, Cultural Studies itself needs to be a kind of *theoretical assemblage*, synthesizing a multiplicity of different approaches. Joining Colin McFarlane and Ben Anderson, what I am effectively proposing is an “ethic of theory-as-assemblage, i.e. as a constellation of singularities that holds together through difference rather than in spite of it, and that cultivates a provocative and fertile common ground” (2011: 164). Thus, in no way am I arguing that Cultural Studies should *turn into* some form of assemblage theory or simply adopt wholesale a realist ontology. But I do believe that a lot is to be gained from a ‘translation’ of the notion of the assemblage into the theoretical horizon of our discipline. As is the case with all translations, both literal and metaphorical, this process does not leave the concept – for which, as I have noted, there is no definite meaning or use anyway – unchanged. Above all, what I think gets emphasized and amplified once the assemblage enters the Cultural Studies ‘toolbox’ is its *political dimension*. In particular, stress is now placed on “the ways in which relationalities are generated through political activity” (Featherstone 2011: 141). David Featherstone has suggested that the concept be brought into dialogue with the key Cultural Studies notion of ‘articulation’, in order to add this “directly political edge that usages of assemblage generally lack” (2011: 141). However, it seems to me that this political dimension has, at least latently, always been present in the concept of the assemblage itself. As has often been pointed out, unlike its English equivalent, the original French word *agencement* refers not only to an assembled ensemble of parts, but also to the action of fitting these together (*agencer*). It denotes both, the process and the product, and both, “the ephemeral, the emergent, the evanescent, the decentered and the heterogeneous” as well as “the structured and systematic” (Marcus/Saka 2006: 101). Since the structured whole that is an assemblage is never simply ‘there’ and given for all time, but rather the result of a process of assembling (or articulating), there is always the possibility for a politicization of the assemblage. As Thomas Nail points out, “[i]t is not just the so-called ‘application’ of the assemblage that is practical or political, but the very construction of the assemblage – the way it is arranged or laid out” (2017: 28). A *politics of assemblages*, in other words, is rooted in what, following Stuart Hall, we can call their ‘arbitrary closure’, that is, in the fact that the particular arrangement or layout of any assemblage is contingent, a product of history, and thus principally open to change.

Once the notion of the assemblage is imported into the theoretico-discursive horizon of Cultural Studies, it profoundly affects many of its central assumptions and concepts. If, following Oliver Marchart (2008: 33–36), culture, power, and identity can be considered the most basic categories of the field, together forming something like a ‘magic triangle’ in which they are inextricably interlinked, then it would seem that all three undergo a reconceptualization once the concept of the assemblage is brought in, a reconceptualization that more strongly opens them up to the

nonhuman. What follows are some methodological remarks outlining the direction for such a reconceptualization.

Culture

In an aside of an instructive essay dedicated to the subject of what constitutes a 'posthumanist reading', Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus have proposed that "the sum of the otherness projected by humans into their world" may serve as "the equivalent of a 'posthumanist' definition of culture" (2008: 101). Yet, while the deconstruction of such projections must undeniably be a crucial aspect of a 'critical posthumanism', I am not convinced by Herbrechter's and Callus' definition of culture. As I see it, there are two (interrelated) problems with it: its anthropocentrism and the fact that it remains more or less representational. Bringing the notion of the assemblage to bear on our understanding of culture allows us to move beyond these difficulties and towards a properly posthumanist definition. In fact, to define culture solely in terms of signifying systems and practices, of the production and circulation of meaning, as has been common within Cultural Studies since the cultural turn, has always seemed somewhat reductive.⁸ Is culture really nothing but meanings and the making of them? What about the materiality, the recalcitrance, indeed, the *agency*, of objects? Don't they also 'make culture'? What about animals, plants? The development of a field such as material culture studies has gone some way to correcting this narrow focus on (human) textuality, even though, from a posthumanist perspective, several difficulties remain. Not least, the term 'material culture' is misleading insofar as it can be taken to imply that the material and the immaterial or symbolic are two clearly separate domains. In contrast, an understanding of culture inflected by assemblage theory would move beyond anthropocentrism, textualism, and the 'Great Divides', by giving a central place to the nonhuman in its various forms instead of reducing it to being merely the bearer of human projections. Thus, material artifacts, animals, plants, rocks, the climate, architecture, infrastructure, and so on would be acknowledged as an "ontologically real and active, lively presence" (Goodman 2001: 183). Now, culture (like the social) is no longer the exclusive prerogative of humanity (and neither are signs or meanings) and no longer reducible to signification. Of course, the latter remains crucial, yet the analysis is now complemented by a close attention to materiality, and reoriented by the awareness that even the

8 As noted before, a concept like the famous 'circuit of culture' (du Gay et al. 1997) already somewhat acknowledges this. Nevertheless, like the 'magic triangle' under discussion here, the circuit too will need to be revised in light of the nonhuman turn. (In fact, the more recent, second edition of the book in which it was originally proposed already explicitly concedes this [du Gay et al. 2013].) For some reflections regarding such a revision, cf. ch. 7.

“webs of significance” in which, in Clifford Geertz’s immensely influential formulation, man (sic!) is “suspended” are not, after all, ones that “he himself has spun” (1973: 5) all by himself, but also the product of different kinds of nonhuman agency. As Jane Bennett puts it: “culture is *not* of our own making” (2010: 115). Therefore, to speak of ‘culture’ today necessarily means speaking of what Latour calls hybrid ‘networks’, consisting of ‘associations’ of diverse actants, such as persons, animals, artifacts, and signs. It means speaking of ‘nature-cultures’ (Haraway), of ‘material-discursive’ (Barad) or ‘material-semiotic’ ‘entanglements’ – and of the processes through which boundaries are drawn and seemingly bounded domains and beings come into existence⁹, processes that are nonetheless “never finished, whole, simply there and original” (Haraway 1988: 586).

If, in other words, in Raymond Williams’ famous phrase, culture has to do with ‘ways of life’, or, as E.P. Thompson suggested in his critique of Williams, with ‘ways of struggle’, then these now have to be radically rethought in terms of human-non-human assemblages, of “an open-ended entanglement of ways of being” (Tsing 2015: 83) (where ‘being’ is distinctly not synonymous with ‘life’). Such an approach decidedly moves beyond organicist models, conceiving of culture not as a coherent and unified whole, but as a kind of Russian *matryoshka* doll (Bennett 2010: 45) – an assemblage of assemblages (of assemblages, and so forth), a “non-totalizable sum” (Patrick Hayden qtd. in Bennett 2010: 24). “To learn about an assemblage” like culture, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing points out, “one unravels its knots” (2015: 83). Such unravelling, that is, the close analysis of the composition (elements, relations, interactions) and functioning of ‘cultural assemblages’ (Bennett/Healy 2011) in their always specific situatedness (how, where, when, for whom?) is now the task of Cultural Studies.

Power

The concept of the assemblage, and the nonhuman turn in general, also has profound consequences for the ways in which we conceive power. While it forces us to rethink a number of our received assumptions about power, I would argue that it is nevertheless in some senses eminently compatible with the general orientation of Cultural Studies analyses insofar as these have always been based on a dismissal of any “essentialising metaphysics of power” (Sedlmayr 2018: 22). In other words: In the wake of scholars such as Michel Foucault, when Cultural Studies investigates

9 As Tony Bennett (2007), one of the most important proponents of actor-network theory and (new) materialism within Cultural Studies, has observed, the ‘culturalness’ of cultural assemblages is thus derived from, rather than preceding, the assembly. In analogy to science studies, he proposes the perspective of ‘culture studies’ to account for the ways in which the assemblage of heterogeneous elements produces culture as what, following Latour, he calls ‘a specific form of public organization’.

power, its inquiries are typically “flat and empirical”, proceeding from the conviction that “power as such does not exist” (Foucault 1982: 786). Thus, instead of speculating about the universal nature of Power, Cultural Studies has always been interested in historically, locally, and culturally specific forms of power, their genealogies, composition, ways of functioning, etc. As we have already seen, a very similar dedication to the contingent and the concrete underlies assemblage theory. To understand power as an assemblage means primarily two things: First, that “power, like society, is the final result of a process and not a reservoir, a stock, or a capital that will automatically provide an explanation. Power and domination have to be produced, made up, composed.” (Latour 2005: 64) And secondly, that in order to be able to fully grasp this composition, agency has to be understood as distributed, and not just between human beings, but across the human-nonhuman divide. Thus, Bruno Latour replaces the ‘actor’ or ‘agent’ – a ‘subject’ confronting passive ‘objects’ – of traditional, anthropocentric political and social theory with his ‘actant’, which “can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action” (1996: 373). To speak of an actant hence “implies *no* special motivation of *human individual* actors, nor of humans in general” (Latour 1996: 373). An actant, quite simply, is that which “makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event” (Bennett 2010: 9). Building on the work of Latour, Deleuze and Guattari, Baruch Spinoza, and many others, Jane Bennett has seized on the notion of the actant in order to develop an elaborate account of ‘thing-power’, that is, of “an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve”, and to flesh out the idea of a “congregational understanding of agency” (20). Agency, she argues, is emergent and ‘distributive’: never the property of a single (human) mastermind, but always “an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage” (28), by a ‘swarm’ of what she calls ‘vital materialities’. As she points out, “insofar as anything ‘acts’ at all, it has already entered an agentic assemblage” (121).¹⁰ Bennett produces a complex and extremely helpful account of the agency of assemblages, concluding that “[t]here was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore.” (31)

Such a rethinking of power and agency in light of the nonhuman turn has at least two important, interrelated consequences for the ways in which we theorize and analyze power: For one thing, as Tony Bennett has observed, it enjoins the task of “tracing the networks of associations through which particular forms of power are assembled, aiming for as dense a description as possible of the capacities that are

10 As Levi Bryant notes, in such a model, it seems reasonable to distinguish between different degrees of agency (2014: 220–22).

folded into and accumulate within them” (2007: 615).¹¹ For another, it draws our critical attention to levels, aspects, and domains of power that were previously largely underexplored, ignored, or are only now becoming visible. In particular, this concerns the *material* and the *ontological* dimensions. Even though, contrary to a common perception, a consideration of materiality was never really entirely absent from Cultural Studies analyses, critics like Levi Bryant certainly have a point when they diagnose a recent overemphasis on the textual and the discursive, paradoxically even within materialism itself, leaving them wondering “where the materialism in materialism is” (Bryant 2014: 2). “Why”, Bryant asks, “is there no talk [...] of ‘stuff’, ‘physicality’, or material agencies?” (2014: 2) As he points out, this neglect has had detrimental analytic as well as political effects, since “it became nearly impossible to investigate the efficacy of things in contributing to the form social relations take. An entire domain of power became invisible, and as a result we lost all sorts of opportunities for strategic intervention in producing emancipatory change.” (2014: 3) By contrast, once power is conceived in terms of ontologically heterogeneous assemblages, the nonhuman and the material components of these assemblages come clearly into view. For instance, infrastructure, to name just one such formerly invisible domain of power, has been explored by Keller Easterling and others not as merely a “bureaucratic or technical footnot[e]” to the “[w]ell-rehearsed theories, like those related to Capital or neoliberalism”, but as an absolutely central element in the exercise of power, a medium of what she terms ‘extrastatecraft’, “the secret weapon of the most powerful people in the world precisely because it orchestrates activities that can remain unstated but are nevertheless consequential” (2016: 22, 15). It seems to me that the work of scholars like Bryant – who speaks of ‘gravity’ instead of ‘power’ in order to escape the latter’s anthropocentric connotations and associations with discursivity – has a lot to offer if we want to develop procedures for the analysis of contemporary assemblages of power that are able to recognize and address elements such as the ones discussed by Easterling. For what Bryant outlines with his notion of ‘geopolitics’ is very much akin to what we must fashion: a framework that

would include all the issues of traditional social and political thought with its emphasis on ideology critique, questions of identity, political economy, and so on, while opening the political onto the domain of the non-human, investigating how non-humans such as microbes, animals, geography, and technologies contribute to how social assemblages come to be organized through the gravity that they exert, while also striving to give voice to non-humans as beings deserving of recognition within human social assemblages. (2014: 207)

11 In this context, a dialogue between the study of assemblages and the study of what Foucault termed ‘apparatuses’ (*dispositifs*) may prove fruitful, where both can perhaps be understood as dialectically related, with the latter effectively being a specific type of the former (Legg 2011).

A thus altered critical attention, broadened to include the nonhuman, the material, and the ontological, not only makes possible a timely and needed revision of our established concepts and analytics of power (e.g., regarding biopower), but also allows us to identify and tackle changes in the contemporary 'ecology of powers' as well as types of power that were formerly undetected: 'ontological politics' or 'politics of matter' (Papadopoulos 2014), 'ontopower' (Massumi 2015), 'geopower' (Bonneuil/Fressoz 2017: 87–96), 'geontopower' (Povinelli 2016), and more. Concepts such as these seem to me indispensable if Cultural Studies wants to continue its 'political project' in the Anthropocene. As Jane Bennett, like many others, indicates, this should today involve a commitment to the ethical aim "to distribute value more generously, to bodies as such" (2010: 13), and thus to recognize nonhuman bodies as potential participants or members of a public (2010: 94–109). In doing so, I believe Cultural Studies would do well – as it has in the past in some of its finest works – to integrate, along the lines suggested by Nancy Fraser (1995), such an extended emancipatory 'politics of recognition' with an egalitarian 'politics of redistribution'.

Identity

Stuart Hall's well-known 1996 essay "Who Needs 'Identity'?" is a superb, lucid, (then) state-of-the-art discussion of the subject matter of identity, a convincing attempt, in the wake of the (post-)structuralist 'decentering of the subject', of "thinking it in its new, displaced or decentred position", in particular by disarticulating the notion of identity from "its settled semantic career" and instead developing a concept that is "not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one" (1996b: 2, 3). According to this understanding, the defining characteristics of identity are no longer unity, coherence, and continuity, but fragmentarity, heterogeneity, and contingency. No longer taken as signaling a supposedly natural, primordial, stable core of the self, identity is instead seen as a tenuous construct, produced "within the play of power and exclusion" (Hall 1996b: 5), a point of 'arbitrary closure', or of a 'suturing' of interpellating social discourses and practices on the one hand and psychic processes such as investment and identification on the other. This concept has served as the foundation for countless debates and analyses concerning identity within Cultural Studies, and I think it is still valuable. Yet, in the context of the 'magical triangle' proposed by Marchart, I wonder whether 'identity' was perhaps never the ideal term or category. With reference to the extensive and important work conducted under the label of a 'genealogy of subjectification' (Rose 1998), especially within governmentality studies, I believe that '*subject*' would in fact be a more appropriate term.¹² This is so because

12 In fact, in Hall's article, the two levels of analysis – subject and identity – repeatedly slide into one another.

it is the more general, encompassing category, allowing us to grasp the complex relations between culture, power, and person more comprehensively. The concept of identity should be understood as part of the concept of the subject. Whereas 'identity' designates merely one aspect of the subject, namely its particular mode of self-understanding and self-interpretation (a 'hermeneutic of the self'), to ask about the 'subject' more generally means to inquire into the specific 'cultural form' which individuals adopt in particular historic and social contexts in order to become socially 'intelligible' (Reckwitz 2008: 9). The sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2006, 2008) has developed a heuristic framework for just such a 'subject analysis', dedicated to analyzing the processes of subject-formation or subjectivation through which, under specific socio-cultural conditions, human beings become or are 'made into' subjects. This mode of analysis investigates social and cultural orders, practices, discourses, and all kinds of assemblages from the point of view of what psychic, bodily, and affective models they produce:

A Cultural Studies subject analysis aims at ascertaining which know how and which structures of desire, which bodily routines and which self-image, which forms of demarcation from the outside and which competencies, which mental-affective orientations and instabilities the individual develops in order to become that 'human being' which the respective social orders require. (Reckwitz 2008: 10, my trans.)

While analyses focused on identity will of course remain central to Cultural Studies, in a revised magical triangle, they will become a subset of more far-reaching investigations of (dominant, alternative, residual, emergent) subject-forms, -cultures, and -orders.

Reckwitz's subject analysis is largely based on, indeed, built out of, poststructuralist theories. What happens when it is brought into an encounter with the non-human turn? Above all, two things: First, as Reckwitz (2008: 106–20) himself points out, it becomes clear that human beings are subjectivated not just in and through discursive regimes, ideologies, social practices, symbolic orders, etc., but also, to use Latour's terminology, through the various associations with all sorts of actants within the networks of which they are a part. Once again, materiality is emphasized here. Whether it is architecture, media, food, the climate, clothes, or other artifacts, these cannot be reduced to 'objects' which humans as sovereign 'subjects' simply confront or use – rather, humans and nonhumans are closely interconnected within historically specific assemblages, and any subject-form, with its particular psychic, mental, corporeal, perceptual, and affective constitution, is necessarily co-produced by just these linkages. This means that, secondly, our very conception of the subject must be modified as well. Already Reckwitz (2006, esp. 18–21, 81–89) conceives all subject-forms and -cultures as inevitably *hybrid*, as unstable, fissured, contra-

dictory formations consisting of a number of heterogeneous and partly conflicting codes. It would seem that in view of the recent arguments regarding the entanglements, interpenetrations, and cross-contaminations of the human and the nonhuman, this hybridity must today be rethought in yet more radical ways. If being is not only always a becoming, but a 'becoming-with' (Haraway 2008), if corporeality is always 'trans-corporeality' (Alaimo 2010), if action is 'intra-action' (Barad 2007), and so forth, then the subject needs to be reconceptualized in terms of a human-nonhuman assemblage. Any seemingly unified actor, Latour points out, "is itself an association made up of elements which can be redistributed" (1990: 109). In a similar vein, DeLanda has argued that "persons emerge from the interaction of subpersonal components" (2006: 47), and Jane Bennett has proposed a conception of the self "as itself an impure, human-nonhuman assemblage", "a self that is its own outside, is vibrant matter" (2010: xvii, 116). According to Bennett, just as "[i]t is futile to seek a pure nature unpolluted by humanity", it is equally "foolish to define the self as something purely human" (116). Speaking about the "alien' quality of our own flesh", Bennett writes: "My 'own' body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. [...] The *its* outnumber the *mes*. [...] We are [...] *an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes." (112f) Thus, as Rosi Braidotti has argued, emphasizing the "embedded and embodied and grounded, multi-directional and multi-scalar" ontological relationality of (human) beings, the subject has to be understood as a "dynamic convergence phenomenon", a 'transversal' "zoe/geo/techno assemblage" (2019: 45, 41, 44). In other words, as Tsing observes, considering the subject, "purity is not an option" (2015: 27) – *this human which is not one*¹³.

Summarizing the poststructuralist critique of liberal-humanist conceptions of the subject, to which their own work significantly contributed, Judith Butler once declared that "the subject as a self-identical entity is no more" (2011: 175). Today, it almost seems as if the subject *as such* is no more. It is therefore not surprising that, in a recent special issue of the journal *Cultural Critique*, scholars felt compelled to rephrase the question of "Who Comes After the Subject?", which had been the topic of an influential debate among numerous French philosophers in the late 1980s (Caldava et al. 1991), as "What Comes After the Subject?" (Haines/Grattan 2017b). Relat-

13 It is my impression that the work of Luce Irigaray, to whose famous essay "This Sex Which Is Not One" (1985) I allude here, deserves a careful rereading within and, indeed, an articulation to the project of a critical posthumanism. Particularly with regards to contemporary art or popular cinema (e.g., the 'new weird') it would seem as if new, posthumanist 'imaginaries' are emerging that present a distinct alternative to what I would describe as the hegemonic overlay of 'phallomorphism' and '-centrism' with anthropomorphism and -centrism. In this context, cf. my reading of the science fiction horror film *Annihilation* in the coda.

edly, Bryant has suggested that the subject should no longer be treated as a particular *type* of being, but rather as a “transitory *role* defined *functionally* in particular situations”, so that “there is no necessity to restrict the category of subject to human beings” (2014: 218, 224). Here, subjects are more or less akin to what Latour terms actants, “transitory catalytic operators” that “quilt other beings together in assemblages” (Bryant 2014: 224, 225). This is a helpful approach, and ontologically speaking, I agree with such a ‘flattening’ of being. Yet, as Bryant himself notes, while humans may not be ontologically exceptional, empirically, they are nevertheless in many ways unique (that is to say: able to form or enter into unique assemblages). For this reason, they certainly require distinct modes of analysis. And after all, the fact that the Subject, that is, the unified and sovereign entity conjured by liberal humanism, never existed (ontology) has not kept this projection from having had real historical force (empiricism). All posthumanist theorizing notwithstanding, what Cary Wolfe has called the “humanist and speciesist *structure* of subjectivization” (2003: 8) remains intact. It continues to produce ‘subjects’. In fact, this production is only *possible* on the basis of a constant repression or ‘abjection’ (Kristeva 1982) of the entangled nature and hybridity of (human) existence. The semblance of unity and autonomy, in other words, is the effect of a continuous, and always incomplete, process of what Latour (1993b) calls ‘purification’, of the labor of ‘ontological hygiene’ (Graham 2002) and the concomitant fabrication of alterity (a labor that, as Latour, Haraway, and many others have argued, is becoming ever harder and more difficult in the present).

Empirically and analytically, to speak of and investigate the subject is therefore still justified. The task of a Cultural Studies ‘subject analysis’ is, then, to critically examine existing subject-forms (and -cultures) as well as the processes through which they are produced. Yet, following thinkers such as Barad (2007), whose work is extremely helpful in this context, crucially, this must now include attention to the performativity of ‘agential cuts’ through which differential boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are drawn and stabilized and bodies are materialized. The task, in other words, is also to bring to light the underlying ontological ‘maintenance work’ of purification as well as the ways in which the subject is at the same time being unmade by its de facto hybridity and entanglement with the nonhuman in its various forms.

New Cartographies

Cultural Studies has long seen one of its central tasks in the critical analysis of ‘maps of meaning’ – which, in fact, have come to be virtually synonymous with ‘culture’. I have always found this metaphor helpful, and considered Cultural Studies as an expert for this task. However, I have here argued that, in view of the profound changes

in both reality and theory (the latter partly responding to the former), this metaphor and this task are no longer sufficient, and have proposed the concept of the assemblage as an alternative onto-epistemic commitment for Cultural Studies, allowing it to better tackle the complexity of the contemporary world. In a sense, I have argued that Cultural Studies, which can be said to be more obviously and self-reflexively an assemblage than many other disciplines, should partly reassemble itself, forging new associations and modifying existing ones, by opening itself up more strongly to the theoretical influx of the nonhuman turn. In doing so, its task will still be cartography. Indeed, the fact that a number of contemporary theorists (as well as artists) have recently mobilized this metaphor (cf., e.g., Bryant 2014; Cord/Schleusener 2020; Latour 2018: 2; Toscano/Kinkle 2015) attests to the complexity and confusion that marks the present – adequate maps are much needed. Yet, these new maps produced by Cultural Studies will be maps of a different kind, more comprehensive (though without being totalizing in an unreflective manner), no longer restricted to (human) signification. They will be *maps of assemblages*. Gilles Deleuze, too, uses the image of the map in his discussion of the Foucauldian notion of the ‘apparatus’ (*dispositif*), which in his reading – in contrast to the one set forth by Giorgio Agamben (2009) – is very much like an assemblage: “Untangling these lines within a social apparatus is, in each case, like drawing up a map, doing cartography, surveying unknown landscapes, and this is what he [Foucault] calls ‘working on the ground’.” (1992: 159) Untangling associations, tracing networks, surveying ecologies of actants, working on the ground (rather than in the lofty air of abstraction) – these are now the central elements of Cultural Studies cartography. But as in Bryant’s ‘onto-cartography’ (2014, esp. 257–67), which can be helpful in this context, mapping alone will not be enough. As not just an ‘academic’, but an ‘intellectual’ undertaking, “a project, an intervention”, as an endeavor in which “there is something *at stake*” and which “aims to make a difference in the world” (Hall 1996a: 272, 263, 264), the mapping carried out by Cultural Studies should tend to be inscribed into a ‘cartographical politics’ (Bryant 2014: 283). To use Bryant’s terminology, cartography ought to be combined with ‘deconstruction’ and ‘terraformation’ (267–79), that is to say, with the creation of ‘modal maps’ (266f) of alternative assemblages and possible futures, and with the struggle to bring these into existence. Cartography, in other words, as part of new material-semiotic *worldings*.

In the Anthropocene, more than ever, the *analytical* needs to be coupled not only with the *critical*, but also with the *affirmative*, the latter signifying not acquiescence with the status quo, but, quite to the contrary, an “abandonment of the apocalyptic mood in theory”¹⁴ (Haines/Grattan 2017a: 3). Contra Latour, I am convinced that

14 Christian Haines and Sean Grattan consider posthumanism as a whole as part of this shift from critique to affirmation (2017a: 28n1). On the topic of the different ‘modes’ of posthumanist theorizing (critical, affirmative, etc.), cf. ch. 3.

theorists still need to demystify, critique, attack – but they *also* need to transform, care, compose, assemble (cf. Latour 2004, 2010). This, then, is theoretical practice as “an occasion for social and political experimentation, for redrawing the limits of collectivity and individuality” – theory, that is, as “affirmations of possibility” (Haines/Grattan 2017a: 5, 4).

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Postscript. Political Ontologies: Cultural Studies and the Nonhuman Turn

Over the past decade, since it was first proposed as the title of a conference held at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2012, the phrase ‘nonhuman turn’ has gained currency as an umbrella term for theoretical formations as diverse as actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology, the various manifestations of speculative realism and varieties of new materialism, affect theory, critical animal and plant studies, or new media theory (cf., e.g., Caracciolo/Marcussen/Rodriguez 2022; Grusin 2015b; Lettow/Nessel 2022; Roffe/Stark 2015; Thakur/Dickstein 2018; Zylinska 2017). As I have observed before, though all of these should certainly not be conflated, what they arguably have in common is their profound challenge to human exceptionalism. As Richard Grusin explains:

Intended as a macroscopic concept, the nonhuman turn is meant to account for the simultaneous or overlapping emergence of a number of different theoretical or critical “turns” – for example, the ontological, network, neurological, affective, digital, ecological, or evolutionary. As something of a theoretical or methodological assemblage, the nonhuman turn tries to make sense of what holds these various other “turns” together, even while allowing for their divergent theoretical and methodological commitments and contradictions. Each of these different elements of the nonhuman turn derives from theoretical movements that argue (in one way or another) against human exceptionalism, expressed most often in the form of conceptual or rhetorical dualisms that separate the human from the nonhuman – variously conceived as animals, plants, organisms, climatic systems, technologies, or ecosystems. (2015a: x)

Arguably, many of the approaches associated with the nonhuman turn have a particular relevance for thinking in and about the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, in which issues of the interrelation and entanglement of the human and the nonhuman have acquired a heightened urgency everywhere.¹ As already indicated, we should

1 Though there is no room here to go into these important debates, I would point out that none of these terms – human, nonhuman, Anthropocene (which also inscribes the figure of

now ask ourselves: How do these important theoretical developments affect Cultural Studies as an intellectual and political practice? And how does Cultural Studies relate to them in turn? More specifically, where are possible points of interconnection or cross-fertilization? What novel questions or fields of investigation and intervention can be opened up for Cultural Studies? How do the respective genealogies of Cultural Studies and the approaches associated with the nonhuman turn relate to one another; what parallels, affinities, or entanglements can be identified? What are sources of friction, contradiction, or antagonism? After all, like everything else, the nonhuman turn is a contested one. For instance, while most commentators agree that the Anthropocene requires a rethinking of many of the central categories in which the relationship between humanity and the environment has previously been thought, the nature and the extent of this reconceptualization are far from undisputed, and authors such as Kate Soper, Alf Hornborg, or Andreas Malm – many of them arguing from a Marxist perspective – have rather fiercely attacked posthumanist theorizing and expressed their skepticism or outright refusal regarding these new approaches, especially their often flattened, relational, and processual ontologies – as Malm, for one, puts it: “[l]ess of Latour, more of Lenin” (2020: 118).

I have been arguing that these theoretical movements have a lot to offer to Cultural Studies and that their novel ways of addressing issues of matter, objects, affects, the real, etc., especially the way they tend to interlink questions of epistemology, ontology, politics, and ethics, have the potential to significantly enrich our discipline – something that is, of course, already happening. While the literature on the new materialisms, speculative realisms, etc. is often dominated by either blanket, categorical rejection (as we have seen with Malm) or by an uncritical euphoric hype, it seems more productive to opt for a position lying between or, better, beyond these extremes. As I have pointed out before, it is not a question of Cultural Studies *becoming*, say, new materialist, or necessarily of adopting wholesale a different ontology – rather, I would want to reactivate the syncretism that has long been a characteristic of Cultural Studies, to emphasize its long-standing role as a theoretical *bricoleur*, and propose what is essentially a pragmatic, even slightly opportunistic, approach.

Bricolage, as the concept emerges from the work of Lévi-Strauss, has been defined as a “science of the concrete” whose “‘improvised’ or ‘made up’ (these are rough translations of the process of *bricoler*)” structures are “ad hoc responses to an environment” (Hawkes 2003: 36). Theoretical *bricolage*, then, means the production of “implicitly coherent, though explicitly bewildering, systems of connection between things which perfectly equip their users to ‘think’ their own world” (Hebdige 1979: 103). Thinking the world, mapping it, intervening in it – I believe that these, not the

the universal *Anthropos*) – should be used uncritically, but that they need to be problematized or deconstructed, contextualized or ‘provincialized’ (as Chakrabarty [2000] might say), and thus divested of their homogenizing and universalizing power.

purity of frictionless systematicity, define the purpose of Cultural Studies theorizing. Consequently, rather than to simply adopt or outright reject new materialist or speculative realist work, I suggest it focus on the finding of *tools* that can be used. This, of course, is precisely the approach Deleuze and Foucault encouraged vis-à-vis their own writing (Foucault 1996: 76). What is Cultural Studies if not a large toolbox? It is a heterogeneous, inter- or transdisciplinary theoretical assemblage, gathering and pulling together concepts and methods from a wide variety of sources for the purpose of intellectual work, understood as a political practice. Tools are there not to be marveled at as a beautiful harmonious ensemble, but to be put to use. As Stuart Hall, whose own thinking stands testament to this, pointed out, “there is something *at stake* in cultural studies”; it is, he said, “a serious enterprise”, “a practice which aims to make a difference in the world” (1996: 263, 264). Its vocation is ‘worldly’. For this purpose, promising tools need to be identified, in a variety of sources, and articulated to the Cultural Studies project. This will frequently involve a process of *translation*, in the anti-essentialist and anti-teleological sense in which Hall and others have used this term. In other words, what is required, in keeping with the word’s Latin etymology, is a ‘transfer’, a ‘transport’, a ‘transformation’, that is to say, some work of recoding and recontextualization.

In other words, it is, to use Haraway’s terminology, a question of bringing the discipline of Cultural Studies and the approaches of the nonhuman turn into an ‘encounter’, one that leaves none of the participants unchanged, but transforms them through new relations (as Barad [2007] teaches us, *relata* never precede and are not independent of their relations). Regarding Cultural Studies, the outcomes of such an encounter include an increased awareness for the productivity and dynamics of material processes, where matter is understood not in essentialist terms but as contingent, variable, and flexible; the discarding of modern dualisms such as nature and culture, mind and body, human and nonhuman, replaced by a sharpened analytic focus on the processes through which such boundaries are erected, maintained, but also contested; a renegotiation or extension of the realm of the political, marked, for instance, by important reconceptualizations of notions of agency and subjectivity or by new forms of the study of power; an intensified interest for and engagement with knowledge produced by the natural sciences; and, last but not least, an explicitly postanthropocentric ethics, revolving around the relations, dependencies, and interdependencies with human and nonhuman others, and focused, among other things, on issues of accountability, ‘reponse-ability’ (Haraway 2016), and care.

Such an encounter enriches the other approaches as well. If you take, say, some of the new materialisms as an example, Cultural Studies allows for a very productive refraction or, as Barad (2007) might say, ‘diffraction’, based on some of the aspects that define Cultural Studies: I am thinking here of its emphasis on contingency and its rigorous contextualism, its attention to complexity, its dedication to the concrete, and its conviction of what we may call the primacy of the political. Taken to-

gether, all this may serve as a welcome corrective to what critics such as Thomas Lemke (2021) and Katharina Hoppe (Hoppe/Lemke 2021), whose argument I follow very closely here (cf. esp. Hoppe/Lemke 2021: 156f), have described as the overly affirmative orientation of some new materialist thinking, which – for instance, the work of Jane Bennett or Rosi Braidotti – sometimes tends to romanticize the relationality it highlights against older, essentialist ontologies, as something that is *per se* and always *good*. That is, implicitly or explicitly, it is assumed that once the fact of ontological interdependence, openness, and fluidity is affirmed, an existence that is more ‘green’ or even post-capitalist, more just, egalitarian, and democratic, will more or less automatically follow. What this fails to consider is that relationality is neither inherently good nor bad. Actually, such an assumption only runs the risk of a reintroduction of essentialism through the back door. Fluidity and plasticity are not at all incompatible with some of the more recent modes through which power is exercised and capitalist surplus value is generated. Thus, Thomas Lemke (2021), taking his cue from a few rather brief remarks made by Foucault in his lectures, has recently spoken of ‘environmentality’ as a neoliberal mode of government that represents a current trend towards an ‘ecologization of power’, insofar as this form of governmentality explicitly addresses issues of the environment and programmatically operates through attempts to act upon and regulate, *not* ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, but, precisely, processes and webs of relations. This, in other words, is a dispositive that is based on a decidedly *ecological* understanding of the environment, as having to do with dynamic processes, circulations, flows, etc., and where these are understood as being material-semiotic and natural-cultural in character. So here, the non-human is precisely *not* ignored and matter *not* treated as passive and static – instead, nonhuman organisms, geological forces, or technological artifacts are expressly mobilized in specific ways in order to establish and preserve particular social regimes and ways of life. We may, for instance, think of concepts such as ‘resilience’, ‘ecosystem services’, or ‘natural capital’ here, all of which do not at all signal a break with capitalism but aim in the direction of an ‘ecologically conscious’ regime that controls and capitalizes natural processes in a ‘sustainable’ way (Hoppe/Lemke 2021: 157). As Lemke summarizes: “The ‘nonhuman turn’ [...] and the move beyond anthropocentric ontologies is not at all incompatible with techno-managerial projects and capitalist imaginaries” (2021: 189).

Thus, instead of assuming that the insight into the radical relationality of the world always already makes a difference politically, we need to hold on the principle of contingency (Hoppe/Lemke 2021: 165) – that is to say, what needs to be analyzed are the concrete materialities, textures, and articulations of relations that are always specific (how are they structured? how are they being mobilized? by whom? for what purposes? ...). The political significance of relations as well as of the principles of fluidity, indeterminacy, and openness is itself unstable and flexible (Hoppe/Lemke 2021: 158). Rather than to presume that an alternative, relational understand-

ing of ontology will inevitably result in a radical politics, I believe that we should insist that there is no necessary causal connection between ontology and politics. Relations do not exist all by themselves but are articulated in always specific ways by and with a host of agentic forces (both 'human' and 'nonhuman') and sets of practices. And that means that if we want to transform our modes of existence, it is precisely these practices and articulations that we need to address and alter (though without thereby resorting to a simplistic, liberal, and voluntaristic understanding of agency or the subject!). Indeed, following science and technology studies, we may want to insist that the study of ontology actually requires an empirical and praxeological approach, insofar as realities and ways of being are never really pregiven in a kind of transhistorical, universal way, but come into existence and are stabilized through specific sets of material-discursive practices or 'modes of doing'. That is, the make-up of the world is effectively a *performative* affair: ontologies are constituted, 'done', enacted – they come into being through particular regimes of practices, not the other way round. They are "relational effects enacted in practices" (Lemke 2021: 148). And consequently, they can be changed.

What all of this amounts to – and this is exactly my point here – is a stronger focus on the *political* dimensions of ontological questions. In other words: The encounter between Cultural Studies and the new materialism (or the nonhuman turn more generally) entails a *politicization of ontology*, an extension of the political into the ontological. Instead of embracing relationality per se, as some new materialist work is prone to do, a posthumanist Cultural Studies approach enquires into how relations are materially composed, assembled, and articulated, and addresses this itself as a site of struggle. After all, since ontologies are not essential but contingent, local, and temporary, they must principally be understood as embattled and conflictual. Here, I believe the encounter or articulation with key elements from within the Cultural Studies toolbox – I am thinking, for instance, of the theory of hegemony – can prove tremendously productive: Among other things, it may sharpen our sensitivity for the fact that the materialization of every relation, the composition of every assemblage, inevitably involves, indeed *depends upon*, a process of exclusion or abjection of other, alternative possibilities, that is, on the production of a 'constitutive outside' (cf. Papadopoulos 2010a, 2014). As John Law and Marianne Lien stress, it is important to "attend not just to ontologies enacted, but also to their shadowland of alterities", to the "not quite realised realities" (2012: 373, 363). These remainders and exteriorities inescapably continue to haunt, destabilize, and contest existing configurations. That is, in the domain of ontology too, antagonism is – at least principally – ineradicable. What Rancière (1999) calls 'disagreement' concerns not only 'orders of the visible and sayable', but what may be called '*orders of the existable*', orders of being (cf. Papadopoulos 2018). A perspective diffracted by or through Cultural Studies brings these exclusions, asymmetries, and instabilities that accompany all material-discursive processes of constitution into sharp(er) focus. At the same time, and relat-

edly, I think more attention would then be paid to hegemonic, durable, long-lasting constellations (Hoppe/Lemke 2021: 78). This is another important shift in emphasis. Whereas new materialist work can tend to overemphasize contingency and radical openness, permanent mutability, and endless becoming – or, in a Deleuzian idiom, the forces of deterritorialization – we *also* must address and study the processes of (re-)territorialization, that is, the conditions and ways in which relations are *stabilized*, reproduced, and sustained – and that includes/means relations of domination and subordination (cf. also, in particular, Giraud 2019). While the new materialism is certainly right to de-essentialize and, to borrow a term of the English philosopher Nick Land (2011: 273), to ‘de-thing’ entities, and to underscore the basic instability and processuality of the world, relations nevertheless *do* assume stability, ontologies *do* sediment and congeal into at least temporarily set arrangements. This stability is not pre-given and primordial, it is not inevitable and for all time, but it does exist. As Frédéric Neyrat has argued, the notion of relationality needs to be complemented by what he calls a “*counterprinciple of separation*” (2019: 14). Borrowing a term frequently used in the theory of hegemony, we may perhaps speak of an ‘arbitrary closure’ or of a provisional ‘suturing’ of relations here. Concepts such as these (the already mentioned articulation is another one) are extremely helpful to move beyond the unhelpful dichotomies – unhelpful both analytically and politically – that structure some of the discourses in which we currently think and speak about these matters: roots vs. routes, monads vs. nomads, etc. (and here, these debates to some extent actually reproduce some of the issues and impasses that already emerged in discussions within and about poststructuralism). So, echoing an argument made in a different context by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001: 154–56), I believe it is not enough – again, neither analytically nor politically – to simply accentuate and mobilize relationality, processuality, and (vital) materiality against alleged cultural norms of fixity and stability. Instead, what is necessary is to focus on the level of *production* – the production of relations, of stability and mutability, of closure and openness, etc. This is one key site of political struggle today: the control of this production, in a collective, democratic, egalitarian, and non-anthropocentric way – its ‘commoning’ – and with the goal of enabling livable, just futures for the many – alternative worldings, ‘alterontologies’, terraformation from below (Papadopoulos 2018).

Thus, in theoretical terms, what transpires here is something like a postfoundational, *hegemony theory of ontology*, where ontology emerges more clearly than before as “a vital and contested political terrain” (Morton 2013: 20), a realm of power relations. Here, what we may call ‘ontopolitics’ encompasses, but also goes beyond the more ‘formalist’ ‘assembly politics’ proposed by actor-network theory in the direction of the more mundane, everyday ‘politics of matter’ advocated by thinkers like Dimitris Papadopoulos, dedicated to the concrete, on-the-ground, practical, and experimental rearticulation of the material conditions of existence – let’s emphasize that “ontology is ordinary”! And this ontopolitics might perhaps be thought about in

ways analogous to those proposed by Raymond Williams (1977: 121–27) for the study of cultures, that is, in terms of hegemonic, residual, and emergent, and of dominant, alternative, and oppositional ontologies. At the same time, such a focus on questions of ontology, important as it is, would always need to be complemented by and connected to an attention to the level of political economy, and ontopolitics consequently coupled with a politics of redistribution (cf. Fraser 1995), that is, a more ‘direct’ and ‘open’ opposition to power in the shape of struggles for the abolition or transformation of particular institutions, laws, economic relations, etc. Following Gramsci and his notion of the ‘war of position’, we still need to fight on several fronts and strive for the articulation of different terrains (or ‘trenches’) of struggle (now including that of ontology). For me, this, to borrow a phrase of Papadopoulos’ (2010b), would be a truly political, ‘insurgent posthumanism’.

As was pointed out before, the undertaking of bringing Cultural Studies and the new materialism or the nonhuman turn more generally into a contact zone is of course not without its obstacles. In chapter 1, I have noted some of the tensions and conflicts that have to be addressed as well, whether it is the friction between constructivist and realist epistemologies, the question of the social totality, or the status of critique. Yet, on the whole, it is my impression that both, the rhetoric of innovation on the part of the new approaches as well as the accent on differences and clashes on both sides have been somewhat exaggerated (think, e.g., of the alleged radical ‘culturalism’ or ‘textualism’ of poststructuralist theories). Ultimately, I believe it is fruitful to shift the focus from the search for differences to potential points of contact, cross-fertilization, and to possible alliances between the new and older – critical, poststructuralist, materialist – movements. Let the work of articulation begin!

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Part II – Tools

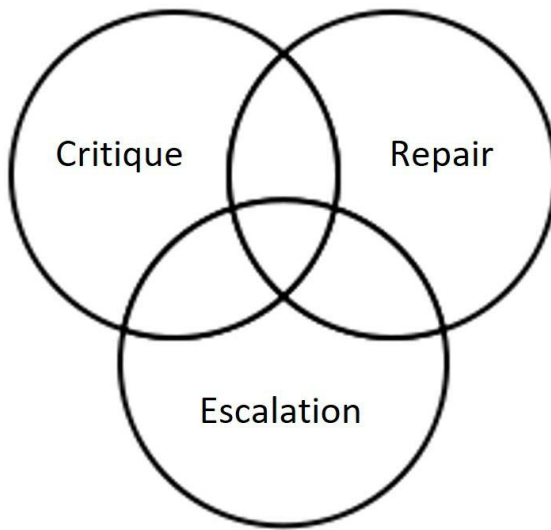
3. Critique, Repair, Escalation: Three Modes of Posthumanist Theorizing

The Modes of Posthumanist Theory and the Cultural Studies Kraken

Posthumanism, broadly conceived, investigates and contributes to the ‘end of man’, in the sense of a particular, humanist conception of the human. As such, it draws on and brings together a wide array of critiques of the human, for instance in evolutionary biology, Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and poststructuralism, science and technology studies, postcolonialism, disability, gender, and queer studies, and many other fields. As a theoretical formation, posthumanism is thus of a markedly hybrid nature. For one thing, it is strongly transdisciplinary – particularly in its current ‘phase’ after the postanthropocentric or nonhuman turn – but it also encompasses a wide variety of different, even conflicting, outlooks, positions, and approaches. Nevertheless, as I want to argue here, despite, or rather beyond, this heterogeneity, we can identify certain recurrences, isotopies, and patterns, which allow us to distinguish distinct *paradigms* or, better, *modes* of posthumanist theorizing. Inspired by the work of critics like Rita Felski (2015), I conceive theoretical ‘modes’ as particular *styles of thought*, and thus as a matter not only of philosophy and politics but also of affect and rhetoric, that is, as involving specific epistemological, ontological, and political orientations as well as distinctive sensibilities, dispositions, moods, even *ethea*, and forms of speech, tone, narrative, and argument. As such, a mode constitutes a unique approach to and manner of doing theory, consisting of a characteristic set of analytical assumptions, conventions, expectations, and orientations. Since intellectual work is always a ‘worldly’, material-semiotic affair, these different theoretical modes inevitably ‘matter’, functioning also as political interventions. As Donna Haraway has put it: “It matters what thoughts think thoughts” (2016: 39). I want to suggest that within posthumanism, we can today identify three principal modes of theory. There is, of course, *critique*, the mode that, because of its virtually uncontested dominance, was for a long time more or less synonymous with theory itself. Following Eve Sedgwick (2003: 123–51) and Felski, I essentially conceive of it as involving a ‘paranoid’ or ‘suspicious’ stance, of being committed to negativity and the practice of denaturalization, and of being driven by an interventionist,

emancipatory ethos. Yet, this hegemony has come under attack, especially by what, following Sedgwick, I will call a *reparative* mode of theorizing, whose main characteristics are a more affirmative, hopeful outlook, and its commitment to an ethics of care, and which manifests most clearly, though by no means exclusively, in the various new approaches associated with the ‘postcritical turn’ (Anker/Felski 2017a; Felski 2015). Finally, there is *escalation*, a mode that works through excess and overdrive, through pushing things to the extreme, that is resolutely anti-natural and committed to a politics of radical immanence, and whose chief, though again not sole, expression is accelerationism.

Fig. 1: *The Modes of Posthumanist Theory*



These three modes are best thought of as ideal types, forming the end points of a continuum, or as three overlapping circles (fig. 1), allowing for the existence of all sorts of mixed forms. For in reality, while theoretical texts can usually be said to follow one of them, they frequently nevertheless also contain elements belonging to at least one other mode. As always, impurity is the rule rather than the exception. Needless to say, an author's work as a whole can, and often does, involve shifts from one theoretical mode to another, too – and in fact, such shifts constitute precisely one of the aspects that, as Foucault (1972a, 1972b) has argued, problematize the very notion of the ‘author’ and the ‘oeuvre’. Thus, whereas Foucault himself, for instance, is generally associated with critique, his work – and not just his late writings,

in which he explicitly invokes an ethos of care – also distinctly exhibits traits of the reparative mode (cf. Sheehy 2020). Indeed, it would seem that such entanglements, of varying degrees and kinds, are rather frequent in the history of theory. The significance of our present, properly ‘posthumanist’, theoretical moment is precisely that by crystallizing the different modes, it renders these entanglements transparent and thus allows us to make them productive.

In the following, I will briefly review the three theoretical modes I have introduced, which cover much of the work that is currently being done within posthumanism and beyond. Somewhat analogous to Stuart Hall’s (1986) argument regarding what, in 1980, he considered the two dominant paradigms within Cultural Studies, I want to argue that for a posthumanist Cultural Studies today, the task should not so much be to choose or side with one of the currents of contemporary posthumanism, but rather to combine them. We should take seriously the well-known Deleuzo-Foucauldian notion of theory as a ‘toolbox’ (Foucault 1996a: 76) and adopt an orientation that would be essentially a *pragmatic* one, selecting those concepts, ideas, and methods from our kit that, in a given situation, are most promising, most useful, that will *work best*, regardless of where they come from. As Bruno Latour says, it is a “question of having the right tools for the right job” (2010: 475). In fact, I am convinced that each of the theoretical modes has something vital to contribute to our efforts to understand and respond to the pressing issues of the present. Each of them “does some things well and other things poorly or not at all” (Felski 2015: 8). Following Latour (via Felski), each is a distinct *actant*, making certain things (and not others) happen. Each of them is therefore necessary, with the strengths of one compensating for the weaknesses of another. Only by using *all* the theoretical resources available to us will we be able to come up with adequate ways of tackling the colossal ‘messiness’ and complexity of the Anthropocene. The friction – theoretical, political, ethical, etc. – such a syncretistic approach entails should not be regarded as an impediment, but rather as something that can itself be made productive. We have to be willing, as Haraway – whose work is exemplary in this regard – has put it, to tolerate and work with “the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true” (2010: 2190). It is my contention that Cultural Studies, a project that, in terms of theory, has always been markedly and programmatically open, heterogeneous, and trans- or even postdisciplinary, represents one (though certainly not the only) intellectual formation that is particularly well-positioned for such an endeavor. I believe that a posthumanist Cultural Studies might today most profitably situate itself at the center of the diagram above, in the hybrid space where all three circles overlap. From there, like a bricolage-savvy octopus¹, it can practice ‘tentacular thinking’ (Haraway

1 Cephalopods can be considered the signature of (new) ‘weird’ fiction (Luckhurst 2017: 1054) and, by extension, of Anthropocene writing and thinking more generally.

2016: 30–57), reaching in all directions, holding and making use of many things at once.

The Hammer: Critique

The first major instrument in the Kraken's posthumanist bag of tools is the hammer of critique (Latour 2010: 475). It is very useful for breaking down walls, smashing idols, destroying illusions. With Terry Eagleton, we could say that the point of critique is to regress us to childhood, that is to say, to (re-)turn us to a state of incredulous wonder and bewilderment regarding 'the way things are'. If, for Eagleton, "[c]hildren make the best theorists", this is because "they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as 'natural', and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions" (1990: 34). Critique, in other words, works essentially through (modernist) *estrangement*, making the familiar and unthinkingly accepted strange. It defamiliarizes, so that what previously appeared to us as natural and inevitable is revealed to be a historical construction and thus *contingent*. As Max Horkheimer famously put it: "Critical theory maintains: it need not be so; man [sic] can change reality, and the necessary conditions for such change already exist." (1972b: 227n20). As was already pointed out, such theorizing in the critical mode – *critical theory* (in a wider sense, beyond its association with the Frankfurt School) – has over the past few decades become more or less synonymous with theory itself, so that Jonathan Culler, for instance, can declare theory to equal "a critique of common sense and exploration of alternative conceptions" (2000: 4). This latter aspect is likewise essential to the critical mode. Critique can be said to take its bearings from Marx, who spoke of the necessity for a "*ruthless criticism of everything existing*", which "must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be" (1978b: 13), and who famously asserted that the task of philosophy was not primarily to interpret the world, but to change it (1978c: 145). Theory, for him, was a "practical-critical" (1978c: 143), transformational affair, itself a "material force" (1978a: 60) in the struggle for emancipation. In Horkheimer's bold words: "[Critical] theory never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man's [sic] emancipation from slavery." (1972a: 246)

Thus, critique always involves denaturalization and aims at transformation. In the imagery of Nietzsche's (1969: 54–56) three metamorphoses of the spirit, critique is the lion fighting against the dragon of the status quo, clearing a space for the creation of something new.² In what was arguably the last great 'wave' of 'high theory', this mode of critique, as it transpires from the work of thinkers like Marx, Nietzsche, or those of the Frankfurt School, was brilliantly developed and explicitly theorized by

2 With his third metamorphosis, like Eagleton, Nietzsche too invokes the figure of the child.

Michel Foucault. Particularly in his two late lectures “What Is Critique?” and “What Is Enlightenment?”, Foucault presented an understanding of critique that may well serve as a further characterization of this mode in general. Conceiving critique as an *ethos*, one essentially derived from the Enlightenment, Foucault defines it in terms of a “critical ontology of ourselves” (1984: 47), a historical investigation whose focus are the ties that bind power, truth, and the subject. It asks: “in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?” (1984: 45) And again, we find in Foucault an emphasis on what Judith Butler (2001), in their commentary on the Foucauldian notion of critique, has called the ‘double task’ of critique, namely to combine the permanent critical interrogation of the present and of ourselves with the attempt at clearing a path towards something new. Critique, says Foucault, “will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think” (1984: 46). Critique consequently has a transgressive as well as experimental side. What Foucault thus highlights is that critique is always tied to a “voluntary inservitude” and “reflective indocility”, and hence, importantly, to a process of “desubjectification” (1996b: 386). Through critique, “the contemporary ordering of being is brought to its limit” (Butler 2001). Foucault thus concurs with the other major thinkers of the critical tradition in seeing critique as intimately tied to emancipation: “it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom” (1984: 46). And he specifies that this is always crucially also a matter of “freeing ourselves from ourselves” (Eagleton 1990: 36).³

As a mode of theorizing, one of the fundamental characteristics of critique is thus ‘the will to be against’ (Hardt/Negri 2001: 210–14) or ‘againstness’ (Felski 2015: 129). Though its commitment assumes different shapes, critique is nevertheless always firmly committed to *negativity*, understood as “a practice of the destruction of existent positivities through the performance of immanent ruptures” (Noys 2010: 17). It is out, as Benjamin Noys puts it, “to perform some necessary destruction” (2010: 4) – hence the image of the hammer. The defining prefixes of critique are ‘*de*’ – denaturalizing, demystifying, decoding, deconstructing, decentering, destabilizing, etc. – as well as ‘*un*’ and ‘*dis*’ – undoing, uncovering, unraveling, dismantling, disassembling, disenchanting, and so forth. As Felski, following Paul Ricœur (1970: 32–36), has argued, it is essentially a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, committed to ‘paranoid’ (Sedgwick 2003: 123–51) or ‘symptomatic’ readings⁴, which characteristically work through (and conflate) the oppositions manifest/latent, present/ab-

3 It is thus important to understand Foucault’s oft-quoted definition of critique as “the art of not being governed so much” (1996b: 384) against the background of his notion of ‘governmentality’ and not, or at least not primarily, with a view to forms of governing per se.

4 These terms are here used in a metaphorical rather than diagnostic or medical sense.

sent, and surface/depth (Best/Marcus 2009: 3f). As the ‘method wars’ currently taking place in many areas within the humanities and beyond make clear, it is important to resist the prevalent conflation of critique with theory and to consider it as just one possible mode among others. That being said, it nevertheless seems clear that this mode, which has been vital in the development of the field of posthumanism, will continue to occupy a central role within any posthumanist Cultural Studies. Felski certainly has a point when she characterizes critique – the “suspicion without limits” (Cusset 2008: 83) – as frequently being a “mode of militant reading” (2015: 1) – yet, it seems to me that in the social, cultural, economic, and political struggles of the present, we will hardly be able to do without certain forms of militancy.

Amongst other things, the significance of critique in this context is attested to by the theoretical formation of ‘critical posthumanism’, whose name already indicates its continuity with the tradition of critique. Particularly considering the centrality of *representation* and its critique for Cultural Studies, the relevance of this formation to, and its compatibility with, the discipline is almost immediately apparent. Building on the antihumanist legacy, especially of the poststructuralist generation, critical posthumanism typically employs a combined cultural materialist and deconstructivist approach (Herbrechter 2013: 9f), aiming, as Stefan Herbrechter puts it, at “inhabit[ing] humanism deconstructively” (2013: 7). To the extent that it aspires to sabotage the “dialectic engine” (Herbrechter 2013: 87) driving what Giorgio Agamben has called the “anthropological machine” of humanism and thus to stall this “device for producing the recognition of the human” (2004: 26), critical posthumanism links up more or less directly with the ambitions of Cultural Studies as a ‘political project’ (Hall 1996). What is of particular importance here is the way critical posthumanism, incorporating arguments from fields such as postcolonial, queer, or gender studies, reveals the realm of the human as a “colonial realm” (Halberstam 2020: 7) insofar as the human “functions to domesticate and hierarchize difference within the human (whether according to race, class, gender [or any of the many other categories]) and to absolutize difference between the human and the nonhuman” (Halberstam/Livingston 1995: 10). That is to say, it discloses and contests the “morphological normativity” (Braidotti 2009: 526) that is always inscribed at the core of the human. For critical posthumanism, as Judith Butler, whose work is central in this context, puts it, the human is essentially “a differential norm” and “a differential of power”, “a value and a morphology that may be allocated and retracted” (2016: 76, 77). Proceeding from the constitutive and political nature of representation, a Cultural Studies inflected by these theoretical perspectives thus analyzes and deconstructs discursive formations and regimes of representation in order to show that there are discursive limits which establish the limits of human intelligibility and to disorganize “that field of discourse and power that orchestrates, delimits, and sustains that which qualifies as ‘the human’” (Butler 1993: 8). Here, as Stuart Hall once said, textuality indeed emerges “as a site of life and death” (1996: 273). However, a properly

posthumanist Cultural Studies would even go beyond this focus on discursivity, incorporating it into a broader examination of the diverse processes (including the material, practices, etc.) through which the human is ‘assembled’. Yet, as a deeply ‘worldly’, interventionist project, such a Cultural Studies also exceeds the genealogical investigation of the contingency of an assemblage such as the human subject by pushing towards “an insurrection at the level of ontology” (Butler 2006: 33). It attempts, in other words, to “free subject formation from the normative vision of the self” (Braidotti 2009: 527) and to disrupt the contemporary ordering of being by encouraging experimental processes of *reassembling* for the sake of alternative, *unruly ontologies*.

Here, critique overlaps with or shifts into the more affirmative theoretical mode of repair, to which I will turn next. As this makes clear, there is an element of caricature to the usual equation of critique with (nothing but) destruction. Indeed, while negativity, as we have seen, is always central to its operation, critique can usually not be reduced to it. While certainly secondary, there is nevertheless frequently a distinctly ‘positive’ side to it, so that I would join Benjamin Noys when he argues for a “detachment of the thinking of negation from a purified and absolute politics of abstractive destruction” (2010: 171) and consequently for a more nuanced conception of negativity. In fact, critique seems to oscillate between a resolutely ‘paranoid’ or cynical and a more affirmative, positive pole, the latter of which effectively moves it closer to the reparative mode – a fact that lends support to the argument that the three theoretical modes under discussion here are better conceived in terms of a continuum rather than as fixed, clear-cut, and fully separate.

Glue: Repair

Over the past two decades, critique has increasingly come under attack from various sides. Particularly within literary studies, many scholars have turned away from ‘suspicious’, ‘paranoid’ approaches to textuality and sought for alternative ways of reading. Their frustration with critique⁵ stems, among other things, from its lack of attention to affect and the embodied dimensions of experience (as well as its own limited affective range), the ways in which its methodological orientations limit the inquiries, experiences, and insights available to the critic, as well as its perceived political shortcomings. The latter include what is perceived as critique’s normalization and domestication as part of the academic mainstream within the neoliberal university⁶, its Eurocentrism (particularly its ties to the rationalist and secular logic of

5 I here follow Anker/Felski 2017b: 10–17; Felski 2015.

6 In fact, proponents of postcritical approaches frequently go even further than such a ‘meta-suspicious’ critique of critique. Instead of claiming that critique has of late become institu-

modernity), its elitism (e.g., in its denigration of common sense and ordinary experience and language), as well as its diffusion not just into a relatively broad, widely-shared cultural sensibility, but, much more problematically, into the worldview and rhetoric of groups such as right-wing populists and conspiracy theorists, a fact that makes the received (self-)image of suspicion as inherently marginal, oppositional, and aligned with the left appear rather suspect. In this context, it would seem that the Cultural Studies concept of 'articulation' (cf., e.g., Grossberg 1986, esp. 53ff; Slack 1996) may prove helpful, allowing us to replace the essentializing binary opposition that frequently dominates theory in the critical mode, between an intrinsically resistant and progressive critique on the one hand and inevitably 'uncritical', apolitical or even quietist alternative modes on the other, with the question (and task) of their always specific and contingent relations and articulations. In the domain of literary criticism, this dissatisfaction with critique and its 'paranoid' outlook has spawned a number of innovative approaches such as 'reparative' (Sedgwick 2003: 123–51), 'distant' (Moretti 2013), 'surface' (Best/Marcus 2009), 'just' (Marcus 2007), and 'flat' (Love 2010, 2013) readings. Though they are not to be conflated, many of these readings tend towards the literal or descriptive rather than the 'symptomatic' – one reads 'with the grain' (Bewes 2010), not against it. In this way, the hermeneutics of suspicion is often replaced by a hermeneutics of trust, faith, restoration, and recollection (Ricoeur 1970: 28–32). As Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski observe, most of the scholars associated with postcritique opt for "a more generous posture toward the text" than the suspicious one and are hence "committed to treating texts with respect, care, and attention, emphasizing the visible rather than the concealed in a spirit of dialogue and constructiveness rather than dissection and diagnosis" (2017b: 16).

Trust, restoration, generosity, respect, constructiveness, care – these are some of the keywords characteristic of what I call the theoretical mode of repair. The post-critical turn in literary studies is just one of its manifestations. Compared with critique, this mode has come to prominence only fairly recently, especially – though not exclusively – from within certain strands of feminist and queer studies, actor-network theory, science and technology studies, affect theory, new materialism, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology. Notably, all of these theoretical formations are more or less closely associated with the paradigm shift of the 'nonhuman turn' (Grusin 2015) – and indeed, Christian Haines and Sean Grattan (2017: 28n1) have even gone so far as to consider posthumanism as a whole as defined by this

tionally co-opted and defanged, they question the very notion of critique still underlying such complaints, which continue to conceive of it as an inherently transgressive and resistant mode. Finding this understanding to be a highly idealized, unrealistic and, indeed, unrealizable one, these scholars, drawing on approaches such as actor-network theory, instead make a case for "a politics of relation rather than negation, of mediation rather than co-option, of alliance and assembly rather than alienated critique" (Felski 2015: 147).

recent shift towards repair. It seems as if this shift, like the turn to the nonhuman, is in certain ways intimately connected with, an expression of and a response to, the problematic of the Anthropocene. Repair, in other words, emerges as a mode of theorizing expressly developed in the face of the present “urgencies” (Haraway 2016: 37), a form of thinking dedicated to exploring what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing calls the ‘arts of living on a damaged planet’ (Tsing et al. 2017) or the ‘possibility of life in capitalist ruins’ (Tsing 2015). Reparative theorizing can thus be said to constitute a more or less direct response to our current condition of global, existential precarity – “thinking with precarity” (Tsing 2015: 42), or, to use Steven Jackson’s resonant expression, “broken world thinking”. Jackson’s marvelous essay “Rethinking Repair”, from which this phrase is taken, is crucial to my conceptualization of the reparative mode. On the one hand, this mode proceeds from “an appreciation of the real limits and fragility of the worlds we inhabit – natural, social, and technological – and a recognition that many of the stories and orders of modernity [...] are in process of coming apart” (Jackson 2014: 221). It rejects narratives of progress – but also of ruination and apocalypse, which are still under the spell of progress – and takes breakdown, erosion, dissolution, and decay as its starting point. At the same time, on the other hand, it cultivates the more hopeful approach of what Tsing terms ‘arts of noticing’ (2015: 17–25), that is, “a deep wonder and appreciation for the ongoing activities by which [...] rich and robust lives are sustained against the weight of centrifugal odds” (Jackson 2014: 222), activities that are habitually rendered invisible by established theoretical outlooks and narratives, focused as they are on progress, growth, production, design, etc. As Jackson points out, the fulcrum of these two different realities – pain and possibility, destruction and creativity – is *repair*: “the subtle acts of care by which order and meaning [...] are maintained and transformed” (2014: 222).⁷ The notion of *care* is central here. Indeed, Jackson goes on to argue that an ethics of repair, by going beyond the functionalism dominant within technology studies as well as humanist ethics, must consequently open into an ethics of care involving the assumption of “responsibility in chains of mutual entanglement and dependency” (2014: 231). In other words: We have to care *about*, care *for*, and care *with* (cf. Tronto 2013) not just other human beings, but all kinds of actants with which we are entangled, including, in Jackson’s case, our technologies. Or, as Bruno Latour (2012) has it: Unlike Dr. Frankenstein, we should ‘love our monsters’ and ‘care for our technologies as we do for our children’.

7 While I agree with Jackson’s observation that “the world is always breaking; it’s in its nature to break”, and simultaneously “is always being recuperated and reconstituted through repair” (2014: 223), the reparative mode, including Jackson’s essay itself, emerges largely in response to a very particular breakdown, or set of breakdowns, which we have come to associate with the term ‘Anthropocene’.

Care is something like the watchword of reparative writing. In fact, if the characteristic affective orientation of critique is suspicion, care constitutes the distinctive ethos of repair (cf. Sheehey 2020: 74).⁸ Typically grounded in a *relational ontology* which sees all ‘existents’ (humans and other animals, objects, plants, organisms, land, rocks, physical forces, etc.) as unavoidably interconnected and interdependent, reparative theory frequently asserts the vital relevance of care – as affective and ethical disposition, material practice, as well as political obligation (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) – for the maintenance of our complex and entangled webs of life (and nonlife). Such posthumanist ‘thinking with care’, conceiving “caring as a transformative ethos rather than a normative ethics” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 67), has been programmatically developed in the illuminating work of María Puig de la Bellacasa and has lately found a more radical expression in Patricia MacCormack’s *Ahuman Manifesto*. The latter, “a call to activism for the other at the expense of the self”, makes the case not only for ‘active passivity’ and a resolute practice of ‘leaving be’, but for the actual abolition of the human both conceptually and in reality as necessary forms of care and ‘grace’ – of “radical compassion” (2020: 5, x) – in the Anthropocene. Another recent manifestation of the current relevance of the reparative mode is the Care Collective’s *Care Manifesto*⁹, which, characteristically proceeding from the recognition and embrace of the mutual interdependencies of all (living) beings, sharply criticizes neoliberal capitalism as “uncaring by design” and sets out to challenge “the limits being placed upon our caring capacities, practices and imaginations” (2020: 10, 5). The text promotes a reconceptualization of care in the direction of a “radical egalitarianism”, towards what the authors call “an ethics of promiscuous care”, and by advocating a model of ‘universal care’ – “the ideal of a society in which care is placed front and centre on every scale of life” (2020: 40, 19). Today, this important text asserts, we urgently need new caring imaginaries, practices, and politics – and: “There is no category of human, or indeed non-human, to whom this does not apply.” (2020: 44)

Hence, reparative theorizing is a *caring thinking*, a thinking with care – as also evidenced by Bernard Stiegler’s (2018) play with the French words *penser* (to think) and *panser* (to bandage, to heal, to care for), translated into English by Daniel Ross as ‘care-ful thinking’ and ‘thought-ful caring’. Its affective orientation is thus typically quite different from the skepticism and ‘paranoia’ of critique. Indeed, repair often explicitly defines itself in distinction to what it sees as the “pervasive pessimism” and “chronic negativity” (Anker/Felski 2017b: 11) of “corrosive critique” (Puig de la

8 Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus even claim that posthumanism in general is not only “a caring paradigm [...] but also a paradigm for care” (2008: 109) (even though I would argue that their own writing is rather firmly located within the critical posthumanist mode).

9 It should be noted, however, that this text is simultaneously also indebted to the critical mode.

Bellacasa 2017: 49). Against this, the disposition of reparative theory is marked by an embrace of *the affirmative*: positivity, constructiveness, optimism, idealism, even utopianism, frequently define the outlook, mood, and tone of such writing.¹⁰ Consequently, repair generally champions a *politics of affirmation*, which “is affirmative in the sense that it actively works towards the creation of alternatives [...] by cultivating the relations that are conducive to the transmutation of values” (Braidotti 2010: 143). What it seeks is “freedom from the burden of negativity” (Braidotti 2010: 147), supplanting the self-defeating irony and cynicism, the resignation, despair, and passivity it associates with the critical mode with commitment, cooperation, creativity, innovation, imagination, activeness and, indeed, activism. Instead of “disengaged denunciations” and “the corrosive, self-certain, and self-contained traps of nothing-but-critique”, repair thus dedicates itself to “attentive practices of thought, love, rage, and care” and to cultivating what Haraway terms ‘response-ability’, which “requires the risk of being for some worlds rather than others and helping to compose those worlds with others” (Haraway 2016: 56, 178n32). As Haraway’s words make clear, rage still figures here, of course. One should not make the mistake of confusing repair with uncritical and naïve feel-good affirmationism. As a matter of fact, negativity is not outright *rejected* here; rather, since it is considered to have ‘run out of steam’ (Latour 2004), it is *decentered* and displaced, discarded merely as the be-all and end-all of theory (Felski 2015: 9). Yet, negativity is still traversed, worked through, or with. Hence, whereas a critic such as Benjamin Noys (2017) tends to speak of ‘anti-critique’, ‘postcritical’ tendencies – the prefix ‘post’ always denoting a more complex relationality and temporality – seems to me to be a more appropriate designation. Indeed, more than a few of the proponents of a reparative theoretical stance have emphasized the necessity to hold on to and integrate one kind or another of a critical sensibility into their respective approaches – though this is then no longer critique “in the eagle-like sense of the enlightened unveiling of hidden powers in the real causes of things, not in the sense of a critical distance of a skeptical aspirant to Zeus” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 61).

What all of these critics assert, however, is that, for theory in the Anthropocene, there is “a new set of skills to learn” (Latour 2010: 487): to repair, take care, conserve, compose, relate, associate, connect, assemble, gather, and so forth.¹¹ These are the verbs that recur time and again in reparative theorizing. New keywords for Cultural Studies! For Bruno Latour, therefore, “[t]he critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles” (2004: 246). The one who does not subtract, but adds to the world (Latour 1987), the one who does not undermine, but builds and makes possible. Rita Felski wonders: After we have all learned so well to insistently ask “But what about

10 In literary studies, there is even talk of a ‘eudaimonic turn’ (Pawelski/Moores 2013).

11 But also, in view of the ‘slow violence’ (Nixon 2011) of climate change, the sixth mass extinction, etc., to mourn and to ‘grieve-with’ (Haraway 2016: 38f; van Dooren 2016).

power?”), “[p]erhaps it is time to start asking different questions: ‘But what about love?’ Or: ‘Where is your theory of attachment?’”¹² (2015: 17f) Reparative theorizing thus suggests “a (knowledge) politics not so much driven by deconstruction of the given but [committed] to ‘passionate construction,’ ‘passionate connection’” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 79), propelled by the conviction that “emancipation [...] does not mean ‘freed from bonds’ but *well-attached*” (Latour 2005: 218). Not the hammer of critique, then, but the glue of repair – whose defining prefix is not ‘de’, but ‘re’: re-compose, reattach, reassemble, reconfigure, recuperate, reconnect, reimagine, re-world, etc. It is no coincidence that theorists who adopt a reparative stance such as Latour (2010: 485f) or Jackson (2014: 237) refer to Walter Benjamin’s well-known reflection on Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin famously reads as a depiction of the ‘angel of history’:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (2007: 257f)

I would argue that much theorizing in the reparative mode is not only driven by a similar profound skepticism towards ‘modernization’ and ‘progress’, but also by a (sometimes more, sometimes less) latent desire to ‘make whole what has been smashed’ (though mostly not in the sense of a preexisting whole). This, after all, is the meaning of *repair*. There is – in keeping with Eve Sedgwick’s elaboration of the reparative stance – an often underlying but distinct aspiration to conserve, preserve, as well as to ameliorate, replenish, and heal in most reparative theorizing. “Wars. So many wars”, writes Latour, and asks: “Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction?” (2004: 225) And he answers: “While critics still believe that there is too much belief and too many things standing in the way of reality, compositionists believe that there are enough ruins and that everything has to be reassembled piece by piece. Which is another way of saying that we don’t wish to have too much to do with the twentieth century: ‘Let the dead bury their dead.’” (2010: 475f) There is something unexpectedly modernist (not *modern*) here; a preoccupation, as T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*

12 While I appreciate this widening of the horizon of inquiry, following thinkers such as Dimitris Papadopoulos (2010, 2014) and María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 27–67), I would argue that the latter set of questions should actually be connected with the former one.

has it, with ‘fragments shored against our ruins’. Repair thus braces itself against what James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus called the ‘nightmare of history’, “a world”, as Sedgwick writes, “full of loss, pain, and oppression” (2003: 138). As Bonnie Sheehy observes: “The ‘reparative’ refers to a set of strategies whereby subjects salvage possibilities and sustenance from the objects of a culture.” (2020: 69) It is a theoretical “practice that transforms, mends, and provides sustenance”, “invested with a range of attitudes and affects that dispose critics toward an attentiveness to possibility, pleasure, and alteration” (Sheehy 2020: 70). Consequently, along with other more ‘positive’ affects, *hope* – not frequently encountered in theory of the critical mode – has come to new prominence in recent theorizing (cf., e.g., Ahmed 2010; Lear 2008; Muñoz 2009; Snediker 2009).

In all of this, and with its general combined focus on breakdown and renewal, pain and possibility, I believe that repair can be seen as an expression of a broader cultural shift that is still taking place. It is part of the emergence of what we may perhaps call an *Anthropocene* ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams 1977: 128–35), which is arguably also discernible in many other areas, such as the trend towards ‘reconstruction’ (rather than deconstruction) in contemporary literature (Funk 2017), the novel, posthumanist narratives and imaginaries of a number of recent motion pictures (esp. science fiction; e.g., Alex Garland’s 2018 film *Annihilation*)¹³, the ‘conciliative’, ‘consensual’ tendencies in much present-day art (Rauterberg 2021), the explicit concern with ecological issues in certain sections of today’s pop(-ular) culture (e.g., ‘Anthropocenema’ [Kara 2016], the work of performers like Björk, Sigur Rós, Grimes, and Nick Mulvey, or of artists such as Tara Donovan, Olafur Eliasson, or Ackroyd & Harvey), current forms of (eco-)political activism like Extinction Rebellion and the Fridays for Future movement, or the gradual restructuring of the (Gramscian) ‘common sense’ which seems to be happening at the moment – its ‘ecological turn’ – evident, for instance, in a now near-ubiquitous emphasis on themes such as anthropogenic climate change, sustainability, care, resilience, etc.

In a sense, then, repair is *the* theoretical mode of the moment – even though, as I argue here, by itself it is not enough. For the project of Cultural Studies, employing it in a more deliberate, strategic, and extensive way should not be particularly difficult. For while Cultural Studies has always ‘at heart’ been a distinctly critical enterprise, it has nevertheless also continuously ‘wrestled’ (Hall 1996: 265f) with the various critical traditions on which it has drawn and in this process frequently distanced itself from some of the aspects of critique now criticized by postcritical approaches. It has, for instance, even as it undoubtedly came to adopt many of the key assumptions and concepts of structuralism and poststructuralism, always retained something of a skeptical distance from particularly the more radical varieties of the constructivist paradigm – working, rather, ‘within shouting distance’ (Hall 1996: 265) of it – and

13 On this topic, cf. the coda of this book.

refused to relinquish notions such as (embodied, affective) ‘experience’ or (material) ‘reality’; it has always been suspicious of the master narratives and totalizing accounts regularly advanced by critique (‘the control society’, ‘the age of simulation’, etc.) and instead emphasized the need for more nuanced, contextualized, and ‘situated’ accounts; it has firmly rejected the sequestering of critical thinking in the ivory tower of the university and in various ways attempted to forge connections between the academic and the nonacademic world; against the view of ‘ordinary’ recipients as essentially passive cultural dupes, it has from the outset insisted that ‘critique is ordinary’ (Felski 2015: 139) and that consumers more or less actively negotiate the discourses, ideologies, and power structures in which they are caught in complex and often unpredictable ways; and, relatedly, and perhaps most importantly, it has – in keeping with Stuart Hall’s Gramscian motto “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” – frequently championed a more affirmative kind of theory and politics, even at the risk of being smiled at by the representatives of ‘high theory’ and critique – think, for instance, of the sympathetic reading of the charity supergroup Band Aid and the 1985 Live Aid event advanced by Hall and Martin Jacques (1986) as well as Dick Hebdige (1988: 216–23). In texts that, in both tone and tenor, resonate quite strongly with much recent, reparatively oriented writing, thinkers such as Hebdige made the case for a “revision of priorities” which, he maintained, “requires us to redefine the function(s) of critique” (1988: 223). Hebdige asserts:

A politics based exclusively on the perfection of critique, on the identification of pain and exploitation, on the regular exposure of ‘hard’, ‘unwelcome’ truths which would otherwise remain concealed from less alert, less well informed or less ‘politically committed’ individuals, a politics which offers only ‘dissent’ and ‘resistance’ as positive terms, is simply not enough. It will not work. (1988: 222f)

Against the fatalistic, authoritative, and totalizing character of such suspicious, ‘paranoid’ approaches, “the ‘fatal errors’ which all too often flow from the forms of institutionalised critique to which we are – perhaps treacherously – habituated”, Hebdige, not unlike Sedgwick or Felski, proposes a more tentative and flexible “weak thought” and “a more enabling, *vital* set of strategies” (1988: 216, 226, 210) attuned to “the positive potentialities” of phenomena, “working with and on the resources of optimism, good faith and good will”, engendering “a sense of possibility”, and articulating “positive critical energies” (1988: 217, 222, 210). Thus, the now prominent theoretical mode of repair already has a comparatively distinct and rich history within the discursive formation of Cultural Studies.

The Accelerator: Escalation

In his “Compositionist Manifesto”, Bruno Latour makes the case for a “radical transformation in the definition of what it means to progress” by replacing “an idea of inevitable progress” with “one of *tentative and precautionary progression*”. Accordingly, he intends his manifesto “[n]ot as a war cry for an avant-garde to move even further and faster ahead, but rather as a warning, a call to attention, so as to *stop* going further *in the same way* as before toward the future” (2010: 473). With this ‘avant-garde’, Latour may well have had a different theoretical stance in mind, whose origins lie in the French theory of the 1970s (though, as always, it can be traced back further, at least to the work of Marx), but which has come to prominence only over the last decade and, in 2013, spawned its own manifesto: accelerationism. I want to argue that in accelerationism, we can detect a third important posthumanist mode of theorizing – escalation – which, however, is not confined to it. As I see it, accelerationism is the purest, but by no means the sole manifestation of escalation – a theoretical mode which is not primarily defined by the fact that it makes processes of acceleration and intensification into its main concern – works such as Hartmut Rosa’s (2015) important study on social acceleration do just that, but remain firmly tied to the mode of critique¹⁴ – but that escalation constitutes its characteristic method, its quintessential argumentative, and often also rhetorical, move, that it designates a specific set of philosophical assumptions and a particular style of argument, and that it is made into a veritable ethos.

As Robin Mackay and Armen Avanesian explain in the introduction to their *Accelerationist Reader*, the term ‘accelerationism’ designates “a convergent group of new theoretical enterprises that aim to conceptualise the future outside of traditional critiques and regressive, decelerative, or restorative ‘solutions’” (2014: 6f). Though repair should certainly not be equated with regression, clearly accelerationism signals a new departure beyond the critical and the reparative modes. While its philosophical roots lie in classical Marxism, its historical emergence as a theoretico-political ‘movement’ is inseparable from what Jacques Camatte, an important thinker in this context, referred to as “the failure of a future that was thought inevitable” (2014: 133). In other words: The works that would later come to be seen as having articulated the accelerationist impulse for the first time, most notably texts by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard, constituted a more or less direct response to the failure of May 1968 and the concomitant disenchantment with the Marxist narrative of the certain supersession of capitalism. What ensued was a profound *dis-illusionment*: frustration and despair, but also a removal of all illusions intellectuals still held regarding the nature of the capitalist system, which

14 However, in his more recent work on ‘resonance’ (2019) and ‘uncontrollability’ (2020), Rosa is distinctly moving closer to the reparative mode.

they increasingly came to see as immune to received forms of political critique and activism. Consequently, as Sylvère Lotringer puts it, these “‘children of May,’ revolutionaries bereft of a revolution”, resolved “to sleep with the enemy” and “turned to capitalism, eager to extract its subversive energy they no longer found in traditional class struggle” (2007: 11). Theoretical work became driven by a ‘logic of failed revolt’ (Starr 1995). Accelerationism, therefore, can largely be seen as a symptom of and a response to *crisis* – in the 1970s in France, but equally in the 1990s in Britain, and in the early 21st century on a more international scale. For in a way, the basic sense of crisis persists, refracted through historical events and discourses such as, in the case of the 1990s, the global victory march of neoliberalism, the revolutions of 1989, and the ensuing debates surrounding the TINA doctrine and the notion of the ‘end of history’ (cf. esp. Fukuyama 1992), and, in the case of the present, the financial crisis of 2007/08 and the discourses of ‘capitalist realism’ and the ‘cancellation of the future’ (cf. esp. Berardi 2011; Fisher 2009, 2014a; Srnicek/Williams 2016; Williams/Srnicek 2014). Today, these discourses are intimately tied to the more general, in fact, global, problematic of the ‘Capitalocene’ (Moore 2015, 2016). In this context, the sense of crisis has, if anything, only become aggravated. As Steven Shaviro points out, “for us today, crisis has become a chronic and seemingly permanent condition. We live, oxymoronically, in a state of perpetual, but never resolved, convulsion and contradiction. Crises never come to a culmination; instead, they are endlessly and indefinitely deferred” (2015: 9) – “omni-crisis” (Hardt/Negri 2001: 189). Hence, our experience of the contemporary moment is that of a frustrating impasse, of a ‘frenetic standstill’ (Rosa 2015) – an eternal, ‘absolute present’, in which, as Fredric Jameson famously put it, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (2003: 76).

What present-day accelerationism reacts to is thus essentially what Marx described as the transition of capitalism from ‘formal’ to ‘real subsumption’, a process that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have redescribed as “investing not only the economic or only the cultural dimension of society but rather the social *bios* itself”. That is to say that “the increasingly intense relationship of mutual implication of all social forces that capitalism has pursued throughout its development has now been fully realized”, so that “the whole social body is comprised by power’s machine”. Today, in other words, biopolitical capitalism operates “a control that extends throughout the depths of the consciousnesses and bodies of the population – and at the same time across the entirety of social relations” (Hardt/Negri 2001: 24f). Capitalism’s ‘extensive expansion’ across the entire globe is thus coupled with an unprecedented ‘intensive expansion’ (Masumi 1992: 132), which – whether it is labor, social life, subjectivity, affect, creativity, or cognitive processes – leaves no aspect of life uncolonized. Consequently, in the ‘smooth space’ of neoliberal, globalized, networked capitalism, in which power no longer has a definitive place but is “both everywhere and nowhere” (Hardt/Negri 2001: 190), there is no longer any *outside* to the system,

from which it could effectively be attacked. Accelerationists maintain that in this situation, “[r]enouncing [...] critique and consolation” (Lyotard 1993: 120) is the only way forward – the first, because it has lost all foothold and become ineffective, the second because all calls to slow down, scale back, and return to one form or another of primordial purity are not only fundamentally illusory but also politically dangerous. As Sadie Plant and Nick Land put it, in a tone and rhetoric typical of the CCRU’s (the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at Warwick University) accelerationism in the 1990s:

Security cybernetics has supplanted the critique of alienation [...]. Alienation used to diagnose the condition of a population becoming foreign to itself, offering a prognosis that still promised recovery. All that is over. We are all foreigners now, no longer alienated, but alien [...].

To what could we wish to return? Heidegger completed the degeneration of authenticity into xenocidal neurosis. Being died in the führer-bunker, and purity belongs entirely to the cops. The capitalist metropolis is mutating beyond all nostalgia. (2014: 306)

Though the two theoretical modes are generally very different, both escalation and repair thus also emerge as antidotes to what is perceived as the exhaustion of critique, to ‘left melancholia’ (Brown 2000), ‘transcendental miserabilism’ (Land 2011), political defeatism and inertia. Yet, whereas the one responds with an emphasis on *innehalten*, that is, pausing for a moment, on conservation and care, the other presses on, pushing even further ahead – instead of the ‘re’ of repair, provisionally patching things together, the ‘un’ – in the sense of a release – of escalation, forever speeding things up, plunging further in, and intensifying our immersion in current processes: unbinding, unleashing, unfettering, uncaging, unlocking, etc. Thus, the essence of accelerationism is “the argument that the only way out is the way through” (Shaviro 2015: 2). Or, as Mark Fisher puts it, “if there is no desire to go back except as a cheap Hollywood holiday in other people’s misery – if [...] there are no primitive societies”, then “the only direction [is] forward” – “[t]hrough the shit of capital, its metal bars, its polystyrene, its books, its sausage pâtés, its cyberspace matrix” (2014b: 340).¹⁵ Since retreatist solutions are not an option anymore, accelerationism holds that “we must match and exceed capital’s inhuman speeds” and therefore insists on “the continuing dynamism and transformation of the human wrought by the unleashing of productive forces, arguing that it is possible to align *with* their revolutionary force but *against* domestication” (Mackay/Avanessian 2014: 17, 13). The origins of such an approach lie primarily in Marx’s ‘parallax’ view of capitalism,

15 Fisher’s text here references a notorious passage from Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* (1993: 115f).

expressed, for instance, in his (and Engels') famous assertion of its 'constant revolutionizing', melting 'all that is solid into thin air', or in his well-known argument about the increasing conflict between the forces and the relations of production, effectively creating the conditions for its own overcoming. But it is also rooted in the (early) work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, especially their influential characterization of capitalism as a force that is on the one hand revolutionary and 'deterritorializing', but on the other simultaneously inhibiting and 'reterritorializing'. It was particularly the following 'accelerationist' passage from their *Anti-Oedipus* that proved to be inspirational:

But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one? – To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist "economic solution"? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to "accelerate the process," as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet. (1983: 239f)

Building on this, accelerationists like Gilles Lipovetsky argue that "'revolutionary' actions are not those which aim to overthrow the system of Capital, which [...] has never ceased to be revolutionary, but those which *complete* its rhythm in all its radicality" (2014: 233) – or rather, which opt for the latter as the only path to achieve the former.

Thus, accelerationism denotes a politics of *radical immanence*, and one that eschews 'folk politics' (Srnicek/Williams 2016), centered on the small-scale, the authentic, the everyday, the traditional, and the natural, and, instead, is "at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology" (Williams/Srnicek 2014: 354). This refusal of transcendence as well as of decelerative, regressive solutions is characteristic of the escalative mode of theory at large, which generally considers certain contemporary processes such as technologization, mediatization, digitalization, globalization, or 'posthumanization' not only as irreversible, but, indeed, as desirable, because they open up previously foreclosed possibilities. In this, escalation is vehemently *anti-naturalist*, framing "nature and the natural as a space for contestation" (Hester 2018: 19). The position of xenofeminism (XF), an accelerationist strand of feminism, first articulated by the Laboria Cuboniks collective, is emblematic here:

XF seizes alienation as an impetus to generate new worlds. We are all alienated – but have we ever been otherwise? It is through, and not despite, our alienated con-

dition that we can free ourselves from the muck of immediacy. Freedom is not a given – and it's certainly not given by anything 'natural'. The construction of freedom involves not less but more alienation; alienation is the labour of freedom's construction. Nothing should be accepted as fixed, permanent, or 'given' – neither material conditions nor social forms. (2018: 1)

Escalative approaches such as this one thus rigorously position themselves 'against nature' (Daston 2019) and 'against purity' (Shotwell 2016) and embrace alienation as a positive, emancipatory force (cf. Trafford/Wolfendale 2019) – or, as the CCRU collective puts it: "Alienated and loving it." (2014: 331) Rejecting essentialist humanism as "capitalism's default ideology" (Noys 2014a: 11), escalation revolves around a "transformative anthropology" (Negri 2014: 373) and "relentlessly revises what it means to be human" (Negarestani 2014: 427).¹⁶

Like the other theoretical modes, escalation is of course profoundly heterogeneous, comprising not only very different strands of accelerationism¹⁷ – from the libidinal-anarchic one of the 1970s, via the techno-nihilistic cyber-accelerationism of the 1990s, to the more sober, Enlightenment-rationalistic variant of the present, from left to right, etc. – but also, to a varying extent, the work of an extremely wide range of thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Paul Preciado, McKenzie Wark, Benjamin Bratton, Tiziana Terranova, Helen Hester, or Andrew Culp. Revolving as it does around intensification, acceleration, and expansion, the escalative mode is typically affirmationist, in the sense in which Ben Noys (2010) has used the term – even in a case like Baudrillard's more ambivalent, 'negative accelerationism' (Noys 2010: 6). Yet, one can also identify other manifestations as, for instance, Culp's idiosyncratic counter-reading of the philosophy of Deleuze in terms of the destructive 'darkness' he identifies in Deleuze's work and which he escalates towards a "revolutionary negativity" (2016: 2). A very different kind of text, for sure. However, as in the case of the other modes, what counts are not particular arguments, which may well be divergent or even outright contradictory, but a shared style of thought, disposition, sensibility, and ethos.

16 In this context, it is interesting to note that the emergence of the more recent, distinctly *left* variants of accelerationism – a 'conditional accelerationism' typically aiming at a repurposing of science and technology for progressive political ends – has been accompanied by a return, under new auspices, to the rationalism and 'Prometheanism' of the Enlightenment (cf., emblematically, Brassier 2014).

17 It should also be noted that accelerationism has been subject to much debate and criticized for what is perceived as its lack of attention to differences relating to, for instance, class, 'race', age, or ability.

The Uses of Tentacularity

Open the toolbox. Depending on the tool you take out and hold in your hand (or tentacle), you are able to do very different things. Certain actions become possible, while others are foreclosed. For example, take James Cameron's 2009 science fiction blockbuster *Avatar*. Now grab your hammer and set to work. Break and ply open; deconstruct, for instance, the Pocahontas myth, bring to light the imperialist nostalgia and settler colonial logic at work in the text, the displacement of 'Western' desires and fears regarding the 'Other' onto the alien, and the inescapable workings of what Said called a 'flexible positional superiority' (1979: 7), here connected to a fantasy of 'going native', of appropriation, and to a white savior fantasy, essentially a means to assuage racial guilt. Smash through the surface of eco-kitsch-exoticism and special effects, tear off the mask, and expose the film as what it really is: a white man's fantasy – ultimately, a reaffirmation of white supremacy (cf. Loza 2013). But then, put the hammer away, take out your tube of glue, and try out what can be done with that. As you reassemble the shards and fragments, see what new meanings and alternative usages for the text emerge: a fable of the clash of modernity (in the Latourian [1993] sense) with Gaia, which, however, "doesn't take ultimate catastrophe and destruction for granted – as so many have before – but opts for a much more interesting outcome: a new search for hope on condition that what it means to have a body, a mind, and a world is completely redefined" (Latour 2010: 472) – a plea, in other words, for repair and care, and for the overall composition of a more livable, sustainable future. Finally, shift gear once again, put the glue away and press down hard on your accelerator. As you're pushing ahead at ever-greater speed, the *Avatar* you have just assembled now appears as a manifestation of an escapist nostalgia for a precapitalist world suffusing contemporary culture, a symptomatic expression of "a negative theology of an outside of capital" (Mackay/Avanesian 2014: 24), which is a sentimental response to the de facto immanence of the social and the technical – "a paradigm of that late-capitalist subjectivity which disavows its modernity" (Fisher 2018: 196). Speeding up, you recognize that such primitivist organicism is highly unconvincing – and, in fact, ironically undercut in the movie itself by the fact that the protagonist's (and our) immersion in the organic idyll of Pandora depends upon the very advanced technology it is contrasted with. More than that, it is also deeply ideological – an instance of a corporate, gestural anti-capitalism that ultimately serves to cement the capitalist status quo instead of challenging it (cf. Fisher 2009: 12–15). Indeed, with its emphasis on the natural, the authentic, the primordial, and the pure, it is politically dangerous. Against this, you accelerate further, like J.G. Ballard's protagonists, onwards, 'through the crash barrier'...

Cultural Studies is primarily accustomed to using the hammer of critique. Yet, as I have argued here, in the Anthropocene, more tools are needed than just one. And in fact, the other theoretical modes to some extent already form a part of the Cultural

Studies tradition. *Articulation* is absolutely central here. It is what holds our toolbox together. In fact, the concept itself might perhaps be turned into a starting point for the process of articulation, given that, with varying inflections, it has been mobilized from within all three theoretical modes, designating, for example, the cultural practice of manufacturing contingent connections between ideological elements, ideologies, and social forces, (e.g., Grossberg 1986, esp. 53ff; Laclau/Mouffe 2001), the work of repair (Jackson 2014: 223), or a practical process of composition operating on the ontological level of matter itself (Latour 1999, esp. 142ff; Papadopoulos 2018: 47f). Even though there are obviously significant differences, tensions, and conflicts between the three different modes of theorizing, I believe that these have often been overemphasized and exaggerated, and thus made to appear as irreconcilable opposites. The theoretical relation between Bruno Latour and Benjamin Noys may serve as an illustration of this. While the former has long been passionately advocating alternatives to critique, whose energies he considers to be exhausted, and the latter has for over a decade now been issuing very critical engagements with the work of the former (cf. esp. Noys 2010: 80–105, 2014b, 2016), relentlessly asserting the persistence and value of negativity, it is interesting to observe that more recently, something of a rapprochement seems to be taking place (cf. esp. Latour 2018, 2019; Noys 2019), one that, moreover, appears to reveal a compatibility that, despite all disagreements, was *always* (latently) existent. Thus, instead of choosing and defending one theoretical mode over and against the others, I think that it is more fruitful today to think about their respective potentials as well as limits, about possible points of articulation, and about how tensions between them may themselves be made productive.

Mediation, synthesis, hybridization, bricolage – these have always been theoretical strengths of Cultural Studies. Stuart Hall once wrote about the warring paradigms of culturalism and structuralism within Cultural Studies, and argued that, although there could be no easy synthesis between them, it was necessary “to *think forwards* from the best elements” (1986: 48) in both of them – with the work of Gramsci serving as a fulcrum for such an articulation. Today, it is perhaps in the influential thought of Donna Haraway that we can identify such a hinge. Her work stands testament to, and, indeed, as one model for, the immensely productive combination of the three posthumanist theoretical modes: critique, repair, *and* escalation (cf. also Love 2017).¹⁸ It illustrates that all three, especially together, can be pragmatically and profitably put to use in the struggle for alternative worldings. If theoretical interventions also function as forms of political practice, then what is

18 While Haraway has always drawn on all three theoretical modes, it seems to me that one can nevertheless identify some kind of shift in her work, to the extent that care has come to occupy a much more central role in her thinking during the last two decades.

needed in the Anthropocene are cephalopodal politics and theorizing. The Cultural Studies Kraken must articulate.¹⁹

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19 I have developed the notion of 'Kraken theory' in more detail in Cord 2026.

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Excursus. In Repair: The Reparative as Theoretical Mode and Structure of Feeling in Times of Crisis.

An Outline

How do we ‘do theory’ in the present? How do we think and feel (in) the Anthropocene? I want to propose that we now often do so in a distinctly *reparative* way.

Repair, both in a literal and metaphorical sense, has already received some attention in the humanities and social sciences. There is, for instance, one short philosophical study of repair as an anthropological constant (*homo reparans*) (Spelman 2002) and, in the wake of Eve Sedgwick’s influential essay on ‘paranoid’ and ‘reparative’ reading (2003: 123–51), a broader debate within literary studies and queer studies (cf., e.g., Love 2010; Wiegman et al. 2014), as well as the occasional consideration from within other fields, such as media and technology studies (Jackson 2014), art studies (Best 2016), urban design (Fjalland/Samson 2019), political theory (Sheehy 2020; Stuelke 2021), or psychology (Liu 2021). However, repair has not yet been named, let alone investigated, as what I believe it actually has become: a broad theoretical mode and general cultural sensibility. In the following, I want to provide a rough outline of this premise and briefly indicate promising avenues for potential future work on this topic. Instead of an exhaustive account, this intervention is thus intended to initiate debate.

To begin with, my hypothesis is that in the recent past, especially over the past two decades, a distinct novel ‘mode’ of theorizing has emerged across various disciplines and fields in the humanities and social sciences. Adopting Sedgwick’s term, in chapter 3, I have called this mode *repair*.

Following Rita Felski’s widely discussed 2015 monograph, *The Limits of Critique*, modes of theorizing can be conceived as particular styles of thought that encompass certain epistemological, ontological, philosophical-political, ethical, and affective orientations, as well as distinctive formal characteristics. Thus, to speak of a theoretical ‘mode’ means to refer to a unique manner of doing theory, consisting of specific analytical assumptions, conventions, and expectations, to an identifiable sensibility, disposition, and mood – even something like an ethos – and to typical forms of speech, tone, narrative, and argument.

What I term the ‘reparative mode’ distinctly takes shape in dissociation from the hitherto dominant mode of *critique*. Put most simply¹, to engage in critique means to expose a hidden truth ‘behind’ phenomena (e.g., the workings of power or the unconscious) – hence the customary mobilization of oppositions such as manifest/latent, present/absent, and surface/depth – to ‘be against’ and to unsettle existent positivities, and to be committed to struggles against subjugation and for a transformation of the status quo. Critical theorizing, in other words, usually entails the adoption of what has been read as a ‘suspicious’ (Felski 2015; Ricœur 1970: 32–36) or ‘paranoid’ (Sedgwick 2003: 123–51) stance, a commitment to negativity, and an interventionist, emancipatory ethos.

In the humanities and social sciences, this mode was for a long time virtually synonymous with theory per se. Yet, following Felski and others, and taking up as a sort of maxim Donna Haraway’s assertion that “[i]t matters what thoughts think thoughts” (2016: 39), I want to stress the centrality of a ‘politics of theory’ and the importance of denaturalizing modes of thinking and of exploring alternatives, since these essentially constitute orientations toward the world that cause the world to come into view in a certain way and thus effectively function as material-discursive worldings (cf. Barad 2007) with ‘real-life’ effects and consequences.

Repair constitutes one such alternative. The outlook, presuppositions, and ‘feel’ of reparative writing are markedly different from critique. Let me briefly recapitulate how this is the case. As I have noted before, one could say that whereas the defining prefix of critique is ‘de’ (denaturalizing, demystifying, decoding, deconstructing, decentering, etc.), that of repair is ‘re’ (recomposing, reattaching, reassembling, reimagining, restoring, reworlding, etc.). Emerging especially from within certain strands of feminist and queer studies, post-/decolonial, Black and Indigenous studies, actor-network theory, science and technology studies, affect theory, new materialism, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology, repair can essentially be characterized as a “thinking with precarity” (Tsing 2015: 42) or, to use Steven Jackson’s resonant expression, “broken world thinking”. As such, this mode is characterized by a double focus: On the one hand, it proceeds from what Jackson calls “an appreciation of the real limits and fragility of the worlds we inhabit – natural, social, and technological – and a recognition that many of the stories and orders of modernity [...] are in process of coming apart” (2014: 221). It rejects narratives of progress and takes breakdown, dissolution, and decay as its starting point. At the same time, on the other hand, it cultivates the more hopeful approach of “a deep wonder and appreciation for the ongoing activities by which [...] rich and robust lives are sustained against the weight of centrifugal odds” (Jackson 2014: 222) – or, as the title of

1 Needless to say, this is a gross simplification. The critique/repair opposition, like all such categories, is a *heuristic*, a tool to ‘think with’, with the two terms functioning akin to Weberian ‘ideal types’. As I explain below, the reality is, of course, much more complex and messy.

one publication has it: the “arts of living on a damaged planet” (Tsing et al. 2017) – activities that are habitually rendered invisible by established theoretical outlooks. The fulcrum of these two different realities – pain and possibility, destruction and creativity – is repair.

Unlike critique, the reparative mode is thus marked by an embrace of the affirmative – of positivity, constructiveness, optimism, even utopianism. Consequently, it generally champions a politics of affirmation, which supplants the self-defeating irony and cynicism, the resignation, despair, and passivity it associates with the critical mode with commitment, creativity, innovation, imagination, activeness and, indeed, activism. Moreover, repair typically revolves around an ethos of care, accentuating the importance of caring about, caring for, and caring with (cf. Tronto 2013) others, of the cultivation of ‘response-ability’ (Haraway 2016). These others are usually thought of not just as other human beings, but all kinds of ‘actants’ with which we are entangled, including, for instance, nonhuman animals, plants, technologies, ecosystems, or inorganic matter. Repair is hence closely connected with the ‘turn’ to the nonhuman in the human and social sciences (cf. Grusin 2015) – it is no coincidence that many of its most pronounced articulations come from within fields with a strong posthumanist orientation – and characteristically entails an emphasis on relationality (frequently in the form of a relational ontology).

Thus, the reparative, in short, refers to a set of strategies whereby subjects salvage possibilities and sustenance from the world (Sedgwick 2003: 150f). It is a theoretical practice “invested with a range of attitudes and affects that dispose critics toward an attentiveness to possibility, pleasure, and alteration” (Sheehy 2020: 70). As such, repair can be considered a mode of theorizing emerging expressly in the face of the multiple and interconnected crises that mark the present moment (climate, biodiversity, socio-political, economic, cultural, etc.). In particular, it appears as an expression of and a response to the problematic of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene.²

In this context, I would claim that the reparative, in fact, constitutes not just a mode of theory, but, beyond that, also a broader cultural sensibility and orientation toward the world – what, following Raymond Williams (1977: 128–35), we may describe as an (emergent) Anthropocene ‘structure of feeling’, which pervades (‘Western’) society at large and can be traced across the socio-cultural landscape, in contemporary art, literature, film, pop, architecture, and elsewhere. It is particularly through the affective dimension of the theoretical mode of repair, the fact that it includes specific attitudes, dispositions, and moods, that this mode connects with

2 The concept of the ‘Anthropocene’ is a contested one, criticized especially for its reinscription of human exceptionalism and its lack of attention to the differential distribution of vulnerability, harm, and responsibility. It is vital to point out that critical issues such as these must be part of our discussions of the reparative as well.

this novel structure of feeling. Williams' concept here commends itself for two main reasons: For one thing, while emphatically drawing attention to the realm of the experiential, often occluded by an exclusive focus on questions of meaning, representation, discourse, or ideology, it nevertheless, through the unusual combination of its two principal terms, posits feelings as decidedly social phenomena (thus resonating with some key arguments within contemporary affect theory). For another, it is a concept with an explicitly 'presentist' orientation, meant to capture something that is still emerging and hence not yet fully articulated and immediately available – as one commentator remarks, the crucial feature of the concept is “the presence of the present” (Huehls 2010: 420). Starting from these two aspects, and drawing on the field of affect studies and its frequent (non-dualistic and pragmatic, not ontological) distinction between ‘affect’ (“dynamic transindividual processes”) and ‘emotion’ (“recurring sequences of affective intra-action that have come to be culturally coded” [Slaby et al. 2019: 5]), structures of feeling can be (re-)theorized as intermediary phenomena, where affect is gradually sedimenting or congealing into a specific historical formation, which, however, since the process is still ongoing, remains inchoate. As such, these structures also exert a significant influence in processes of subject-formation, establishing or modulating particular capacities and dispositions. Building, among other things, on the findings of recent empirical studies (e.g., the German Shell Jugendstudie 2019 and the Rheingold Jugendstudie 2022), we may thus tentatively want to identify a novel, emergent ‘subject form’ (cf. Reckwitz 2006, 2008), particularly (though not exclusively) among the youth: that of the *reparative subject*, at its core governed by feelings of anxiety, chief among them what has been called ‘Anthropocene anxiety’ (Merola 2018) and ‘solastalgia’ (Albrecht et al. 2007), frequently oscillating between resignation and hopefulness, and characterized by a ‘bundle of dispositions’ (Reckwitz 2006: 40), which includes, among many other elements, a new earnestness, an intensified sense of responsibility, a more pragmatic orientation, an increased willingness to make sacrifices and ‘do without’, as well as a ‘new gentleness’ (Campbell 2018) of attunement, curiosity, and an energized sense of care.

Of course, the reparative does not suddenly emerge out of nowhere. What, exactly, is meant when the reparative is announced as a ‘new’ theoretical and cultural orientation? Essentially, this is a question about our model of intellectual and cultural change. Here, I adopt a position distinct from both, (grand) narratives of strong continuity as well as of radical discontinuity. Instead, drawing on the rich body of work within Cultural Studies dedicated to ‘conjunctural analysis’³ (of which the thought of Stuart Hall is emblematic), I would propose a reconceptualization of processes of cultural development in terms of a succession of shifting *conjunctures*. More than in the case of alternative concepts of periodization such as epoch, age,

3 For more on conjunctural analysis, cf. part III.

etc., change is conceived here as a distinctly complex and uneven process – neither a straightforward, linear ‘progress’ nor a sequence of sharp and absolute ‘breaks’. To think conjuncturally means to think along the lines of a ‘cultural logic of hybridity’ (Reckwitz 2006: 19). That is to say, conjunctures as well as many of its elements are not homogeneous totalities but decidedly syncretistic, relational, and dynamic constellations, fluctuating mixtures of ‘residual’, ‘dominant’, and ‘emergent’ components (cf. Williams 1977: 121–27). In other words, while conjunctures and cultural forms are understood as superseding each other in a process of historical discontinuity, this supersession is not conceived as a total rupture but as a process of a rearticulation and recombination of cultural elements. Consequently, modes of theory as well as structures of feeling should be thought in terms of heterogeneous, intertextual, and only ever provisionally stable *assemblages*, not as fixed, pure, and clear-cut wholes.

This model of intellectual and cultural development thus conceives change in terms of varying accentuations of tendencies and rearticulations of theoretical assemblages that are intimately connected with shifting conjunctures. Proceeding from this understanding, it becomes possible to chart a genealogy of the reparative, as it allows seeing critique and repair as variously entangled rather than radically opposed. Clearly, this means a break with the frequent claims of radical novelty and absolute distinctiveness of contemporary theoretical approaches and a significant complication of the common notion of earlier theorizing as “nothing-but-critique” (Haraway 2016: 178n32). If talk of a broad reparative ‘turn’ is warranted here, it can only be, in keeping with the word’s various meanings, as a process, a turning (into), a becoming, which is also a twisting, a repositioning and changing of orientation, a rearranging rotation, and one involving a number of re-turns (cf. Hemmings 2011: 95–127). Critique and repair are neither static and fixed nor fully separate and self-contained, but instead dynamic and interconnected to various degrees, the end points of a continuum rather than a clear-cut dichotomy, so that there are always also more or less mixed, hybrid forms.

This opens the door to novel archaeological work on critique and repair which would aim at unearthing different prehistories, simultaneities, overlappings, and afterlives, and to identify elements of the one within the other. In particular, it invites innovative rereadings of the intellectual archive in order to identify antecedents, latent tendencies, and unrealized potentials of the reparative within the (‘Western’) philosophical canon. As Paul Saint-Amour (2018), speaking of what he calls ‘weak thought’, something I see as closely related to repair, points out: “critics of the hermeneutic of suspicion have paid scant attention to the variety of weak-theoretical projects that shelter under the ostensibly strong-theoretical big-top of critique.”

By way of example, we may think of the work of Walter Benjamin here, a clear ‘precursor’ of the reparative. Benjamin’s idiosyncratic type of cultural analysis has

often been commented on, and can, it seems to me, be read specifically as an early form of quasi-reparative theorizing. Here, I am thinking of aspects such as the entanglement of nature and culture (esp. his comments on natural history and Darwinism, e.g., his reflections on ‘the fossil’ in the *Arcades Project* [cf. Buck-Morss 1989: 58–77], which could productively be brought into dialogue with Elizabeth Grosz’s [2008, 2011] new materialist interpretation of Darwin); his conception of things as basically multiple, complex, heterogeneous, and dynamic (cf. also his assemblage-like notion of the ‘constellation’); his non-linear understanding of temporality, profound skepticism of the notion of progress, and commitment to witnessing; the centrality of enchantment in his work (e.g., by urbanity, consumer goods, lavish window displays, etc.); and the general combination of pain with a more affirmative focus on possibility characteristic of the ‘broken world thinking’ of repair (e.g., Benjamin’s [Blochian] desire for utopia).

Much of the writing associated with the reparative turn is characterized by some degree of discontent with what is frequently seen as the overemphasis by structuralist and poststructuralist theories on issues of textuality, representation, and discursivity. I would argue that this assessment generally needs to be qualified, but perhaps the thinking of Roland Barthes, to give a second example, can be read as one particularly salient exception to this verdict. Or, more precisely: though his work is ardently dedicated to the study of signs, texts, discourses, and writing, in his case, especially the later writings, this nevertheless frequently does not entail a commitment to the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and the neglect of questions of materiality, corporeality, or affect which such a pursuit is regularly accused of. An exploration of the reparative elements in Barthes’ thought could comprise the emphasis on relationality, processuality, and multiplicity (the text as a lively ‘web’, the theory of it as a ‘hyphology’); material-semiotic entanglements (text/body, sense/sensuality); his sensual, materialistic aesthetics of pleasure, marked by a decidedly affirmative orientation (focused on pleasure, joy, futurity); the centrality of an emphatic notion of life (“*la force de toute vie vivante*”), which also evinces distinctly posthumanist inflections; his interest in and fascination by the ordinary which exceeds mythology’s ‘paranoid’ task of deciphering the hidden and naturalized meanings of the everyday; and the experimentation with innovative forms of writing which, rather than ‘deconstructive’, can be considered as ‘reconstructive’.

As a third example, let me mention the thinking of Michel Foucault. Often regarded a ‘master of critique’, he himself considered critique to be a veritable *ethos* guiding all his scholarly inquiries. Unsurprisingly, then, his work, understood as an exemplar of ‘paranoid’ approaches, is frequently used as a contrasting foil in contemporary reparative and ‘postcritical’ writing. While the characterization of his thought as critical at heart is certainly accurate, I would claim that it is nevertheless possible to elaborate a number of reference points for a more nuanced assessment by disclosing the presence of a reparative undercurrent in his work (cf. Lemke 2021;

Sheehey 2020). These points include the centrality of the theme of care, explicitly in the late work (as an ethical form of self-transformation ['care of the self']), but more indirectly already in his earlier, 'genealogical' writings, too (as an affectivity or mode of attention); a significant, though often overlooked, affirmative, sometimes even utopian, dimension of his thought; and elements of a non-anthropocentric thinking of nature-cultural entanglement and agential materiality.

These are just a few potential starting points for possible future explorations of the complex and entangled histories of critique and repair. In fact, as a Cultural Studies scholar in the 'Birmingham tradition', it is my impression that my own discipline offers a particularly rich archive for a genealogy of the reparative. While Cultural Studies has generally always conceived itself as a 'critical' project, aimed at the denaturalization and subversion of hegemonic regimes of meaning, representation, and power, it has nevertheless often tempered or kept a certain distance from some of the aspects of critique most heavily attacked by recent reparative theorizing. The reasons for this include the field's origins in and close ties with extramural spheres (esp. adult education, political activism) and its concomitant dedication to pedagogical-political action, its trans- or postdisciplinary, syncretistic character, as well as the fact that different, sometimes contradictory tendencies have at all times coexisted within it (e.g., culturalism and structuralism [cf. Hall 1986], materialism and social constructivism). Writing an alternative history of Cultural Studies from the perspective of repair would mean exploring a number of key reparative elements and tendencies, such as the discipline's persistent skepticism about the more radical or 'idealist' variants of constructivism and its commitment to a focus on materialist matters; its devotion to questions of the empirical, the ethnographic, and the experiential (cf. McRobbie 1999); its traditionally more affirmative and optimistic outlook (e.g., regarding the issue of agency); its interest in and defense of ordinary, everyday practices and experiences; its characteristic suspicion of 'grand narratives' and totalizing philosophical accounts and its emphasis on contextuality, contingency, complexity, and the concrete, what I have called the defining 'Cs' of Cultural Studies (a form of 'low' or 'weak' theorizing).

This is the question of genealogy and the archives. What about the present? Which are the main sites and ways in which the reparative is today articulated? Answering this question would mean charting a complex network across whose manifold interrelations the reparative takes shape. Rather than a series of separate and self-contained investigations, it would mean weaving a *mesh*, marked by complex connections, overlaps, and imbrications, thus mirroring the actual entanglement of the aspects under discussion. Instead of independent dimensions of repair, let us speak of particular *nodes* of this web, where different lines condense or are 'articulated'. The double meaning of 'articulation', as the concept is used within Cultural Studies (cf., e.g., Clarke 2015; Grossberg 1986, esp. 53ff; Slack 1996) – expression as well as combination – is central here. I would identify three

main nodes, which illuminate central dimensions of the reparative: *the material*, *the ordinary*, and *the futural*. While none of these key concerns of the present in relation to which repair has emerged is reparative per se, they are currently being (re-)turned to and interlinked in quite specific ways which give them a distinctively reparative inflection. Thus, the claim is not that, for instance, materialisms or even the so-called 'new materialisms' are inherently, always and everywhere, reparative, but that the recent return to questions of matter constitutes one central context in which repair manifests itself. A few brief comments on each of these nodes:

Node 1: The Relational-Material

One of the key contexts within which the reparative impulse has been articulated is the renewed interest in questions of matter in the humanities and social sciences during the past two decades. These new theoretical formations, most notably the new materialisms and object-oriented ontology, represent a significant break with – or, as I would argue, complement to – older approaches which, particularly in the wake of the 'cultural turn', put the focus on social constructions, cultural practices, and discursive processes (even when they explicitly turned their attention to objects, e.g., in material culture studies and research into the 'social life of things' [Appadurai 1986]). Yet, in some important ways, the recent approaches also notably depart from earlier materialisms, for instance of the Marxist tradition, by breaking with (economic) determinisms and essentialisms and reconceiving matter as agentic, plural, and dynamic instead of passive, uniform, and inert. Their orientation is decidedly non-anthropocentric and non-dualistic (nature/culture, subject/object, etc.).

I would argue that many (though by no means all) theories and positions from fields such as actor-network theory and (feminist) science and technology studies, both of which represent important resources and anticipations of various contemporary perspectives, as well as present-day Indigenous studies, object-oriented ontology, and new materialism can be said to be firmly committed to what is here called the reparative mode. Think Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, Robin Wall Kimmerer, or Jane Bennett. Above all, much of this work explicitly or implicitly pulls away from 'critical' outlooks and presents the world along ecological lines (cf. Hörl 2017), as an extremely fragile and precarious web of material relations and interdependencies which, especially in view of the countless urgencies of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, require not the "militant" (Felski 2015: 1) approaches of "corrosive critique" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 49), but much more 'care-ful,' 'ecopo-ethical' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2021) forms of analysis and response. Notably, the shift to the new theoretical stances is itself frequently portrayed in terms of a reparative move, part of a broader necessary process of making up for the wrong (philosophical as much as historical) committed against 'things'.

It seems to me that a host of contemporary cultural artifacts and phenomena are occupied with very similar concerns, from science fiction cinema (e.g., Alex Garland's 2018 film *Annihilation*⁴) and contemporary art (e.g., the documenta 13 of 2012, whose guiding theme, significantly, was *Collapse and Recovery*, or the 2022 Venice Biennale, entitled *The Milk of Dreams*) to literature (e.g., David Mitchell's 2004 novel *Cloud Atlas* or the 'tender narrator' of Olga Tokarczuk's 2018 Nobel lecture) and popular music (e.g., Kae Tempest or Björk, especially the latter's 2011 *Biophilia* project, a complex, multidimensional assemblage concerned with issues such as 'nature-cultural', 'zoe-geo-techno' entanglements, 'vibrant materiality', nomadic becomings, 'bioegalitarianism' and the struggle against anthropocentrism and phallogocentrism, as well as with [environmental] destruction and healing, with fostering hope, and an ethos of care). Though the particulars always vary, what we encounter across nearly all of today's cultural landscape are different attempts at the articulation of a novel, posthumanist imaginary centered on relationality and repair.

Node 2: The Experiential-Ordinary

In their seminal collection on postcritique, Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski point out that scholars committed to a postcritical approach to literature generally adopt "a more generous posture toward the text" than the 'paranoid' or 'suspicious' one characteristic of critique and are hence "committed to treating texts with respect, care, and attention, emphasizing the visible rather than the concealed in a spirit of dialogue and constructiveness rather than dissection and diagnosis" (2017: 16). As Felski puts it elsewhere, their project of a new 'hermeneutics of restoration' (cf. Ricoeur 1970: 28–32) crucially involves "a politics of relation rather than negation", a "'looking at' rather than 'seeing through'" (2015: 147, 55). The result is a significant shift, one that decidedly moves away from what these critics consider to be the essentially 'diagnostic' orientation of critique, involving as it does the presence of an expert (the literary critic) who is committed to the revelation of 'defects' (repressed desires or meanings, ideologies, discourses, socio-historical fractures, etc.) that are not readily apparent to non-specialists (Anker/Felski 2017: 4). Instead of this, what gets emphasized is the value of *the ordinary*. Accordingly, both, texts and the encounter with them, are no longer principally assessed in relation to the degree of their subversiveness – in other words, in terms of what is essentially a modernist-avant-gardist regime of aesthetic value (Felski 2015: 17) – but rather with regard to their effects on and relations with the reader, that is, the affects, resonances, and forms of attachment, involvement, and identification they bring forth. The new focus on the

4 For a detailed discussion of this film, cf. the coda.

ordinary is thus frequently coupled with an interest in *experience*, in the concrete, mundane, and embodied reception of the text.

I would claim that this domain of the ordinary and the experiential represents another central sphere for the articulation of the reparative. This novel concern can be traced across a wide spectrum of theoretical approaches and cultural fields, including, in addition to postcritique, actor-network theory, science and technology studies, the new materialisms, political theory, affect studies, object-oriented ontology, Black and queer studies. Think Kathleen Stewart, Rita Felski, Astrida Neimanis, or Jane Bennett (particularly her earlier work on enchantment). One expression of this is a rekindled interest in empiricism and phenomenology. Yet, similar to the recent (re-)turn to materialism, these are today taken up again in innovative ways, all characterized, I would argue, by a shared tendency towards posthumanization. Crucially, the orientation of much of the recent work on the ordinary and the experiential is a distinctly reparative one – something that is well captured, for instance, in the designation of one postcritical approach to literature as ‘just reading’ (Marcus 2007) or in a chapter title that reads “The Wonder of Minor Experiences” (Bennett 2001: 3). In various ways, these novel theories all mark a break with critique, particularly with what is considered to be its overly pessimistic, disenchanted outlook – which can also see in the world nothing but disenchantment – and its general ignorance about, or flattening out of, the complexity, thickness, and unpredictability of (affective, everyday) life. Repair, on the other hand, cultivates new ‘arts of noticing’ (Tsing 2015: 17–25), an attention and a will to the extraordinary amid the everyday. What transpires is a ‘new gentleness’ (Campbell 2018), a mix of curiosity, wonder, attunement, and ethical responsibility. In other words, against what is described as critique’s cynical, detached, and absolutizing perspective, these approaches all opt for a stance that is more affirmative and hopeful, that engages in a differentiating manner with the diverse singular relations, encounters, and assemblages of the everyday and the manifold affective textures of personal and transpersonal experience, and that is more cognizant and appreciative of the phenomenological plenitude of the ordinary. Consequently, many of them also evince a distinctly post-representational orientation (cf. Thrift 2008).

Across the contemporary cultural landscape, artifacts can be found that substantiate the claim about the experiential-ordinary as another central domain of the reparative; works of art, popular music, film, and literary works which all can be read as rehearsals of novel, more sensitive and care-ful ‘arts of noticing’ and expressions of a ‘new gentleness’ or ‘tenderness’, assembling the inflections and experiential details of the everyday as an emergent and sensitive form of ecology. We may, for instance, think of the restaging of still lifes by the 2022–23 Louvre exhibition *Les choses: Une histoire de la nature morte* here, or of what has been termed ‘metamodernist’ tendencies in contemporary fiction (van den Akker et al. 2017, 2019; Vermeulen/van den Akker 2010), particularly a powerful trend towards *reconstruction* rather than decon-

struction in much present-day writing (Funk 2017), which involves a notable re-statement of categories such as authenticity, sincerity, and empathy.⁵

Node 3: The Possible-Futural

A third key context for the articulation of repair as theoretical mode and structure of feeling is that of futurity. I would begin by observing that, particularly in the domain of cultural and political theory, the period since the turn of the millennium, and especially the last decade, has been marked by a peculiar ambiguity or oscillation: On the one hand, there have been numerous declarations, above all from within the political left, that history has ended and the future consequently been ‘canceled’ (cf., e.g., Anderson 2000; Berardi 2011; Fisher 2009, 2014). These authors diagnose the present with a profound political and cultural sterility, tied to a pervasive sense of exhaustion resulting from the lack of any kind of viable alternative to the global dominance of capitalism. This ‘capitalist realism’, where capitalism “seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (Fisher 2009: 8), finds expression in Fredric Jameson’s famous observation that it is today “easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (2003: 76), a phrase that, tellingly, has been cited countless times over the past decade. On the other hand, in defiance of this condition, a range of efforts have been made to open up again the horizon of possibility and ‘reinvent’ the future (cf., e.g., Berardi 2017; Srnicek/Williams 2016). In fact, the future is everywhere today. Whether it is museum exhibitions (or, in the case of the Futurium in Berlin, which opened in 2019, even an entire museum in itself), film or art festivals, workshops, conferences, political initiatives (e.g., the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration) and political programs, campaigns, and speeches (emblematically, Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign with its “Yes We Can” slogan and “Hope” poster), or social movements – an interest in, a concern for, and a (cautiously) hopeful commitment to the future are almost ubiquitous.

I would argue that this two-sidedness or shift(-ing) is another expression of the reparative, understood as a ‘broken world thinking’ or ‘feeling’ that encompasses both pain and possibility, destruction and renewal, and which, in contrast to critique, is hence characterized by a more affirmative outlook. This outlook finds expression in a widespread, renewed engagement with and embrace of positivity, optimism, hope, and utopianism. This novel orientation can be traced across the contemporary theoretical landscape, in spheres including queer studies, Black and Indigenous studies, political theory, science and technology studies, actor-network

5 I believe that a detailed dialogue with the metamodernism thesis, with which my argument resonates in various ways, could lead to a productive discussion of what I would identify as an important legacy of modernism within the reparative.

theory, postcritique, and new materialism. Think José Esteban Muñoz, Michael Snediker, Fred Moten, Jonathan Lear, Rosi Braidotti, or Franco Berardi. In all these fields, the task of the critic is reimagined or expanded: beyond the critical 'de', to the 're' of repair – the critic as the one who does not (primarily) debunk and deconstruct, but who assembles, builds, and makes possible (cf. Latour 2004, 2010).

Again, it seems to me that similar concerns and stances pervade the socio-cultural realm more generally, too, from the domains of film (e.g., the 2021–22 miniseries *Station Eleven*) and popular music (e.g., Björk's 2017 album *Utopia* or the music and performances of pop star Harry Styles) to the arts and architecture (e.g., the 2023–24 exhibition *The Great Repair* at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin). A reparative care about and for the future seems to be at the heart of much current cultural production. It also clearly infuses the realm of (eco-)political activism. In dialogue with the work of thinkers like Eva von Redecker (2020), I suggest we read social movements and groups such as the tellingly named Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, Ende Gelände, or Letzte Generation as manifestations of a novel type of protest, focused on witnessing and a reparatively oriented struggle on behalf of all that lives, or, perhaps better, of the ecological entanglement of all 'existents' (Povinelli 2016). Here, as elsewhere, critique is not so much replaced as *decentered* by repair, and reintegrated in its displaced and reshaped form, a fact that again underlines their complex and interlinked relation. In this context, I believe we should challenge those accounts that portray reparative orientations and modes of thought as inherently conformist or quietist. Instead, what transpires is a different model of politics (and utopianism), one that largely departs from the imaginary of revolution and aims at 'regeneration' (transformation of the given) rather than 'rebirth' (creation of the wholly new) (Haraway 2010: 2220).

I believe that the reparative emerges at and through the networked intersections of such different tendencies or developments. Like critique, it is ultimately a heuristic and inevitably 'fuzzy' category, but we can nevertheless begin to distill key elements of repair. For the purpose of clarity, we can separate these out into the domains of ontology, epistemology, ethics, politics, affect, and form, as long as we keep in mind that actually, these must all be considered as interrelated:

Ontology: A general emphasis on relationality, processuality, and hybridity, and consequently a break with mechanistic, dualistic, and essentialist conceptions of the world, as well as an orientation 'against purity' (Shotwell 2016), so that 'repair' is not conceived in terms of a restoration of an unspoiled whole – instead, the reparative typically proceeds from the assumption of the 'alterlife', that is, of "life already altered, which is also life open to alteration" (Murphy 2017: 497; cf. also Blanco-Wells 2021).

Epistemology: Generally driven by the conviction that knowledge is always situated, worldly, and caught up in complex power/knowledge networks, and that

ways of knowing, theories, and concepts ‘matter,’ that is, have world-making effects insofar as they affect the material-semiotic perception/existence of things (cf. Barad’s [2007] notion of ‘onto-epistemology’); consequently, an emphasis on ‘matters of concern’ or ‘care’ instead of ‘matters of fact’ (Latour 2004; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017); a general tendency towards ‘low’, ‘minor’, and ‘weak’ forms of thinking, with corresponding ‘weak’ onto-epistemological conceptions of subjectivity, agency, temporality, etc. (cf. Halberstam 2011: 15–18; Katz 1996, 2017; Pétursdóttir/Olsen 2018; Saint-Amour 2018; Stewart 2008).

Ethics: Generally committed to an ethics of humility (which includes a postanthropocentric orientation) and a (more-than-human) ethics of care (cf. esp. Puig de la Bellacasa 2017), proceeding from the assumption of the existential precarity of the ecological ‘mesh’ (Morton 2010) and the interdependency and shared vulnerability of all ‘existents’, and focused on issues of responsibility for the maintenance of this web; also frequently involves a concern with witnessing (cf. Gan et al. 2017; Richardson/Zolkos 2022, 2023), especially in the form of paying attention to and giving testimony of extinctions and the unmaking of ecologies (rather than ignoring or forgetting them in the name of progress) (cf. also the emerging field of extinction studies [cf. Rose/van Dooren/Chrulaw 2017]).

Politics: Generally skeptical of both ‘great politics’ (whose culmination is the imaginary of revolution) as well as ‘micropolitics’ and instead championing ‘minor’ or ‘minimal’ forms of politics (Marchart 2010: 289–328); suspicious of the ‘strong’ modern semantics of progress, individuality, and liberation; more driven by concerns of individual and collective self-preservation than self-realization (Staab 2022); hence encompasses a crucial conservative dimension, which, importantly, does however usually not signal quietism, passivity, or an affirmation of the status quo – instead, the conservative orientation is coupled with (indeed, expressed through) dissent, creativeness, intervention, and action; a utopianism ‘in this world’, not one that first wishes the given world away (von Redecker 2020: 66).

Affect: Frequently marked by a ground tone of anxiety, but nevertheless generally affirmative and cautiously optimistic; as an ethos, often marked by the combination of sorrow, pain, and mourning on the one hand and hopefulness and a belief in possibility on the other; another characteristic set of affects revolves around wonder, appreciation, and enchantment.

Form: Generally, forms of voice and style, rhetorical repertoires, and narrative patterns that evoke a ground tone of deep concern, attunement, empathy, curiosity (a ‘new gentleness’), and, often, philosophical modesty.

To conclude, let me say that, following Donna Haraway’s (2016) advocacy of ‘tentacular thinking’, it seems to me that what we need today is a ‘Kraken theory’⁶, that is, a flexible, pragmatic, syncretistic, and bricolage- or assemblage-like approach

6 I have developed the notion of ‘Kraken theory’ in more detail in Cord 2026.

that is not afraid to make use of and create encounters between a variety of different theoretical modes and outlooks, as each has its own strengths and weaknesses, its specific 'ways of seeing' and blind spots. Theory, I would argue, is a matter of doing, not being. It is a toolbox (Reckwitz 2023). We do not have to choose to be *either* critical *or* reparative. Instead, we can perform both critical *and* reparative intellectual work. We need to create more contact zones for critical and reparative approaches. This doubtless involves numerous tensions and frictions, but these can themselves be made productive. The result of such encounters could be an immensely productive (non-)system of theoretical 'checks and balances', which may be most adequate and helpful with regard to the incredible complexity and messiness of our time.

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4. 'Humanity Recedes like a Loathsome Dream': Nick Land, Ahuman Becoming, and Cultural Studies

Accelerationism and the Cultural Studies Beachcomber

What are the tools for a posthumanist Cultural Studies? Surely they are manifold. I have made the case for a stronger 'posthumanization' of Cultural Studies by means of a theoretical 'encounter' with the diverse intellectual approaches associated with the 'nonhuman turn' in the humanities and social sciences. I have argued that such an expanded, modified, and reorganized discipline would need to avail itself of a number of theoretical and methodological resources and draw on all three of what I consider to be the main 'modes' of contemporary posthumanist theorizing: critique, repair, and escalation.¹ As I have shown, while critique, with its commitment to deconstruction and denaturalization, undoubtedly lies at the heart of the Cultural Studies project, there is within it also a less central but nevertheless distinct and rather rich history of reparative theorizing, with its characteristic break with the 'paranoia', pessimism, and negativity that so often mark thinking in the critical mode, and its adoption of a more affirmative, positive, even optimistic, outlook. In contrast, it seems to me that the theoretical mode of escalation, though certainly not entirely absent, has nevertheless overall played only a minor role in the field. However, I want to argue here that for a posthumanist Cultural Studies, escalative thinking, too, can become an important theoretical resource, valuable, among other things, for its potential to urge Cultural Studies towards a position that no longer makes any (untenable) claims to 'stand outside', that accepts the immanence of the social and the technical as an irreversible given, and that hence does not resort to de-celerative or restorative solutions but is future-oriented and aiming at technological literacy (Mackay/Avanessian 2014: 4–8).

At first, though, there seem to be some good reasons for the existing distance to such approaches. After all, the chief, though by no means the only, manifestation of escalative theorizing is accelerationism. As is typical of escalation, accelerationist theory works through intensification and excess, through pushing things to

1 On this topic, cf. ch. 3 and the excursus.

the extreme, and is committed to a radical anti-naturalism and a politics of complete immanence. Its essence consists in “the argument that the only way out is the way through” (Shaviro 2015: 2). What accelerationism wants to get out of is, of course, capitalism. It is no coincidence that this theoretico-political approach, which first materialized in the work of thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard, emerged in 1970s France. Not only is it heavily indebted to the new libertarian spirit of the times; more than that, it decidedly represents a response to the failure of May ’68 and the ensuing disenchantment with Marxist certainties and teleologies and the general waning of revolutionary hopes. In fact, these theoretical interventions can be considered as so many attempts to preserve and actualize these libertarian impulses and hopes in the face of a capitalism that increasingly came to be experienced as exceedingly resilient, totalizing, and able to recuperate virtually all forms of opposition. As such, these works are very helpful in understanding the accelerating expansion of capital, both ‘extensively’ across the world and ‘intensively’ into every aspect of life (Massumi 1992: 132), an expansion that would only further intensify with the neoliberal counter-revolution in the following decades. As Benjamin Noys, one of the foremost analysts and critics of accelerationism, has pointed out, the movement must essentially be understood as a reaction to the “felt experience of closed, if not terminal, horizons” (2014: 6). Confronting a system that was now seen as largely immune to both traditional (workers’ struggle) as well as novel (counter-culture) forms of contestation, some left-libertarian thinkers chose a new strategy. As Sylvère Lotringer has put it, these “‘children of May,’ revolutionaries bereft of a revolution”, resolved “to sleep with the enemy” and “turned to capitalism, eager to extract its subversive energy they no longer found in traditional class struggle” (2007: 11). For these theorists, the only remaining path beyond capitalism was not to resist it, but, quite the opposite, to embrace it and take it further, pushing it to its most extreme point, beyond even its very own limits, where, thus the hope, it would collapse. This strategy was perhaps most explicitly formulated by Gilles Lipovetsky, who asserts: “‘revolutionary’ actions are not those which aim to overthrow the system of Capital, which [...] has never ceased to be revolutionary, but those which *complete* its rhythm in all its radicality [...]. This speed proper to capital in its expansive logic must be exacerbated in the struggle against all the dispositifs of power [...]” (2014: 233) Similarly, in an oft-quoted passage from their *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari write:

But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one? – To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist “economic solution”? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic

character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to "accelerate the process," as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet. (1983: 239f)

In the 50 years since these lines were written, accelerationism has significantly branched out, and various manifestations, developments, and transformations of its impulse have occurred. After this first explicit articulation in the 1970s, it most notably resurfaced in the 1990s, in the work of a number of thinkers more or less closely associated with Warwick University, UK, and its Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), and, most recently, in the 2010s, this time as a more inter- or trans- (or perhaps outer-)national phenomenon. Yet, in practically all of its incarnations, accelerationism essentially appears to be a crisis phenomenon. What it registers – though frequently in oblique or hyperbolic form – is both, significant transformations in the capitalist regimes of accumulation, as capitalism successively renews itself through forms of 'creative destruction', and the often concomitant crisis of forms of political agency. As such, if nothing else, I believe it remains a valuable diagnostic tool. Without a doubt, our present moment is still, or once again, marked by such double crisis, as evidenced by today's dual dynamic of stagnation and acceleration (Noys 2014: 10f) and the ongoing shift towards a 'post-post-Fordist' accumulation regime (Gilbert 2019: 30–34; Murray/Gilbert/Goffey 2014) on the one hand, and by our pervasive sense that the future has been 'cancelled' (Berardi 2011; Fisher 2009, 2014) and that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson 2003: 76) on the other.

However, it is not hard to see that as a political strategy, accelerationism is highly problematic. For at least in its 'purest', most radical instantiations, it becomes virtually indistinguishable from the dynamic of capitalism itself, which is driven precisely by the desire to perpetually break through ever new barriers – a fact that is perhaps most evident in its contemporary, neoliberal form. As already Baudrillard – who would nevertheless go on to develop his own, 'negative' kind of accelerationism (Noys 2010: 6) – pointed out: "This compulsion toward liquidity, flow, and an accelerated circulation [...] is the exact replica of the force which rules market value: capital must circulate; gravity and any fixed point must disappear; the chain of investments and reinvestments must never stop; value must radiate endlessly and in every direction." (2007: 39f) Here, in other words, the demands of the accelerationists paradoxically come to coincide with those made by the managers of capital. Hence, the belief that increased acceleration will necessarily lead to capital's demise and thus clear the path towards a more just and egalitarian society on closer inspection effectively turns out to be a reinstatement of old-fashioned Marxist teleology. In this way, the issue of political subjectivity and agency – the central question of political subjectivation – is simply bypassed, and "[a]gency disappears into a fundamental passivity" (Noys 2010: 8). By contrast, Cultural Studies will raise this question anew each time

and insist on struggle – including the struggle over the imagination of the future itself – as the means through which a better world can emerge.

In spite of this, I want to argue that there is something to be gained from an engagement with accelerationism. I would like to advocate a position beyond the binarism of ‘being for’ or ‘being against’ accelerationism. Instead, I want to reactivate the syncretism that has long been a characteristic of Cultural Studies, to emphasize its long-standing role as a theoretical *bricoleur*, and propose what is essentially a pragmatic approach. Thinking the world, mapping it, intervening in it – I believe that these, not the purity of frictionless systematicity, define the purpose of Cultural Studies theorizing. Consequently, rather than to simply adopt or outright reject accelerationist work, I suggest it proceed like a beachcomber – more Walcott’s Crusoe than Defoe’s. The goal is always the finding of tools that can be used. As I have said before: What is Cultural Studies if not a large toolbox? It is a heterogeneous theoretical assemblage, gathering and pulling together concepts, methods, and theories from a wide variety of sources for the purpose of intellectual (not just academic) work as a political practice. As numerous examples, such as, say, the ‘left’ readings of Martin Heidegger or Carl Schmitt, illustrate, helpful tools are sometimes found in unexpected places. Accordingly, their appropriation frequently involves a process of ‘translation’, in the anti-essentialist and anti-teleological sense in which Stuart Hall and others have used this term.

In the following, I want to adopt just such a beachcomber’s approach with regard to accelerationism. While the recent emergence of more moderate, ‘conditional’, and distinctly left accelerationist positions (cf. esp. Srnicek/Williams 2016; Williams/Srnicek 2014) in my view testifies to a basic compatibility with Cultural Studies – partly via a shared debt to the work of Antonio Gramsci – here I will focus on a rather ‘extreme’ manifestation, which is in many ways very much at odds with the general outlook of Cultural Studies: the thought of the English (anti-)philosopher Nick Land. Disregarding academic conventions and deliberately provocative, not least for many on the political left, his writings have been subjected to oftentimes fierce criticism. While I agree with much of this critique, particularly regarding his nihilistic embrace of the runaway circuits of cyber-capitalism and his more recent appalling turn to neoreaction, I will argue that Land’s work nevertheless offers a set of very helpful theoretical resources for a posthumanist Cultural Studies facing the challenges of the Anthro- or Capitalocene.² To do so, I will first briefly introduce and provide an overview of it, and particularly elaborate on Land’s “program for the posthuman” (2011: 379) and his championing of a machinic, ‘cyberrevolutionary’ becoming-ahuman, and then proceed to open up a way of reading his work that

2 Land himself would no doubt disapprove of a reading such as the one I am undertaking here, which he would certainly – and quite rightly – consider as hopelessly ‘docile’, corresponding as it largely does to the established norms of discursive propriety.

stresses its critical, emancipatory dimensions. I will argue that while we should discard the hyperbole and his (a-/anti-)political conclusions, both argumentatively and methodologically, there are various aspects of his analyses that are worth salvaging and articulating to the project of Cultural Studies. In this essay, I will principally focus on Land's powerful critique of defensive, 'securocratic' humanism or what he terms the 'human security system' and its frequently quasi-fascistic 'immuno-political' manifestations. As I will argue, this critique can at once inspire a useful 'anti-naturalist' orientation, draw our attention to alternative becomings ('becoming-inferior'), and sharpen our awareness for the hybrid, composite, palimpsest-like character of power structures and socio-cultural formations. The Coronavirus pandemic will serve as a case study to illustrate these arguments.

Introducing Nick Land

Land's work comprises his only academic – or, better, quasi- or anti-academic – monograph, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, published in 1992, a large number of essays and shorter pieces, many of which were first collected in the volume *Fanged Noumena* in 2011, and, especially since his move to Shanghai, several self-published works of both fictional and non-fictional nature, as well as numerous online commentaries, including the infamous 2012 text "The Dark Enlightenment", which has become an important intellectual reference point of recent neoreactionary thinking. While Land's writings have been largely ignored by the academic mainstream, they have exerted a rather strong subterranean influence in other spheres, such as music, art, and fiction – for instance in the work of the musician Kode9, the artists Jake and Dinos Chapman, or the writers Reza Negarestani and Hari Kunzru – though more recently, particularly with the emergence of speculative realism and new materialism, their mark can be felt in the domain of theory and philosophy as well, as in the writings of Mark Fisher, Kodwo Eshun, Luciana Parisi, Ray Brassier, Robin Mackay, or Iain Hamilton Grant, many of whom actually studied or worked with Land. Like the work of these thinkers, Land's thought (at least up until its turn to the far right) can be characterized as rigorously opposed to the ideology of liberal humanism and to anthropocentrism in general, as well as to all theoretical positions that can be described as correlationalist (Meillasoux 2009) and/or representationalist (Barad 2007). I believe that his work can be roughly divided into three main phases:

A) the early writings, which are still heavily indebted to theory's 'critical' mode (though they are already distinctly moving towards escalation) and which mainly consist of highly idiosyncratic engagements with the history of 'Western' philosophy. For one thing, Land here develops subversive readings of what he considers to be the West's philosophical mainstream (esp. Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Husserl, Hei-

degger, Derrida) – the “theo-humanists”, “croaking together in the cramped and malodorous pond of Anthropos” – while for another, he identifies/constructs and aligns himself with a small and marginalized insurrectionary counter-tradition (essentially Nietzsche and Bataille, but also, with some limitations, Schopenhauer and Freud) – “the wild beasts of the impersonal” (2005: 97). Methodologically speaking, Land engages with the philosophical canon through highly original genealogical-materialist rereadings, in which, for instance, Kant’s Enlightenment project of critique turns out to be the type of thinking corresponding to, and ultimately justifying, patriarchal, xenophobic, colonialist, capitalist modernity³. I believe that this approach, driven by an insistence on “the ineliminable materiality of all spiritualization [and thought] processes” (2011: 187), has certain affinities with some of the work that is done under the banner of Cultural Studies and may well serve as a source of inspiration for further work on the ‘archive’ (a term that should here also be understood in the Foucauldian sense [Foucault 1972]).

B) Then, in the early to mid-1990s, a noticeable shift occurs, a change in content as well as style and form. The increasing technologization of life, its accelerating penetration by technocapital, now becomes Land’s central concern, one he addresses theoretically through an eccentric synthesis of the thought of Deleuze and Guattari as well as Bataille on the one hand and the field of cybernetics on the other. This is the properly accelerationist phase of Land’s work. Conceiving capitalism along ‘machinic’ lines, that is, as an essentially self-organizing cybernetic system, Land emphasizes the revolutionary power of positive feedback loops and long-range runaway circuits against the conservative control-function of negative loops and stabilization or short-range circuits. Following the Deleuzo-Guattarian update of Marx’s and Engels’ famous description of capitalism as a force melting ‘all that is solid into thin air’, Land calls for an ‘escalative’, ‘delirial’ cybernetics that would break with the humanist, managerial-technocratic form of ‘security cybernetics’ in the vein of Norbert Wiener and, abandoning the homeostatic ideal, unshackle the deterritorializing feedback processes and thus unleash “exploratory mutation” (2011: 297f). According to Land, once all flows are freed from the inhibitions of reterritorialization, the ensuing emergent escalation processes come to constitute a nomadic, “unmanageable exploration that escapes all authority and obsolesces law” (2011: 301). As Land puts it: “cybernetics is the reality of critique” (2011: 300). ‘Acephalic’ capitalism itself – a relentless force of unbinding, of death (2011: 266) – thus represents the

3 As Land argues, “the first *Critique* corresponds to appropriative economy or commodification”, “the second critique corresponds to imperial jurisdiction”, and “the third critique corresponds to the exercise of war at those margins of the global system that continue to resist both the market and the administration” (2011: 74f).

path to 'exit'⁴, to connecting with the vast tracts of the unknown.⁵ Hence, since "the forces of production are going for the revolution on their own" (2011: 341), the goal becomes to participate in this anarchic process of radical destratification and deterritorialization, in the escalating unmaking of cultures, customs, traditions, institutions, and subjectivities, in such a way as to persistently accelerate and intensify it – up until the point, thus Land's wager, at which this "automatizing nihilist vortex", "becoming ever more tightly identified with its own self-surpassing" (2011: 444, 625), implodes. Political action is thus radically redefined as the acceleration of capitalist deterritorialization in the direction of "escape velocity" and the "catastrophe threshold of change", that is, as the "coercion of capital into immanent coexistence with its undoing" (2011: 341, 278). For Land, whose stance has accordingly sometimes been labelled as 'right accelerationism', there is no alternative to this – all hopes for a return to some type of precapitalist, organic, communal lifeform, or socialist calls for a strong, regulating state and appeals to solidarity and collectivity, are considered by him as hopelessly nostalgic, anachronistic in both, their analyses and propositions. As Land argues: "'Post-capitalism' has no real meaning except an end to the engine of change." (2011: 626)

In this period, escalation for Land is simultaneously subject matter, philosophical stance, and political program, as well as formal principle. Consequently, Land's texts of this time turn into increasingly experimental theory-fictions, effectively forsaking all conventions of academic discourse. Now, form and content effectively fuse, as Land seeks out adequate ways of responding to the real of hypermodern⁶ capitalism, which, as he sees it, has rendered theoretical critique obsolete by itself becoming, through its infinite powers of deterritorialization, "the definitive automation and realisation of critique, stripped of all philosophical subjectivity". Hence, "Land's writing is compelled to abandon the obsolesced model of critique perpetuated by philosophy, and to engage in positive feedback with this actually

4 Land's notion of 'exit' constitutes one important common theme connecting all phases of his work, including the most recent, neoreactionary one, in which this erstwhile complex and suggestive idea is now rewritten in a very concretizing and, in my view, rather trivializing and politically highly questionable manner.

5 Despite its emphasis on radical immanence, Land's accelerationism thus ultimately remains a 'philosophy of the outside', driven by what Badiou famously called the 'passion for the real', pairing immanence with a "(deferred) transcendence" (Noys 2014: 8), insofar as capital's escalating 'immanentization' is supposed to eventually flip over into transcendence.

6 I believe that Land's take on the present is perhaps best characterized not in terms of 'late' or 'postmodernity', but, in reference to theorists such as Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard, or Marc Augé, as 'super-' or 'hypermodernity'. Though the philosophical and political positions of these thinkers differ significantly, they nevertheless all consider the present as above all characterized by phenomena of acceleration and excess. In this context, cf. especially the centrality of the 'hype(r)' in Land's essay "Hypervirus" as well as Land's and the CCRU's notion of 'hyperstition'.

effective automated critique" (Mackay/Brassier 2011: 27). Or, as Land puts it: "There is no real option between a cybernetics of theory or a theory of cybernetics" (2011: 295). The goal, then, can no longer be to write *about* or *against* capital, but to write *with* it, in sync with its deterritorializations. Thus, Land's work turns into a kind of mash-up or "sample machine" (Mackay/Brassier 2011: 34), not only combining a wide variety of different disciplines and fields in a radical trans- or post-/non-disciplinarity, but also interweaving science with literature, occultism, myth, popular fiction, electronic music, and film, and fusing writing with performance, dance, music, and visual art (e.g., in his collaboration with the artist collective Orphan Drift). In this way, as Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier point out, "Land proceeds to deterritorialize and de-institutionalise 'philosophy', turning it into a mode of concept-production which dissolves academic theory's institutional segregation from cultural practice and subverts the distinction between cognitive representation and fictional speculation". In doing so, his "superpositions of figures and terminologies approach a point of maximum compaction and density, forming their own compelling microcultural climate" (Mackay/Brassier 2011: 26, 34). The goal, for Land, was the creation of "a textual machine for affecting reality by intensifying the anticipation of its future" (Mackay/Brassier 2011: 32), or, as the CCRU used to say, 'hyperstition': 'fictions that make themselves real' (CCRU 2015).

Not unlike some other late 20th-century philosophical writings – we may, for instance, think of the work of Derrida here – Land's texts forcefully remind us of the significance of a *politics of form*. In this regard, different subdivisions of this phase of his oeuvre would be possible as Land's battle against the traditional protocols of 'Western thought' and against all that is sedimented in and subliminally perpetuated by it assumes more and more radical shapes, his experimentation *with* writing gradually giving way to one moving *beyond* writing (Mackay 2012). Thus, in the later texts, his self-consistent, somewhat hermetic theory-fictional assemblages are replaced by highly eccentric experiments with esoteric numbering practices (escaping 'Occidental' mathematization) and alphabetic anti-systems (based on the QWERTY keyboard) and attempts at a performative evacuation of the (speaking/writing) voice itself.⁷ These 'non-sensical' writings from the late 90s and early 2000s can effectively be understood in terms of a radicalization of the deconstructivist struggle with the 'prison-house of language' (Jameson 1972), to the extreme point of the elaboration of a veritable 'anti-Logos' (Mackay/Brassier 2011: 21), efforts aimed at a subtraction from signification and meaning itself.

7 In this context, a clear point of reference is Land's interest in the dance music of the 90s, especially Jungle, whose aesthetic was often similarly characterized by a welcoming of mechanization or computerization and an abandonment of human(ist) residues such as the voice (Noys 2014: 53).

C) In his 'late' work, roughly texts published after 2000, Land then increasingly returns to more conventional and accessible forms of writing. Now, however, as Mackay and Brassier observe, the formerly "tactical embrace of unlimited deregulation, marketisation, commodification, and privatisation, as vectors of social deterritorialization, apparently flips over into a complacent acceptance of actually-existing capitalist social relations" (2011: 47f). Increasingly conceiving of liberal democracy and its (attempts at) management of the economy as an obstacle to the unfolding of the inhuman dynamic of capitalism, Land now calls for its abolition and replacement with a system of 'neo-cameralism', in which nation-states are dissolved into tiny 'gov-corps', effectively run like businesses and, according to Land's neo-eugenic 'hyperracism', often based on 'race' (Land 2012). With this vision of a "rigidly formalized capitalist technocracy" (MacDougald 2015), capitalism is pushed to an extreme, openly authoritarian, fascist point. Like the online writings of computer scientist Curtis Yarvin (blogging under the pseudonym Mencius Moldbug), on which he heavily draws, Land's "The Dark Enlightenment" and other more recent texts are at the heart of the intellectual movement known as neoreaction, which Lawrence Grossberg has described as "conservatism after postmodernism" (2018: 78), a highly idiosyncratic amalgamation of older conservative, libertarian, economic-liberal, racist, and postmodernist discourses⁸, which – as is so often the case with the contemporary new right – also distinctly incorporates or echoes left critique.

If Cultural Studies is a 'political project' (Hall 1996a), one that, generally speaking, aims at a more just, free, and egalitarian world, then the arguments and demands put forth in these late works by Land need to be unambiguously rejected. If they are of significance at all, then certainly not as tools, but as material for better 'knowing the enemy'. Though this is far beyond the scope of this essay, in order to better understand, and ultimately better fight, the extremely complex and heterogeneous phenomenon of the new right, these texts thus deserve to be submitted to a rigorous (discourse) analysis, deconstruction, and critique. With regard to the already mentioned integration of 'critical', leftist, postmodernist, and poststructuralist thought into this body of work, there is, I think, also something to be learned here about the considerable conceptual and political flexibility such approaches are evidently able to tolerate (Burrows 2019). In this context, against Mackay, who, with respect to the late work, maintains that "[i]n any normative, clinical, or social sense of the word, very simply, Land did 'go mad'"⁹ (2012), it bears

8 Cf. also the discourses of 'post-truth' politics, 'fake news', etc.

9 Land himself identifies a similar gap between his old and new work/self: *"It's another life; I have nothing to say about it – I don't even remember writing half of those things ... I don't want to get into retrospectively condemning my ancient work – I think it's best to gently back off. It belongs in the clawed embrace of the undead amphetamine god."* (qtd. in Mackay 2012)

pointing out that while a radical shift did unmistakably take place, there are also distinct continuities throughout Land's writing – and I believe we would do well to keep these continuities in mind and allow them to trouble our reading of the earlier work (and our theorizing more generally¹⁰).

Dismantling the Human Security System

You scrape away your face and step into
the dark...

(Nick Land)

I have already indicated that, as a political proposition, I believe that Land's accelerationism needs to be rejected. As his own philosophico-political trajectory shows, a simple embrace of the existing dynamics of capitalism will not lead us anywhere good – only to more, perhaps even worse versions, of the same. After all, capitalist crises come and go. 2007/08 was only the latest in a series of crises, none of which has led to the demise of capitalism. On the contrary, crises frequently help the system to advance and regenerate itself. As Steven Shaviro points out: “we are all accelerationists now” (2015: 34). Excess, transgression, and crisis are what fuels neoliberalism. There is thus no reason to expect that the next crises and contradictions will be any different. Interestingly, what Land's position comes down to in the end is not entirely unlike certain other political philosophies that have emerged from the ‘radical left’ in the (not so) recent past – I am thinking here, for instance, of those positions held by the likes of Badiou, Rancière, or Žižek, which effectively tend to collapse politics into ‘the political’ (cf. Marchart 2010), understood as the “absolute singularity of an event” (Badiou 2005: 23), or those, like Lévinas’ or Derrida’s, that appeal to the ‘totally Other’, figured as some radical outside. Though these theories should no doubt not simply be conflated, they arguably all run the risk of turning politics into a quasi-theological affair and, paradoxically, of ultimately resulting in a-political attentism. Here, curiously, these often ultra-radical stances seem to fold into their very opposite: ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’.

Thus, if Landian accelerationism is of value, then not as political strategy but as a symptom, a marker of the crisis of political agency. Yet, as I have suggested, there are other aspects of his work which may prove more useful. In my view, one of these is Land's powerful critique of humanism. Before I embark upon an in-depth discussion of this critique, let me briefly introduce (my reading of) Land's idiosyncratic brand of materialism on which that critique is based. The reference points

10 In my opinion, the ‘unnatural political alliances’ (as a call for papers dedicated to this important topic put it) that mark our present moment still deserve more analytical attention.

for this materialism are mainly Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Deleuze and Guattari, and especially Bataille, whose 'base materialism' (e.g., 1985) Land develops and updates for the age of technoscience. Like Bataille's, Land's vision is a 'heterological' one, focused on waste, dirt, and the abject, on all that is excluded from capitalist 'homogeneity', yet which constantly haunts and disturbs this world centered on rationality, utility, production, and accumulation, with which it cannot be coordinated, threatening to rupture the 'restricted economy' of capitalism¹¹ and to void value. Anticipating certain varieties of the new materialisms, for Land, matter is essentially active, unstable, and unruly, something that can ultimately not be contained within models that posit sovereign human subjects manipulating external and passive objects, as propagated by modern (read: humanist, correlationist) science and elsewhere. Here, matter is creative and excessive, an entropic force always undoing any form, order, or organization, whose stability can never be but provisional – "base matter twitches and spits, selfassembling neoverminous swarms. It bites, and spreads disease." (Land 2011: 393) It is "acategorical", "turbulence 'beyond all regulation'" (211, quoting Bataille). There is clearly something vitalist about this – perhaps we may speak of a 'dark' or an 'excremental vitalism' (Noys 2014: 79) – and it would no doubt be interesting to put it into dialogue with some of the vitalisms that have emerged or been reenergized in recent years. For now, what matters most is that Land's ontology is essentially a processual one, conceiving all phenomena in terms of only ever temporary aggregations, precarious assemblages of flows of energy. After structuralism and poststructuralism emphatically 'depresentified' (Foucault 1972: 47) things, Land, not unlike several new materialist philosophers, now argues for their "de-thinging" – "there are no things" (273, 210). Citing Nietzsche, Land writes: "With the libidinal reformulation of being as composition 'one acquires degrees of being, one loses that which has being' [...]. The effect of 'being' is derivative from process" (2005: 30). Thus, "any possible self – or relative isolation – is only ever precipitated as a precarious digression within a general economy, perpetually renegotiated across the scale of energy flows. The relative autonomy of the organism is not an ontological given but a material achievement" (2005: 45). With this insistence on what Barad (2007) would call the 'intra-activity' of matter, binary oppositions such those of nature and culture, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, etc. are destabilized. Like the work of Haraway, Barad, and others, Land's writings allow us to think and address the contingent and fabricated nature of such

11 Against this, Bataille proposes a 'general economy' able to do justice to all those elements excluded or denigrated by capitalism. Similar to what was said above, I think it is debatable in how far this theory, which was clearly modeled on an older form of capitalism still largely devoted to production and accumulation and driven by the asceticism of the Protestant work ethic, is still adequately able to capture the realities of our '(post-)postmodern' capitalism of consumption and excess.

boundaries. As he writes with regards to the body: “There is a boundary of sorts along the banks and shores of the body where fluidity and rigidity meet, but this is not sufficient to authorize the irrigational idol of rigid differentiation.” (2005: 91) What is denied here is not the existence of boundaries, but their essentialist, permanent character. As Land’s use of metaphors suggests, they are better thought of in terms of congealments, solidifications, sedimentations, and as such are always tenuous and marked by “porous heterogeneity” (2011: 192). Here, in other words, ontology emerges as “managed flow” (2005: 92). And this management can, of course, be thematized and problematized. That is to say, Land’s libidinal, dark materialism contributes to an explicit *politicization of ontology* – a politics of matter. While Land’s radical Dionysian pessimism leads him to denounce organization per se as invariably a form of despotism¹² and accordingly to champion total, uninhibited deterritorialization, we do not need to follow Land to this extreme stance – which I would consider as depoliticizing and disempowering and thus as highly problematic – but can still assert the validity and usefulness of his reflections.

One context in which their analytic value becomes apparent is Land’s critique of humanism. In my reading, this critique condenses what, throughout his writings (especially the early ones¹³), shows up as the anti-authoritarian, anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, anti-nationalist, and anti-fascist thrust of his politics. For Land, the defining trait of ‘Occidental’, modern humanism is its ‘securocratic’ (2011: 585, *passim*) nature. It is a prime instrument of “anthropomorphic power” (397) – which should be read as both, the power of *Anthropos*, but also the power that *produces Anthropos* in the first place¹⁴. The specific form of the human manufactured by humanism is referred to by Land as the ‘human security system’ (312, *passim*). From Land’s pessimistic, neo-Dionysian, libidinal-materialist perspective, infused by the thought of Nietzsche, Bataille, Deleuze and Guattari, human existents¹⁵ are essen-

12 In this context, cf. also Land’s idiosyncratic theory of ‘geotraumatism’ (esp. 2011: 493–505), which construes the organization of matter as itself an expression of trauma and hence assumes that all things universally yearn for release. While this view is no doubt somewhat eccentric, I believe that Land’s interest for geology and the inorganic domain might nevertheless be a potential opening for instructive dialogues with more recent theoretical work on the inhuman (cf., e.g., Povinelli 2016; Yusoff 2018).

13 Cf. especially the essays “Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest”, “Art as Insurrection”, and “Making It with Death”.

14 The phrase “in the first place” should here not be misunderstood as signaling precedence or some founding act or moment. Instead, this production of the human must be conceived along the lines of Butler’s (1993, 1999) concept of ‘performativity’ or Althusser’s (1971) notion of ‘interpellation’ (esp. as reread by Butler [1997: 106–31]) as an ongoing process, a constitution in time.

15 The concept of the ‘existent’ is borrowed from Elizabeth Povinelli (2016). I use the slightly awkward phrase ‘human existent’ in order to avoid alternative terms such as ‘individual’, ‘subject’, ‘person’, or ‘human’, which all come rather fully loaded with sedimented meanings and

tially a "battlefield" (189), caught in an endless flux of energies, given over to multiple, heterogeneous 'becomings', traversed by impersonal forces beyond any control, and constituted, but also undone, by the "ferocious exteriority" (153) of radical alterity and 'base matter'. According to Land, the "anthropological machine" (Agamben 2004: 26) of humanism works precisely to repress this reality. Along with other mechanisms of stratification and territorialization, it represents an attempt to organize, structure, and control the processes of matter-energy flows. It is fully dedicated, he writes, to the "paranoid ideal of self-sufficiency" (443). Humanism, in tandem with capitalism, individualizes existents, provides them with a unique 'face' (cf. Deleuze/Guattari 1987: 167–91), and endows every single one with an *identity*, signaling the unity, continuity, and coherence of the person. No fragmentarity, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and mutability, but sameness (Lat. *idem*) – "a person or thing is itself and not something else" (OED 1991: 620). Land is unambiguous in his view that this is a form of power. For him, as Mackay and Brassier point out, "every repressive culture is founded upon the identification and repetition of sameness" (2011: 21). Land here effectively inscribes himself in the long line of thought of the critique of the subject (esp. in its poststructuralist variant), which, instead of the primordial and sovereign origin of all action, speech, affect, relation, etc., he considers to be the effect and product of a whole number of "macro- and micro-governmental entities" (450). As for Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, and numerous others, the result is docility: humanism "shores up the cop in everyone's head" and "smother[s] the earth in priests, cops, and bureaucrats" (280, 394) – a process, as Land maintains in line with many of these thinkers¹⁶, strongly contributed to by the so-called human sciences, especially the "medico-security apparatus" and the "psychopolice" (308, 307), that is, psychology and psychoanalysis.

For Land, the human subject fabricated by modern humanism is one among many 'PODS': "Politically Organized Defensive Systems" (320). These pods can be understood as assemblages, existing at various scales, though one of their defining characteristics is precisely the repression of their 'assembled' character – which, in keeping with the double meaning of the original French word *agencement*, should be taken to refer to both, their nature as a heterogeneous ensemble of parts as well as the fact that they are the result of a process, the action of fitting these parts together (Fr. *agencer*). In a radicalization of the Foucauldian notion of power as 'micro-physical' and all-pervasive, Land identifies the operation of control 'all the way down' and 'all the way up', from the micropods of the organization of matter, the

connotations I wish to avoid (and each of which, of course, has been subjected to rigorous deconstruction).

16 Here, out of a plethora of works, we might single out the groundbreaking writings of Canguilhem and Foucault as well as those associated with the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s and 70s.

cells of the body, or the organism, via the self, family, or institutions, up to macropods such as nations, Fortress Europe, or the capitalist world order. In each case, “fluctuations are case-packed into reproducible units – geochemical, bio-organic, cultural – encrusted within security pods” (415). They are “pseudo-organic unities” (448), instances of “pseudoabsoluteness” (188), relying on the “defensive strategies of repression, projection, denial, censorship, exclusion, and restriction” (448). Like the human, which is effectively nothing but “crystallized paranoia” (Plant/Land 2014: 311), all pods constitute “fortifications”, marked by an “anal-sadistic structure” (Land 2011: 320, 200). Their make-up is essentially *‘immuno-political’*. With this focus on immuno-politics, Land effectively joins the (radicalized) determination to ‘wage a war on totality’ (Lyotard 1984: 82) propelling so much poststructuralist writing to the theoretical discourses on biopower and biopolitics. What immuno-politics is aimed at is the effective repression of relationality, entanglement, and processuality through the manufacture of (ostensibly) discrete and self-contained entities. For this project, alterity is a problem. Yet, because it is the very condition of possibility for any such entity, the (un-)ground from which they can be constructed in the first place, and because modernity is by its very nature propelled by a drive pushing it outward and forward, towards novelty, acceleration, and expansion (not least, of course, in the form of capitalist exploitation), alterity can never be eradicated. Instead, the encounter with it always has to be reduced to what Land terms an ‘inhibited’, that is, a pre-structured and -framed, safely regulated, and hazard-free one. As he points out, a modern society’s “dream is to grow whilst remaining identical to what it was, to touch the other without vulnerability” (63f). Hence the central law of all pods: “the outside must pass by way of the inside” (320). The goal is invariably “to capture alterity within a system of rules, to provide it with an identity, and to exclude the possibility of the radically different” (69). This, in other words, is an alterity that is in advance rigidly positioned, fixed in a stable relation, inscribed with meaning, and therefore always already delimited, domesticated, and tamed. Otherness is thus stripped of anything that might trouble or undo the ‘self’ and reveal the ‘agential cuts’ (Barad 2007) through which it was produced in the first place. As Land puts it: “we have always already torn out the tongue of alterity before entering into relation with it”¹⁷ (64).

To a certain extent, Land’s thinking on immuno-politics here resonates with the work of Roberto Esposito (2008, 2010, 2011), a major contribution to the theorization of biopower. It was above all Esposito who forcefully argued that “*in bio-politics, the hyphen is immunological*” (Neyrat 2010: 32). Opposing *communitas* to *immunitas*, Esposito explains that the former, harking back to the *munus* (Lat. ‘task’, ‘duty’,

17 This may well be a reference to the mutilated Friday of J.M. Coetzee’s original rewriting of the Robinson Crusoe-myth in his 1986 novel *Foe*, a text in which – as in Coetzee’s work on the whole – the question of alterity is of central concern.

'gift'), means a living interdependence with the other, a reciprocal relation in which human existents 'ex-*pose*' themselves, whereas the latter signifies a defense of the 'proper', of one's own identity, and thus a negative, privative form of community, in fact, the very interruption of the "social circuit of reciprocal gift-giving" (Esposito 2011: 6) that is the foundation of every community. That is to say, for Esposito, community is really the very opposite of the individual, the private, and the particular; it is the 'common', "the giving up of all identity closed onto itself", an "originary exile" (Neyrat 2010: 33). As Frédéric Neyrat explains: "Existing only outside of itself, community is first and foremost a lack of Self, of unity, of a One." (2010: 33) By contrast, the 'immunitary paradigm' denies precisely this alterity that permeates the (putative) self and conceives community in an identitarian way by equating the common with the proper. Immunity signifies "the 'nonbeing' or the 'not-having' anything in common" (Esposito 2011: 51). Individual as well as collective life is defined in terms of a self-sameness, a unity, a self-enclosed absolute, and, importantly, as something to be defended against risks and dangers. The process of 'immunization' as Esposito understands it means the protection of life from 'external' threats, a securitization against the loss of identity and individuality. It thus institutes the demarcations of inside and outside, self and other, human and nonhuman. As for Land, this process – in keeping with its biomedical meaning – involves the controlled admittance or introjection of small dosages of that which threatens it – an "exclusionary inclusion or exclusion by inclusion" (Esposito 2011: 8). At the heart of immunization we thus find an irreducible dialectic: the proper (self or community) is to be defended against precisely that which is constitutive of it and to which it constantly needs to have recourse: the other. According to Esposito, it is because of this dialectic that there is always the danger of an 'auto-immunitarian' hypertrophication of self-preservation: the frenetic attempt to defend the self and cleanse it of all traces of alterity results in the shift – what the German Left Hegelians would call *Umschlagen* – from the protection to the negation of life (hence the subtitle of Esposito's *Immunitas*). When this happens, biopolitics turns into what Foucault termed 'thanatopolitics'; the power over life is exercised against life, a politics for life becomes a politics of death. Hence the countless murders and genocides committed in the name of life. This, for Esposito, is the 'enigma of biopolitics' (2011: 13–44). Esposito and Land consequently consider Nazism the most extreme, but also the 'logical', not wildly aberrant, endpoint of the logic of immunity. Where, in Esposito's (2010) view – which echoes somewhat similar sentiments in the work of Bataille, Blanchot, Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Derrida, and Agamben – the community is something that can never *be*, since it is founded on a lack, a lacuna, an indelible limit, and thus "is not identifiable with itself, with all of itself and with itself as all", totalitarianism pursues precisely this "furious illusion" and must therefore be understood as "the phantasmatic temptation of abolishing the limit, of filling in the fault, of closing the wound" (2013: 29). However, this temptation haunts *all* pods, since, logically, every pod is a

'monopod' (Land 2011: 347, *passim*). For an author like Land, fascism must thus be seen as something like the dark flipside of securocratic humanism, whose immunopolitical orientation entails a tendentially obsessive and violent need to define, delimit, and defend the 'proper', understood at once as 'one's own' and 'the clean' (cf. Kristeva 1982). In fact, it is driven by a veritable 'will to purity' (Kroker/Kroker 1993). That is to say, the immunological production of the human inevitably also constructs the nonhuman, subhuman, infrahuman, parahuman, etc. and is accompanied and underpinned by an incessant work of 'purification' (Latour 1993) or 'ontological hygiene' (Graham 2002). As Land succinctly puts it: "The only possible politics of purity is fascism" (2011: 76). Here, I believe that Land's thinking intersects in potentially productive ways with critical posthumanism and its focus on the human as a "differential norm" and its critique of "the limits of human intelligibility" (Butler 2016: 76, 2006: 35).

Yet, as I have already noted, while the 'politics of purity' may aim at total integrity and homogeneity, without any remainders, it will always inevitably fail, as absolute closure is an impossibility. Because of this, there will always be existents that resist or escape immunological capture. Adapting Deleuze and Guattari (1987, esp. 232–309), Land describes these oppositional or alternative modes of being as so many ways of 'becoming-inferior'¹⁸. Regarding these, I here only want to observe two things: Land notes that for such becomings, the rule is: "No revolution without insurrectionary desire, no effective route for insurrectionary desire without integral anti-fascism." (170) For Land, the anti-immunological, anti-fascist thrust of these becomings already registers in their very 'form', that is, in the fact that desire is here not congealed in the territorialization of a subject – routes instead of roots, nomads rather than monads. This, precisely, is a *becoming*, not a subjectivation (hegemonic, oppositional, or otherwise). The 'subject' (again, language itself constrains us here) of a becoming is always 'one' (Fr. *il*, Ger. *man*): it is not *I* but *one* that is becoming-minor, -wild, -lateral, -imperceptible, ... I believe we may well feel compelled to oppose this typically Landian radicalization of the impulse towards deterritorialization along multiple 'lines of flight' and, against his injunction to "extinguish all nostalgia for belonging" (264), insist on the latter's legitimacy, if not necessity (as well as the fact that it is not necessarily nostalgic). In that context, we may want to think of 'routes vs. roots' and so forth not so much in terms of a binarism than of a question of 'articulation', and bring into play the key problematic of 'identification' (cf. Hall 1996b). Nevertheless, I would like to hold on to the significance of Land's notion of becoming as, on the one hand, a welcome reminder that any sense of identity should always be put 'under erasure', kept open to be troubled, unsettled, and refashioned by its constitutive outsides, that is, to use Deleuzo-Guattarian terminol-

18 The most concise elaboration of this important concept can be found in the essay "Spirit and Teeth".

ogy, remain 'molecular' and never be permitted to petrify into a fixed 'molarity'; and, on the other hand, as a potentially potent figuration of a new political, not subject, but *assemblage*.

The other point I want to make is related to this: It concerns the second aspect of Land's concept, not the 'becoming', but the 'inferior'. Rather than a reaffirmation of hierarchical logics of superiority and inferiority, I think that this notion should be read as an *appropriation*: a tactical siding with the other(s) of the human, a strategic seizure of this problematic term which effectively decenters it through a deconstructive move problematizing and displacing classifications and aiming in the direction of a utopian anti-/non-logic that eschews all orderings. For Land, to be becoming-inferior (only the progressive form is appropriate here; one can never *be* inferior) means to *escape*: to break away from hegemonic constructions of humanity towards its outside – "becoming an enemy of mankind" (200). Hence his insistence that 'the inferior ones' are indecent, lazy, disobedient, unrestrained, unclean, and impure, "no more employable than they are psychoanalyzable", "excluded from every possibility of salvation" (183). Becoming 'dehumanized', they undo the territorializing codings of class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, and so forth. In this context, it is significant to note the numerous figurations of the nonhuman and not-quite-human among the plethora of Land's examples of becomings that exceed the 'human security system': becoming-animal (esp. 'abject' ones such as rats), -beast, -werewolf, -vampire, -plant, -virus, -cyborg, -inorganic, and more. For Land, becoming-inferior is essentially all about deterritorialization and the liberation of flows. As he explains, inferiority is a "wilderness terrain" with "channels of open flow"; becoming here means "becoming multiple, fluid, unpredictable, [...] becomings of all kinds". Inferiority is hence "not a state, essence, or genus, but a complex space cross-cut by voyages of all kinds" (200). Yet, I believe that it is also possible to understand all these passages and images simultaneously in terms of a potent political speculation, gesturing towards a wholly other mode of existence, in which, to quote Donna Haraway, whose work points in just such a direction, "people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines" (2010: 2196). In fact, I think Land's writing can be read as part of a new, *posthumanist imaginary*, emerging in theory, philosophy, and across the cultural landscape (with science fiction as a primary site), consisting of often daring representations and radical thought experiments which all signal the necessity for a novel type of collectivity, without yet really being able to articulate what it could concretely look like.¹⁹ Nevertheless, what transpires in many cases, including, in my reading, in Land's, is that, for a more sustainable, just, and egalitarian future, this collective will have to be a sort of transversal²⁰ as-

19 In this context, cf. also my reading of Alex Garland's 2018 science fiction horror film *Annihilation* in the coda.

20 On transversality, cf. Braidotti 2019.

semblage of assemblages, based on wide-ranging “re-distributions of difference and identity” (Halberstam/Livingston 1995: 10) and a collectively negotiated posthuman performativity (Barad 2007). In this context, becoming-ahuman – “Man is something [to be] overcome: a problem, drag” (Land 2011: 446) – would not mean heading full throttle for human extinction, as championed by Land in many of his texts, but rather working towards the abolition of the human as a category. We can escape and undo the Human without having to wish for the end of the human.

Not unlike Haraway, Land sees the more recent accelerations of technoscientific development as an opportunity to similarly speed up this process of becoming. Now, from all corners, “deterritorializing replicants of nomad-cyberrevolution close in upon the reterritorializing reproducers of the sedentary human security system, hacking into the macropod” (330). Everywhere – through digitalization and VR, AI, biotechnology, (third-wave) cybernetics, etc. – the human is today being disassembled, so that “[h]umanity recedes like a loathsome dream” (300). Identity is being ‘shut down’ (457), the pods taken apart, and if this ‘meltdown’ “has a place for you”, then only “as a schizophrenic HIV+ transsexual chinese-latino stim-addicted LA hooker with implanted mirrorshades and a bad attitude” (456). Yet, whereas Haraway (2010) emphasizes what she calls ‘the social relations of science and technology’, that is, their articulation with other societal subsystems, and while she stresses the ambivalent, over- as well as underdetermined nature of the cyborg, and thus frames technoscience itself as a site of struggle, Land tends to fall back into a technological determinism. “It is ceasing”, he writes, “to be a matter of how we think about technics, if only because technics is increasingly thinking about itself.” (293) For Land, the “pilot of history” is “impersonal”, and consequently, “politics is obsolete” (295, 317). According to Land, the “planetary technocapital singularity” inescapably assembles itself: “Life is being phased-out into something new, and if we think this can be stopped we are even more stupid than we seem.” (338, 317f) While such depoliticization should resolutely be resisted, I believe that Land’s analyses still have their use for the project of a critical ontology and genealogy of the present. In fact, his work can be added to the long list of writings that attempt to think the present moment in terms of a shift, or a number of (interrelated) shifts – analyses associated with notions such as late capitalism, post-Fordism, the control society, the information age, the network society, the posthuman condition, and numerous others. Such diagnostic accounts engage in the work of periodization, which, despite the fact that it is never unproblematic²¹, is in my view indispensable for mapping and being able to intervene in the present. The significance of Land’s writings is not

21 For instance, I am here thinking of the dangers of generalization, absolutization, and homogenization, with such theories always running the risk of turning into oversimplifying ‘grand narratives’.

only that they chart the shift towards our contemporary cybernetic technocapitalism, but that they allow us to see this shift as a deeply uneven, heterogeneous process. I think that if we read Land somewhat against the grain and ignore his flippant hyperboles, which always tend to reduce historical process to teleology, his deliberations on pods and immuno-politics, his focus on the tensions between territorialization and deterritorialization, and related aspects of his work may well sharpen our awareness of the fact that socio-cultural formations and power structures are always hybrid, composite, palimpsest-like in character, so that, for example, the post-modern, technoscientific society of control must be understood as uneasily coexisting with, but also sometimes integrating, numerous elements of humanist, disciplinary modernity.²² While, for instance, human existents are today in all kinds of ways being subjectivated as 'dividuals' (Deleuze 1992), that is, as decentered subjectivities dispersed across a variety of networks, they are, in other contexts, simultaneously continuously being interpellated as integrated and autonomous individuals (i.e., pods) – with effects that are not infrequently pathological. As I see it, the nuanced and differentiating investigation of such 'simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous', of syncretisms, multidimensionality, and of the ensuing effects, is today one important task for Cultural Studies. Power and society, too, are effectively assemblages, not homogenous wholes.²³

I think the relevance of all these reflections on immuno-politics, becoming, and social assemblages is also attested to by the Corona pandemic.²⁴ As several commentators have pointed out, the epidemic was an occasion for a reconfiguration of technologies of power. With regard to the various measures adopted by different nation-states in order to contain the spread of the virus (lockdown, curfews, compulsory mask-wearing, mobile phone tracking, etc.), a rather heated debate has broken out about the question of how to interpret these developments. While some, most

22 On discipline and control, cf. Foucault 1979 and Deleuze 1992.

23 In a similar vein, we might consider Land's political proposition of accelerationism as giving us cause for doubt regarding the received theoretical model of subversion and containment, which continues to infuse many contemporary leftist political analyses – we may, for instance, think of the influential work of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) and their argument about the 'incorporation' of critique by the 'new spirit of capitalism' here. In contrast to the binarism of this model, I would read Land's work as urging us to take more seriously the central Foucauldian insight about the mutual implication and entanglement of 'power' and 'resistance' and to realize that nothing ever simply comes 'from outside' – there is no outside in that sense – and is then 'taken in'. Nothing is *essentially*, by and in itself, resistant. Instead, it is a question of relations, tendencies, and articulations – all of which are immanent. In the wake of Barad's important work, we may therefore want to abandon the whole geometric model which opposes interiorities to exteriorities and replace it with the notion of a "contested and ever-changing topology", one that is "iteratively (re)produced through the dynamics of intra-activity and enfolding" (Barad 2007: 243).

24 The Corona pandemic is taken up again in more detail in ch. 7.

(in-)famously Giorgio Agamben (2021), saw the (for 'Western', liberal societies) unprecedented restrictions on freedom, the universalization of (bio-)surveillance, and the imposition and, to some extent, normalization of what effectively amounted to a state of emergency as a sure sign of a reassertion of Foucauldian disciplinary power, or worse, even a new "technological-sanitizationist despotism" (Agamben 2021: 10) quickly sliding towards totalitarianism, others contradicted, arguing, for instance, that the measures were better understood with reference to what Foucault described as liberal governmentality and the *dispositif* of security (Sarasin 2020), or, within the Deleuzian paradigm of post-disciplinary power, as a manifestation of media-cybernetic, 'pharmacopornographic' control (Preciado 2020). Yet, looked at from the theoretical perspective outlined here, instead of absolutizing this type of power or that, the Corona measures are perhaps more productively seen in terms of an assemblage of power technologies, of a heterogeneous, dynamic, and contested network (in which, importantly, each technology must itself be conceived as an assemblage of practices, discourses, regulations, institutions, artifacts, etc.). In place of totalizing, large-scale pronouncements, such an outlook demands a much more nuanced, differentiating, and contextual (or conjunctural) approach, one dedicated to the concrete, delimiting its investigation both spatially and temporally, and trying to analyze as precisely as possible the actual configuration of the social force-field. While concepts such as discipline, bio- and necropower, control, or governmentality are extremely helpful for this task, I think they are best considered not as absolutes taking turns in the course of history, in a more or less linear succession of different 'types' of power and society, but rather as elements in a series of complex, uneven, and shifting constellations. These need to be described in terms of unstable sets of relations between what, following Williams (1977: 121–27), can be termed the hegemonic, the marginally residual, and the emergent – relations which can take various forms: a parallelism, an incorporation, a syncretism, a contradiction, etc. (cf. Cord/Schleusener 2020: 8). The precise nature of the nexus of these relations has to be determined anew in each specific case, as the Corona measures showed very well, which not only differed from place to place and were continually being adjusted in time, but which were in themselves a variable assemblage of disparate elements. And this, I contend, is what power *always* is.

The pandemic also demonstrates the enduring significance of the notion of immuno-politics. Here, Land's theoretical framework once again proves productive. For what did the shutdown of public life, the social distancing regulations, the closing of national borders, and related measures in Europe and elsewhere signify if not a general attempt at the fortification of 'pods' at various levels, from that of the individual body to the national and supranational ones? Everywhere, the immunitarian impulse was radicalized; what was to be maintained and defended at all cost was integrity (bodily, national, etc.). In that way, sovereignty was to be preserved: "the sovereign is he who protects from the diffuse conflict raging on the outside. He

bio-contains, he safeguards.” (Di Cesare 2021: 34f) As Donatella Di Cesare’s use of the masculine pronoun implies, the sovereignty that was thus meant to be guaranteed in Europe was, as in earlier epidemics (syphilis, HIV, etc.), once again principally that of the male, white, ‘Western’, bourgeois, able-bodied, younger and middle-aged (read: productive²⁵) subject – the ‘human security system’. Here as elsewhere, the pandemic functioned like a catalyst or “magnifying glass” (Nancy 2020), revealing modes of biopolitical and necropolitical management – especially through a “politics of *differential vulnerability*” (Lorenzini 2021: 43) – that, both within and at national borders, were often already operating in some form before the implementation of the new measures. It thus exposed more clearly the dialectical, even paradoxical, relation between community and immunity discussed above and the fact that immunity is never just “a biological fact independent of cultural and political variables”, but something that is “constructed through social and political criteria that produce sovereignty or exclusion, protection or stigmatization, life or death” (Preciado 2020).

Yet, at the same time, and because of this, it seems to me that Covid-19 can also be said to have opened up a window onto something different. It arguably not only raised the awareness for the necessity of alternative forms of inhabiting the earth, but also provided us with some ideas of what this might mean or entail. As I have already indicated, on a general, theoretical level – which will have to be translated into countless concrete measures (for which many suggestions already exist) – it is, to adopt Land’s terminology, precisely (also) a question of becoming-inferior, of refusing the immunitary paradigm, that is, “the obstinate desire to remain intact, uncorrupted, beyond harm” by immunizing ourselves against “all that is outside, other and beyond” (Di Cesare 2021: 27). What is at stake is a radically different biopolitics. Esposito, whose work is extremely helpful in this context, attempts to think such an alternative type of biopolitics, one that would not entail “the self-destructive revolt of immunity against itself” but “an opening to its converse, community” (2011: 141). Drawing, among other things, on Spinoza’s ‘multitude’, Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the ‘flesh’, Simondon’s thinking of ‘individuation’, and Deleuze’s concept of ‘a life’, Esposito outlines an ‘affirmative biopolitics’ thought through the *munus* of community and the notion of an ‘impersonal’ life shared among all (living) beings, which can never be fully contained within a closed, unified (individual or collective) body. Citing Simondon, he conjures a different logic of community, that of an “impersonal singularity (or a singular impersonality), which, rather than being imprisoned in the confines of the individual, opens those confines to an eccentric movement that ‘traverses men as well as plants and animals independently of the matter of their individuation and the forms of their personality’” (2008: 194). To a certain extent, Esposito’s reflections here resonate not only with Land’s critique of the – in the

25 Cf. the concept of ‘productivity ageism’.

last instance always *imaginary* (in the polysemic Lacanian sense) – fortifications of the pods, but also with some of the more recent new materialisms and their reconceptualization particularly of the individual body. Not unlike Land, who repeatedly polemicalizes against the conception of the organism as “a little security system” and instead emphasizes “the reality of the free penetrability of the body” and the fact that “the subject is not the owner of its skin, but a migrant upon its surface” (2011: 332, 200, 343), new materialist philosophers rethink corporeality as ‘transcorporeality’ (Alaimo 2010) and stress the body’s basic volatility (Grosz 1994), porousness, heterogeneity, and its nature as “an impure, human-nonhuman assemblage” (Bennett 2010: xvii).²⁶ An alternative, affirmative biopolitics would thus have to proceed from a very different ontology: not from the identitarian, sovereigntist fantasy of pure, unified, self-enclosed, and self-sufficient entities, but from the basic relationality, interdependence, entanglement, and processuality of being.

Similar propositions have recently been put forward explicitly in the context of the Corona pandemic. Thus, thinkers as diverse as Latour (2021), Preciado (2020), or Bratton (2021) have all argued, in their very different ways, that the pandemic should finally drive home to all the illusory and dangerous nature of the old ontology – that is, the fact that ‘we have never been modern’ (Latour 1993) – and articulated their hope that it might hence function as a catalyst for a radically different form of planetary cohabitation, based on a whole new biopolitics (many of these authors employ metaphors of metamorphosis and mutation to signal the fundamental and far-reaching nature of the required transformations). Preciado, for instance, writes: “Contrary to what one might imagine, our health will not come from a border or separation, but only from a new understanding of community with all living creatures, a new sharing with other beings on the planet.” (2020) Here, much could be said about the nature of viruses in general, which, in both their ontology (defiance of clear classifications, esp. the ‘living’ vs. ‘non-living’ binary) and their mode of functioning (replication inside the cells of organisms, i.e., circulation from one body to another, contamination and altering), always represent something akin to an “ontological insult”²⁷ (Bratton 2021: 98). It is certainly no coincidence that the virus figures

26 For Land, who here follows in the footsteps of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s schizoanalysis, the psychological apparatus of ‘Western’ man (sic!) is another such pod, essentially oriented towards shoring up the integrity of the ‘self’ through the clear demarcation of an inside from an outside. In this context, too, Land evokes the immuno-political nature of these structures and processes, as when he speaks of the ego as a “political or policed skin” or of its functioning as “a kind of quarantine” (333).

27 With regard to the present ‘posthuman condition’ (Braidotti 2013, 2019), marked as it is, among other things, by new technoscientific, mediatic, and biomedical realities, by the numerous problematics associated with the term ‘Anthropocene’ or ‘Capitalocene’, and now also by Covid-19, one is tempted to take up Freud’s train of thought and speak of further ‘narcissistic insults’ for Man here.

prominently across Land's writings (esp. in the essay "Hypervirus"), as a powerful figuration of "xenopulsions" (Land 2011: 333), subverting immunosecurity and signifying "not just infection, but connection" (Plant/Land 2014: 312). In the readings of Latour and others, Covid-19 today produces in all "a general uncertainty about our protective envelopes". Latour writes: "If lockdown is the bad news, the good news is the calling into question of notions of a border." (2021: 42) According to him, we can now finally "escape the traps of identity" and instead "start thinking in terms of *overlapping* and *encroachment*": "Thanks to confinement, we can finally breathe!" (2021: 43, 42) Taking this 'flattened', relational, and processual ontology, where life is understood not as the property of a clearly delineated organism but as distributed and emergent, as a 'mesh' (Morton 2010), and where the basic unit of analysis is accordingly not the individual but the assemblage, as its starting point and foundation, the main modality of a positive biopolitics would clearly not be immunological. The precise shape of such a new biopolitics has yet to be determined, of course. Certainly, immuno-politics would inevitably still be important, yet it would no longer be about the paranoiac defense against a threatening outside, but about *a conscious, care-ful, and collective negotiation of (permeable) boundaries*. Latour's reflections in this regard remain largely metaphorical and suggestive (his text can be described as essentially a theoretico-poetic rereading/-writing of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* through the prism of the pandemic). Preciado's comments likewise are unfortunately not very helpful, as he – quite uncharacteristically! – contents himself with resorting to what almost sounds like a quasi-Luddite fantasy of extracting ourselves from contemporary bio-surveillance: "Let us turn off our cell phones, let us disconnect from the internet." (2020) Esposito's deliberations, too, which revolve around the counter-metaphors of the flesh, birth, and the norm of life (2008: 146–94), often remain rather speculative. One of the central images Esposito offers for the envisaged immunitary opening to community is pregnancy, where, in his reading, the fact that the immune system of the mother "immunizes itself from an excess of immunization" (2011: 170), which would mean an attack against the child, makes it an apt symbol for the needed tolerance of alterity within a system and the desired permeability of the border between inside and outside. Yet, whether this image is really fitting as a motif for a new type of politics remains questionable. For not only can this situation of utmost intimacy merely be generalized to a very limited extent and is, moreover, simultaneously also one marked by a highly asymmetrical relation – from a posthumanist perspective, infused by Landian or, more generally speaking, escalative thinking, we may also feel compelled to challenge the naturalist, organicist connotations of this image – no least with a view to, on the one hand, the political critique from within queer theory of the usage that is often made of the figure of the child and representations of motherhood, which are frequently mobilized for the purpose of legitimizing and perpetuating hegemonic, heteronormative social imaginaries (cf. esp. Edelman 2004), and, on the other, the new materialist re-theorization of prenatal diagnostics,

which has brought to light the extremely complex relations of power practices such as ultrasonography are caught up in, and has shown that the fetus is no static entity but ontologically and epistemologically multiple and processual, something that is only ‘intra-actively’ produced in variable ways by different sets of discursive-material practices or ‘apparatuses’ enacting ‘agential cuts’ (Barad 2007, esp. 189–222). In that regard, we may want to insist that biopolitics is not only – as, for instance, critical animal and plant studies remind us – always ‘more-than-human biopolitics’ (Lemke 2021: 136–40), but also always ‘technobiopolitics’ (Barad 2007: 59), and that any new form of community will hence only come about through a deliberate, projective, and ‘response-able’ (Haraway 2016), process of *producing* that community. As Bratton (2021) suggests, post-pandemic biopolitics will have to revolve around an intentional, premeditated governance, operating through something like a ‘biopolitical stack’, that is, an infrastructure of different technologies, institutions, policies, and parameters. A posthumanist Cultural Studies as I understand it would thus reject any “[l]aissez-faire vitalism for which ‘life will find a way’” (Bratton 2021: 5), but would likewise remain skeptical of the assumption that an affirmative biopolitics “in the name of life” (Esposito 2008: 15) could easily be distinguished or separated from a negative one that subjects life. Yet, it would also refuse the Landian ideal of uninhibited deterritorialization and the dissolution of all limits – especially if this process is imagined as one driven solely by the autopoietic dynamics of capital.²⁸ Instead, proceeding from what we may call the ‘primacy of the political’, it would emphasize the essentially *political nature* of all forms of community, which is based on the fact that the ‘common’ of the community is never simply given as some sort of essence or substance, but is always the result of a conflictual negotiation. The boundaries of a community, the identity of any ‘us’, are always contested, always constructed or articulated in and through antagonism (Laclau/Mouffe 2001); never are they determined by some pre-political, primordial ‘fact’ such as a shared descent, tradition, culture, etc. Because of this, the unity of community, in the strict sense of the word, is finally an impossibility because the ‘will to totality’ (Laclau 1990: 92) will always

28 We may add here that, with regard to the political developments of the more recent past, Land’s hopes also turned out to have been overly optimistic. As Mackay and Avanesian point out, it is not that radical decoding and deterritorialization did not take place – they certainly did – only that these processes, instead of having “broken through all the social control mechanisms” (Plant/Land 2014: 305), were largely “rerouted back into the very identitarian attractors of repetition-without-difference they were supposed to disperse and abolish, in sole favour of capital’s investment in a stable future for its major beneficiaries” (2014: 24). Perhaps, an embodiment of these strange reversals and unexpected amalgamations can be found in the complex phenomenon of Trumpism, effectively a fusion of accelerated, deterritorializing hypercapital with a radical immuno-political re-fortification of a whole series of pods, among them the nation-state and the human security system, whose quasi-fascistic tendencies are now no longer merely latent but manifest.

flounder against an irreducible, non-integrable 'remainder', the 'constitutive outside', and hence the ineradicable political conflict. The 'us' is only ever based on 'contingent foundations' (Butler 1992), always caught up in the incessant play of the institution/destitution of the social. From the perspective of such a 'postfoundational' – not anti-foundational! – understanding of community (Marchart 2010, 2013), starting from the contingency and conflictuality at its heart, and against the background of the powerful critique of humanist immuno-politics, which has acquired additional urgency in the wake of the Corona pandemic, it becomes clear that what is needed today is nothing less than a radical redesign of planetary coexistence. While there is no room to develop this here, I believe that it is vital that any future form of togetherness be conceived as an explicitly *political* and a decidedly *postanthropocentric* project. It would need to proceed from the ontological as well as social reality of connectivity, interdependence, and entanglement, and hence conceive of boundaries, whether those of the individual organism or a collective, in terms of contingent and variable 'borderlands', not fixed and static 'borderlines' (Anzaldúa 1987; Hinchliffe et al. 2013). No more pods! Consequently, these boundaries would be openly politicized (where previously, they were largely depoliticized, though of course they have in fact at all times been political) and made the subject of processes of democratic decision-making.²⁹ Community would no longer be tantamount to a paranoid-immunitary defense of identity against the outside, but be redefined along the lines of a 'political ethos of cohabitation' (Hark 2021). It would be fashioned under the sign of a shared vulnerability (Butler 2006, 2016) and mutual obligation (Esposito's *munus*), responsibility and accountability, and be founded on practices of care. As Di Cesare puts it: "To be part of a community means to be linked, bound to each other, constantly exposed, ever-vulnerable" (2021: 47) – and this includes not just the human, but all kinds of existents.

The Uses of Nick Land

We have come quite a long way: We began with the emancipatory potentialities of the 'alienating' dynamics of contemporary capitalism and ended with the vision of

29 The wide-ranging transformation outlined here would also have to involve the democratic process itself which, in the wake of arguments put forth by thinkers such as Latour (2004) or Bennett (2010), would, among other things, need to be widened so as to include previously excluded 'actants' – "a parliament not defined in terms of the politics of identity or nationality", but "a parliament of (vulnerable) bodies living on planet Earth" (Preciado 2020) (though we may wish to broaden this constituency even further so as to include non-living existents as well [cf. Povinelli 2016]). Clearly, notions such as equality, liberty, and a host of others will inevitably have to be reimagined beyond the traditional liberal-humanist framework as well.

a posthumanist, radically egalitarian form of community based on a politics of interdependence and an ethics of 'promiscuous care' (Care Collective 2020) that transcends all kinds of differences – those of 'race', gender, class, sexuality, and age, but also those of species and of life vs. non-life. Along the way, I have utilized Land's thinking, drawn inspiration from it, but also criticized it, twisted it, reinterpreted it, and made it mine. I have thought from and with, but also against and beyond Land. My reflections on the Covid-19 pandemic were not a *Landian reading*, but they *made use* of Land's work, in a pragmatic spirit, as one tool among others. Focusing on his critique of the human, I have here elaborated some of 'the uses of Land' for Cultural Studies. In doing so, I have inserted his work into some unlikely contexts and opened up for it some unusual dialogues. Critique, escalation, repair – to think, imagine, and work towards sustainable futures, a variety of theoretical modes are needed. *Escalation*, for instance, can caution against the pitfalls and dangers of retreatist solutions and not just serve as an antidote to the often highly problematic implications and consequences of discourses and politics of the pure, the natural, and the 'proper', but also sharpen our awareness for the political usage made of the frequently nostalgic rhetoric of deceleration and slowing down (e.g., "Keep Calm and Carry On" – that is: shut up and swallow austerity). Without falling into technological optimism, its anti-naturalism can foster an increased sensitivity to the progressive potentials of technoscience and "the evident (if partial) changeability of nature as a space for emancipatory politics" and encourage us to think of "technology as an activist tool" (Hester 2018: 21, 7). While technologies are certainly not inherently value-free and neutral, their potential is never exhausted by their original premises and purposes. Accelerationist theorizing thus typically urges us "to strategically deploy existing technologies to re-engineer the world" (Laboria Cuboniks 2018: 2). At the same time, a *reparative* impulse may serve to somewhat dampen the occasionally overly Promethean drive of escalative theorizing – Williams and Srnicek, for instance, envisage a "politics of maximal mastery over society and its environment" (2014: 360) – and remind us that our technologies are not, after all, "flawless instruments or prosthetic extensions of our will" – a view that ignores both that their flexibility has limits and that they, for their part, also modify us – and that, following actor-network theory, we rather "need to engage in *alliances* with our tools" (Shavero 2015: 20). Thus, while I think (left) accelerationism's rehabilitation of rationalism represents a welcome corrective to a sometimes exaggerated and politically debilitating postmodern skepticism, and while its interest in the appropriation and repurposing (rather than rejecting) of capitalist technologies can open up paths for progressive political work, reparative theories certainly have a point when they caution that such positions run the risk of reinscribing a simplistic subject-object binarism and of reinstating the phantasm of the sovereign human monad, ignoring once again the ontological reality of interdependence and entanglement, the distributed nature of agency, the volatility, unpredictability, and uncertainty that inevitably ac-

company and hamper all planning, and, as a result of all this, the ineradicable limits constraining the field of human endeavor – limits we may well not only establish as fact empirically, but also wish to embrace ethically.

I believe that Cultural Studies should open up to these various theoretical influxes and allow itself to turn (even more than it in fact already is) into a kind of theoretical assemblage. If anything, the Anthro- or Capitalocene world is deeply messy, marked by an almost unprecedented complexity. Whether it is the vexed question of geoengineering, the contentious issue of biopolitics, or any of the other challenges that urgently need to be addressed if we are to build livable futures for all existents on this planet – as I see it, it is such a syncretic, hybrid outlook, one involving a system of theoretical 'checks and balances', cross-fertilizations, multiperspectivity and transdisciplinarity, that best enables us to do so, not least because it allows us to move beyond stifling and false dichotomies (geoengineering or systemic change, capitalist biopolitics or no biopolitics at all, etc.).³⁰ As I have tried to show here, helpful resources may be found in unlikely places. Let's comb those beaches of theory and look for tools.

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30 For helpful starting points regarding the two issues mentioned here, cf. Buck 2019 (on geo-engineering) and Bratton 2021 (on biopolitics).

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5. Cyclonoplicity: Impurity Politics for the Anthropocene

In part I of this book, I have made the case for a stronger ‘posthumanization’ of the discipline of Cultural Studies by means of a theoretical ‘encounter’ with the diverse intellectual approaches associated with the ‘nonhuman turn’. Though neither Cultural Studies nor the nonhuman turn of course represents anything like a unified, static, and homogenous theoretical formation, and though there are a number of difficulties and tensions which complicate any attempt at such an encounter, I have nevertheless argued for the potential productivity of a cross-fertilization between the two. More than that, in view of its history as a syncretistic and transdisciplinary theoretical *bricoleur* and its commitment to the intellectual work of ‘translation’, I have suggested that Cultural Studies could, in fact, come to function as something like a contact zone or Derridean ‘hinge’ for various different approaches – including, I contend, those that are frequently seen as incompatible or even opposed, such as, for instance, Marxism and actor-network theory (ANT). Thus, I have accentuated the field’s character as a heterogeneous theoretical *assemblage*, and stressed that one of its fortes lies in the work of *mediation*. Referring to commentary on this issue by Jean-Paul Sartre and Bruno Latour, Gregor McLennan has highlighted this crucial dimension in the work of Stuart Hall, explaining that, “by way of synthesising inclusivity in the journey of ideas, respecting aspects of a position without endorsing whole positions[,] and in so doing transforming the problem under consideration”, the practice of mediation constitutes “ongoing zones of engagement” and attempts to make very different theoretical formations “part of the same universe of discourse and progressive horizon” (McLennan et al. 2022).¹ In this sense, mediation, as a theoretical style or mode, is emphatically *not* aimed at an easy, tension-free, and harmonious compromise, but rather designates hard intellectual work, driven by what I have called the ‘five defining Cs’ of Cultural Studies, that is, by an emphasis on *contextuality*, *contingency*, *complexity*, and *the concrete*, as well as by its political *commitment*.

1 Cf. also McLennan 2021: 12–14, as well as his three editor’s discussions of Hall’s writings gathered in that book (Hall 2021).

As Stuart Hall famously pointed out, “there is something *at stake* in cultural studies”; it is “a serious enterprise”, “a practice which aims to make a difference in the world” (1996: 263, 264). For Cultural Studies, in other words, this intellectual work is (to name a sixth, umbrella term-like ‘C’) *conjunctural* – it responds to and takes place in a particular historical moment, a particular configuration, or articulation, of social relations (economic, political, cultural, etc.), a particular set of problematics and struggles. To that end, its theoretical orientation is principally a *pragmatic* one, something that Hall himself repeatedly underlined when he spoke of theory as a ‘detour’, albeit a necessary one, on the way to something more important (1996: 270, 1997: 42). It is, to repeat Latour’s words, essentially a “question of having the right tools for the right job” (2010: 475) – I have suggested that this image for theory of the *toolbox*, this approach to concepts as so many pliers and screwdrivers with which to ‘work on’ a given issue is a very helpful one.²

In the present essay, I would like to hold on to this pragmatic outlook and focus on a set of issues that are of central importance in the ‘contact zone’ between Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn, namely questions of subjectivity or the subject, of agency, accountability, and responsibility. I will address these issues through the field of complicity studies, in which they are key concerns. I want to ask: What contributions can the nonhuman turn make to the study of complicity? In how far may it prompt us to rethink some of the central categories and frameworks we commonly work with? But also: What effects could such an encounter have for the other side? That is to say, in Karen Barad’s terms, what I am interested in is once more a ‘diffraction’ and “cross-pollination” (2007: 57), in this case of complicity studies and the nonhuman turn, particularly certain variants of the new materialisms and speculative realisms.

Note the reserved, questioning character of my formulations. These, really, are *questions* – I would like to raise them, because I think they matter; I would like to look into them, to open up a space for thought and debate – I do not necessarily want to provide definite answers. My deliberations are tentative and exploratory, not conclusive. Most of all, what I certainly do not want to do is to proclaim a revolution of thought, a great overhaul of all and every category, and the necessity to reconceive the study of complicity or culture from the bottom up. This is not a conversion narrative. As I hope will become clear in what follows, I am quite skeptical of certain theoretical arguments as well as some of the rhetorical gestures of some of the newer intellectual movements. This includes, among other things, the claims of absolute novelty and radical difference from what came before occasionally voiced from within these (and, for that matter, also by some of their critics and opponents). I often find these to be overstated. As I have indicated, my own approach is a very

2 It is also one we find advocated by the likes of Deleuze and Foucault (Foucault 1996: 76), or, more recently, by Andreas Reckwitz (2023).

different one. On the whole, I am more interested in looking for points of contact, cross-fertilization, and for possible alliances between the new and older approaches. In fact, as will hopefully become apparent, for me, the productive potential of the dialogue I would like to foster and delineate lies less in a comprehensive remaking of the field of complicity studies than in something like a reorientation or an extension and intensification of certain aspects which are already part of it. Thus, when I speak of the ‘nonhuman turn’ here, I use that term as a heuristic one – helpful for pointing to certain broadly shared tendencies and dimensions, but at the same time not unproblematic, both, in its subsumption of a wide variety of actually very different fields and theories under one heading, and in its evocation of radical breaks and new beginnings. Generally, to repeat a point I have made before, if talk of a nonhuman ‘turn’ is warranted, it can, in my opinion, only be – in keeping with the word’s various meanings – as a process, a turning (into), a becoming, which is also a twisting, a repositioning and changing of orientation, a rearranging rotation, and one involving a number of re-turns.

Let’s begin by briefly recapitulating what is meant with the ‘nonhuman turn’. As Richard Grusin puts it, this turn “is engaged in decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies” (2015: vii). As such, it makes sense to see it as part, a development or a new stage, of posthumanism. As explained before, the latter, generally conceived, “inhabits humanism deconstructively” (Herbrechter 2013: 7; cf. also Badmington 2003) and, through a combination of cultural materialist and deconstructivist work (Herbrechter 2013: 9f), attempts to stall what Giorgio Agamben has called the “anthropological machine” of humanism, the “device for producing the recognition of the human” (2004: 26). Posthumanism, in other words, reveals the realm of the human as a “colonial realm” (Halberstam 2020: 7) insofar as the human “functions to domesticate and hierarchize difference within the human (whether according to race, class, gender [or any of the many other categories]) and to absolutize difference between the human and the nonhuman”, and consequently aims at “re-distributions of difference and identity” (Halberstam/Livingston 1995: 10), that is, at a dis- and reorganization of “that field of discourse and power that orchestrates, delimits, and sustains that which qualifies as ‘the human’” (Butler 1993: 8).

The current turn to the nonhuman can perhaps be considered the latest, properly *postanthropocentric* phase of this posthumanism. Grusin explains:

Intended as a macroscopic concept, the nonhuman turn is meant to account for the simultaneous or overlapping emergence of a number of different theoretical or critical “turns” – for example, the ontological, network, neurological, affective, digital, ecological, or evolutionary. As something of a theoretical or methodological assemblage, the nonhuman turn tries to make sense of what holds these

various other “turns” together, even while allowing for their divergent theoretical and methodological commitments and contradictions. Each of these different elements of the nonhuman turn derives from theoretical movements that argue (in one way or another) against human exceptionalism, expressed most often in the form of conceptual or rhetorical dualisms that separate the human from the nonhuman [...]. (2015: x)

A key element of these discourses are notions of interconnection and interdependence, which are thought in different ways, and which find expression in a number of metaphors and concepts such as networks, webs, meshes, assemblages, transversalities, continuums, convergences, becomings-with, entanglements, and more. One might, perhaps, speak of something like a new ecological paradigm (Hörl 2017). In various ways and on various levels, the human is here seen as always already inescapably bound up with the nonhuman in its diverse manifestations, whether it is organisms, animals, ecosystems, or technologies. The characteristic prefixes of these conceptions are hence ‘trans-’ and ‘inter-’, or, indeed, ‘intra-’ – depending on the degree to which the entities in relation are themselves theoretically unsettled (i.e., not assumed as preexistent and independent). For if the human and the nonhuman are always variously entangled and entwined, then these onto-epistemological categories/beings and the distinctions/boundaries between them are more than ever revealed as contingent material-discursive productions, the result of what Barad, who is arguably among the ones who have gone furthest in this unsettling, calls ‘agential cuts’. Accordingly, for Barad, “[p]osthumanism doesn’t presume the separateness of any-‘thing’, let alone the alleged spatial, ontological, and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart”; rather, “*posthumanism* marks the practice of accounting for the boundary-making practices by which the ‘human’ and its others are differentially delineated and defined” (2007: 136). Here, entanglement appears as a basic ontological condition. As Barad declares: “Relations do not follow *relata*, but the other way around.” (2007: 136f) Thus, the ontology that emerges in many of the contemporary approaches, particularly the new materialist ones like Barad’s, is a decidedly *relational* and *dynamic* one – and, importantly, one that is consequently significantly *flattened*. Instead of “monarchs of being”, as Levi Bryant puts it, humans are now “*among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings” (2011: 40). To already link up with a key notion of complicity studies, derived from the word’s etymological roots (from Latin *complicare*, *com* “together” + *plicare* “to fold”), they are *folded together* with other entities. An object-oriented ontology (OOO) philosopher like Timothy Morton pushes this reasoning further and provocatively proclaims: “my being is not everything it’s cracked up to be – or rather [...] the being of a paper cup is as profound as mine.” (2013: 17)

I will have more to say about this levelling later. For the moment, I would just like to note the new, upgraded status accorded to the nonhuman in these theoretical

discourses. Against this background, I have suggested that it is safe to say that these recent approaches can generally (also) be seen as a symptom of and/or response to the socio-ecological crisis widely referred to as the Anthropocene or Capitalocene. What is at stake here, essentially, is a novel appreciation for and a novel relation with the more-than-human world. This revaluation and 'putting in its right' of the non-human also entails a reconsideration of our understanding of *agency* – in the sense of a greater acknowledgement of the nonhuman's capacity to act or to 'make a difference' (Latour 2005: 71), of wresting the notion of action away from its close ties to human intentionality, and of elaborating a dispersed, distributive account which sheds more light on the 'nonhuman' conditions, parts, and participations in what are usually seen as 'human' actions.

A case in point is the highly influential work of Jane Bennett, a key voice of the so-called new materialisms. Bennett's 'vital materialism' mounts a powerful challenge to human exceptionalism by defying the received dualisms between dull matter and vital life, inorganic and organic, between passive objects and active subjects. In place of this dominant 'partition of the sensible' (Bennett 2010: vii), she advances her conception of 'vibrant materiality', which understands matter *in all of its manifestations* as generative and creative. Going beyond both, traditional variants of vitalism and of materialism, matter, whether human or nonhuman – this distinction too loses its force – is here conceived as inherently lively – not in the sense of being suffused by a universal life force (such as Bergson's *élan vital*), but of 'having an effect', exerting influence or force. This is what Bennett calls 'thing-power'. In her eyes, all material bodies constitute potential actors, or, to use Bruno Latour's terminology, 'actants'. An actant is that which "makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event" (Bennett 2010: 9). Importantly, this force is not to be thought of as the abstract 'agency' or 'capacity to act' – in the sense of a property or attribute – of a pre-formed, pre-existent subject. In line with much new materialist, and especially feminist materialist, writing (e.g., Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Elizabeth Grosz), Bennett rejects the traditional analytic focus on singular bodies and their boundaries and instead emphasizes the latter's porousness, contingency, and mutability. Materiality is figured here as endlessly swirling and swarming, temporarily settling into particular configurations, only to be then swept up again and to rearrange into new sets of contingent relations.

Heterogeneity, hybridity, processuality, and volatility are key elements of this thinking. In all kinds of regards, it rigorously positions itself '*against purity*' (Shotwell 2016). Any seemingly unified actor, in the words of Latour, "is itself an association made up of elements which can be redistributed" (1990: 109). As Bennett points out, just as "[i]t is futile to seek a pure nature unpolluted by humanity", it is equally "foolish to define the self as something purely human" (2010: 116). Instead, the subject needs to be reconceptualized "as itself an impure, human-nonhuman assemblage", "a self that is its own outside, is vibrant matter" (xvii, 116). Speaking about the "alien"

quality of our own flesh", Bennett writes: "My 'own' body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. [...] The *its* outnumber the *mes*. [...] We are [...] *an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes." (112f) Thus, as Rosi Braidotti has argued, emphasizing the "embedded and embodied and grounded, multi-directional and multi-scalar" ontological relationality of (human) beings, the subject has to be understood as a "dynamic convergence phenomenon", a 'transversal' "*zoe/geo/techno assemblage*" (2019: 45, 41, 44).

Although in certain regards, the new materialisms and other more recent theoretical movements expressly position themselves in distinction to older, poststructuralist approaches, I believe that in this respect, they can also be seen as continuing, extending, or radicalizing the latter's characteristic politics of difference: Here as there, we find a resolute opposition to discourses and forms of power relying on essentialized identities, binary divisions, and hierarchical orderings, an emphasis on hybridity and fluidity against the relegation of the multiplicity of difference to totalized and homogenized binaries and dualisms. Even though the meaning of that phrase is not exactly the same in both cases, nevertheless we could say that for both, to adopt Latour's (1993) famous slogan, 'we have never been modern'. In their different ways, both, to this time quote Lyotard, "wage a war on totality" (1984: 82). And not unlike poststructuralism did, so these new approaches too impel us to rethink our understanding of agency and responsibility. The former, in its decentering of the sovereign subject of the humanist tradition (understood as originary, unified, and autonomous) and its concomitant repudiation of atomistic conceptions of agency, is, of course, a central element in the field of complicity studies, urging us not to restrict our thinking to questions of personal moral agency, but to broaden it so as to take into account structural forms of complicity, that is, to extend or shift the focus from the individual to the social and from the exceptional to the ordinary.

Here, the nonhuman turn arguably encourages us to go further still. For if the basic condition of interrelationality and entanglement and the ubiquity of assemblages are accepted, then what emerges is a new, 'congregational' understanding of agency. As Bennett points out: "an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces." (2010: 21) For her, agency is emergent and distributive: "the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts" (23). The root cause of an effect is thus never simply a single (human) subject, but always an assemblage of various vital materialities, what Bennett also terms an "agentic swarm" (32). She writes: "insofar as anything 'acts' at all, it has already entered an agentic assemblage" (121) – and this assemblage owes its agentic force to the particular con-

figuration of the elements that constitute it.³ Of course, this applies equally to what is usually figured as *human* agency. To quote Bennett again: “There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore.” (31) Agency, in these posthumanist accounts, is always a complex chain or swirl, a knotty folding, a dance (Pickering 1995), a choreography (Cussins 1996).

Importantly, this does not mean a denial of human intentionality. Yet, this intentionality is radically decentered (Bennett 2010: 31–34), reconceptualized as less determinative of outcomes than assumed by liberal-humanist thought, merely one force among a swarm of others – or, as Bennett puts it, like a pebble thrown into a pond, vibrating and overlapping with other currents (32) – and, moreover, *itself* subject to or an effect of an interplay of human and nonhuman forces. It can be agentic only *because of, through, and alongside* an entourage of nonhumans. Now this, of course, has consequences for how we may think about things such as accountability and responsibility. If any outcome is essentially the result of a complex and multifaceted, non-linear and fractal interaction between a host of elements and tendencies, if agency is distributed across a network of agentic forces, then the locus of political responsibility is always a human-nonhuman assemblage (36). Consequently, it becomes impossible or disingenuous to assign singular blame. As Bennett writes: “a theory of vibrant matter presents individuals as simply incapable of bearing *full* responsibility for their effects” (37). Accordingly, while moral outrage should by no means disappear, for her, “[a] moralized politics of good and evil, of singular agents who must be made to pay for their sins” (38), is essentially unethical. In its place, Bennett advocates a politics more dedicated to a close discernment of the agentic elements and the relations constitutive of a given assemblage. An illustration of this is her analysis of the 24-hour power blackout in North America in the year 2003, which affected approximately 50 million people. In Bennett’s reading, the electricity grid is less a machine or tool consisting of fixed parts organized from without, but rather a vibrant association of a variety of actants, which includes the humans who build and maintain power plants, consume energy, and pass regulation laws, but also “coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood” (25). For Bennett, in one way or

3 Bennett thinks this part-whole relationship along the lines of the Deleuzian notion of ‘ad-sorption’, which she describes as denoting “a gathering of elements in a way that both forms a coalition and yet preserves something of the agential impetus of each element” (35). This view is characteristic of assemblage thought more generally, which commonly emphasizes the novelty of the constellation as a whole as well as of its constitutive relations and the character of the relata themselves, but simultaneously stresses that none of these are reducible to one another. On the notion of the assemblage, cf. ch. 2.

another, all these actants contributed to the energy failure of 2003, which she interprets as the “end point of a cascade” (25), involving voltage collapses, human motivations, decisions, and omissions of various kinds, generator withdrawals from the web, and brush fires, which together made cooperation between the actants impossible.

In this complex and hybrid web of forces and relations, where do we assign blame? Instead of a single determining source of wrong we find a host of contributors and participants, instead of a single guilty party a series of entanglements and complicities. I believe that Bennett is right to point out that there are no easy answers here. Responsibility is distributed. I think that this type of thinking links up, or can be linked up, in very helpful ways with earlier work – within feminism, critical race theory, postcolonialism, the study of intersectionality, and elsewhere – which not only decentered the subject, but also emphasized its situatedness, embedded- and embodiedness, and ‘worldliness’. Like the field of complicity studies, all these approaches contribute to a significant complexification over against liberal-humanist perspectives.⁴ It would seem as if today, in the messy present of the Anthropo- or Capitalocene, this is more important than ever. In her *Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway declares that “[i]n layers of history, layers of biology, layers of naturecultures, complexity is the name of our game.” (2003: 2) As she herself, along with Latour, Bennett, and many others, has pointed out, if this is always the case, it is especially so nowadays. Interconnection and interdependence, hybridity, assemblages, and the congregational character of agency are today increasingly harder to ignore and deny. This is most obvious, of course, in the nature of the Anthropocene as, in the words of Timothy Clark, an “emergent ‘scale effect’”, which means that “at a certain, indeterminate threshold, numerous human actions, insignificant in themselves (heating a house, clearing trees, flying between the continents, forest management) come together to form a new, imponderable physical event, altering the basic ecological cycles of the planet” (2015: 72). Both, with regards to space and time, we are now aware of and confronted with unheard-of entanglements. As Timothy Morton writes:

Every time I start my car or steam engine I don't mean to harm Earth, let alone cause the Sixth Mass Extinction Event in the four-and-a-half billion-year history of life on this planet. [...] Furthermore, I'm not harming Earth! My key turning is statistically meaningless. [...] But go up a level and something very strange happens. When I scale up these actions to include billions of key turnings and billions of coal shovelings, harm to Earth is precisely what is happening. I am responsible as a member of this species for the Anthropocene. (2016: 8)

4 In this context, cf. the shared etymology, already referred to above, of ‘complicity’ and ‘complexity’.

Although there are arguably a few things that are not unproblematic about this passage – not least its mobilization of the universal figure of the *Anthropos* or its somewhat sensationalist seamless short circuiting of individual responsibility and planetary climate change – it can nevertheless be seen as a paradigmatic example of the countless complexities and complicities that mark the present. As Eben Kirksey succinctly puts it: “Life and death are at stake every time we eat, buy clothes at the store, or flip an electric light switch.” (2015: 219) Whether ethico-politically, ontologically, or otherwise – in the Anthro- or Capitalocene, more than ever, we are confronted with what Alexis Shotwell calls ‘constitutive impurity’: “complexity and complicity as the constitutive situation of our lives” (2016: 8). *Impurity is our condition*. “Everyone carries a history of contamination”, writes Anna Tsing; “purity is not an option” (2015: 27). Of course, this assertion should not be taken as a false universalization: Its meaning varies from context to context; the ‘we’ shifts from case to case. Harm and responsibility are distributed extremely unevenly. But, as Shotwell explains, “however the bounds of the ‘we’ are drawn, we are not, ever, pure. We’re complicit, implicated, tied in to things we abjure.” (2016: 7)

Despite this – and perhaps also because of this – discourses and politics of purity abound. In particular, ‘purism’ is now a key element of contemporary capitalism, in which, for instance, the illusory promise of purity is mobilized to great effect for marketing purposes, with purity itself being turned into a lucrative commodity (“Detoxify your body!”, “Eat clean!”, etc.), or in the context of the fabrication of the imaginary of a ‘green’, ecologically conscious, and sustainable economic system. In this context, we can observe that contemporary governmentality only continues and intensifies the trend towards responsabilization that has long been a central feature of the entrepreneurial subject form hegemonic under neoliberalism. Contemporary regimes, in other words, consistently dictate individualist responses to ‘pollution’, be it moral or corporeal, and make each and every one of us personally responsible for our own purity. Here, I believe that one task of complicity studies is to continue to challenge such de-complexifying narratives and the concomitant technologies of subjectivation through its forte of structural critique. Not least because purity practices – as essentially attempts (ultimately futile) to impose order and system on what is, in fact, untidy and disorderly (cf. Douglas 2002) – are politically highly problematic: For one thing, their orientation is always, at heart, immuno-political, and thus entails a tendentially obsessive and violent need to define, delimit, and defend the ‘proper’, understood at once as ‘one’s own’ and ‘the clean’ (cf. Kristeva 1982).⁵ For another, as Shotwell points out, “[p]urism is a de-collectivizing, de-mobilizing, paradoxical politics of despair.” (2016: 9) If every choice we make, whether it’s while we’re grocery shopping or while we’re pondering where to place our political commitment, is inevitably a tainted one, then we may well end up wishing not to choose

5 On this topic, cf. ch. 4.

at all (which is, of course, also a choice). I am sure this is a feeling many of us will know all too well. Always, the flipside of the responsible subject is the overwhelmed, exhausted, and resigned one.

We need different responses to the impossible complexity of the present than purity politics. Here, however, some of the new materialist thinking perhaps reaches its limits. As I have explained, I believe this thinking has the potential to significantly enrich the study of complicity. If we can say that this field is in large parts driven by the well-known Marxian dictum that “Men” – let’s rather say: “People” – “make their own history, but do so under conditions not of their own making” (cf. Afxentiou et al. 2017: 9f), or, to refer to an equally important theoretical tradition, by the Deleuzo-Foucauldian notion of the ‘dividual’ as a node in a complex network, produced through and bound up with a multiplicity of powers and relations, then I think the nonhuman turn alerts us to the fact that these forces and entanglements are even more numerous and complex than we already knew. Judith Butler revisits the well-known Nietzschean topos of there being ‘no doer behind the deed’ and emphasizes the constrained, performative nature of all social practices (1999: 33) – a shift from humanism to (post-)structuralism. Then Jane Bennett takes up this same topos once again and argues that the doing that, for Nietzsche and Butler, ‘is everything’ is, in fact, an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage (2010: 28) – an extension of poststructuralism into (nonhuman-turn) posthumanism. As I have pointed out, I consider this as more of a broadening of the horizon of complicity studies than a radical reorientation. As I see it, the field is already more or less firmly committed to relationality, with the concept of complicity, as Afxentis Afxentiou et al. put it, ultimately invoking “a demand for recognizing the ways in which people are connected both to one another and to the nonhuman world” (2017: 10f), or what Mark Sanders calls “a generalized foldedness in human-being” and, he adds in parentheses, “perhaps beyond *human-being*” (2002: 17). Here, the nonhuman turn encourages us to omit the hesitant ‘perhaps’ and draws our critical attention to previously marginalized or overlooked dimensions of complexity and complicity, to new points of intervention, and to perhaps necessary reconceptualizations of political space and community.

Yet, as I indicated, an encounter is never a one-way street. And this is where I return to the question of politics. Ultimately, I think that some of Bennett’s conclusions in this regard remain unsatisfactory. She observes that the notion of distributive agency, while attenuating “the blame game”, “does not thereby abandon the project of identifying [...] the sources of harmful effects”, but, to the contrary, “broadens the range of places to look for sources” (2010: 37). As I have said, in that respect, I consider her thought to be a very helpful one. The problem, for me, lies elsewhere. Referring back to her discussion of the blackout, Bennett explains:

Though it would give me pleasure to assert that deregulation and corporate greed are the real culprits in the blackout, the most I can honestly affirm is that corporations are one of the sites at which human efforts at reform can be applied, that corporate regulation is one place where intentions might initiate a cascade of effects. Perhaps the ethical responsibility of an individual human now resides in one's response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating: Do I attempt to extricate myself from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to do harm? Do I enter into the proximity of assemblages whose conglomerate effectivity tends toward the enactment of nobler ends? (37f)

I feel that, even as autonomy and what Bennett calls “strong responsibility” (37) may be empirically false, and even as the analysis of root causes may be a very complicated affair, the conclusions she comes to here simply are not enough. It seems to me that the attempt to avoid an overly moralized politics ultimately results in an *avoidance of politics tout court* (Marso 2011: 426). Here, ethics effectively replaces politics – and, we might add, quite paradoxically, an individualist and voluntarist ethics at that (Washick et al. 2015: 75). Here as elsewhere in Bennett's work and new materialist theorizing more generally, does this thinking, as several, especially Marxist, critics have claimed, end up reaffirming the status quo and playing into the hands of the powers that be (thus echoing similar claims made at an earlier point in time vis-à-vis poststructuralism)?

Choosing another path, I believe that we should remain committed, both analytically and politically, to what Cultural Studies has always described as the ‘dirty and messy’ domain of politics (cf. Cord 2018) – and that means, essentially, remaining committed to the analysis and critique of relations of *power*. That means that we will have to continue the work of rethinking the notions of agency and responsibility, beyond the established liberal conceptions⁶, for instance building on distinctions within the field of complicity studies, by distinguishing between different *degrees* and *kinds* of agency (cf., e.g., Afxentiou et al. 2017: 10).⁷ Even if ontology is flattened, this should not keep us from making important distinctions. After all, as OOO philosopher Ian Bogost has pointed out, “*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally*” (2012: 11). What we need is an account that conceives agency as truly relational, emergent, and contingent. Bennett, for her part, somewhat oscillates between the frequent assertion of the relational and non-stable character of things on the one hand and, on the other, a problematic tendency to reinscribe essentialism through the ascription of fixed characteristics and properties to them, which seem

6 I am here thinking, for instance, of the equation of agency with activity, participation, and voice/speech, or distinctions such as the one between full and partial responsibility or imputability, etc.

7 Bennett (e.g., 2010: 31, 98, 104, 108f), too, repeatedly makes comments that point in such a direction, but never really pursues this further.

to be inherent to the things ‘in themselves’ (Hinchliffe 2011). Here, the more consistently and radically relational account of, for instance, Karen Barad’s ‘agential realism’ may prove useful, which completely gives up the notion of preexistent, individual, and independent entities, instead seeing relata only as the result of relations and ‘intra-actions’, and consequently conceives of agency not as an attribute but as “the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices [...] through the dynamics of intra-activity” (Barad 2007: 235), that is, as intimately bound up with the contingency and mutability of particular material-discursive configurations. In a similar vein, Thomas Lemke, whose work I consider to be extremely valuable for the kind of encounter I am concerned with, combines new materialist theories and work in science and technology studies and actor-network theory with the thought of Michel Foucault, and also rethinks agency along performative lines, in terms of so-called ‘modes of doing’, thus likewise shifting the focus “from individual actors and their capabilities to the dispositives that allow for certain emergences rather than others” (2021: 152). Finally, we may find helpful tools to think with in Levi Bryant’s ‘ontocartography’, which develops a very differentiated account of agency (2014: 218–26). In our context, what is perhaps of particular interest is his reconceptualization of power as ‘gravity’ and his posthumanist rethinking of the subject as not a specific *type* of being, but a *transitory functional role*. It is akin to Michel Serres’ ‘quasi-objects’, essentially a dynamic catalyst or, to use a Lacanian term, a ‘quilting point’ which creates or draws together – similar to gravitational pull – divergent entities into an assemblage or ecology and assigns them roles or positions.

There is no room to go into detail at this point, within the context of these more programmatic reflections. For sure, there is much theoretical work still to be done here. But I believe that if we were to bring together these and other recent approaches with classical Cultural Studies concepts such as ‘articulation’, ‘arbitrary closure’, ‘suture’, or ‘hegemony’, we may arrive at a type of analysis ultimately more productive than that which transpires in new materialist work such as Bennett’s, allowing us, for instance, to identify certain points of condensation or suture in a given assemblage, nodes in the web which have an ‘overcoding’ function or influence (e.g., the neoliberal organization of the energy market) and where, hence, agency and responsibility congeal or accrue. It would permit us to keep questions of power firmly in view and to not have to abandon the political for the ethical. Ultimately it would push us to raise anew what I consider to be the (still) central question of the *social totality*.⁸

What, I believe, appears on the horizon here is a mode of analysis not unlike the one which many have seen as definitive for Cultural Studies: something like a *diffraction of conjunctural analysis and assemblage analysis*, which begins with one particular,

8 I address these issues in more detail in ch. 6.

more or less clearly defined event or phenomenon and then sets out from there, asking, as Stuart Hall was wont to do, what this ‘has to do with everything else’. Start with a blackout; start with the death of two-year old Julen Roselló, who fell down a 109 meter deep shaft in the south of Spain in early 2019, and move outwards, to the approximately one million such holes illegally excavated in the country by peasants looking for more water than is available in order to be able to grow fruits and vegetables, on to the soil conditions, to agricultural practice and policy, to supply chains, to supermarkets in Germany and elsewhere, where these goods will eventually be sold, on to agribusiness, global divisions of labor, the capitalist food industry, ... Such a mode of analysis would thus proceed along widening circles or spirals, branch out in various directions, move across different spatial scales and levels of abstraction, sketch the contours of the relevant assemblage(s), and trace the complex networks of relations, including the intricate foldings of – to allude to Reza Negarestani’s (2008) wordplay – cyclonoplicity. Let’s invoke a thoroughly paradoxical image and say: *It would be like an ANT desiring to see like an eagle.*⁹

This cyclonic or, to use Haraway’s (2016: 30–57) image, tentacular methodology would also allow us to see further. Another one of Bennett’s key examples of nonhuman agency is that of edible matter, for instance omega-3 fatty acids, which, when consumed by human beings, can modify the latter’s affective states, behavior, and cognitive skills (2010: 40–43). Yet, a critical analysis such as the one I have in mind might here not only point out that the relation in this human-nonhuman assemblage is not a symmetrical one – after all, one participant eats while the other is being eaten (Abrahamsson et al. 2015: 11) – but also that, importantly, the assemblage actually extends farther than Bennett acknowledges.¹⁰ After all, like everything else, omega-3 is not matter *itself*, but matter *in context*, matter *related* (Abrahamsson et al. 2015: 12). It is an element in more than one set of relations. Following other tentacles, which also lead us into the domain of political economy, we find, for instance, that many of the omega-3 fatty acids consumed by health-conscious people in the so-called ‘Global North’ actually come from fish in the ‘Global South’, whose catch

9 For some intimations of what such an analysis could look like, cf., e.g., Nancy Tuana’s (2008) illuminating discussion of Hurricane Katrina or the work of Anna Tsing (2015).

10 In a sense, this is, of course, always the case. The description/construction of every assemblage/conjuncture will inevitably involve an element of ‘arbitrary closure’ or an ‘arbitrary (agential) cut’. As assemblage theorists have pointed out, assemblages are somewhat like Russian dolls, and the relations and connections always reach further still – not, as Haraway explains, because everything is connected to everything, but because everything is connected to something (2016: 31). What, I think, is significant is thus not the fact that certain relations and elements are missing from Bennett’s account per se, but rather what *kinds* of relations are omitted. What matters, in other words, is *how* or *where* she makes her cut. And here, I believe it is significant that what is excluded from the analysis are above all more overtly *political* issues, e.g., questions pertaining to political economy.

contributes to the overexploitation of the oceans and to food shortage on these regions (Abrahamsson et al. 2015). I would argue that the omission of these contexts is somewhat symptomatic of the evasion of questions of power relations in Bennett's vital materialism.

By contrast, such issues would be central to the kind of 'cyclone analysis' I have outlined. No doubt the work undertaken by it is extremely demanding and complex (given that it attempts to do greater justice to the complexity of the world), can only be carried out collectively and interdisciplinarily, and can never really come to any definitive end. Still, I believe it should be attempted. Though infused by the new materialisms, speculative realisms, and other posthumanist theories, such an approach would still insist on the accountability of particular entities and assemblages (not least particular *human* collectives!) and on the necessity to identify those political, economic, and social conditions that impede more sustainable, equal, and democratic ways of life. It would proceed from a 'metaphysics of compost', not purity (Shotwell 2016: 16), from the fact that living today (and always) inevitably means 'compromised living' (Shotwell 2016: 7), that ethico-politically as well as ontologically, impurity unavoidably defines our condition. Thinking about these entanglements and enfoldings has to be our starting point for action. We need to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway 2016). As complicity studies so compellingly argues, while *non*-complicity is not an option, *anti*-complicity, which is not about exculpation and the preservation of individual purity but about solidarity and the transformation of structures that cause harm, is (Afxentiou et al. 2017: 11). If the heuristic tool of complicity "broadens our horizons as to what constitutes *harm being done*" (Afxentiou et al. 2017: 12), then I believe the nonhuman turn encourages another, postanthropocentric broadening, and consequently urges us to develop a widened, posthumanist understanding of solidarity, where this would extend to animals, plants, ecosystems, geologic formations, fungi, technologies, microbes, or atoms (cf. Morton 2017). Alexis Shotwell, for one, speaks of an 'aspirational solidarity', one "based on collective conceptions of worlds that do not yet exist" (2013: 105).

A political practice driven by such solidarity would certainly encompass what Dimitris Papadopoulos (2018) calls a 'politics of matter', that is, the material, mundane, and collective work of building alternative attachments and assemblages, the working towards 'alterontologies'. I would argue that such an orientation, which might, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003: 123–51), perhaps be called 'reparative', infuses much contemporary theorizing.¹¹ It decidedly departs from the imaginary of revolutionary 'eventfulness' and instead emphasizes the cultivation of ordinary 'arts of living on a damaged planet' (Tsing et al. 2017) or ordinary practices

11 On the reparative, cf. ch. 3 and the excursus.

that enable ‘life in capitalist ruins’ (Tsing 2015).¹² Here, resistance is understood not so much in terms of open opposition or revolt, but rather as “a movement of exit and escape” (Papadopoulos 2018: 253n122) from prevalent power relations. As Papadopoulos has it: “Resistance is not primarily about direct confrontation but about changing the conditions in which power operates. This is possible only by changing the ontological conditions of life in a certain field.” (2018: 253n122) While I find such rethinking of the space of the political to include the everyday practices that remake the materiality of life very helpful, I believe that such ‘terraformation from below’ still needs to be complemented by struggles taking place on other fronts as well. Let’s be better Gramscians! When, for instance, Eben Kirksey explains that “[c]apitalist enterprises [...] may well be unstoppable” and encourages us to not let this lead us into resignation but to join those who are “transforming feelings of futility into concrete action, cynicism into happiness and hope” (2015: 219), then, even though I do appreciate the affirmative outlook, I believe that such approaches might be running the risk of giving up on or losing sight of certain domains of struggle which, in my view, continue to be essential. After all, even though it may sometimes seem (and present itself) that way, capitalism is, of course, *not* unstoppable. Here, I think we should not buy into the TINA doctrines of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009), endlessly and performatively repeating “the truth of the impossibility of the impossible” (Rancière 1999: 132), but instead remain committed to political economy, bring ‘old’ and new materialisms into stronger dialogue¹³, and reaffirm the possibility of systemic change and of ‘reinventing the future’ (Srnicke/Williams 2016).

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12 Within complicity studies, a broadly similar orientation is, for instance, expressed by Paul Reynolds, who argues that “complicit individuals should still explore ways in which they can become less or indeed anti-complicit, even while acknowledging that this alone will not lead to radical systemic change” (2017: 43).

13 Of course, work in this direction is already being undertaken in various contexts. For the present purposes, cf. particularly the invaluable work of Noel Castree (2002).

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Part III – From Theory to Practice: Doing Cultural Studies in the Capitalocene

Cultural Studies is a political project. As I have explained, my understanding of it is largely derived from the so-called Birmingham tradition, associated with names such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg, Angela McRobbie, Dick Hebdige, or Paul Gilroy. It is a project that, both analytically as well as politically, is resolutely oriented towards the 'dirty and messy business' of the world. As I see it, this metaphor captures what is essential to Cultural Studies: its political nature, the emphasis on contingency, its rigorous contextualism, the commitment to complexity, its trans- or anti-disciplinary character, the dedication to the concrete, and its interventionist orientation. As such, I have argued, it is eminently suited for analyses of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, which is everywhere marked by an exceptional complexity and impurity. After all, what is the Anthropocene if not messiness, a mess, dirty, messy business? Here, Cultural Studies has a lot to contribute to the critical struggles being fought today. Yet, in order to do so, it cannot (or at least ought not) remain the same and simply go on asking the same kinds of questions, start off from the same kinds of assumptions, make use of the same kinds of concepts. As a discursive formation, Cultural Studies itself has always been self-consciously and self-reflexively contextual, frequently remaking itself in response to changed circumstances. I have argued that it should do so again today and have made the case for a stronger 'posthumanization' of Cultural Studies through an 'encounter' with the various theoretical approaches subsumed under the umbrella term of the 'nonhuman turn'. To this end, I have, among other things, proposed the notion of the assemblage as a possible starting point or hinge for such an encounter and an alternative onto-epistemic commitment for Cultural Studies, and advocated a pragmatic combination or articulation of different theoretical 'modes' and resources.

The goal of this final part will be to translate these theoretical and meta-theoretical reflections into practice by outlining what, methodologically speaking, such a posthumanist Cultural Studies could concretely look like. Hence the title of this part, which references Paul du Gay et al.'s classic textbook *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*: what I am concerned with here is *how to do* Cultural Studies today, or rather, with *one way of doing* Cultural Studies, without claiming that this is the right, true, or only way. Part III consists of two chapters. While the first one is essentially methodological in character, championing conjunctural analysis – an approach often considered *the* characteristic Cultural Studies mode of investigation – coupled or 'diffracted' with assemblage theory/analysis as a most useful tool for posthumanist Cultural Studies, the long second one sketches – in a montage or 'pin-board' mode – how such a method can be put into practice using the Covid-19 pandemic as a case study.

6. Soft Totalities: Conjunctural Analysis and/as Assemblage Analysis

Back to the conjuncture!
(Lawrence Grossberg)

Undoubtedly, the present is messy. It is a moment marked by multiple overlapping crises, indeed, by a paradoxical sense of *chronic crisis*, which indicates that we are living through an ‘interregnum’, characterized, in Gramsci’s well-known words, by the fact that “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (1971: 276). As Stuart Hall writes, in such a “Transitional Age”, “we must *expect* unevenness, contradictory outcomes, disjunctures, delays, contingencies, uncompleted projects overlapping emergent ones” (1996b: 232). Simple explanations, like those that attempt to capture all of the present moment in one single term, won’t do. How, then, to analyze such messy moments? It would seem that what is needed is a ‘multimodal methodology’ (Coole/Frost 2010: 32) which, on the one hand, is able to do justice to complexity and context specificity, while, on the other, simultaneously does not let go of the attempt to ‘see it whole’ (Toscano 2012), that is, to produce an orienting representation – a ‘cognitive map’ (Jameson 1991: 51–54) – of the social totality. Of course, this concept has come under attack in the recent past, particularly from Bruno Latour and other actor-network theorists, who have more or less completely dismissed it in favor of the empirical study of concrete associations and networks. “Like God, capitalism does not exist” (1993: 173), and, appropriating Thatcher’s infamous words, “There is no such a thing as a society”, Latour boldly proclaimed and urged us to replace all such “mysterious structure[s]” by “fully visible and empirically traceable sites” (2007: 5, 179). As Rita Felski explains: “For Latour, [...] there is no historical box and no society, if we mean by this term a bounded totality governed by a predetermined set of structures and functions. Society does not stand behind and steer human practices, as if it were outside of and ontologically distinct from these practices, akin to a shadowy, all-seeing, puppet master.” (2015: 157) Yet, it has to be said that this understanding of the totality against which actor-network theory (ANT) scholars polemicize has in fact long lost traction both within large sections of Marxism and beyond. Instead,

in the wake of earlier theoretical challenges, above all deconstruction, a number of novel conceptions have taken its place. One of these is the notion of the *conjuncture*.

In the following, I want to suggest that the method of conjunctural analysis as developed within Cultural Studies is an ideal candidate for the type of methodology I have outlined. As the recently resurgent interest in conjunctural analysis¹ (cf., e.g., Gilbert 2019b, 2020) suggests, this is an approach that is well-suited to capturing the social complexity and specificity of a historical moment like ours. In this context, I particularly want to return to the vexed question of the totality and the apparent tension between conjunctural analysis and intellectual formations such as ANT. My main concern will be to argue for a more nuanced relationship between the concepts of totality, conjuncture, and assemblage, a key notion within ANT and elsewhere, by elaborating a theoretical ‘encounter’ or ‘contact zone’ (Haraway 2008) between Cultural Studies on the one hand and currents associated with the ‘nonhuman turn’ (Grusin 2015), such as ANT, new materialism, or speculative realism, on the other. In doing so, this article distils and builds upon a tradition of thought that mainly stretches from the work of Louis Althusser and his followers – in Britain, especially Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst – via the post-Marxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as well as important work within Cultural Studies² by such thinkers as Hall or Lawrence Grossberg, right up to the present. This is a tradition that detractors of ‘the Totality’ and critical social theory in general, such as Latour, systematically ignore. My goal is not so much to revisit important moments of it in detail, but to condense and extract from it a conception of the totality, particularly under the label of ‘conjuncture’, which evinces significant affinities with the notion of the assemblage and is thus in some respects not at all incompatible with those assemblage-based approaches frequently portrayed as being opposed to any thinking of the totality.

This, of course, is not entirely novel terrain. Indeed, in a number of fields, various steps in the direction of such a conversation between older, ‘critical’ paradigms and more recent, nonhuman turn-related ones have already been taken. Regarding Cultural Studies, this has especially been the case within what Jeremy Gilbert has called “a radical Deleuzian furrow at the very edge of the cultural studies field” (2008: 66), work, that is, whose principal points of reference are not the likes of Saussure, Derrida, and Foucault, but, rather, Deleuze and Guattari and, often through them, philosophers such as Simondon, Whitehead, Bergson, Nietzsche, and Spinoza (cf., e.g., Seigworth 2006; Seigworth/Wise 2000; Wiley/Wise 2019). In this context, the thought of Grossberg, who for decades now has been fashioning a decidedly a-modern, ‘Deleuzian Cultural Studies’ (Wiley 2005; cf., programmatically, Grossberg 2014

1 On this growing interest, cf. the introduction. There, I also list a number of further references.

2 On the close relation between post-Marxism and Cultural Studies, cf. Bowman 2007.

and Grossberg/Behrenshausen 2016), certainly deserves special mention as an invaluable source of inspiration. The present essay is inspired by all of this work and by those scholars who have explicitly called for and worked towards a stronger opening up of Cultural Studies to the nonhuman before (cf. esp. Badmington 2006; Slack 2008; Slack/Whitt 1992). In particular, it is in dialogue with those writings within the field, especially by scholars like Grossberg, Gilbert (2014; Gilbert/Williams 2022), or Jennifer Daryl Slack (2008, 2016; Slack/Wise 2015), who have already begun translating the concept of the assemblage into the discursive horizon of Cultural Studies, elaborating a decidedly relational and processual understanding of the world, and bringing assemblage and conjuncture into exchange. Beyond Cultural Studies, one vital source of inspiration for the kind of work of translation and articulation I want to undertake and advocate is geographer Noel Castree's brilliant essay "False Antitheses?" (2002), which effectively constitutes an early attempt to bring what he terms a 'weak' version of ANT and a more 'modest' variant of relational eco-Marxism into encounter and thus to do away with the 'false antithesis' between the two approaches.

Though there will be no room for detailed engagements with all these important antecedents, the following reflections should be understood as informed by, building on, and continuing this work in and on the 'contact zone'. They also represent a modest attempt to add to it, especially by developing a closer conversation regarding the question of the totality with more recent approaches such as new materialism and speculative realism. The vanishing point of these efforts is a posthumanist contouring of the concept of the conjuncture. I maintain that a cross-fertilization or 'diffraction' (Barad 2007) of conjunctural analysis and assemblage theory, of Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn, holds significant analytical potential with regard to the complex messiness of the present. In particular, it promises to update conjunctural analysis vis-à-vis the analytical demands and challenges of the Capitalocene, not least regarding the climate and biodiversity crises, especially by ridding it of its lingering anthropocentrism and sharpening its awareness for the central role of the more-than-(just) human vectors which are constitutive elements of any conjuncture: technology, infrastructure, the material organization of the environment, ecology, biology, nonhuman life forms, the body, etc. What thus emerges here are the contours of a *posthumanist conjunctural analysis*. I hold this to be vital so that Cultural Studies can continue to do what, according to Grossberg, it has essentially always been about: 'telling better stories' about the world, in order to better intervene in it.

Conjunctural analysis has long been an integral element of Cultural Studies and is considered by some to be its defining methodology. As Hall stated in an interview: “The commitment to understanding a conjuncture is what from the beginning we thought cultural studies was about.” (qtd. in Grossberg 2006: 4) While John Clarke has dubbed conjunctural analysis “Stuart Hall’s difficult gift to cultural studies” (2019: 146), thus emphasizing Hall’s central role in the development and popularization of the approach within as well as beyond the field, the concept actually has a long and diverse history in Marxist theory (cf. Koivisto/Lahtinen 2012), though its two most influential thinkers, at least with respect to Cultural Studies, are arguably Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser (who are also Hall’s principal sources). For both, ‘thinking conjuncturally’ means thinking about the “question of the relations of force, at the various levels” (Gramsci 1971: 184). Hence, put simply, conjuncture refers to the “complex formation of an historical moment” (Koivisto/Lahtinen 2012: 276), a “complex structured whole” (Althusser 2005: 205), or, as Nicos Poulantzas, another prominent theorist in this context (cf. Gallas 2017), has it, the “*nodal point where the contradictions of the various levels of a formation are condensed in the complex relations governed by over-determination and by their dislocation and uneven development*” (1978: 41). To speak of a conjuncture, understood as “a specific moment in the life of a social formation” (Hall et al. 2013: xv), always involves a particular temporal and spatial focus as well as a specific theoretical outlook, which conceives this formation in terms of a condensation of a number of different tendencies, forces, circumstances, and antagonisms. This, after all, is also what the Latin etymology (*coniungere*) suggests: a conjoining, a binding, a joining together. These multiple lines of force that come together and ‘make up’ a conjuncture are located in and across different fields or dimensions of the social formation, including the political, the economic, the cultural, or the ecological. Hence, a conjuncture, as Hall points out, “is not a slice of time, but can only be defined by the accumulation/condensation of contradictions, the fusion or merger – to use Lenin’s terms – of ‘different currents and circumstances’”. It is a ‘moment’, not a ‘period’ – ‘over-determined in its principle.’ (1980a: 165) Importantly, conjunctural analysis considers any such ‘moment’ as an inevitably precarious ‘equilibrium of forces’, the result of a fragile ‘settlement’, which always harbors more or less strong centrifugal forces which can only be suppressed temporarily. Sooner or later, as Hall and his colleagues, quoting Althusser, write, “the antagonisms and contradictions, which are always at work in society, begin to “fuse” into a *ruptural unity*” (2013: xv). It is precisely the ensuing *crises* of social formations that are of particular interest to conjunctural analysts. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that conjunctural analysis (also) constitutes a genuine *theory of crisis*. In accordance with the distinctive analytic outlook of Cultural Studies as I have characterized it – the ‘five Cs’ of Cultural Studies – this approach to crises emphasizes *contextuality*, *contingency*, *complexity*, and *the concrete*, and is driven by a political *commitment*, that is, by a strategic and interventionist orientation. What is of par-

ticular importance is that crises are understood in a decidedly non-reductive and non-deterministic way, as always overdetermined and open to a number of possible forms of 'resolution', and that, in keeping with what can be described as Cultural Studies' (post-Laclaean) political ontology (cf. Marchart 2010: 211–18), there is a persistent focus on the *primacy of the political*, that is, on the ineradicability of (ontological) 'antagonism' and hence of (ontic) 'dislocation', and thus of contradictions, conflicts, and struggle (cf. Cord 2018). This is precisely where the performative dimension of conjunctural analysis comes into play: It is a "theoretical-analytical-political practice" (Grossberg 2010: 42) – its mapping of the social territory is ultimately meant to serve the purpose of identifying potential sites of political intervention and "entering into the struggle over whether and how to construct an organic crisis", that is, in Gramsci's terminology, a sort of larger 'meta-crisis' of the social formation as a whole, a battle "over a new reality" (Grossberg 2019: 54, 53). Within Cultural Studies, no one has done more to theorize the conjuncture and conjunctural analysis than Grossberg. He writes:

A conjuncture must always be seen as the result of a complex and fragile set of articulations, which requires various labours attempting – and always partly failing – to maintain its ever-changing shape and density. It is, in the last instance, a complex articulation of multiple overlapping, shared, interacting and sometimes even contradictory contexts – perhaps even multiple conjunctures – connected by the specificities of the movements and interactions of a variety of forces that extend in and across varied spatial and temporal configurations and ranges. (2019: 58)

In its attempt to do justice to the complexity of a conjuncture, the analysis takes into view multiple dimensions and planes of the social formation. This includes such interrelated aspects as temporality, especially the relations between the conjuncture and the 'current situation' as well as the 'epoch'; the entanglements between, using a Heideggerian terminology, the ontic (or empirical) and the ontological, or, speaking in a Gramscian terminology, between the 'war of positions', the 'problem space', and the 'organic crisis'; and the interconnections between the different domains of politics, the economy, culture, the media, etc. (Grossberg 2019). As this necessarily incomplete list makes clear, conjunctural analysis, even as it principally works at what may be called a 'meso' concretion level, must nevertheless be ready to shift between different levels of abstraction. Hence Cultural Studies' characteristic interweaving of the descriptive and empirical with the conceptual and theoretical. Importantly, the point of all this movement is precisely to bring to light the close interpenetration of these different levels. For Cultural Studies, as Hall once put it, the central question is always: "what does this have to do with everything else?"

Conjunctural analysis thus starts off, in Grossberg's words, "by accepting that there is complexity everywhere and at every level" (2018: 31). To 'think conjuncturally' means to 'think multiply' (Clarke 2019: 134). Yet, as Hall's statement makes clear, this commitment to complexity does not mean a renunciation of the attempt to 'see it whole'. On the contrary, this type of investigation explicitly focuses on the social formation "as some sort of totality, however fragile and temporary" (Grossberg 2019: 42). In fact, it could be said that the shift from received notions of totality to that of the conjuncture corresponds to the shift, made by Hall and many others since the 1960s and 70s, from an older sort of Marxism to what Hall (1996c) famously referred to as a 'Marxism without guarantees', a flexible, open, non-dogmatic mode of theorizing, shorn of all the received 'certainties'. In the wake of, among other things, the growing interest in Gramsci's writings, the first English translation of Marx's *Grundrisse* (published in 1973), the work of authors such as Sartre or Althusser, of structuralism and poststructuralism, contingency became a central feature of this new Marxism (or 'post-Marxism'). The time of eternal principles of history, universal laws of development, true consciousness, essential identities, total structures, and so forth was over. Yet, significantly, in the case of Hall and others, this did not result in a move to the opposite end of the theoretical spectrum, to a radical deconstructivism which contented itself with tracing always and everywhere the inevitable slip-page and 'dissemination' of all meaning brought about by the unstoppable play of differences, and with celebrating the infinite semiosis of language. Instead, Cultural Studies has typically opted for a middle course between these extremes, in a manner that I would say is emblematic of its characteristic self-positioning in what may perhaps be called its '*third space*', a space of the in-between, one of whose defining features is its willingness to accept and work with *tension*. The goal, in other words, has always been to find a way, as Hall once put it, "through the Scyllia of a reductionism which must deny almost everything in order to explain something, and the Charybdis of a pluralism which is so mesmerized by 'everything' that it cannot explain anything" (1980b: 343). This position finds a paradigmatic expression in Hall's dictum of 'no necessary correspondence', with which he offered precisely such an alternative, 'third' mode of thinking beyond that of 'necessary correspondence' (i.e., [Marxist] teleology and determinism) and that of 'necessary non-correspondence' (i.e., radical poststructuralist relativism) (cf., e.g., Hall 1985). For Hall, the fact that meanings, identities, or relations were arbitrary did not make them any less real. In other words: While they certainly are not inevitable and eternal, they nevertheless have a bearing in the real world. As Grossberg puts it: "They did not have to be that way, but, given that they are that way, they are real and they have real effects." (2010: 22) This is what has been called the 'anti-anti-essentialism' (Gilroy 1993: 102), or, perhaps better, 'post-essentialism' or 'post-foundationalism' (Marchart 2010) of Cultural Studies, proceeding from the assumption of 'contingent foundations' (Butler 1992) and hence committed to thinking both, identity *and* difference, positional-

ity *and* movement, institution *and* destitution. Although nothing, neither meaning, nor identities, nor the social, is ever instituted naturally and once and for all, for at least a certain amount of time, differences *are* necessarily stitched in place and organized in a particular way – they are, as Cultural Studies says, *articulated* (cf., e.g., Clarke 2015; Slack 1996, 2016). It is precisely this key concept of articulation that allows Cultural Studies to hold on to the notion of the totality even as it takes on board the constructivist critiques directed against Marxism. To speak of a conjuncture is always to speak of an *articulated totality*, and that in a double sense: For one thing, this totality is never really ‘total’, its unity only ever being a ‘*unity-in-difference*’ or a ‘*unity-in-complexity*’, one of merely provisional condensations, in principle always open to change. As such, as was already indicated, it is also a more concrete totality than those of earlier moments of Marxist theorizing, since conjunctural analysis, as a mode of “radical historicity” (Jefferson 2021: 41) aiming at what Foucault called “writing the history of the present” (1995: 31), is never (mainly) about ‘Capitalism’ per se, but always about the actual composition of forces and relations in a particular time and place. At the same time, however, it should be made clear that this commitment to a deliberately ‘low’, ‘weak’ mode of theorizing – as against the ‘strong’, sweeping claims of ‘high theory’³ – should not be confused with a general rejection of more abstract concepts and forms of theory and analysis (and certainly not with the populist charge that the latter have no relevance outside of the allegedly self-sufficient and self-enclosed world of an academic ‘ivory tower’!). Instead, as conjunctural analysis moves back and forth between different levels of abstraction, these frequently provide vital heuristics and perspectivations that not only help to unlock particular elements of a given conjuncture, but also to open the investigation onto “a multiplicity of overlapping contexts, [...] of what we might call embedded contexts” (Grossberg 2010: 28).⁴

For another thing, the notion of an articulated totality further points to the fact that, for conjunctural analysis, the totality is explicitly also a question of representation. That is to say that, while the conjuncture undoubtedly has a material existence and is in that sense real, it is at the same time something that has to be constructed and narrated and is thus to some extent unavoidably bound to the specific positionality of the analyst. As Haraway (2008) or Barad (2007) might say, conjunctures are

3 On this topic, cf. ch. 3 and the excursus.

4 That is to say, although these more abstract modes of thinking, to use a distinction made by Andreas Reckwitz (2023, esp. 23–26), may well originally rather be designed or conceived as theoretical ‘systems’, conjunctural analysis nevertheless treats them as theoretical ‘tools’ (cf. Reckwitz 2023: 203n18). I believe that Reckwitz’s recent meta-theoretical reflections resonate quite strongly with the Cultural Studies approach to theoretical work (though there are also important differences).

‘material-semiotic’. Conjunctural analysis thus self-consciously constitutes a practice of ‘worlding’. In distinction to older Marxisms, knowledge is here not underpinned by the “god trick”, that is, imagined as the result of a “view from above, from nowhere”, but self-reflexively understood as the product of a “view from a body” (Haraway 1988: 589), of a certain socio-cultural positioning – a ‘situated knowledge’. Because of this, such an analysis can never claim to be total and definitive, but will inevitably remain partial and incomplete – something that, of course, applies to *all* analyses. Conjunctural analysis, in other words, self-consciously acknowledges “its general impossibility (as a project of mapping the totality)” (Highmore 2020: 13). If this makes it seem somewhat self-defeating, I believe that this is so only if viewed from an entrenched ‘modern’ perspective, which, however, is precisely one – post-modernism being another – that this approach decidedly goes beyond. If conjunctural analysis expresses a ‘will-to-totality’, then it is a conditional, qualified one, one that is put ‘under erasure’, that takes the form of a ‘will-to-articulation’. As Grossberg points out: “a conjunctural analysis is not a goal but a practice, a process, a critical analytic” (2019: 42). As was already indicated, its orientation is essentially pragmatic: It is a tool, a heuristic, whose ultimate goal is to infuse political struggle (cf. Carley 2021). As such, it aims at *a*, not *the*, truth. As Moritz Ege and Alexander Gallas emphasize, “there is not a single, definite analysis of any given conjuncture – and different analyses highlight different aspects and may be plausible and useful despite their obvious divergences” (2019: 94). Thus, while it is decidedly driven by a desire ‘to see it whole’ and to devise some form of ‘cognitive mapping’, for conjunctural analysis, the totality always remains a vanishing point or horizon which can never be caught up completely and neutrally (cf. Reckwitz 2023: 22).

In my view, such an approach to the question of the totality largely deflates the criticism brought forward by Latour and others. For as we have seen, a conjuncture, as an articulated totality, is precisely *not* a ‘panorama’ in Latour’s sense, one that “see[s] *everything*”, provides “a picture which has no gap in it”, and hence “gives the impression of complete control over what is being surveyed”. It is precisely *not* marked by an “excess of coherence” (Latour 2007: 187, 188) but acknowledges and explores the multiple logics, contradictions, and dislocations of the present, and it does go some way toward ‘paying the transaction costs’ (Latour 2007: 180) for moving from one frame to another and self-reflexively acknowledges its own theoretical activity. In conjunctural analysis, the totality is never a simple expressive, organic but always a complex one, “a totality without a center” (Edwards 2010: 286), “a de-totalized totality” (Coole/Frost 2010: 29).

Crucially, I believe that this makes conjunctural analysis eminently compatible with recent theoretical work associated with the nonhuman turn. As I have suggested in chapter 2, I see the concept of the *assemblage* – a central notion shared by a multitude of posthumanist theories – as a helpful hinge for such an endeavor. Its articulation to the discursive horizon of Cultural Studies sets off processes of

a stronger posthumanization of the field, which have the potential to significantly expand its analytical capacities in ways that better equip it for the messy world(s) of the Capitalocene. To give just a few (interrelated) examples, this concerns things such as matter, processes of materialization and ‘mattering’, the domain of ontology, the multiplicity of nonhuman actants, non- or more-than-representational forms of power, matters of affect, issues of science and technology, ecological concerns, questions of scale (temporal and spatial), or the rethinking of relationality. As I see it, this is not a question of a radical paradigm shift, but of an ‘interruption’, to use Hall’s (1996a: 268) suggestive metaphor, of the established protocols of Cultural Studies, beyond both euphoric hypes and reflexive defensive movements.

Such an encounter with the nonhuman turn facilitated by the notion of the assemblage is aided by the fact that conjunctural analysis in itself already shares a number of commonalities with it. The concept of the assemblage, originally derived from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, is today used in a variety of different ways. Broadly speaking, the term denotes “any set of social elements, and the relations between them, that is more than the sum of its parts” (Gilbert/Williams 2022: 253). I believe the conjuncture, too, can be described in terms of the three features I have highlighted with regards to the assemblage: It, too, is marked by *heterogeneity*, by the articulation of a plurality of different processes and elements; the result of these articulations is something new and distinct, an outcome of just these particular combinations, an *emergent* whole; and finally, any such specific constellation is always *contingent*, the result of distinct conditions of existence. Moreover, *assemblage/agencement* as well as *conjuncture/articulation* both can be taken to refer simultaneously to the result of processes of conjoining/assembling as well as to these processes themselves. In that sense, what Thomas Nail has observed with regard to assemblage theory equally applies to conjunctural analysis: It does not ask “What is ...?” but rather, how? where? when? from what viewpoint? and so on” (2017: 24). Perhaps most significantly, both approaches can be said to similarly proceed from the assumption of the centrality of *relations* and *processes* and, what is more, of their primacy over against specific entities and events. As Hall explains, in conjunctural analysis, “the analysis is a relational matter – i.e., a question to be solved *relationally*” (1986: 14). The focus is on what Gramsci termed ‘*relations of force*’, the mapping of *relations* of power. And as set out above, these relations are always understood as essentially volatile, with every configuration being a contingent and only ever temporary one. The interest of the analysis, in Gramsci’s words, lies in what is conceived as “a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria” (1971: 182).

This onto-epistemological assumption has most explicitly been foregrounded by Grossberg. As he programmatically writes: “Cultural studies treats everything as relationally constituted, and every context as defined by the continual making, un-making and remaking of relations.” (2019: 46) More than that, as I read him, Grossberg draws out the radical implications that the notion that “reality is relational” has

always contained: Explicitly thinking – just as I am here – about “a post-cultural (or at least, a post-culturalist) cultural studies”, he postulates that “any ‘term’ is defined only as the effect of the relations that constitute it” and, what is more, that “the relations precede and are more real than the terms” (2006: 4, 24), a statement that resonates quite strongly with new materialist work such as that of Barad, who famously proclaimed that “[r]elations do not follow relata, but the other way around” (2007: 136f). Because of this, Grossberg explains, “an event is not anything by itself”; “[i]t is what it is [...] only within a set of relations.” (2006: 24) Hence, “[a]ll events and formations are heterogeneous contexts, all the way up to the social formation itself as an articulated unity.” (Grossberg 2006: 24) On any level, what we are dealing with is thus “the construction of one set of relations out of another” (Grossberg 1992: 54) – this, precisely, is what ‘articulation’ (now) means. I would argue that this conception of contexts/conjunctures in terms of a “throwntogetherness”, a hybrid and contingent “constellation of processes rather than a thing” (Massey 2005: 141), decidedly moves conjunctural analysis into the vicinity of assemblage theory. While they should certainly not simply be conflated – clearly, the concept of the conjuncture typically performs a different kind of theoretical work than that of the assemblage – it seems to me that the former can be (re-)conceived as a particular type of the latter. *The conjuncture as assemblage*, an assemblage of assemblages (cf. DeLanda 2016: 3).

In view of these affinities, it comes as no surprise that, as I have noted earlier, the notion of the assemblage has in recent years more frequently been picked up within Cultural Studies. One very helpful case in point is Jennifer Daryl Slack’s and J. Macgregor Wise’s *Culture and Technology: A Primer*, which, aside from being an extremely concise and accessible introduction to the study of technological culture, can be read as an early exploration of some possibilities for the use of this concept in the field. The authors similarly understand an assemblage as “*a particular constellation of articulations*”, one that, as they put it, “*selects, draws together, stakes out and envelops a territory that exhibits some tenacity and effectivity*” (2015: 157), and mobilize the concept to counteract what they, too, see as a tendential overemphasis on the human and on human agency within Cultural Studies (2015: 159). Importantly, Slack and Wise also stress that assemblages, effectively, are “maps of power relations” (2015: 166).

This emphasis, on the one hand, on the ‘tenacity and effectivity’ of articulated assemblages and, on the other, on the centrality of the question of power, is absolutely crucial. As I have shown, conjunctural analysis and approaches for which the concept of the assemblage is key share the assumption of a relational and processual understanding of the world. In their analyses, both similarly foreground heterogeneity, emergence, and contingency, and underline that unities of whatever kind are always fractured, hybrid, and provisional. Yet, it seems to me that it is precisely in the double emphasis of conjunctural analysis just highlighted that this approach productively goes beyond many assemblage methodologies. As we have seen, ANT, for instance, especially in its earlier incarnations, typically confines itself to a rigor-

ous empiricism in the form of a ‘tracing’ of the wide array of actants and relations that make up a specific network. While these connections are described in great detail, what was for long generally ignored are more overtly *political* concerns such as the question of how, with what effects, and in whose interest networks are produced and sustained, or the closely related issue of the ways in which the stabilization of a network, and thus the enactment of a particular ontology, simultaneously produces a “shadowland of alterities”, that is, of Othered, marginalized, “not quite realised realities” (Law/Lien 2012: 373, 363). Relatedly, in its persistent rejection of concepts like structure, culture, or society, that is, of any notion pointing beyond the immediately given of a specific constellation, ANT has been unable/unwilling to identify any overarching formative patterns regarding the multiplicity of existing networks it describes. Similarly, to take another theoretical formation for which the assemblage concept is central, various varieties of the new materialism also tend, contrary to their intention, to de-politicize the analysis. Their often neo-Deleuzian/-Spinozian outlook typically means an accentuation of nomadic becoming and radical contingency and not infrequently entails an unfortunate “lapse into a political romanticization of relation” (Hörl 2017: 7), where relationality is cast in purely affirmative terms, so that material entanglements come to be seen exclusively with a view to an unfolding of potentiality, and where it thus runs the risk of being (re-)essentialized.⁵ Because of this, Thomas Lemke has argued that “new materialist ontology needs to be more strongly connected to an analytics of power that draws on the tradition of critical theory and is informed by a political agenda for change” (2021: 9). While Lemke puts new materialism (and ANT) in dialogue with the Foucauldian analytics of government, it is my contention that Cultural Studies offers another productive nexus. Diffracting/-ed by the new materialisms, Cultural Studies will always insist on the necessity of a detailed analysis of the *specific nature and contextual articulation of relationality in each particular case*, an outlook that will not only not lose sight of its harmful dimensions, but also not neglect the ways in which the flows of becoming are temporarily arrested and, in fact, durable and hegemonic constellations are established, and will scrutinize the power relations that are thus (re-)produced, including the attendant exclusions and asymmetries, but also, importantly, the conflicts and struggles involved in this.

In other words: While an encounter of conjunctural analysis and assemblage theory imbues the former, among other things, with a greater sense for the centrality of processes of mattering in a given constellation, for more-than-human agencies, entanglements, scales, and durations (cf. Cota 2019; Gilbert 2019a; Highmore 2020), it simultaneously entails a stronger politicization of the latter. Bringing assemblage/*agencement* and articulation into conversation (cf. Featherstone 2011), what is given more weight is the verb rather than the noun side of these terms –

5 On these issues, cf. the postscript and ch. 5.

not the fact of connections already forged, but the processes of making and maintaining them (cf. Slack/Wise 2015: 154). Going beyond both, the limitation of ANT to pure descriptiveness as well as the tendential overemphasis of new materialism on indeterminacy and plasticity, Cultural Studies highlights *the work of articulation*. It, too, emphasizes the contingency and basic openness of all configurations, yet its particular interest lies in what Hall termed the 'lines of tendential force' or 'magnetic lines of tendency' (in Grossberg 1986: 53, 54; cf. Slack/Wise 2015: 155), that is, in the ways in which things nevertheless are *made to hold* – as well as in the possibilities for a dis-/rearticulation and thus for change. As Slack and Wise put it:

To characterize [an] assemblage, we would have to do more than list its elements. We would be charged to 'map' the territory with attention to the power of particular articulations to produce this constellation, to assemble specific bodies, actions, passions, and representations in particular ways, to give a world shape, so to speak, in a concrete and imaginative way, with concrete effects. (2015: 157)

In this way, with the dictum of 'no necessary correspondence', Cultural Studies effectively moves beyond a number of unhelpful onto-epistemological binarisms: identity vs. difference, unity vs. plurality, fixity (essentialism) vs. mutability (constructivism) – but also, importantly: wholeness (and totalizing research) vs. fragmentation (and empiricism), (modern) grand narrative vs. (postmodern) language games. As we have seen, the opposition between a centered, organic, expressive whole or no coherence at all is a false one. Instead, the concept of the conjuncture, diffracted through that of the assemblage, allows us to theorize contingent, un-centered or partially centered, 'fractionally coherent' (Law 2002) totalities (in the plural), now effectively conceived as 'assemblages of assemblages', as 'meta-assemblages'. These are mapped by conjunctural analysis in its characteristic manner of "a widening analysis and description" (Williams 2018: 6), though the posthumanization of this methodology now somewhat moves it away from what could earlier still be conceived as a successive analysis of clearly separated domains and levels of ascending order towards a mode for which – as the chapters of part II have shown – a spiral, cyclone, or a Kraken are more adequate images. This is an approach that, appropriate to its subject matter, is itself multiple and mobile, its tentacles simultaneously reaching into a variety of different directions. It effectively interweaves the Hallian, conjuncture-analytical question 'What does this have to do with everything else?', which, as we have seen, nevertheless does not result in a totalizing project "in which everything is connected to everything else" (Grossberg 2006: 5), with the Harawayian, assemblage-analytical maxim "Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something" (Haraway 2016: 31). The maps drawn and stories told by means of this method are thus neither grand nor small, but 'big enough' (Haraway 2016: 50) – big enough to matter (as a heuristic within a given context, not universally), big

enough to make a difference. In such stories, James Clifford (himself in a theoretical dialogue with Hall) explains, “forces intersect but do not form a whole”; they are, he writes, “able to account for a lot, but not everything – and without guarantees of political virtue” (2013: 8, 201).

“Don’t focus on capitalism”, Latour famously admonished us, “follow the connections, ‘follow the actors themselves’” (2005: 179). Yet, we now find ourselves in a position where we are able to do *both*, to make the latter an element of the former. As Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle have argued, despite Latour’s polemics, “the theoretical desire for totality is not incompatible with a painstaking attention to traces, objects and devices” (2015: 48). My argument is that conjunctural analysis, rethought through/as assemblage analysis, constitutes precisely one such methodology able to fashion the kind of panorama envisioned by the two writers, one that “present[s] both the totality and its constituent devices, as well as the attendant gaps and dislocations” (2015: 55). Referring to the Latourian imagery, we could say that it proceeds like an ant with wings, an ant aspiring to see like an eagle. For a ‘political project’ like Cultural Studies, while Latour’s critique – alongside Lyotard’s – remains helpful as it reminds us of the necessity to stay firmly committed to an analysis ‘without the guarantees’ of teleology, closure, essentialism, and determinism, to avoid treating totalities as metaphysical, and to maintain an attitude of principled, self-reflexive skepticism vis-à-vis our own (inevitably selective and interpretive) constructions, his conclusion – to discard all notions of totality – simply will not do.

And, it may be added, it did not really do for Latour himself either, whose writings continued to be haunted by the very specters he was trying to exorcise: of the totality, which, through notions like ‘collective’ or ‘gathering’, kept on resurfacing in distorted form, and of the political (and/as critique), which in his late texts (esp. 2017, 2018, 2019; Latour/Schultz 2022) came to assume a quite unexpected centrality, a shift that could almost be interpreted in terms of something like a ‘coming out of the closet’ of his self-declared (and never really convincing, esp. for a theorist of hybridity) apoliticism. In the last book published during his lifetime, Latour even openly made use of a class discourse and of the thought of Gramsci, and developed an argument that can legitimately be characterized as a hegemony-theoretical one (Latour/Schultz 2022).⁶ It would seem as if the accumulating and overlapping crises of the more recent past, in particular the escalating dynamics of climate change and the loss of biodiversity, somewhat put an end to Latour’s self-imposed ‘dogmatic slumber’ regarding politics. And indeed: In this time of crisis, in the age of the Anthropocene, is not our need to ‘see it whole’ greater than ever? Already we can observe a decidedly revitalized interest in the ‘big picture’ on the part of the general public, an interest to which a growing number of (popular scientific) publications

6 Although at first sight, this is indeed surprising, on closer inspection, Latour’s thinking seems to me to have long had certain (latent) affinities with that of Gramsci.

offering comprehensive theories of contemporary society and holistic explanations of the contemporary moment have begun to respond (cf. Reckwitz/Rosa 2023). Here, I am convinced that Cultural Studies can and should contribute, by doing what it always has: trying to tell better stories.

In an interview from 2010, Martin Jay, the great chronicler of the permutations of the Marxist notion of the totality (1984), expressed his conviction of the ongoing analytic need for some conception of totality, albeit an updated, “softer” version” which, through an image that resonates strongly with the understanding elaborated here, he compared to “a spider’s web without a spider in the middle: it’s connected but there’s no one who controls it” (in Lijster 2010: 97). Tellingly, in view of my case study of the Corona pandemic in the next chapter, the main reason he gives for this necessity is today’s unprecedented degree of global interconnectedness: “when you sneeze in Beijing you get a cold in New York. So there is a need to think on at least a fairly ambitious level.” (in Lijster 2010: 97) These connectivities are contingent. While they did not have to be the way they are, and may change again, and while there is no spider centrally in control of them, they nevertheless have momentarily come to assume this distinct form, and this form is not merely accidental, but has particular, specifiable conditions of possibility. It is the result of (articulated) articulations. And these articulations are not fortuitous either. Rather, as Hartmut Rosa puts it, what needs to be acknowledged and analyzed is “the existence and persistence of forces that have a formative structural and cultural effect across or through all differences” (2023: 103). One such force is what I continue to call capitalism.

How, then, do we understand capitalism? How can we think the formative power of these forces? Once again, my answer will involve an encounter of Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn. With these questions, what we effectively (re-)turn to is a subject that has always accompanied discussions of the totality: the question of determination, which, in turn, is closely connected to debates about other issues such as agency and the relation between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’. These debates hold a central place in the history of Cultural Studies. While the field undoubtedly developed as a decidedly (post-)Marxist project, the relationship between the two bodies of work never was, as Hall has pointed out, “a perfect theoretical fit” (1996a: 265). Particularly the work of Hall himself stands testament to the protracted and intensely passionate debates with Marxism. Besides Marx, key interlocutors in these conversations were Gramsci and Althusser. Particularly the latter, Hall later recalled, he ‘wrestled’ with: “I warred with him, to the death.” (1996a: 266) While Hall resolutely rejected what he read as the “superstructuralist mistranslation” (1996a: 266) of Marx(ism), most notably in Althusser et al.’s *Reading Capital* (to which he preferred *For Marx*), and while he generally privileged a different, lower level of abstraction (namely that of concrete social formations), Althusser’s thought nevertheless proved vital for his own work, in particular the ways in which, especially through an innovative, complexity-sensitive rethinking of the notion of the social formation

and through the use of concepts such as overdetermination and relative autonomy, the French philosopher made significant advances in the endeavor of going beyond those aspects of the Marxist tradition that had increasingly come to be seen as limiting: its teleology, its economic or class reductionism, or the holism of its notion of an expressive totality. Alongside Gramsci's, it was particularly this work that allowed Hall and others to reconceptualize the totality of the social formation in the manner elaborated upon above, as an articulated unity-in-difference, and to leave behind the simplistic notion of base-superstructure determinacy. Yet, as Hall showed, in Althusser's thinking, eventually there often came a rather problematic "hardening up" (2016: 99) of the structuralist line, to the extent that Althusser ultimately fell back upon a rigidly functionalist account according to which the economic remained the determinant factor after all, if only, as he famously put it, 'in the last instance' (2005: 87–128), so that all events and practices of the other 'levels' of the social formation, despite having their own dynamic and specificity, which makes them more than a mere reflection or expression of the mode of production, in the final analysis nevertheless correspond to the latter by inevitably guaranteeing its effective reproduction. Even though he somewhat equivocally declared that "the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes" (2005: 113), Althusser therefore in the end tended to reproduce the very reductionism he set out to get beyond. Moreover, as Hall, Grossberg, and others pointed out, there was also an (again, we might say 'superstructuralist') tendency to reify the different levels of the social formation Althusser identified and to turn them into essentialized and isolated pieces. As Grossberg observes, it was as if "[t]he threat of chaos and radical uncertainty that the concept of overdetermination brings with it had to be compensated for" (2006: 25) through various means. By contrast, Cultural Studies scholars were resolved to hold on to the notion of overdetermination, to take it seriously and to draw the necessary conclusions from it, to think the different 'levels' of society in their complex and conjunctural entanglements, and consequently "to think about different levels and different kinds of determination" (Hall 2016: 122).

I believe that this work is extremely helpful for an attempt to theorize capitalism as itself an assemblage and to reconceptualize determination in a complex, non-reductionist way, beyond both (economic) determinism as well as (political) voluntarism. Once again, this is a theorization from within the characteristic 'third space' of Cultural Studies, the space of the 'anti-anti-essentialism' of articulation and 'no necessary correspondence'. Remarkably, such an endeavor can find valuable support in the work of Althusser himself – though a different, later Althusser⁷, the one of the fragment posthumously released under the title "The Underground Current of

7 Like those of so many influential thinkers, the writings of Althusser in their various shifts and permutations bear out the Foucauldian/poststructuralist argument about the power effects but actual groundlessness of unifying notions such as 'author' or 'oeuvre'.

the Materialism of the Encounter". As I see it, this text, which constitutes a significant break with the scientism of Althusser's other work (and that of many of his followers), is of historical importance as it arguably marks a point from which a particular strand of (post-)Marxist theorizing which has been close to Cultural Studies has managed to steer a course between the extremes of naïve totality-thinking and radical positivism of the Latourian type, and to effectively fuse critique with an emphasis on contingency, relationality, and processuality which makes it eminently compatible with much nonhuman turn-related work.⁸ In the manuscript, Althusser traces the eponymous subterranean current throughout the history of 'Western' philosophy, thus outlining a fascinating genealogy that includes Epicurus, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Marx, Heidegger, and Derrida. The strain of materialism emerging in the work of these thinkers, as Althusser now reads them, marks a rigorous break with all teleological, deterministic, and essentialist thought. This current, which resonates strongly with many of the new materialisms of recent years (cf. Coole/Frost 2010: 35), is a decidedly relational and processual one, which puts the emphasis on the radical contingency of *aleatory encounters*, those moments when a chance convergence of elements and forces leads to the appearance of a new, but only ever provisional constellation. We find again here the same stress on heterogeneity, emergence, and contingency that we already emphasized in conjunctural analysis and assemblage studies. Like these, the materialism of the encounter "does not take anything for granted" (Althusser 2006: 173). Here, things generally exist "in a 'floating state'" (198), and, as in conjunctural analysis, there are no guarantees for anything: An encounter may or may not take place, it may result in this outcome or that or another, it may be durable or fleeting. The basic assumption is hence that of a "radical instability": "since every encounter is provisional even when it lasts, *there is no eternity in the 'laws' of any world or any state*" (195, 174). Like so many nonhuman-turn theorists do, not least in the wake of Derridean deconstruction, Althusser struggles/plays with language in a most revealing manner. To use his terminology, a particular configuration only 'takes hold' or 'takes form' through a 'pile-up' or 'collision-interlocking' (Fr. *accrochage*) of disparate elements (191) – a vocabulary that distinctly resonates with that of assemblages, conjunctures, and articulations. Indeed, in a few scattered passages of the fragment, Althusser explicitly touches on the concept of the conjuncture and, significantly, in view of the argument developed here, even seems to suggest that this notion in fact always implied or held the potential of a materialism of the encounter (187). Consequently, a conjuncture is now conceived precisely in terms of a 'collision-interlocking', "the conjuncture itself being junction, con-junction, congealed (albeit shifting) encounter, since it has already taken place, and refers in its turn to the infinite number of its prior causes" (193). This certainly sounds a lot like

8 I would like to thank one anonymous reviewer for helping me to clarify my argument on this point.

our conjuncture as/and assemblage. Thus understood, conjunctural thinking effectively constitutes “an attempt to think not only the contingency of necessity, but also the necessity of the contingency at its root” (187). Referring to Althusser’s reading of Wittgenstein, we might say that a conjuncture is ‘everything that is the case’ (German, *alles, was der Fall ist*); everything that ‘falls’, everything that ‘comes about’ – where ‘case’, in the sense of *casus*, means “at once occurrence and chance, that which comes about in the mode of the unforeseeable, and yet of being” (190). Conjunctural analysis hence means taking “full account of the way the *conditions* present themselves, of the surrounding circumstances, of the ‘there is’ this and not that, [...] of these conditions and their history, that is to say, of their ‘having come about’ – in short, of the encounters which might not have taken place [...] and which have taken place, shaping the ‘given’ of the problem and its state” (186f).

Thus, importantly, Althusser, too, stresses that, in spite of their contingency, constellations still have effects and may still persist for a certain amount of time, but also – even though his rhetoric of fundamental volatility runs the risk of overshadowing this aspect – that they are subject to, or entangled with, specific forms of force or pressure. Thus, a conjuncture is a moment in which “the world of history [...] *gels* [...], with the taking-hold of elements combined in an encounter that is apt to trace such-and-such a figure” (194). Exactly *what kind* of figure is traced in actual fact, as well as the very fact of taking-hold itself, is in the end not only or entirely aleatory, but a result of contingency *as well as* necessity. This, I think, is where what Hall termed ‘lines of tendential force’ or ‘magnetic lines of tendency’ come into play. Yes, ‘there are encounters’ (Fr. *ça se rencontre*); yes, ‘things are thrown’ (191) – we are far away from any sense of sovereign agency or transparent intentionality here. Yet, as I read Althusser, we are not in the domain of ‘necessarily no relation’ either. As Althusser explains, encounters result from or consist in what Lucretius called the ‘swerve’, “a change of trend” (Lucretius 1910: 72), “the welling up of order from the very heart of disorder” (2006: 189f). However, as far as the world of history is concerned, this swerve never takes place in the philosophical void Althusser talks about but, precisely, always in the context of a ‘there is’, of preexisting conditions, of a given conjuncture. And here, we find a multiplicity of lines of force, inscribing multiple ‘trends’, imprinting various tendencies and dynamics, and in this uneven landscape, it is not so much or only a question of ‘what occurs’, but, as Althusser writes in his discussion of Machiavelli, of “*creat[ing] the conditions for a swerve*, and thus an encounter” (171).

In this way, the issue of determination/agency is effectively moved beyond the dualism of determinism vs. free will and structure vs. agent. Though generally expressed in a different idiom, the extensive debates surrounding the base/superstructure metaphor within Cultural Studies partly already pointed in a direction not unlike the one that emerges from Althusser’s fragment, for instance when Williams defines determination as “setting limits, exerting pressures” (2005: 32) or when Hall

rethinks it along the lines of articulation and conceives it as that which “sets limits and opens possibilities, possible forms”, which inscribes a particular formation with “certain distinct tendencies” and endows it with “a certain configuration” (2016: 95, 119). For Hall, it is that which “define[s] the terrain on which historical forces move” and thus “define[s] the horizon of possibilities” (1986: 13). As Althusser points out, “the concept of possibility can be rooted in the concept of original disorder” (2006: 191). There is, in principle, always a “plurality of possible worlds” (191). Yet, only some actually materialize; only some acquire permanence. Determination is thus perhaps best understood in terms of an ‘un-’ or – as the horizon towards which it strives – an ‘im-possibilizing’, that is, of a reduction of possibilities, a circumscription of wiggle room, of a reinforcing of particular tendencies and an entrenchment of particular configurations and the simultaneous ‘improbable-ization’ – the ‘making-less-likely’ – of others – determination as the *production of orders of possibility*.

Thus understood, it can once again productively be linked to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, provided that we somewhat “update and upgrade” (Gilbert/Williams 2022: x) the latter for the present age. This work has recently been significantly advanced by Alex Williams (2020) and Jeremy Gilbert (Gilbert/Williams 2022). Through a dialogue with theoretical resources such as the thought of Deleuze and Guattari or complexity theory, Williams in particular has produced what can also be seen as a more ‘posthumanized’ account of hegemony, one that makes it considerably more compatible with the field of the nonhuman turn and more attuned to the messy complexities of the Capitalocene. Here, hegemony, reconceived as ‘complex hegemony’, is defined as an *emergent* phenomenon, as a vector of *guided self-organization*, aiming at a state of *metastable equilibrium*, and as a form of *generative entrenchment* (the ‘autocatalysis of power’). It is worth quoting Williams at length:

Complex hegemony [...] emerges out of the interactions of diverse component parts (individual and collective, human and non-human). It gives rise to emergent properties that have downwards causatory impacts back onto the systems from which they emerge. Principle amongst these is the ability to guide the way the system self-organises. On the largest scales, complex hegemony involves leading complex network-hierarchies towards new points of relative metastability. Finally, complex hegemony ensures its own continued existence through mechanisms of generative entrenchment. By generating behaviours, processes, systems, and structures through guided self-organisation, hegemonically manipulated systems are able to take on indispensable roles, leading to increasing risk and cost associated with altering the underlying system. (2020: 156f)

In line with my reading of Althusser’s fragment, the problematic of determination is here effectively displaced into a question concerning the production of order, through specific articulations and the creation of assemblages, the governing of

the overall directionality of a given constellation, the de/formation of a particular terrain, “the construction of an uneven space of possibility” (Williams 2020: 148).

In a not unrelated manner, Barad’s variant of new materialism, too, thinks space in terms of “a dynamic and ever-changing topology” (2007: 176f) which can only be adequately described by moving beyond received binarisms of interiority and exteriority, subject and object, pure cause and effect, absolute freedom and strict determinism. Instead, agential realism’s ‘intra-actions’ constitute “non-arbitrary non-deterministic causal enactments through which matter-in-the-process-of-becoming is iteratively enfolded into its ongoing differential materialization” (234). Because of this dynamic, “phenomena^[9] are forever being reenfolded and reformed”, and “[t]here is a vitality to intra-activity”, such that “[t]he world’s effervescence, its exuberant creativeness can never be contained or suspended” (177, 234, 235). At the same time, Barad also stresses that not “anything and everything [is] possible at any given moment” (234). Rather, “intra-actions are constraining but not determining”; they “iteratively reconfigure what is possible and what is impossible” (234). Similar to the other approaches I have discussed, power, for Barad, “is not an external force that acts on a subject”; “there is”, they explain, “only a reiterated acting that is power in its stabilizing and sedimenting effects” (235). There are distinct resonances here, both conceptually and in terms of metaphoricity, with Althusser’s materialism of the encounter and his rhetoric of ‘taking hold/form’, ‘gelling’, ‘congealing’, and so forth; with Williams’ elaboration of complex hegemony; with key terms of Cultural Studies such as ‘arbitrary closure’, ‘suture’, or ‘condensation’; as well as with a number of other conceptions from within the orbit of the nonhuman turn, for instance ANT’s interest in the stabilization of associations; Thomas Nail’s new materialist, kinetic Marxism and its notion of ‘pedesis’ or ‘kinetic dialectics’, where motion is “neither strictly necessary nor strictly random” but “directly related to [...] the history of motions leading up to it” (2020: 13), and where the kinetic web of flows is thought together with processes of ‘folding’; Nancy Tuana’s concept of ‘viscous porosity’, where, unlike ‘fluidity’, ‘viscosity’ “retains an emphasis on resistance to changing form” (2008: 194); Alexander Galloway’s and Eugene Thacker’s (2007) elaboration of ‘distributed networks’, as opposed to ‘centralized’ as well as ‘decentralized’ ones, which are characterized by ‘nodes’ of tenacious articulations; or Levi Bryant’s concern with the ways in which motion and change, understood as ontologically primary, are temporarily halted by means of the production of ‘paths’ and ‘nodes’ (2014: 140–74) and how assemblages and ecologies are constructed and sustained through what, rather than ‘power’, he terms ‘gravity’ (2014: 184–97) (which echoes Hall’s notion of magnetic pull).

9 This term has a very specific meaning in Barad’s theory. Yet, I believe that for our purposes, it is permissible to leave out the details of this and to retain a wider, more general sense of ‘phenomena’.

As Althusser points out, once encounters have taken hold/form, once articulations have been stabilized, once assemblages have congealed into particular shapes, enduring relationships, necessities, and (tendential) laws (can) emerge (2006: 195, 197). In that sense, I believe we may still retain the analytic notion of 'structure', but only if by that we now mean *not* a stable background opposed to human agency, but rather a *structuration* or *structuring*, an assemblage of assemblages, something emergent that has sedimented and acquired some durability; "nodes of totalization", as Deleuze has it (1995: 86), or, to adopt another concept of Bryant's (who himself borrows it from Lacan), 'quilting points' or 'catalytic operators' (2014: 223–26). As should be clear at this point, these structures, as *structurings*, that is, processual forms of organization, are wholly *immanent*; they do not transcend, stand above, hide behind, or lurk below the 'mesh' of relations and actants in which they operate. They are not beyond being affected. They are productive, they assemble or quilt, but they are also *themselves* produced, assembled, quilted. In fact, within Cultural Studies, Hall's (and Raymond Williams') notion of a 'double articulation' between 'structure' and 'practice', according to which "a structure is what previously structured practices have produced as a result" (2016: 125), already signaled such an immanence, albeit still in a way that remained somewhat anthropocentric in its exclusive focus on human practice¹⁰. As Barad puts it, "[s]tructures are specific material configurations/(re)configurings of the world" (2007: 237). To speak of 'structures' means to point to "the dynamic intra-workings of the instruments of power through which particular meanings, bodies, and boundaries are produced" (230). Materiality is here rethought as a contingent, "constrained but not fully determined, process of iterative intra-activity through which material-discursive practices come to matter, rather than as mere brute positivity or some purified notion of the economic" (237). I believe that it is only against the background of such a revised understanding that we can still, or once again, say with Hall that "[s]tructures exhibit tendencies – lines of force, openings, and closures – which constrain, shape, channel, and, in that sense, 'determine'" (2016: 125).

It is along these lines that we may now also conceive of *capitalist* structures. A conjunctural analysis of such structures certainly each time requires concretization and contextualization – after all, not only are economies always heterogeneous and not reducible to capitalist relations, capitalism, too, is not singular and homogeneous (cf. Gibson-Graham 2006; Grossberg 2010: 101–51). More than that, the 'economic' is itself a contingent, relational category. Nevertheless, at a higher level of abstraction, capitalism can now be rethought in terms of a '*meta-*' or '*overcoding*' *assemblage*, as a 'structure of structures', an 'assemblage of assemblages'. It, too, is a processual and relational affair; a sedimented articulation of a multiplicity of forces

10 However, a praxeological reinterpretation of this double articulation would go some way towards diminishing – though not erasing – this anthropocentrism (cf., e.g., Reckwitz 2002).

and elements, an interlocking or condensation of a wide array of heterogeneous relationalities, only ever partially stable. It is material-semiotic, natural-cultural, and it is by far not exhausted by its 'economic' components – the domains of the political, social, cultural, ideological, affective, technological, ecological, and more (these distinctions only have meaning as heuristic ones) are absolutely indispensable. A similar conception of capitalism also emerges in the work of David Harvey, who re-thinks capital in terms of seven distinct 'activity spheres': "technologies and organisational forms; social relations; institutional and administrative arrangements; production and labour processes; relations to nature; the reproduction of daily life and of the species; and 'mental conceptions of the world'" (2011: 122). While each of these spheres possesses its own dynamic, all of them are at the same time deeply entangled and affected by their relations with one another. There are "complex flows of influence that move between the spheres", "perpetually reshaping all of them" (Harvey 2011: 123), so that there is a strong element of contingency and none of the spheres is in a position of principled dominance. Harvey emphasizes that this, then, is not "a mechanical totality, a social engine in which the parts strictly conform to the dictates of the whole", but "a socio-ecological totality" or "*an assemblage*", in which "the inter-relations are fluid and open, even as they are inextricably interwoven with each other" (2011: 128). Similarly, William Connolly has begun to reconceptualize capitalism as an ecology, which, drawing on process philosophy, he situates within "a cosmos of open, interacting force fields", "each periodically flowing over, through, and around others" (2013: 25, 27). In this way, Connolly has arguably gone still further than Harvey in thinking entanglement in the direction of 'intra-relationality' and in taking into account the central role of nonhuman actants. Perhaps most helpful in this context is once again Barad's agential realism and its notion of a 'differential gear assemblage':

Imagine a differential gear assemblage (i.e., a gear assemblage in which the gear operations literally work through one another and in which an uneven distribution of forces results in, and is the enabling condition for, different potentials and performances among the gears) that in an ongoing fashion is being (re)configured/(re)assembled while it is itself in the process of producing other differential gear assemblages. Gears are remilled through intra-actions with other gears, and some gears are in the process of being enfolded into the assemblage as part of its ongoing process of reconfiguration. The assemblages are marked by these processes of (re)assembly. The sedimenting marks of time do not correspond to the history of any individual gear but rather are integrally tied to the genealogy of the assemblage and its changing topology, that is, to the processes of inclusion and exclusion in the reworking of the boundaries of the assemblages. Imagine further that the differential gear assemblages include humans and nonhumans, where the differential constitution of "human" and "nonhuman" changes with each intra-action. (2007: 239)

Despite the mechanistic nature of the metaphor, this assemblage is hence not a machine consisting of pre-existing, separate parts, but “a topological animal that mutates through an open-ended dynamics of intra-activity” (240). Accordingly, “the spatiality of capitalism is itself a contested and ever-changing topology that is iteratively (re)produced through the dynamics of intra-activity and enfolding” (243). While here, too, there is arguably something of the overemphasis on indeterminacy and fluidity that I have criticized with regards to much new materialist theorizing, it seems to me that this is nevertheless a very promising avenue for a rethinking of capitalism at the intersections of conjunctural and assemblage analysis – *a political economy of assemblages*.

While there is no ontological ‘great chain of beings’, this does not mean that all entities are somehow the same or are all equal. Undoubtedly, some actants “exercise greater power over others and play a more significant role in structuring relations” (Bryant 2014: 115) between existents, a capacity significantly stemming from “their ability to ‘collect’ power and condense it” (Castree 2002: 141). We can still speak of ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ levels, yet no longer in any absolute but a relative sense, since “[s]o-called ‘micro-phenomena’ are always linked, spatially and temporally, to certain macro-phenomena, while these so-called macro-phenomena exist only as they are manifested in individual micro-situations” (Reckwitz 2023: 32; cf. DeLanda 2016: 20f). As Barad has pointed out, scales are connected, and this connectedness “should be understood not as linkages among preexisting nested scales but as the agential enfolding of different scales through one another” (2007: 245). Accordingly, if capitalism is understood as ‘bigger’ and more powerful than other assemblages – as an overcoding or meta-assemblage – then this is because it is far more widely connected (cf. Latour 1993: 121, 2007: 178f), strongly sedimented or ‘locked in’, and itself has a greater power of assembling, articulating, structuring, and stabilizing. As was outlined above, it is in this latter sense that it can still justly be said to be ‘determining’. In this vein, the Althusser of the materialism of the encounter defines the capitalist mode of production in terms of “a *structure* that imposes its unity on a series of elements”, a “structure of exploitation” (2006: 203). A similar point has been made in more detail by Castree, who likewise rethinks capitalism as a network of networks which, despite their heterogeneity, “have a common processual form or logic”, “work in unison” and “towards the same ends”, driven by “the central rationale of the circuit of capital”, that is, the “quest for profit” (2002: 130, 140, 137). These networks, in other words, “both determine and are affected by the value dynamics that make capitalist sociocultural ties so distinctive and dynamic” (Castree 2002: 140).

As should have become clear by now, the understanding of ‘capitalist determination’ I have outlined does in no way preclude what is traditionally called agency. However, in line with the reconceptualization of notions of structure, agent, and determination, and, indeed, with the abolition of the very conceptual opposition between structure and agency, our understanding of agency changes as well. Much re-

cent work associated with the nonhuman turn has already alerted us to the fact that agency needs to be rethought as something not reserved only for particular types of existents (esp. humans) and not inevitably linked with intentionality, but rather distributed between a multiplicity of actants. We now see that what is required is a properly *relational* account of agency, where agency emerges as “a relational effect generated by a network of heterogeneous, interacting components whose activity is constituted in the networks of which they form a part” (Whatmore 1999: 28). Consequently, it is not simply a capacity an individual entity possesses, intrinsic and fixed for all time, but rather a contingent and emergent potential, closely tied up with the mutable spaces of im/possibility elaborated upon above, a result of the particular articulation of an entity within specific assemblages. A useful tool to think with in this context is the concept of ‘affordance’, which first emerged in the field of psychology, was then widely used in discussions about technology, and has of late been taken up in a variety of contexts, from literary studies to political theory (cf., e.g., Felski 2015: 164f; Gilbert/Williams 2022: 179), precisely as a helpful means of going beyond received binarisms of context vs. agent. The concept highlights the ways the possibilities for action are always situationally structured, how certain possibilities are ‘afforded’, ‘made available’, or, as Hall might say, ‘pre-ferred’ (1993: 99), while others are ‘improbable-ized’, and thus replaces simplistic juxtapositions of subject and object, cause and effect, voluntarism and determinism, with a more complex and relational model. Here, agency emerges as a ‘doing’ rather than an ‘attribute’ (cf. Lemke 2021: 149–54). Agency, Barad explains, “is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has” (2007: 235). As such, it is contextual and dynamic, changing as assemblages shift and change. As Barad puts it: “intra-actions iteratively reconfigure what is possible and what is impossible – possibilities do not sit still. [...] [Ne]w possibilities open up as others that might have been possible are now excluded: possibilities are reconfigured and reconfiguring. [...] The world’s effervescence, its exuberant creativeness can never be contained or suspended. Agency never ends; it can never ‘run out’.” (2007: 234f) It is caught up in a constant ‘dance’ (Pickering 1995), entangled with shifting spacetime-matter relations, reconfigured and reconfiguring in ongoing intra-action with changing possibility spaces. While Barad’s rhetoric here once again risks tipping over into the “relational enthusiasm” (Hörl 2017: 7) characteristic of many new materialist positions, with the attendant normative prioritization of volatility – by contrast, referring to Charis Cussins’ (1996) metaphor, we might insist that the ‘dance of agency’ is never without an element of ‘choreography’ – this reconceptualization of (human) action beyond the twin poles of pure cause and pure effect remains very helpful. In a world of processes and relations, full autonomy is as illusory as full determination. And thus, even though the future may not necessarily be “radically open at every turn” (Barad 2007: 235), always, to borrow Leonard Cohen’s famous words, there will be

cracks through which the light shines in. Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.

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7. A Case Study of Covid-19: Towards a Montage of the Pandemic Assemblage

Pin 1: Posthuman Object / Emergence

We need to (re-)assemble Covid-19. That is to say, we have to adopt a posthumanist perspective and shift the unit of analysis (Pickering 2005). In order to do more justice to Covid's complexity, we must think multiply (Clarke 2019: 134). Be a Kraken.¹ Follow the swirls of the cyclone. That means reshuffling existing constellations of agential cuts. Suspending the Great Divides: nature/society, subject/object, human/nonhuman, matter/discourse, social/natural sciences, and so on. Relationality and entanglement instead of boundedness and self-enclosed units, processuality and becoming rather than fixity and stability (cf. **ch. 1**). We need to reconstitute Covid-19 as a *posthuman object* of inquiry (Pickering 2005) – as an assemblage. To begin this work, lists, of the type of the well-known “Latour litanies” (Bogost 2012: 38), remain helpful (cf. also Fox/Alldred 2017):

... – humans – Corona viruses – pangolins – bats – domestic animals – deforestation – agribusiness – monocultures – bushmeat – wildlife trafficking – factory farms – research laboratories – wet markets – urban centers – nation states – global transportation networks – biosecurity – healthcare systems – international trade – biotechnology – tourism – media – surveillance – laws – discourses – representations – narratives – platform companies – rapid testing – biodiversity loss – policies – lockdowns – science – pharmaceutical companies – parliaments – home – transnational organizations – freedom – climate change – mobile applications – diplomacy – normality – experts – affects and emotions – socio-cultural practices – bio-/necropolitics – crisis – identities – masks – stock markets – microscopes – unemployment – disinfectants – toilet paper – conspiracies – race – gender – class – age – care – Zoom – vulnerability – ...

Such lists are not only inevitably incomplete, they are also irritatingly unsystematic, lacking any obvious order, structure, coherence, or a consistent level of scale or

1 On my proposal of ‘Kraken theory’, cf. Cord 2026.

abstraction. In fact, they are best described as a- or non-systematic. As such, they can perhaps be related to Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' (1986, 1994: xviii) and his famous discussion of Borges' strange 'Chinese encyclopedia' – these lists defy our expectations, scramble received taxonomies, and challenge established modes of knowing. In this way, they urge us to see and think differently – they open up ways to a radical *penser autrement*, to "another system of thought" (Foucault 1994: xv). In this way, they help us begin the conjuncture-analytical work of answering the question 'What does this have to do with everything else?' (Hall), refracting it through the assemblage-analytical maxim 'Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something' (Haraway) (cf. **ch. 6**). This work has no definite beginning or end. Much depends on the analytical and political interests and outlooks of the respective researcher; these determine which arbitrary closures and agential cuts they perform. And the elements and relations they focus on will each need to be unraveled into further assemblages. In its complexity, interdisciplinarity, and open-endedness, this is moreover a decidedly collective work. A conjunctural analysis of Covid-19 will thus emerge as a mosaic or montage – an assemblage – of a multiplicity of maps and stories.

I have argued that heterogeneity, emergence, and contingency are key features of assemblages (cf. **ch. 2**). For posthumanist Cultural Studies, what is central in the analysis of all of these is the question of *power* (cf. **postscript**, **ch. 5**, **ch. 6**). And this is, essentially, a question of *articulation*. How, why, under what circumstances did a particular constellation take shape? In what way, through what means, by which actants, for which purposes, in whose interests, and at what costs are its specific relations being maintained? Consider the vexed question of the 'beginning' of the pandemic. Here, Cultural Studies would not only follow Foucault (1984) and shift the focus away from a search for 'origins' towards an investigation of 'emergence' (Kirksey 2020: 12) – in doing so, it would also emphasize Covid's strongly *overdetermined* nature. It is doubtful that we will ever be able to say with certainty whether the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak began 'in the field' (the Wuhan wet market, farther out in the Wuhan wild foods circuit, or elsewhere) or in a laboratory. Important as such questions are, it is critical to emphasize a) that none of these options mean that the emergence of the pandemic can be safely ascribed to either the pole of 'nature' or the pole of 'society', and b) that each of these 'origins' would need to be positioned within a wider web of complex relations and itself to be re/constructed as just such a web. Assemblages always lead to further assemblages. Thus, even if, as a group of prominent viral phylogeneticists claimed in 2020, the virus was most likely "not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus" but the result of "natural selection" (Andersen et al. 2020), this process must immediately be contextualized and re/assembled and thereby exposed as (also) profoundly *unnatural*, or better: as *natural-cultural*.

Already viruses themselves, including Coronaviruses, are constantly mutating and thus constitute “*quasi-species*” (Lowe 2010: 625) rather than well-bounded populations. They are “mutant swarms”, ceaselessly becoming in and through what Celia Lowe has called “multispecies clouds”, that is, “collections of species transforming together in both ordinary and surprising ways” (2010: 625, 626; cf. Kirksey 2020: 12). Notably, these multispecies assemblages frequently include not only a multiplicity of animal hosts (including humans) and ecological communities, but also all sorts of ‘human’ components such as political, economic, and social forces (institutions, infrastructures, practices, etc.) which also shape the becoming. Accordingly, epizootics and zoonoses should often likewise be thought along such lines, that is, for instance, as closely entangled with biodiversity loss induced by deforestation and the growth of monocultures, with ecosystem degradation contributing in multiple ways to the opening up of new disease vectors. And these practices of land grabbing and deforestation in turn need to be thought as part of what is known as ‘ecologically unequal exchange’, whereby the countries and companies of the so-called ‘Global North’ drain the resources and deplete the ecosystems of the so-called ‘Global South’ – in other words, the extractivist and commodifying circuits of global capital. And hence, ultimately, as bound up with the lifestyles and consumption habits of the citizens in those Northern societies where the goods for the sake of which these practices are carried out in the South are consumed (cf. Malm 2020; Wallace 2020). The emergence of the pandemic ‘in the field’ thus cannot be thought outside of the parameters of the capitalist ‘externalization societies’ of the Global North (Lessenich 2019).

But a similar, tentacular analytic, moving in multiple directions and proceeding in widening spirals, would have to be employed in the case of the laboratory hypothesis as well. Thus, a close analysis of ‘laboratory life’ and ‘science in action’ in the vein of actor-network theory (Latour 1987; Latour/Woolgar 1986) (difficult here, of course, due to the lack of access to the laboratories) would need to be interlinked with, for instance, the tracing of the multiple relations that tie the Wuhan Institute of Virology and its experiments with Coronaviruses to other, including ‘Western’, research facilities, organizations, and state agencies, among them the American EcoHealth Alliance and the US National Institutes of Health (cf. Wallace 2020: 89–94). But it would also mean more generally to situate such institutions and their research in a complex network of relations, drivers, and dependencies that comprises not only “legitimate concerns about emergent infectious diseases”, but also “the return of ‘respectable’ biowarfare research, the ideological demands of the War on Terror, and the next iteration in Keynesian military economy” (Wallace 2020: 95). As Rob Wallace points out, such labs “represent a political logistics folding in calculated dangers that science propaganda spins away as so much conspiracy theory” – they effectively “produc[e] the very threat of outbreak the labs were ostensibly set up to stop” (2020: 95).

These complicated assemblages obviously need to be studied in detail. Yet, what is already clear is that we must not “fetishiz[e] causality in the objects involved” (Wallace 2020: 96). Causation is not local and linear, but dispersed, multi-directional, multi-temporal. We recall Jane Bennett’s new materialist account of congregational agency here and her understanding of causality as emergent, fractal, and circuitous (2010: 32–34). And yet, we also recall the problems we identified with this approach (cf. **ch. 5**). While agency and responsibility are distributed, there are, I have argued, nevertheless nodes of articulation, quilting points, and overcoding assemblages, which have a defining impact on the shape of networks of relations. They *determine*, in the sense in which I have used that term (cf. **ch. 6**). In fact, if we somewhat read Bennett against the grain (and against herself), some of her own formulations actually seem to point in a similar direction, for instance when, referring to Hannah Arendt, she defines a ‘cause’ (here, following Arendt’s distinction, understood in the sense of an ‘origin’) as “a complex, mobile, and heteronomous enjoiner of forces” (2010: 33). An overcoding assemblage can be thought as just such an ‘enjoiner’ of actants, a force that draws the latter together, articulates them in a particular way, and works to maintain the resulting constellation. Following Wallace, Andreas Malm, and others, I would argue that in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, capitalism constituted precisely such a meta-driver. It did play a determining role in what happened – not because it was the sole cause of everything, but because it significantly structured ‘possibility spaces’ and drove the ‘entrenchment’ (Williams 2020) of articulations and relationalities that led to the emergence of the pandemic and substantially shaped its course – from the emergence of the virus up to the question of ‘who gets to die?’ (Clarke 2021: 250), that is, to its different effects along the webs of bio-/necropolitics and their matrices of differential exposure and vulnerability (cf., e.g., Lorenzini 2021; Malm 2020: 91–100). Consequently, while a better understanding of the exact beginnings of the pandemic is clearly important, it is also critical to recognize that, regarding the issue of ‘field vs. lab’, “what appear diametrically opposed premises [...] in actuality are scattered together around the dictates of capital and the imperial states that serve it” (Wallace 2020: 97). By making this argument, I am not exculpating other actants, such as the Chinese government – rather, like Malm, I suggest we learn “to see [the rest of the capitalist world] in China and China in that world” and acknowledge that “*China could become the cradle of this disease only because global tendencies were present in concentrated form*” (2020: 67, 61f). Across the rhizomatic multiplicity of elements and relations that make up the pandemic assemblage, capital remains the “meta-virus and patron of parasites” (Malm 2020: 78).

Pin 2: Disease Emergence

The approach to the issue of emergence outlined in pin 1 effectively constitutes a development of the important notion of ‘*disease emergence*’, which has been in wide use at least since the late 1980s (in response to the AIDS epidemic). This concept already encourages a relational understanding of disease by viewing it as “a product of the entangled interplay of environments, hosts, pathogens and humans” (Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 537f) and thus calling for consideration of a number of different factors such as, to use the standard language usually employed in this context, animal domestication, human population expansion, changes in human behavior, international travel, commerce, and conflict, technology and industry, virus structure, transmission, and mutation, and animal migration, feeding behavior, and dispersal (Johnson 2014). The revision of this concept within the context of a posthumanist conjunctural analysis is twofold: For one thing, it involves a radicalization of the understanding of relationality along the lines of concepts such as ‘intra-action’ or ‘becoming-with’, which also introduce a stronger dimension of processuality. Following the original work of Steve Hinchliffe and his colleagues (2013, 2017), such a move challenges the spatial and ontological assumptions underlying received views of disease outbreaks, where pathogens basically cross over from a diseased elsewhere/outside into the separate space of a healthy and normal here/inside, by replacing a topographical with a topological sensibility. The latter “prompts us to do two things: first, to think about proximity, presence and distance in ways that disrupt our sense of what is near and what is far, and, second, to disrupt the notion that pathogens or disease refer to discrete, unchanging objects that retain the same form regardless of their diffusion over space” (Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 538). In the place of ‘borderlines’, what emerges are ‘borderlands’, “marked by the complex intersection”, or better, intra-action, “of multiple spatio-temporal [dis]orders” (Saskia Sassen qtd. in Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 538, alteration in original) working to different rhythms and logics, “spaces in the making, [...] where borders are continually being restated through the juxtaposition of different elements, some close up, others folded in from afar, detached and re-embedded in ways that give rise to new and novel arrangements” (Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 538). This, precisely, is a landscape of contingent assemblages, not fixed spaces, identities, and objects, “an entangled landscape marked by folds and intensities”, where “borders are detached from geographic territory”, akin, to use an image, to a crumpled handkerchief stuffed into one’s pocket (Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 532, 538).

The second central aspect of our revision of the notion of disease emergence is to insist that the precise shape of these landscapes, however, is not accidental. While overdetermined, it is nevertheless the result of *articulations*, and thus also of relations of *power* (cf. **postscript, ch. 5, ch. 6**). As Rob Wallace puts it, this is essentially a question of not “losing the (sociopolitical) forest for the (local) trees”, that is, of not

allowing “a focus on the forensic particularities of any one outbreak [...] [to] obfuscate[e] the relations of production that amplify disease spillover” (2020: 90). What emerges from the groundbreaking work of scholars like Wallace (2016, 2020), Mike Davis (2022), or Andreas Malm (2020) is something like a theory of “*neoliberal disease emergence*”, whose “underlying operative premise is that the cause of COVID-19 and other such pathogens is not found only in the object of any one infectious agent or its clinical course, but also in the field of ecosystemic relations that capital and other structural causes have pinned back to their own advantage” (Wallace 2020: 55, emphasis added). It is a question of tracing what Wallace terms the ‘circuits of capital’. Here, epidemiologies are inextricably bound up with the ‘relational geographies’ that tie the “‘neoliberal frontiers’” (Wallace 2020: 83) characterized by logging, mining, intensive plantation agriculture, wildlife hunting, and other extractivist practices to the hubs of global capitalism where the profits are reaped. Consequently, it is capital centers such as New York, London, or Hong Kong that, in this perspective, now emerge as “the world’s worst disease hotspots” (Wallace 2020: 49). As Malm explains: “The forces reaching out to forests and pulling out pathogens are nowhere as strong as in the central nodes of capital.” (2020: 55) Thus, when we tackle the issue of disease emergence, why not begin there? This will make for a very different kind of ‘outbreak narrative’ (cf. Wald 2008). It will make for ‘better stories’ – this, as Lawrence Grossberg has repeatedly emphasized, is what Cultural Studies is all about. Above all, these stories will make clear that today, “[t]here are no capital-free pathogens” (Wallace 2020: 33).

Pin 3: Pinboard

The issue of the ‘(re-)constitution’ of the object of analysis raised in pin 1 also entails methodological considerations, including questions of form. After all, such constitution is always a material-discursive, onto-epistemological affair. That is to say: Our ways of ‘doing science’ are nothing separate and secondary – methods that we choose ‘after the fact’, to study a phenomenon which is already ‘there’ – but are deeply entangled with, and co-constitutive of, this phenomenon itself. So how to carry out a ‘cultural study’ of posthuman objects then? How to do Cultural Studies in the Anthropo- or Capitalocene?

The title of the third part of this book is meant to invoke Paul du Gay et al.’s classic textbook *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, which, first published in 1997, lucidly laid out what it meant to conduct a cultural study at a different moment in time and in another theoretical conjuncture. If we put the title of part III and the one of this chapter together, we get something analogous to the title of the 1997 volume: “Doing Cultural Studies in the Capitalocene: A Montage of the Pandemic Assemblage”. The correspondences in my title are just as important as the differences.

On the one hand, it signals continuity; for not only do I generally position my project in the intellectual tradition associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, to which the 1997 book and its authors belong as well, I am also convinced of the enduring relevance of many of the book's arguments and concepts. As I hope will have been clear all the way through the preceding chapters, in no way should the overall argument I am making be confused with a call for a wholesale realignment of Cultural Studies. In this regard, the trope of the 'turn' always runs the risk of being somewhat misleading. Decisively, the nonhuman turn (here read as encompassing or at least closely affiliated with the material, affective, ontological, speculative, realist, and related turns) does *not* mean an absolute break with the cultural turn, the defining theoretical 'moment' of the book by du Gay et al. What I think it does mean, however, is the need for the work of *articulation*, and thus for an opening up, expansion, and, in part, for a revision of our received theoretical and analytical repertoire. This is what the changes to the original title of the 1997 volume indicate. As I have been arguing throughout, doing Cultural Studies in the Anthropocene also entails asking some new questions, adding new analytical foci, using novel concepts and approaches, and reworking some of the familiar ones. Among other things, as I explained in pin 1, this involves a rethinking of the object of analysis – away from the notion of a stable and clearly bounded phenomenon towards an understanding of it in terms of a dynamic and heterogeneous assemblage.

I believe that a 'story' (as in "the story of the Sony Walkman") is no longer the ideal form for such an approach to a phenomenon like the pandemic. We need to avoid what I consider to be the story's pitfalls, especially its 'neatness', coherence, unidirectional, linear chronology, the emphasis on discursivity, and its tendency to 'center' the narrator or speaking (human) subject. Here, of course, the 'deterritorializing' (Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari), and 'disseminating' (Jacques Derrida) tendencies of poststructuralism and especially deconstruction present us with helpful tools. Yet, full fragmentation postmodern-style will not do for us either. In keeping with the previous chapter's argument regarding the concept of the totality, we need to devise an approach that is able to do justice to both, unity *and* difference, stability *and* movement, wholeness *and* plurality (cf. **ch. 6**). In other words, what we require is a form that is adequate to and expressive of some 'will to totality', to the desire to 'see it whole', while at the same time, in line with our novel understanding and the notion of the 'decentered totality', sidestepping the dangers of totalization and holism, reductionism, teleology, and simple determinism. A mode of presentation/investigation that reconciles, or carves out a 'third space' characteristic of Cultural Studies beyond the opposition of the 'grand narratives' of the modern and the 'minor' ones or 'language games' of the postmodern (cf. Lyotard 1984). We need narratives that neither negate all heterogeneity and complexity in their eagle-eyed ambition to see 'everything everywhere all at once' (as the title of the 2022 film has it), nor get lost in their ant-like tracing of ever-more minuscule relations (cf. Latour 2007). Stories,

that is to say, that are neither (too) big nor (too) small, but, as James Clifford puts it, 'big enough' – "able to account for a lot, but not everything – and without guarantees of political virtue" (2013: 201). In such stories, "forces intersect but do not form a whole" (Clifford 2013: 201); they "gather up the complexities and keep the edges open" (Haraway 2016: 101).²

While the field of Cultural Studies has generally favored the story-mode, there has long been a resistance to the totalizing pull of the story form and a commitment to its pluralization, to contextuality, contingency, complexity, and the concrete. The textbook by du Gay et al. or the classic *Policing the Crisis* are certainly two cases in point. As we have seen, Cultural Studies has always rejected the notion of a "fixed, seamless totality where everything is neatly slotted into place" (Grossberg 2019: 47) and has hence "sought analytical methods that can balance this level of intellectual ambition [i.e., the will-to-totality] with a healthy scepticism regarding the possibility of ever constructing a fully exhaustive account of any given social 'totality'" (Gilbert 2019: 12). To some extent, it has always tried to acknowledge the "general impossibility" (Highmore 2020: 37) of the project of mapping the social totality. However, as Ben Highmore has observed in a recent, very instructive intervention, the 'impossibility' of this project is today further underlined and augmented by the analytic demands placed before us by the problematic of the Anthropocene, such as the necessity to think in terms of multiple, incommensurable, 'disjunctive' time-scales (Highmore's main focus), for instance human time(s) as well as planetary time(s) (cf. Chakrabarty 2021), or the obligation to take into account the roles played by a multiplicity of formerly neglected nonhuman actants (cf. **ch. 5**). These further complexifications of our analysis constitute added challenges to the form of the story. It seems increasingly doubtful that it is still able, even in its complexity-sensitive, 'minorized' Cultural Studies-shape, to do justice to the new messiness. In a similar vein, Highmore (2020), drawing on Walter Benjamin, has proposed a (re-)turn to a 'constellatory thinking' for Cultural Studies and, with this, to the form of the *montage*. Such an approach is still focused on drawing out connections, but it also more strongly acknowledges (e.g., temporal) heterogeneity, multiplicity, and irreconcilability. It is, to use Highmore's terminology, attentive to both, the conjunctural and the disjunctural. It remains attuned to the "messy, untamed coincidence" of our materials, to "fragile and ephemeral assemblages", and the narratives it creates "don't reconcile themselves into a coherent picture" (Highmore 2020: 38).

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- 2 I believe that this aspect, that is, the question of what *types of stories* are needed, offers a potential starting point for what I am convinced could be a very productive closer dialogue with the field of literary studies, especially narratology. Of particular relevance here may be the work of scholars broadly associated with the 'narrative turn', such as Peter Brooks. In this context, cf. Brooks' (2022) recent study on the 'epistemology of narrative' and the 'use and abuse' of stories in a world that is now 'overtaken by narrative'.

The montage, originally a visual rather than a narrative technique, favored by Dadaist and Surrealist artists, thus emerges as a form that may well consist of stories – though always in the plural – but that assembles these in a rather juxtapositionary, non-totalizing manner, and is therefore better able to capture/perform complexity. Incidentally, such an approach to the question of form finds support in the work of actor-network theorists such as John Law or Annemarie Mol. Though their main concern is a different one, proceeding as they do from the key assumption of the ‘de-centering of the object’ and investigating the multiple ways in which a given object is differently ‘enacted’ in diverse contexts (Law 2002; Mol 2002), importantly, this concern leads them to a very similar desire to break with both, modernism and post-modernism, that is, to evade the “choice between the homogeneities of centered storytelling on the one hand, and pluralism of fragmentation on the other” (Law 2002: 2). When, for instance, Law speaks about the false dualism of things cohering together as a consistent whole or not cohering at all and of instead wanting to balance plurality and singularity through concepts such as ‘fractional coherence’ – which is about “drawing things together without centering them” (2) – or the slogan ‘more than one, but less than many’ (2–4), then I think there are notable resonances with some of the central concerns of Cultural Studies I have discussed, particularly in the previous chapter, and with key notions such as ‘articulation’, ‘arbitrary closure’, ‘no necessary correspondence’, ‘unity-in-difference’, or ‘anti-anti-essentialism’. Law in particular directly links these matters with the question of *how we should write*, of, to use his terminology, how to perform fractional ways of knowing, how to write fractionally, and thus how to “write about multiplicity in a way that also produces the effects of singularity” or “about singularity in a way that does not efface the performances of multiplicity” (4). To this end, in place of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would call the ‘arborescent’, tree-like structure of the story, Law (2002, esp. ch. 9) proposes the metaphor of the *pinboard* to advocate for experiments with alternative modes of writing which take the form of ‘rhizomatic’ networks without the necessity of a single, unifying order. The pinboard is a montage of multiple stories (or also non-narrative, e.g. pictorial, elements), a pastiche of “[s]maller narratives” (5) or “snapshots” (Mol 2002: 53) placed alongside one another, a form of telling about and knowing things “in little patches” (Law 2002: 191). Neither a modern nor a post-modern logic, but a *nonmodern* one. It moves from one story to another, without any central coordination, and yet, though the texts are uncentered and not singular, they nevertheless have intersections, hold together, and cohere (5). But this is not the absolute, smooth, self-assured coherence of the story form, but one that emerges from narrations that are only “partially connected” (193; cf. Strathern 2004), from a montage that is only partially, and tentatively, centered. As Law points out, the pinboard mode is about “ways of knowing that are simultaneously modest and complex” (203) – certainly an ambition that resonates with the aspirations of Cultural Studies. It is an assemblage for a world of assemblages, heterogeneous, contingent, performing

an emergent order (cf. **ch. 2**) – a form more adequate than the story to a posthumanist outlook and to the complexities of the Anthropocene.

The essays in this book as a whole go some way toward performing (in) the pinboard mode. And this chapter in particular is conceived as an intimation of what such an approach could look like for a Cultural Studies-investigation of particular phenomena or conjunctures. It assembles some first ‘snapshots’ for a conjunctural analysis of the Corona pandemic, short vignettes that are not much more than initial, very rough outlines meant to indicate the direction – both analytically as well as methodologically – such a study would possibly move in. They are only sketches, intended as springboards, to be fleshed out into much more detailed analyses and complemented by multiple others. What seems clear, however, is that, in the last instance, Cultural Studies would interpret and use the pinboard’s ‘fractional coherence’ somewhat differently from actor-network theory. While certainly sympathetic to Law’s call for an “ability to live and know in tension” (cf. **ch. 1**) and thus for the capacity “to come to terms with an uncomfortable lack of completion” (11, 193), for Cultural Studies, this will never be tantamount to giving up on the “possibility of an overall vision” and to “reconcil[ing] ourselves [...] to the loss of conclusions” (5, 191). In fact, in view of at least Law’s openly political interests, this is perhaps more a difference of emphasis than of basic principle or orientation, but I think it needs to be stressed that for a posthumanist Cultural Studies as I have envisaged it here, which remains determined to constitute a ‘political project’ (Stuart Hall), conclusions continue to be central – contingent and situated ones, always open to additions and revisions, but conclusions nonetheless – and the same holds true for ‘cognitive mapping’ and overall vision – though now, as I explained in the previous chapter, in the sense of an *assembled totality*, not a naïve, expressive one (cf. **ch. 6**). They remain bound and subject to the central Cultural Studies-logic of *articulation*. Articulated conclusions, articulated totalities. Cultural Studies acknowledges that ‘nothing is connected to everything’ (Haraway), but it persists in raising the question ‘What does this have to do with everything else?’ (Hall). It uses the pinboard to gather and juxtapose snippets which retain their autonomy, their status as fragments, which are not integrated into some all-encompassing order or read in terms of an all-controlling logic. But at the same time, it also (inevitably) arranges these pieces in a particular way, by tracing their links, intersections, overlaps, by seeking associations, similarities, and patterns, that is, by inquiring *how exactly* they connect, in which specific manner they are entangled as threads of a mesh, and in this way identifies *determining structures* after all (in the new sense in which I have started using these two terms). Multiplicity and singularity.

Why not explore the possibilities afforded by the pinboard? After all, as Law reminds us, one way or another, “[t]he hands of the storyteller are never clean” (11).

Pin 4: Mask / Cultural Object

Undoubtedly, one of the key elements that have come to define the Covid years is the protective mask, including the oftentimes fierce conflicts and intense polarizations surrounding it. What would it mean to investigate such a ‘cultural object’ within the framework of posthumanist Cultural Studies? How would such an investigation link up with the general endeavor of conjunctural analysis and/as assemblage analysis?

At least since the 1990s, much academic work in Cultural Studies has tended to focus more or less exclusively on the analysis of the *meaning* of cultural artifacts. In the wake of the ‘cultural turn’, each and every phenomenon came to be considered as one more cultural ‘text’ to be deciphered, and its meaning hence more or less solely understood as a question of textual interpretation or ‘reading’. Consequently, power struggles were frequently reduced to (nothing but) struggles over signification, and, in work that justly came to be criticized as a form of ‘cultural populism’ (McGuigan 1992), this struggle was sometimes understood in an exaggeratedly optimistic way, driven by an overly affirmative view of popular culture, mainly expressed in a firm belief in the productive and resistant capacities of audiences and consumers as well as texts themselves. Yet, when, to refer to the most famous example, Paul du Gay and his colleagues inquired into the ‘meaning’ of the Sony Walkman, this was never a question of semiotics or hermeneutics only. Instead, the authors of the famous Open University textbook emphasized, the device was examined principally “as a clue to the study of modern culture in general” (du Gay et al. 1997: 11) – and, as Jeremy Gilbert observes, much Cultural Studies work like this was “motivated by a conception of ‘culture’ as a kind of proxy for the idea of the ‘social totality’, and by the desire to take a whole ensemble of social and expressive relations as an object of investigation” (2019: 12). That is, their name notwithstanding, at least tendentially, these studies were often about more than just ‘culture’. They were driven by a distinct desire to ‘see it whole’ (Toscano 2012). While *Doing Cultural Studies* is undoubtedly centrally concerned with signification and meaning – and perhaps to some extent at the expense of other important aspects – it is clearly also about much else besides (or entangled with) that. It is impelled by a curiosity to know ‘what this – the Sony Walkman – has to do with everything else’.

Pursuing this question, the book goes some way towards an important balancing act: taking the artifact seriously (to echo the phrase I used in ch. 1), while simultaneously treating it, to use Marx’s expression, as “the concentration of many determinations” (1978: 237). The cultural object under investigation is thus of interest in itself, but at the same time it constitutes an “entrance point into the context, an assumed point of articulation or a crystallization of lines of determination” (Grossberg 2010: 26). As Lawrence Grossberg argues, for Cultural Studies, the “traditional notion of an object of study is only the opening [...] through which one enters into the context that is the [actual] object of analysis” (2010: 26). In view of more recent, ‘postcritical’

approaches, I believe it is worth considering in how far it might be fruitful to somewhat temper or modify this view, so that, through a combination or hybridization of ‘critique’ and ‘repair’ (cf. **ch. 3, excursus**), not only the object itself would remain of (more) interest, but the two dimensions would actually cease to be seen as separate and – beyond any simple one-sided determinism – emerge as deeply entangled, as one. A detailed experiment with such a new approach will have to wait for another time. For now, suffice it to note that Cultural Studies generally treats cultural artifacts as points of entry (‘themes’ being another sort of entrance point; see below, pin 5) which “distill or articulate larger moments, movements, contradictions, and struggles [...] at work in the various domains of the social formation [...] and the relations among them” (Grossberg 2010: 26). The concrete object, in other words, “is understood as a phenomenon the analysis of which offers insights into the entire distribution of power relations” (Gilbert 2019: 7) in a given social formation.

The principal analytical model the Walkman book proposed to address this endeavor is the now well-known ‘*circuit of culture*’, with its five key dimensions of *representation*, *identity*, *production*, *consumption*, and *regulation*. In line with my central argument, I believe the circuit still has heuristic value today, nearly 30 years after its introduction, but should now be rethought and developed further through an encounter with the nonhuman turn. The ensuing ‘diffraction’ would first of all re-accentuate the thoroughly *relational* character of the model and emphasize anew that, in keeping with Cultural Studies’ core objective of avoiding determinism and attending to complexity, the different parts of the circuit were never conceived as separate but as parts that “continually overlap and intertwine in complex and contingent ways” (du Gay et al. 1997: 4). Thus, as I read it, the circuit always contained the seeds of, or tended towards, what I think it needs to become today: the *assemblage of culture*. This notion focuses attention on the multiple entangled dimensions of a given assemblage, on their inter- and intra-related nature and their processual dynamics, but also on the specific manner and conditions of their articulation (cf. **postsript**). Relations of power, as they thread through and shape the various components of the assemblage, here remain the central concern, but the great weight given to representation in the original circuit of culture is now, not counterbalanced or compensated, since the concentration on signs and discourses remains crucially important, but, for instance in accordance with Levi Bryant’s reconceptualization of power as ‘gravity’ (2014: 184–232), rather complemented and extended by a concern with other, including more-than-human, non-representational (Thrift 2008), forms of power, having to do with, for example, materiality and mattering, infrastructures, algorithms, or affect.

Thus, regarding our case of the Covid mask, it is certainly imperative to investigate its role as a “robustly complex as well as an empty signifier, filled with meanings in nothing short of a rapid and intense semiotic guerilla warfare” (Hay 2021: 365), how, in particular, it quickly came to function as “a signifier of political alle-

giances, scientific literacy, and civic obligation”, its donning and the refusal to do so effectively constituting something like “the confessional medium of the pandemic” (Bennett 2021: 348). But such aspects now need to be analyzed in their multi-faceted interconnections with others that exceed or are not exhausted by *representation*, such as the different performances or enactments of the object, now understood as ‘de-centered’ like the subject, in diverse contexts or sets of practices, its multiple productions in varying ‘object positions’ (cf. Law 2002; Mol 2002), or the relational dynamics of affect which, in their inter-/intraplay with situated bodies and specific socio-material settings, co-constitute meanings and subjectivities, especially within “the various arrangements and set-ups that make affect concretely effective at particular sites of social life” (Slaby/Mühlhoff 2019: 36), in other words, within what has been termed ‘affective arrangements’, that is, “array[s] of persons, things, artifacts, spaces, discourses, behaviors, expressions or other materials that coalesce into [...] coordinated formation[s] of mutual *affecting and being-affected*” (Slaby 2019: 109), orchestrated social material-discursive constellations “as part of which affect is patterned, channeled, and modulated in recurrent and repeatable ways” (Slaby et al. 2019: 5).

These arrangements contribute to the production of particular forms of *identity* or, better, subjecthood (cf. **ch. 2**), which now come into view as human-nonhuman assemblages emerging at the intersection of the different subjectivating effects not only of (dominant as well as alternative) discourses and representations relating to the mask, but also, for instance, of gestures, practices, and of the objects themselves. In the language of actor-network theory, what types of ‘interobjectivity’, what sorts of hybrid, nature-cultural ‘networks’ take shape in our entanglements with the mask? Through detailed explorations of, among other things, the maps of meaning, the forms of sensory perception, the ways of body movement, the affective orientations, and the ideas of spatial and temporal situatedness that transpire in and through these networks, the analysis could then elaborate issues such as transformations in the forms of intersubjectivity, shifting boundaries between the public and the private as well as between self and other, renegotiations of constructions of hygiene, immunity, and the body, or the reentrenchment of hegemonic forms/norms of individualism and entrepreneurial citizenship, centered around long-sedimented notions of personal choice and responsibility (cf. Bennett 2021; Hay 2021).

Discussions relating to the aspect of *consumption* would here not only study the different ways – ‘preferred’, to use Hall’s (1993) classic typology, but also ‘negotiated’, ‘alternative’, and ‘oppositional’ – in which people have ‘read’ and used the mask, but also the ‘vital materiality’ and ‘thing-power’ (Bennett 2010) of the mask itself. They would view the mask as an artifact never entirely exhausted by human usage and semiotics, as an ‘actant’ capable of producing a number of effects, both small and large. Like all the other parts of the circuit/assemblage of culture, the investigation

would thus redefine the very notion of consumption, laying emphasis on the ‘con-’ (Lat. ‘with’, ‘together’) of the word ‘consumption’ and highlighting that consuming, like all forms of action, is inevitably always an ‘acting-with’. More than that, being more mindful of the nonhuman, it would also give a fuller account of the “complex biography” of a cultural object like the mask by being more attentive to those stages of its “life-cycle” (du Gay et al. 1997: 118) that to some extent lie beyond (immediate) human grasp. Thus, inspired, among other things, by the recent fields of ‘media archaeology’ and ‘media geology’ (cf. esp. Parikka 2012, 2015), the posthumanist assemblage of culture would significantly expand the spatial as well as temporal reach of the analysis and inquire also into things like the ‘origins’ as well as the ‘afterlife’ of artifacts. How, for instance do they ‘live on’ as ‘zombie objects’ (Hertz/Parikka 2012) after they have been discarded by humans (cf. **coda**)? In which ways do they continue to ‘(inter-)act’ even after the end of direct human use or ‘consumption’? Here, issues such as the enormous amount of medical waste generated by the pandemic (estimated in 2021 at 7,200 tons every day! [Trafton 2021]), chief among it safety masks, and the hazards for ecosystems and the health of human as well as nonhuman animals entailed by vast quantities of microplastics being released into the environment (most masks are made of non-renewable petroleum-based polymers that are non-biodegradable) (cf., e.g., Dharmaraj et al. 2021; Du et al. 2022) are made part of the investigation.

Correspondingly, on the side of *production*, we now not only ask questions about the manufacturing process itself – where?, who?, how?, under what conditions?, etc. – questions that beyond any doubt remain absolutely central, but, following the dictum that, to paraphrase Jussi Parikka, ‘the materiality of artifacts starts much before artifacts become artifacts’ (2015: 37), we also probe into the nature, (deep) history, source, and circumstances of extraction or (in the case of synthetic materials) fabrication of the *stuff* from which they are made (‘natural resources’, chemicals, etc.) – in our case, especially of the oil used for the production of the polypropylene, the basic material of most protective masks, of the metal used for nose strips, the cotton or other types of fabric, and the paper pulp for the cardboard packaging. In addition, further factors such as the machinery used for manufacture, its origins, raw materials, etc., the precise ‘articulation’ of these machines and the human workers, the materiality of the laborers’ bodies and the processes of their ‘reproduction’, and related aspects come into view as well. In this way, the new approach effectively challenges anthropocentric conceptions of production and consumption, which instead emerge as complex and dynamic assemblages of manifold relations which all the while shuffle a multiplicity of human and more-than-human existents.

Finally, regarding *regulation* – something like the orphan of the original 1997 textbook – the key questions continue to be *who* regulates? (or aspires to regulate or to influence regulation) (the government, pressure groups, lobbies, minorities, etc.), *what* is being regulated? (aspects relating to production, consumption/usage, rep-

resentation, etc.), *how* is it being regulated? (through law or more ‘informal’ means such as cultural norms, by means of consent and/or coercion through repressive apparatuses, etc.), and *what cultural maps of meaning* infuse such forms of regulation? (ideologies and discourses of the state, society and the individual, democracy, freedom, etc.). The ‘how’ in particular here explicitly raises issues of power and control, which, as was argued before (cf. **ch. 2**), now include previously neglected or marginalized concerns such as the concrete actor-networks through which regulation is maintained, infrastructural ‘extrastatecraft’ (Easterling 2016), etc. But regulation also directly refers us to the domain of politics in the conventional sense, that is, to “the general field of public contestation between identifiable and opposing sets of ideas about how social relationships should be ordered” (Gilbert 2008: 8). Here, the mask as biopolitical technology – for we are clearly in the domain of the biopolitical management and regulation of life here – emerged as a focal point or articulation for various social antagonisms. These often revolved around conflicts over notions of personal choice and individual sovereignty, which would appear as intimately bound up with the neoliberal privatization of risk and responsabilization of the individual of the last decades (cf. Bennett 2021). What also transpired in this context, especially (though not exclusively) in Germany, was the persistence of what – in analogy to notions such as ‘Thatcherism’ – some scholars have termed ‘*Merkelism*’: a particular mode of crisis management marked by a technocratic and pragmatist, even opportunistic, approach, a decided orientation towards consensus, and an unwavering commitment to neoliberalism and the interests of capital (Ege/Gallas 2019; Werner 2018). During the pandemic, the fundamentally de-politicizing tendencies of this political strategy emerged most clearly in the central role accorded to ‘experts’ and ‘facts’. While the importance of scientific research for political decision-making in contexts like these is beyond question, it was nevertheless striking how *Merkelism* mobilized science to effectively *dispense with* politics insofar as it ignored the ‘worldly’, ‘situated’, and as such inevitably political nature of scientific practice, with all knowledge consequently being contingent, partial, and provisional, and, by simply ‘following the facts’, once again confined politics within the bounds of functionalist reason and limited it to administration and the preservation of the status quo (cf. Di Cesare 2021: 50–55; Klement 2020). What was thus largely prevented (not least also by the bypassing of parliament) were open and broad, properly *democratic* deliberations, not only about the science and the actual process of active *decision-making* – what Donatella Di Cesare refers to as “the torment of decision, the burden of responsibility”, which, she points out, is “the cornerstone of politics” (2021: 55) – but also about more fundamental, ‘structural’ issues such as the state and nature of the healthcare system or, indeed, questions relating to ‘how we want to live’ as a society. Once again, in other words, *Merkelism* emerged as an effective preventer of ‘antagonism’ and thus as a rigorously ‘post-political’ mode of politics – and, all crises and apparent signs of ‘exhaustion’ (Ege/Gallas 2019) notwithstanding, one

that, in Germany as elsewhere, continues well after the departure from the political sphere of Angela Merkel herself (cf. Werner 2021; see also below, pin 6).

Thus, the circuit of culture, reworked into a posthumanist assemblage of culture, remains a valuable tool for the study of individual artifacts as well as a helpful starting point for the analysis of a given conjuncture, since the object in question is always considered ‘conjuncturally’ – as an articulation point of many lines of determination and hence as offering an entry into the complex web of power relations that is a conjuncture.

Pin 5: Moral Panic / Theme

Besides cultural artifacts, another way to ‘enter’ a conjuncture by interweaving the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the general, is through the analysis of what Moritz Ege and Alexander Gallas have termed ‘*themes*’. These are understood as key processes or phenomena “around which contradictions coalesce that characterise a distinct conjuncture” (Ege/Gallas 2019: 92). Such themes – like ‘mugging’ in *Policing the Crisis* or the so-called European ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 in Ege’s and Gallas’ investigation – allow the analyst to access a specific, broader ‘object of analysis’ – the general crisis of hegemony of the British social formation in the former case, the ‘exhaustion of Merkelism’ in the latter – and thus to begin to unlock the conjuncture, in which the object is central, but whose complexity is nevertheless not exhausted by it (Ege/Gallas 2019: 92).

I would propose that with regards to the present moment, one fruitful theme that can be identified are the ‘anti-Corona’ protests, that is, the oftentimes fierce demonstrations against the political responses to the Covid-19 pandemic (compulsory mask-wearing and self-testing, lockdowns, vaccination campaigns, etc.). Especially in the years 2020 and 2021, these protests took place in countries across the world, often attracted large numbers of people, from various backgrounds, and repeatedly assumed hostile and aggressive, sometimes violent, form. Certainly, an analysis of the protests needs to proceed in a contextualizing manner, taking into account the respective locally (nationally/culturally) and temporally specific conditions and articulations. Although there is no room for a fully-fledged discussion here, I nevertheless want to suggest that in the context of the ‘West’ or ‘Global North’, these protests, especially in their concern with morality and the line between the permissible and the unacceptable, and in their intense, frequently near-hysterical animosity against ‘the elites’, often marked by “a certain religious fervour” (McRobbie/Thornton 1995: 567), can productively be read through the heuristic prism of *moral panic theory*. This analytic approach first emerged in the work of sociologists such as Jock Young and Stanley Cohen in the early 1970s and has over time differentiated into various strands. Within the field of Cultural Studies, in which it has a rich history (partic-

ularly in relation to the study of subcultures), moral panics – that is, the relatively uninhibited and spontaneous, ‘maverick’ forms of ‘collective behavior’ (Goode/Ben-Yehuda 2009: 130) that react against perceived threats to the principal value system and social fabric of a given society – are mainly understood as a key form in which a more deep-seated historical crisis appears and is experienced by social actors (Hall et al. 1978: 221). It is, as the authors of *Policing the Crisis* put it, a “surface manifestation[n]” of such crisis, a “displacement of a conjunctural crisis into [a] popular form” (Hall et al. 1978: 221). As I will explain in more detail in a moment, it seems to me that this is a potentially helpful way to begin an investigation of the issue of the anti-Corona protests.

At the same time, such an investigation would arguably also need to entail a number of modifications and updates of the approach itself. Such a process of revision could take its cue from Angela McRobbie’s and Sarah Thornton’s 1995 essay “Rethinking ‘Moral Panic’ for Multi-Mediated Social Worlds”, which, though 30 years old by now, remains an important reference point for the debate. As I see it, the three main aspects discussed by McRobbie and Thornton – a reconsideration of moral panic theory’s understanding of ‘society’, the ‘media’, and the relationship between reality and representation – continue to be key issues today. Indeed, it would seem as if a central development in the decades that have passed since the publication of their article was an intensification of the processes of complexification they described. Above all, McRobbie and Thornton take issue with moral panic theory’s monolithic and totalizing conception of society and the mass media as well as moral panics and argue for the need to recognize that “each of the categories described by moral panics theorists has undergone a process of fissure” and that the more or less stable and clear-cut set of relations these theorists traditionally focused on – between the media, agents of social control, moral entrepreneurs, and scapegoats or ‘folk devils’ – has hence “given way to a much more complicated and fragmented set of connections” (1995: 567). In view of these, they argue, it is now necessary to take into account the “diversification of forms of media and the sophisticated restructuring of various categories of audience” and “to acknowledge the perspectives and articulations of different sectors of society” and “the plurality and divergences of opinion that characterize today’s (and probably yesterday’s) ‘moral panics’” (1995: 573, 567, 569). Observations such as these can certainly be said to anticipate what we may perhaps call, taking up Habermas’ (1989) well-known phrase from the 1980s, the ‘new obscurity’ (*die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*) of the current socio-cultural-political landscape, in other words, the fact that this landscape presents a much more muddled and messy picture than, say, in the 1970s or 80s, as political factions have fragmented and multiplied, and the ideological fronts between camps have become blurred and shifting, so that time-honored categories and distinctions such as ‘left’ and ‘right’, while certainly not irrelevant, have undoubtedly lost some of their power to map and explain the social field. This is particularly evident in the case of the demonstra-

tions against the Corona health mandates, where the groups of protestors were frequently marked by irritating coalitions and ideological interferences or, as Diedrich Diederichsen (2015) has it, by unprecedented ‘post-ideological cross-fronts’ (cf. also Amlinger/Nachtwey 2025). Relatedly, when McRobbie and Thornton criticize the undertheorized role of the audience in the traditional models of moral panic, in which it generally “played a minor role” and was essentially reduced to “the space of consensus”, and make the case that “a new model need embrace the complex realm of reception”, including “the disparate perspectives of different mass, niche and micro-media” and thus “the discovery and effective representation of niches of opinion and identity” (1995: 572, 568), their deliberations arguably already point in the direction of what I would claim is the urgent contemporary requirement to rethink moral panics in the age of digitalization, of ‘convergence culture’ and ‘participatory culture’ (cf. Jenkins 2006), and of a ‘new structural transformation of the public sphere’ (Habermas 2023), especially by exploring the now central role of the social media in the ‘signification spirals’ described by Hall and his colleagues, that is, the processes of amplifying the threat of social events through particular mechanisms of representation such as ‘convergence’ or ‘thresholds’ (Hall et al. 1978: 223–27). While moral panic scholarship long neglected these important developments, recent work has begun to remedy this omission and to explore the ways in which digital technologies and cultures affect the processes in which moral panics take place (cf., e.g., Falkof 2020; Hier 2018; Ingraham/Reeves 2016; Walsh 2020). As Nicky Falkof, for one, observes in an important contribution: “Claims-making has changed; moral entrepreneurship is no longer restricted to certain types of people; elite mediation is no longer a necessary component of the panic; and moral panics can spread faster and more widely than ever before.” (2020: 228)

In the context of such ‘new obscurity’ and a fragmented, re-arranging public sphere, the old assumption of a more or less straight-forward relation (binary, asymmetrical, unidirectional) between the ‘control culture’ on the one hand and unruly sub- or countercultures on the other no longer seems viable. What is particularly important to acknowledge is the fact that, as (social) media ‘prosumers’, a plurality of actors are now able to ‘make their voices heard’ and to influence or contest particular discourses, narratives, and regimes of representation, so that moral panics are today a much more volatile and embattled affair, to the extent that, in analogy to Cultural Studies’ well-known phrase about hegemony, one is almost tempted to speak of a ‘struggle for/over panic’. Importantly, this also means that the stoking of moral panics is no longer the prerogative of ‘the authorities’ alone. As McRobbie and Thornton already point out, “moral panics [...] are not necessarily hegemonic” (1995: 569). Instead, “niche and micro-media can [...] attempt to incite their own moral panics” (McRobbie/Thornton 1995: 568). In particular, as Chris Ingraham and Joshua Reeves note, “mobile and social media [have] dealt an important blow to the elite mass media’s monopoly over panic production” (2016: 459). Thus, in the case of the

anti-Corona movement, we can identify the emergence of a complex ecology of actants, spinning a multi-pronged web of communication, which fueled what we may call ‘a moral panic *from below*’. Here, the classical elements and relations of the traditional moral panic model are almost upended: Rather than “the top-down, hegemonically driven methods of social control outlined by Hall et al. (1978), in which primary definers collaborated with the mass media to delineate the object of the panic and communicate this information to the public” (Falkof 2020: 228), what we had in this case was a “participatory, crowd-sourced pani[c]” (Walsh 2020: 846), in which what could formerly still be conceived as the ‘audience’ transpired not as a passive ‘space of consensus’ but as the active motor of the panic, and in which the technomanagerial ‘political class’ (cf. Gilbert/Williams 2022: 6f, *passim*), often dubbed ‘the elite’, itself came to play something like the role of the folk devil³. Analogous to my overall argument, it would thus seem that the analysis of moral panics, too, could profit from a novel heuristic, a new ‘way of seeing’ better able to capture the unstable and shifting dynamics of the contemporary socio-cultural field. Again, a topological instead of a topographical vocabulary will be helpful here. Once again, let us heed Cultural Studies’ dictum of ‘no necessary correspondence’, locating ourselves in its characteristic ‘third space’ (cf. **ch. 6**), and hence move beyond both, the notion of an essentially static socius of old, comprising more or less settled positions, fixed identities, and stable relations (mostly binary), but also beyond those alternative imaginaries that conceive the social landscape and its relations as fundamentally liquid, uncentered, and rhizomatic. Instead, proceeding from the cultural logic of articulation, perhaps a terminology such as the one developed by Arjun Appadurai, who, in his influential investigations of the cultural dimensions of globalization, speaks of a number of different ‘flows’ and ‘-scapes’ (1996, esp. 27–47), can offer a helpful starting point, allowing us to move the study of moral panics towards a mode of analysis revolving around ‘stabilizations’ (rather than stability), ‘positionalities’ (rather than positions), ‘identiscapes’ and ‘affectscapes’ (rather than identities and [affective] communities), ‘mediascapes’ (rather than sharp boundaries between types of media, producers and consumers, etc.), ‘ideoscapes’ (rather than ideologies only), and related notions, all understood as tenuous and only ever temporary.

3 As Falkof aptly points out, “the relation between folk devils and moral panics is not always clear-cut”; the folk devil can be difficult to pin down, they may be imaginary or even non-existent, or conditions, episodes, issues, or acts rather than actors can serve their purpose (2020: 229). The latter was arguably the case with the measures taken to combat the coronavirus – nevertheless, the notion of a diffuse ‘elite’, consisting of politicians, medical ‘experts’, journalists of the ‘mainstream’ media, managers of cultural institutions, etc., simultaneously often came to play the role of a more concrete folk devil. Again, also regarding the concept of the folk devil, it would seem that moral panic theory is in need of a more flexible and complex framework, capable of capturing a plurality of figurations, different layers, contexts, functions, and so forth.

As I see it, a re-accentuation of the key logic of articulation is likewise central for tackling the third aspect of moral panic theory that requires revision identified by McRobbie and Thornton. The two scholars criticize analysts of moral panics for their “call for an account which tells how life actually is, and which deals with the real issues rather than the spectacular and exaggerated ones” and point out that “[t]hese versions of ‘reality’ would also be impregnated with the mark of media imagery rather than somehow pure and untouched by the all-pervasive traces of contemporary communications” (1995: 570f). This critique resonates with others that have been made over the years, for instance regarding moral panic theory’s (at least implied) assumption of the disproportionality of the social reaction under investigation. After all, to call something a ‘panic’ is usually to suggest that the concern and reactive behavior are exaggerated, inappropriate, even irrational, not warranted by a realistic, sober assessment. Even if only implicitly, the approach thus invokes a true and objective reality, one to which the analyst has access, but not the participants of the panic. As formulations such as Hall’s famous assertion that “[r]ace is [...] the modality in which class is ‘lived’” (1980: 341) or the claim made in *Policing the Crisis* that panics such as the one about mugging effectively constituted a “political and ideological distortion”, a series of “false ‘resolutions’” (1978: 322), indicate – or at least certain readings of such phrases⁴ – there is, in the wake of the Althusserian reconceptualization of ideology infusing many of these statements, a trace of the idea of ‘false consciousness’ still distinctly at work in this type of analysis. In this vein, Philip Jenkins has drawn attention to what he sees as the “inherent ideological bias” of the approach and to the “ideological vested interest in debunking or exposing” of most of its practitioners, and pointed out that “moral panic theory was always founded on a set of implicit value judgments, which assumed that the subject of analysis must, by definition, be somehow bogus or exaggerated” (2009: 36). Yet, as we well know, the notion of an objective truth, accounting for the world ‘as it really is’, is untenable. Even empirical ‘evidence’ and ‘pure’ data – as, for instance, the controversy around Hall et al.’s use of statistics in *Policing the Crisis* already illustrates (cf., e.g., Waddington 1986) – are, we have long come to understand, far less evidential and pure than one may assume.

Where to, then, with moral panic analysis? I believe that it is possible to preserve what I see as the strengths of the approach while at the same time avoiding those as-

4 As I will explain shortly, especially in relation to *Policing the Crisis*, I opt for a different reading. Regarding the first claim mentioned here, I would, against interpretations that understand this statement as pointing to the *essential* and *determining* role of the economic (and material) as against the ‘merely’ cultural (and discursive), (re-)read it as pointing to the inextricable entanglement of the former and the latter. That is to say, “‘race’ enters not only in the determination of how class is ‘lived’, ‘experienced’ or ‘fought through’, but in how ‘class’ itself is constituted” (Harris/James 1993: 4), and both must be construed as material-discursive.

pects which appear rather problematic. It seems to me that moral panic theory remains valuable as a highly useful approach for the study of episodes which contain a strong moral dimension – “the thing that is feared poses a threat to an established order or a group identity that is seen as ‘good’” (Falkof 2020: 234f) – and the element of panic. However, the latter need not immediately be taken to imply illegitimate exaggeration and irrational hysteria, but rather, more neutrally, that “the thing that is feared is amplified via an affect-driven collective response that increases in intensity as it spreads” (Falkof 2020: 235). As I see it, it is first of all the dynamics, mechanisms, and possible reasons of this amplification that are the main concern of the analyst, not the degree of appropriateness of the response itself. In an important early contribution to these debates, also referred to by McRobbie and Thornton, Simon Watney argued:

Moral panic theory is always obliged in the final instance to refer and contrast ‘representation’ to the arbitration of ‘the real’, and is hence unable to develop a full theory concerning the operations of ideology within all representational systems. Moral panics seem to appear and disappear, as if representation were not the site of *permanent* ideological struggle over the meaning of signs. (1987: 41f)

Proceeding from this latter key point, McRobbie and Thornton, citing Watney, suggest that a moral panic “is best seen as a local intensification or ‘the site of the current front line’ rather than a sudden, unpleasant and unanticipated development” (1995: 564). I believe that this take on moral panics also allows us to retain what I consider to be the approach’s most productive analytic move, namely the relation of such episodes to other, often ‘larger’, issues, all the while remaining true to our post-false consciousness, non-condescending, more ‘reparatively’ (cf. **ch. 3, excursus**) oriented understanding of ‘panic’. In this context, moral panic theory could certainly profit from a closer dialogue not only with psychoanalysis but also affect theory. Falkof, for instance, has suggested that, rather than as overreactions, it is more useful to think of moral panics in terms of *displacements*, in the sense that “[s]eemingly overblown or hysterical fears can stand in for realities that are less lurid and fantastic but may feel as though they pose a greater risk to society” (2020: 234). In fact, though, the logic of displacement already appears in early moral panic work such as *Policing the Crisis*, in which, following Althusser’s post-Lacanian conception of ideology, ideological forms of experience such as moral panics are understood along the lines of “an inflection or misrepresentation of real relations, a displacement of the class struggle” (Hall et al. 1978: 322). However, as is evident here, the concept of ‘displacement’ ultimately still remains tied to false consciousness (and, in this case, a residual economic determinism). Yet, I believe that if we emphasize the notion of ‘inflection’ rather than that of ‘misrepresentation’, an alternative reading opens up. In this reconceptualization, moral panics become a question not so much of displace-

ment, but of *articulation*. The socius is an ever-dynamic force-field of shifting (power) relations, which, in particular conjunctures, rearrange so as to produce more and heightened forms of tension and conflict, along with affective landscapes and structures of feeling that can include emotions such as widespread anxiety, strain, or fear, so that the given moment may come to be felt and/or coded (or articulated) as ‘crisis’. Rather than from manipulation or ‘misrecognition’, a moral panic emerges out of an articulation of such affective-material-semiotic dynamics to specific concrete phenomena. They are a mode of articulation, not a symptom. Like the social, the subject and subjectivity are *assemblages*, territorialized and deterritorialized through constant processes of dis/articulation. As Jasbir Puar explains in her critique of identitarian paradigms and her critical engagement with the heuristic of ‘intersectionality’, the concept of the ‘assemblage’, read through the lens of the ‘affective turn’, allows us to properly think the “affective ideation of identity”, where, given the ontological primacy of processuality, “position is but one derivative of systems in constant motion” (2007: 215). It allows us “to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities”, to “interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body” (Puar 2007: 215, 212). I would argue that these should become a central element of the study of moral panics. If subjectivities, as assemblages, are “collections of multiplicities”, “series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks” (Puar 2007: 211), then moral panics can be understood as reorganizations of precisely these networks, as processes of reassembling that take place through the forging of new linkages. They constitute, as Hall and his colleagues argued, an intervention into ongoing struggles over hegemony, but struggles that are now taken to encompass a ‘politics of affect’ and a ‘politics of matter’ (Papadopoulos 2014, 2018), involving conflict over the ‘partition of the sensible’ (Rancière 1999) and the ‘worlding’ of reality itself (cf. **postsript**).

I believe that rethought along these lines, as a rearticulation/*reagencement*, a moment of intensification and condensation of ongoing dynamics and struggles, moral panic can still, or once again, offer a useful heuristic framework, one that, as part of the endeavor of conjunctural analysis, allows us to investigate what we have termed a ‘theme’ in terms of a point of entry into what was called the ‘object of analysis’. In our case, the phenomenon of the anti-Corona protests, what would such an investigation look like? What could the larger object of analysis be? In this short vignette, I will once again only be able to sketch the direction in which the analysis may move.

Certainly, the protests that took place in Germany and elsewhere in 2020/21 qualify as a ‘moral panic’, given that they contained a deep moral as well as a strong affective element: They were marked by intense and quasi-viral feelings of “anxiety, worry, concern and alarm”, a “sense of urgency, the feeling that there is a risk to one’s community and way of life and that something must be done about it before it has disastrous consequences”, and these feelings were not just about “fears for the

safety of the self, the family or the immediate community”, but about “a perceived threat to a system of values that is understood as being intrinsic to the functioning of society”, a threat to “*the polis as a whole*” (Falkof 2020: 231, 230). And here, too, the characteristic representational maneuvers described by Cohen regarding the objects of the moral panic could be observed:

They are *new* (lying dormant perhaps, but hard to recognize; deceptively ordinary and routine, but invisibly creeping up the moral horizon) – but also *old* (camouflaged versions of traditional and well-known evils). They are damaging in *themselves* – but also merely *warning signs* of the real, much deeper and more prevalent condition. They are *transparent* (anyone can see what’s happening) – but also *opaque*: accredited experts must explain the perils hidden behind the superficially harmless [...]. (2011: viif)

Like most moral panics of the past, the one about the Corona measures was essentially ‘conservative’ in nature: It was marked by an affirmative relation to existing structures of power and privilege (Daub 2022: 33), which hence were to be preserved. There was a sustained ground tone of fear about an impending loss of control – to red-green elites, globalists, Jews, and others – and a persistent sense that what was happening in Germany and elsewhere was ‘no longer normal’. In my view, these aspects are absolutely central. In fact, I would argue that – though they should certainly not simply be conflated – at this point, this specific moral panic resonates and links up with several others that have emerged in the recent past, for instance regarding migration (condensed in relation to the 2015 ‘summer of migration’ and the events at Cologne Cathedral during New Year’s Eve in the same year [cf. Ege/Gallas 2019]), ‘gender mania’ (*Genderwahn*, e.g. in connection with the ‘gendering’ of the German language), ‘wokeness’ and ‘cancel culture’, or the rise of a green ‘climate dictatorship’. It seems to me that feelings of an increasing loss of control and of an expanding erosion of normality are at the heart of all of these. Here, I believe these panics articulate and condense what are in fact much broader contemporary ideo-affectsapes. “Take back control”, the Brexiteers proclaimed. “Deutschland. Aber normal.”, demanded the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland. In the academy, too, talk of ‘post-normal times’ (Sardar 2019) is doing the rounds, and a left-leaning scholar like Alex Demirovič (2020) speaks of several recent ‘denormalization crises’ while another, William Davies (2021), discusses what he describes as the collapse of liberalism in Britain and elsewhere under the title *This Is Not Normal*. It would appear as if the sense of an ‘end of normality’ is becoming a diagnosis and (structure of) feeling widely shared across different social milieus and politi-

cal camps. And clearly, the very normality at stake here – its meaning and limits, whether it is to be defended or not, etc. – is a site of intense contestation.⁵

Of course, as Stephan Lessenich (2022)⁶, whose work is an indispensable resource in this context, emphasizes, normality is socially produced, the effect of ongoing processes of *normalization* – as such, it is inherently political. And it is precisely this manufacture of normality that, in a time experienced by many in the so-called ‘Global North’ as one of chronic crisis, has now stalled. The established ‘order of normality’ is in decline and we stand at the “beginning of a new era of normality politics” (*Beginn der neuen normalitätspolitischen Zeitrechnung*; Lessenich 2022: 39). In this context, the Corona protests, along with other moral panics of recent years, effectively represent something like “nervous convulsions” of a “society on the brink of postnormality” (Lessenich 2022: 125). They are manifestations of a tenacious “will to normality” and an expression of a powerful “anti-denormalizing affect” (Lessenich 2022: 12, 126). In their efforts to describe such and related movements, including what is frequently characterized as a new populism of the right, scholars have recently returned to the concept of ‘ressentiment’ (cf., e.g., Amlinger/Nachtwey 2025, esp. 104–06; Lessenich 2022: 126–28; Vogl 2022). While, on the one hand, following the influential work of thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche or Max Scheler, the central elements of this affect – “negating self-affirmation, deferred impulse to act, envy of life, tendency to delegate, and addiction to apportioning blame” (Vogl 2022: 118) – have often been seen as structurally connected with modern capitalism per se – intimately related to the economic imperative to valorize, compare, and compete, and fulfilling an essentially system-stabilizing function by deflecting anger from the market and directing it towards scapegoats – they have, on the other hand, in the past also repeatedly been analyzed in a more ‘conjunctural’ manner. For an investigation of the – highly volatile – affective landscapes of the current conjuncture, the concept of ‘ressentiment’ is therefore doubtlessly very productive. Yet, it is critical not to diagnose such essentially ‘regressive’ reactions to the crisis of normality for the political ‘extremes’ alone.⁷ Instead, it has to be emphasized that regressive impulses are at work in much present-day government action and the attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles of social majorities as well, so that we must in fact acknowledge a profound complicity between the ‘radical and dangerous margins’ and the – especially in Germany quasi-mythical (Lessenich 2022: 35–37) – ‘moderate’ middle-class

5 Following Grossberg’s scheme, we could say that the issue of normality constitutes a ‘problematic’. A problematic is a “conceptual knot [...] that animates particular struggles”; they “operate across and are dispersed among the sites of the war of positions” (Grossberg 2019: 52).

6 In all the following quotations from Lessenich’s study, the translations are mine.

7 And indeed, as Ingolfur Blühdorn (2024) has argued in an important recent intervention, the very attribute of ‘regressive’ itself should not go unproblematicized (see the discussion below).

'center'. As Ingolfur Blühdorn – whose writings deserve much attention in this context as they constantly challenge us to critically question our own assumptions and narratives (esp. 2000, 2013, 2024; Blühdorn et al. 2020) – observes, “the suspicion arises that the *immoral* and *de-civilized* mob is perhaps taking on a dirty job that the cultivated bourgeoisie rejects out of hand, but which is nevertheless indispensable to them”⁸ (2020: 18, my trans.).

In my reading, the *loss of normality* which calls forth “the regressive syndrome” (Lessenich 2022: 124f) is the (/an) ‘object of analysis’ we can ‘enter’ through the discussion of our ‘theme’ of the Corona protests. Whereas, in their bestselling study *Triggerpunkte*, Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux, and Linus Westheuser identify violations of normality as only one among four key contemporary ‘trigger points’ (2023: 253–60), it seems to me that the role of today’s ‘struggles over normality’ goes well beyond this and that, as something like a superordinate ‘nodal point’ articulating a number of different affects, discourses, ideologies, and struggles, they effectively constitute one crucial way of beginning the work of mapping the current conjuncture (though emphatically not in the sense of another master key that allows us to unlock more or less everything). ‘The normal’ is one of the central battlefields of our time. A crucial category for understanding the often regressive attempts to defend normality is that of *loss*. As Andreas Reckwitz, who has taken some first steps in such a direction, has pointed out, we are in need of a ‘sociology of loss’.⁹ While, as in much of his writing, the level of abstraction on which Reckwitz works is mostly a significantly higher one than that of the conjuncture, his thought nevertheless constitutes a very helpful resource. In particular, I am here thinking of his characterization of ‘late modernity’ in terms of a combination of intensified ‘loss sensitization’ as well as ‘loss escalation’, his identification of a social ‘dynamic of loss’, which, importantly, entails conflicts about which losses are recognized, considered legitimate, and get politically addressed (e.g., through restitution or reversal), his description of the usually negative ‘affects of loss’, including sorrow, anger, fear (including fear of loss itself), or resentment, and the argument that the painful experience of loss is almost always also a loss of identity, as well as his observation that there is a range of different ‘practices of loss’ or socio-cultural ways of ‘doing loss’, including nostalgia and the politicization of loss (Reckwitz 2021a, 2022). Reckwitz also emphasizes the range of what can be lost, and it would seem that just such a plurality of different losses is at stake in the current struggles over normality. Trying to preserve ‘what’s normal’ very often means trying to hold on to things that are slipping away – *economic* losses;

8 The original reads as follows: “Aber der Verdacht drängt sich auf, dass der *unmoralische* und *entzivilisierte* Pöbel hier vielleicht eine dreckige Arbeit übernimmt, die das gepflegte Bürgertum zwar weit von sich weist, die ihm aber doch unverzichtbar ist.”

9 More recently (after this chapter had already been completed), Reckwitz (2024) significantly expanded his initial reflections into a full monograph.

political losses, including forms of hegemony, not least in a geopolitical sense; *social* losses, involving status, recognition, privilege, and power; and, just as important, *cultural* losses, having to do with established narratives and maps of meaning, received modes of perception, interpretation, and experience, as well as with feelings of order, stability, and control, and with traditional horizons of expectation, especially regarding the future. In that sense, many of today's political movements can (also) be seen as movements motivated by loss (Reckwitz 2022: 18). In a similar vein, John Clarke has even suggested that "[t]his 'sense of loss' might be what Williams once called the 'structure of feeling' of the present moment" (2019: 139).

Crucially, there is something 'hauntological' to the 'normalcy revolt' that reacts against all these different losses. The regressive responses are also driven by a hauntedness of the normal itself, by a feeling that the self-evident may not be entirely self-evident after all. As Reckwitz (2021b) has observed, the present is certainly a moment of profound disillusionment for the 'Global North', in the sense of both, a moment of pessimism and of an end of illusions. And this wearing away of illusions concerns normality itself, because what has today become ever harder to ignore is that 'Western' normalcy in virtually all of its dimensions – its freedom, its values, its prosperity, its ways of life – was always based on, and could only ever be maintained through, a variety of forms of oppression, exploitation, and an externalization of costs (social, ecological, economic). It was at all times upheld at the expense of others (Lessenich 2019) – be it groups of people that are racialized or gendered as different from the white, male, cis, heterosexual norm, migrants and 'guest workers', the 'Global South', the more-than-human world (climate, soils, animals, plants, etc.), or, indeed, future generations (cf. **ch. 5**). And this fact of living from the work and resources of others and from offloading damage onto others, this truth that we "do 'well' or are better-off *because* others do 'badly' or are worse-off" (Lessenich 2019: 12), could – the countless critiques articulated within the 'Global South' and various academic discourses notwithstanding – for long more or less successfully be kept at bay by a 'veil of deliberate ignorance' (Lessenich 2019: 43–53) in which 'we' have shrouded ourselves. Now, however, this veil has been torn in many places. And this is so because increasingly, as there are "no longer any 'internal' or 'external' social relationships, if indeed they ever existed", but only "asymmetrical internal *global* relationships" (Lessenich 2019: 36), the consequences of 'Western' normality are finally coming home – whether in the form of the growth of economic problems and the increasing frequency of economic crises, the mounting struggles for social participation (which are always struggles over symbolic *and* material resources – the common separation is artificial), greater migratory movements, or accelerating climate change and loss of biodiversity. It is a veritable return of the repressed. The recognition now dawns on more and more that there was absolutely nothing 'normal' about our normalcy. "Welcome to the desert of the real." (*The Matrix*)

Pin 6: Conjuncture / Epoch

Many in the ‘West’, used to understanding their privileges as a given (or, more precisely, not seeing them *as privileges* to begin with – cf. Peggy McIntosh’s well-known metaphor of the ‘invisible knapsack’), experience the profound shift outlined in pin 5 as a serious insult, an imposition, an attack on their very identity (which of course it is). This, I have argued, is a central factor in what I have called today’s struggles over normality. As we have seen, the erosion of normalcy is an overdetermined process, tied up with developments in a number of different domains (cultural, economic, political, social, ecological, etc.), and the struggles, too, are hence multiple. It is not least because of this that it constitutes a highly illuminating ‘object of analysis’ for unpacking the current conjuncture. Once again using the notion of the assemblage or network, I suggest we consider normality as something like a ‘nodal point’ which ‘articulates’ a plurality of processes – and importantly, I would argue that these interlinked processes are of varying scope or are located on, or can be looked at in terms of, different levels of abstraction. In our case, it seems to me that we are faced with developments which are best described as ‘conjunctural’, but also with others which appear to be rather ‘epochal’ in character (cf. Grossberg 2019). Yet, I would contend that what they all have in common is that they mark the present moment as an essentially liminal or transitional one, as what, adopting Gramsci’s term, is perhaps best characterized as an ‘interregnum’, in which “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (Gramsci 1971: 276). Here, I believe that the sensitivity for complexity inherent to the method of conjunctural analysis, its attention to what may be called the ‘cultural logic of hybridity’ (Reckwitz 2006: 19) and to the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’ (Ernst Bloch), compel us to skepticism vis-à-vis hasty periodizations and to look closer. In the face of the Corona pandemic, many commentators advanced more or less ‘grand’ pronouncements such as the onset of the ‘Coronascene’ (Anderson 2020)¹⁰ or ‘Virocene’ (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2020), of an “epic moment in world history” (Miller 2021: 1), or a “caesura in the time of our species on this planet” (Mitchell 2021: 98). Meanwhile, scholars explicitly working with conjunctural analysis have spoken of the unfolding of a ‘pandemic conjuncture’ (Means/Slater 2021; Probyn 2021: 567) and of an ‘epochal’ or ‘organic crisis’ pointing to the “untenability of the current global order” (Ang 2021: 599). “This”, Jeremy Gilbert and Alex Williams declare, “is the global crisis of neoliberalism” (2022: vii). In their eyes, “[w]e are in a moment of grand realignment, where different cycles of world history have clicked together to produce a rare instant where more or less anything could be possible.” (2022: vii)

10 However, while he uses the term ‘Coronascene’, it should be noted that Anderson is actually skeptical of such large-scale pronouncements.

Obviously, the mapping of the current conjuncture requires a lot of precise, detailed, contextualizing, trans-/postdisciplinary, and collective work. I believe that, on the whole, Gilbert's and Williams' intervention, for one, is an incredibly valuable contribution to this effort. Yet, to make just one general observation, I think that, perhaps just as much as the rupture, the change, and the novelty, what needs to be brought out more strongly are the continuities, the persistence of the established, and the radical openness of the current situation. For is not one of the key characteristics of our interregnum its zombie-like side (cf. **codā**), that is, the refusal of the old to really die? It is without doubt true that on both, the level of the conjuncture and of the epoch (to adopt this heuristic distinction for the time being), profound changes are taking place. Surely, for instance, since around the time of the financial crisis of 2007/08, and even more so during the last ten years, a certain neoliberal consensus, formed in the 1980s and consolidated in the 'long 1990s', which had already for long been upheld through more passive and disaffected rather than active modes of consent, became seriously fractured. In particular, the so-called 'political class', which since the 80s played a central part in the maintenance of this consensus by establishing a centrist, technocratic mode of politics, has, especially with the rise of a new 'authoritarian populism' (Stuart Hall) from the right, increasingly lost control of the situation. Gilbert and Williams (2022), Nancy Fraser (2019), and others have worked this out excellently. Yet, whether this erosion of consent automatically means a crisis of neoliberal hegemony, or even a crisis of capitalism, as these and other analysts suggest¹¹, is, in my view, an open question. Different alternatives to the hitherto dominant constellation of 'progressive neoliberalism' (Nancy Fraser) – the fusion of a socially liberal with an economically liberal agenda – are not only imaginable but already visible. And indeed, seen from today, it is not even clear whether this variant of neoliberalism and the 'political class' managerial, technocratic style of governing are really on their last legs. While, especially in the wake of Brexit, the victory of Donald Trump, and the political successes of right-wing, autocratic parties and movements in many countries in Europe and beyond, it may have initially seemed that way, we have more recently, for instance with the election of Joe Biden in the US, the losses of PIS in the 2023 general election in Poland, or the 2024 European Parliament election, in parts also seen a reassertion of the hold of the old 'center'. In Germany, too, while the political management mode of 'Merkelism' for some time seemed to have exhausted itself (Ege/Gallas 2019), with the 'traffic light coalition' (Social Democratic Party, Free Democratic Party, and Green Party) and Olaf Scholz as chancellor, we effectively witnessed a continuation of a very similar pragmatist, opportunistic

11 To be fair, Gilbert and Williams waver on this point. They repeatedly strike a more skeptical note, but by and large tend to diagnose a crisis of hegemony.

tic, de-politicizing style of decision-making.¹² This, as the journalist Bernd Ulrich has called it, is “technocracy in the stage of futility” (2024b, my trans.) – “Scholz is the last attempt at/of a fading normality” (2024a, my trans.). One may be tempted to read such developments in terms of a ‘last gasp’ – but this could also be wish-/fearful thinking. In the interregnum, things are over- as well as underdetermined (Clarke 2019: 136). Instead of a radical break, or at least a break that is uniform and has a definite meaning and direction, what I believe we are confronted with is a complex, hybrid, and dynamic situation in which what we are actually faced with is the simultaneity and overlapping of several different logics and processes, including the coexistence of what Anton Jäger (2023) has identified as different political ‘modes’: ‘post-politics’, ‘anti-politics’, ‘hyper-politics’ (and, perhaps, once again ‘mass-politics’?). The current political changes – which are no doubt real – are overdetermined; they are not a question of neoliberal capitalism alone (cf., e.g., Blühdorn 2024, esp. 125–36, 308–26; Manow 2020; Schäfer/Zürn 2021). Whether they will turn into or be part of an organic or hegemonic crisis – indeed, whether they will (continue to) be experienced as a ‘crisis’ at all – all this – that is one point conjunctural analysis emphasizes – is a question not of any automatism, but of *articulation*. And the hopes of many on the left notwithstanding, it is perfectly possible that, despite all the ostensibly ‘de-normalizing’ developments of the recent past, the undead normalcy of old will continue to linger on. After all, as I already indicated in the previous pin, whether it is the pandemic, the financial crisis, migration, the climate emergency, or the war in Ukraine – even though in all of these cases the repressed is finally returning, the truth is that generally, the governmental and social response was/is each time decidedly *not* marked by a fundamental change of direction but – against all knowledge about its disastrous effects – by the attempt to defend and preserve normality.

Deflating many of the assumptions, categories, narratives, and expectations of ‘progressively-minded’ people, Ingolfur Blühdorn (2024)¹³ has in a critical recent intervention argued that it is precisely this, the more or less unwavering commitment to the continuation of life ‘as we know it’ “whatever it takes” (Mario Draghi), that, paradoxically, is now paving the way into a new, third phase of modernity, whose central characteristic is the growing obsolescence of post-Enlightenment idea(l)s of

12 After this chapter had already been completed (in 2024), several new developments took place. Whereas in Britain, too, the election victory of Keir Starmer’s Labour Party, which some commentators have already linked to Tony Blair’s and Gordon Brown’s New Labour (Clarke 2024; Rustin 2024), seems to point in a similar direction, by contrast, the reelection of Donald Trump in the US or the premature end of the German ‘traffic light coalition’ again appear to indicate a different trend. On the whole, the political situation is at present extremely volatile, making any predictions highly difficult – this, precisely, is the nature of the interregnum.

13 In all the following quotations from Blühdorn’s study, the translations are mine.

democracy, liberty, equality, human dignity and universal rights, rationality, autonomy, responsibility, and maturity (*Mündigkeit*). For Blühdorn, rather than a 'regression', 'decline', or 'end' of modernity, this development signals the dawning of a new type – a dialectical evolution, since it results from the consistent *realization* of modernity, not from its *suspension*. After all, key values such as emancipation, freedom, or self-realization remain absolutely central – what is changing is not the basic principles themselves, but their *meaning*. Thus, what we are arguably witnessing today is "the emancipation from the traditional idea of the autonomous subject *in the name of* freedom and self-determination" (248). As Blühdorn explains: "While the first and second modernity were a project of inclusion, equality, universal rights, self-determination and cosmopolitanism, the third modernity is dominated, in ideologically different variants, by an agenda of closure, control, inequality, polarization and exclusion." (247) And this agenda is pursued on behalf of the ideals of modernity themselves. Blühdorn too, adopting Karl Polanyi's term, discusses several 'great transformations' that are taking place today – the crisis of capitalism, the Anthropocene, the 'autocratic-authoritarian turn', digitalization and the rise of artificial intelligence, and the new geopolitical East-West-conflict (97–159). For him, what all these changes essentially point to is the more or less conscious abandonment of *the modern central norm of the autonomous subject*. This, then, is a truly epochal, quasi-ontological transformation: "It is correct to assume that the multiple crisis [*Vielfachkrise*] is a *systemic crisis*. However, contrary to popular belief, the crumbling system is not capitalism [...], but the value system of European-Western modernity." (161)

As I see it, the precise interrelations between conjuncture and epoch require further elaboration within Cultural Studies. Yet, I believe that these intersections, too, constitute crucial sites of struggle – and as the changing understanding of terms such as 'freedom' just mentioned makes clear, this also involves struggles over meaning (which have of course always played a central role in Cultural Studies). It seems to me that one potentially productive way for thinking about the contemporary transformations and struggles is through the notion of *relationality*. For at heart, what the 'return of the repressed' discussed above in most cases is about is a return of (the fact of) relationality – in the sense that 'our' way of life is inseparably connected with the conditions of existence of multiple 'others', human as well as nonhuman. And the conflicts over normality are fundamentally conflicts over the visibility and acknowledgement of this fact and its consequences. That is, they are conflicts over 'immunity' (cf. **ch. 4**). In other words: Whether it is the financial crisis, the urgencies associated with the notion of the Anthropocene, the so-called 'migration crisis', the recent debates about gender, or the Corona pandemic – what has become palpable in all of these cases is the essentially fictional and problematic nature of a formatting of reality that is based on dualisms and the idea of clearly separated, self-contained

entities.¹⁴ Instead of distinct and stable binary oppositions of inside and outside, the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’ (Stuart Hall), self and other, subject and object, mind and body, man and woman, human and nonhuman, and so forth, what these and other recent developments have actually brought to light is the fundamental fact of ‘entanglement’. The basic unit of thought should be the relation, not the self-enclosed entity. Whether we are considering ‘social’ (economic, socio-cultural, political, etc.) or biological worlds, what we encounter everywhere are interrelations, webs, networks, assemblages rather than stable, pure, and independent existents. As I argue in the **coda**, this has almost always been the ‘ontological unconscious’ of ‘Western’ onto-epistemology, and of course it has time and again surfaced throughout history, especially in literature, film, and art. In recent years, it has much more explicitly and broadly become the subject of the sciences – natural (biology, ecology, physics, and more) and social (postcolonialism and decoloniality, critical race theory, Indigenous studies, feminist, gender, queer, and trans theory, disability/crip theory, environmental science, and more) – as well as of different forms of social activism – and it has always been a vital element in numerous ‘non-Western’ cosmologies (cf. Descola 2013). From all these different corners, the hegemony of the onto-epistemology of ‘Western’ modernity has now come under attack, its construction of the real – long able to pose as ‘Reality’ – exposed as just one possibility among many – and a ruinous one at that – and contested by a multiplicity of “subaltern realities” and “proposals for ‘worlding’ life on new premises” (Escobar 2020: 4).

By contrast, what I have described as the various attempts to defend normality are (also) fueled by a desire to ward off this “ontological insult” (Bratton 2021: 98) through a reassertion of immunitarian logics, that is to say, through a re(in)statement of identities and boundaries – holding off complicity and accountability (cf. **ch. 5**), holding off the ‘floods’ of migrants, holding off the ‘infiltration’ (including the corporeal one) by the Other, both human and nonhuman, etc. Consequently, borders, real and symbolic, rise up far and wide. Whether it is the climate, the state, the body, identities, or epistemic regimes with their categories and codes – just as the reality of interrelatedness, impurity, multiplicity, and processuality becomes obvious everywhere, as the “leakages multiply”, we witness a widespread tendency towards purity and rigidity, a desire to shore up, congeal, and “guard [the] dam against all that flows” (Daggett 2018: 43, 36; cf. also Shotwell 2016). Central to many of these maneuvers is the fortification of the ‘Western’ fantasy of the sovereign, monadic Self. As Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey (2025) have shown, many of the recent movements and measures to protect the status quo are based on a sense of ‘offended freedom’ (*gekränkte Freiheit*), in other words, on a radically libertarian under-

14 With regard to the pandemic, cf. on this issue especially Bratton 2021; Di Cesare 2021; Latour 2021; Preciado 2020; and Sloterdijk 2021. On immunity more generally, cf. the work of Roberto Esposito.

standing of the subject and its freedom, which ignores, denies, and resists all forms of (inter-)dependency and which hence sees any restriction on individual behavior as an unbearable imposition. What the two scholars call 'libertarian authoritarianism' is thus a "demonstrative gesture of dissociation" (Amlinger/Nachtwey 2025: 11; *eine demonstrative Geste der Beziehungslosigkeit* [Amlinger/Nachtwey 2022: 21]). For a paradigmatic example, think of the refusal to wear a safety mask during the pandemic on behalf of personal choice and autonomy (cf. Bennett 2021). Here, we once again encounter what Blühdorn describes as an emancipation from Enlightenment modernity *in the name* of its central norms – autonomy, self-determination, self-realization. 'Freedom' here primarily comes to mean an individual freedom, a personal (phantom) possession (cf. von Redecker 2020) – not a relation with the world, but with oneself.

Without doubt, such issues must form part of the contemporary struggles. I have argued that the present can productively be read as an interregnum, that is, as an essentially transitional moment marked by multiple shifts and changes. As we have seen, this pertains to both, the level of the conjuncture as well as the level of the epoch – the power of political regimes such as those of Merkel or Scholz, at core dedicated to "keeping the world out of the people's hair" (Dausend et al. 2024, my trans.), is waning, and this is intimately bound up with several epochal transformations, many of which signal an erosion of the ethico-onto-epistemology of 'Western' modernity. From the perspective of a Cultural Studies that continues to conceive of itself as a 'political project' (Stuart Hall) and that hence remains committed to the fight for justice, liberty, and equality, this is not something to be lamented. After all, it was precisely the hitherto dominant epochal constellations that led into the contemporary urgencies in the first place and the conjunctural ones that determinedly deepened them. The question is what comes next. Even though Blühdorn's sobering argument suggests that the emancipatory hopes of old have outlived their time, I would insist once more that the outcome of the processes currently unfolding is still an open one. An alternative to Blühdorn's 'third modernity' is yet a possibility. For this, however, both 'normality' and the immunitarian paradigm will have to be overcome – and there are signs of this, too, after all, many of them, both within but also especially outside of the 'West'. Perhaps we (who?) can yet come to terms with the reality of interrelationality, of the vulnerability and dependency of all, which the pandemic has once again brought home to us in such a powerful way, come to terms, in other words, with the fundamental entanglement of the world, and fashion a new political ethos, an 'ethos of cohabitation', as Sabine Hark (2021), building particularly on the work of Judith Butler, has outlined it, that is, create power-sensitive, democratic, egalitarian, and 'horizontal' ways of being, built on practices of 'promiscuous' or 'universal' solidarity and care (Care Collective 2020).

Pin 7: Virus / Biopolitics

The preceding pins have to some extent reproduced the typical procedure of conjunctural analysis (cf. Kramer 2018): from the concrete – the ‘cultural object’ of the mask, the ‘theme’ of the anti-Corona protests as moral panic – to the abstract – the conjuncture and even the epoch as interregnum. They have shown how disputes over mask mandates or demonstrations against lockdown are intimately entangled with transformations and conflicts that are of a much more ‘systemic’ nature (economic, political and geo-political, socio-cultural, technological, etc.), and, indeed, with struggles over the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (or ‘existable’) (Rancière 1999), over the reigning ethico-onto-epistemology itself, and hence over the very ‘make-up’ – its ‘worlding’ – of the world we live in (cf. **postscript**). The pins were driven by the central question of conjunctural analysis: ‘What does this have to do with everything else?’ In doing so, they have pointed to a variety of different dimensions and tried to give an indication of the complexity of the present moment. Needless to say, these rough brushstrokes do not do justice to the demands for detail, differentiation, and specificity of the method. Rather than a conjunctural analysis proper, I prefer to see them as ‘intimations’ of one, as a set of preliminary methodological and analytical reflections that will hopefully prove useful to future investigations. As a final step, let me now reverse the direction of travel in our cyclone, slide down a different arm of our tentacular analytic assemblage, and move back again from the ‘very big’ to the ‘very small’ – and once again illustrate the essential interconnectedness of all these different ‘levels’.

For pragmatic reasons – to somewhat reduce complexity – the discussion in pins 5 and 6 has admittedly remained rather anthropocentric. Yet, it is clear that for a posthumanist Cultural Studies, the non- and more-than-human must consistently be a key part of any investigation. Naturally, in the case of the Corona pandemic, this has to include *the virus*. And here, once again, I believe that the posthumanization of our field provides us with helpful tools that allow for better analyses. Unsurprisingly, for many commentators, the Foucauldian concept of ‘biopolitics’ offered a very productive approach for thinking about the pandemic, perhaps most prominently Giorgio Agamben (2021). Though Agamben’s interventions are not without merit, from the perspective of conjunctural analysis, there is much about his large-scale, sweeping declarations about the ‘state of exception’, ‘bare life’, ‘sanitation terror’, and the ‘religion of health’ that should be viewed skeptically and critically. Such a necessary critique has already been developed by others. Here, I want to confine myself to a few remarks regarding the analytic of biopolitics itself. Once this notion is ‘diffracted’ through thinking associated with the nonhuman turn, several important reformulations ensue. What emerges is a ‘*more-than-human (techno-)biopolitics*’, which not only extends the ‘bios’, and with it the issue of the political management and regulation of life, from humans to animals, plants, and other living beings, and

which is more attentive to the unparalleled transformative power of contemporary technoscience, now intervening on a multiplicity of levels, including the molecular and genetic, but which also rethinks the very object and the medium of biopolitics (Lemke 2021: 140).¹⁵

Here, a central concept is the Foucauldian notion of the ‘milieu’, which Thomas Lemke, in his illuminating ‘posthumanist’ rereading of Foucault, has recently unearthed and brought into dialogue with the new materialism (as well as science and technology studies) (Lemke 2021: 121–40). The milieu, a vital element of liberal governmentality as Foucault understands it, is what is at stake in the central governmental endeavor to control *circulation*, that is, to organize the mobilities of human as well as nonhuman entities. For Foucault, “the milieu is more than an ‘environment’, a ‘background’ or a ‘surrounding’ in which individuals and populations live and evolve; it is an interactive space, a relational network that constitutes the elements of which it consists as much as it is itself their endpoint or outcome.” (130) As Lemke explains, “the concept of the milieu attends to the multiple, complex, recursive, and always mobile relations between interdependent elements and entities of all kinds mobilized in ‘circulations’” (131). The milieu is material-semiotic, natural-cultural – “a spatial-temporal arrangement of a hybrid ensemble of [...] entities mobilized to control future trajectories and to achieve specific goals” (131). As such, it is a crucial field of intervention for power. Now, the key biopolitical implication of this concept (cf. 135–40) is that it compels us to think biopower not so much in terms of the management of individual (human) bodies and populations (only), but of *the regulation of sets of relations and processes* – or, more precisely, to rethink the former in terms of the latter. Importantly, this also means that “human nature is not an invariant anthropological universal but is differently articulated within practices – practices that are conceived of as more-than-human processes” – and that “neither nature nor life is a self-evident or stable entity or property” (137). The concept of the milieu thus “not only disrupts conventional ideas of exteriority and externality but also urges humans to recognize alterity in their own humanness” (137). Recalibrated along such lines, the analytic of biopolitics demands not just an investigation of the multiple forms of control through which life – human as well as nonhuman – is ‘made to live’, but also of the political stakes involved in the drawing of the ‘agential cuts’ (Barad 2007) through which ‘life’ is constructed in the first place. This move, then, also connects biopower to ‘geontopower’, the governance of life and death to the governance of the very distinction between life and nonlife (Povinelli 2016).

I believe that such a reformulated notion of biopolitics could prove very productive in the context of a conjunctural analysis of the Corona pandemic. While conjunc-

15 On more-than-human biopolitics, cf. also the important work of posthumanistically oriented scholars such as Donna Haraway (esp. 2005), Jeffrey T. Nealon (2015), or Cary Wolfe (esp. 2013).

tural analysis has traditionally tended to ignore the nonhuman, this perspective now puts the virus itself center stage. Interestingly, it is especially with regard to the virus that received understandings of life and of the organism have come under attack within biology itself. In particular, philosophers of biology have begun developing a “bottom-up perspective, starting at the microscopic level of biology, rather than top-down from its most complex and undisputed exemplars”, and, from such an alternative vantage point, have suggested that “much standard thinking is based on quite restricted and even covertly normative conceptions of what life is” and hence gone on to “challenge the view that entities such as viruses are not alive and that the minimal definition of life must be cellular” (O’Malley 2012: 209). Scholars have challenged the “inflexible dichotomy of life and non-life” and replaced it with a “continuum view of life” (O’Malley 2012: 228, 225). Intimately connected with this is the rejection of the basic supposition that life is composed of discrete, stable, and genetically homogeneous organisms that possess more or less clear boundaries and that it is essentially driven by ‘selfishness’ (Richard Dawkins) and competition. Of course, this assumption “accords well with the orthodox metaphysical thesis that the world is composed of things, or substances” (Dupré/Guttinger 2016: 109), with the attendant essentialism and individualism, and not least, it needs to be said, with the ideology of capitalism. By contrast, not least through newer research regarding symbiosis – now seen as virtually omnipresent – and related subjects like holobionts or microbiomes, biological entities have increasingly come to be conceived as “series of dynamic and diverse collaborations”, whose “boundaries are flexible and unfixed” (O’Malley 2012: 225). As in the humanities and social sciences, and, indeed, partly in conversation with them (cf. also Haraway 2016), a different, namely *relational* and *processual* onto-epistemology has emerged – ‘everything flows’ (Nicholson/Dupré 2018; cf. also, e.g., Dupré 2012, 2020).

Viruses in particular straddle and unsettle the borderline between the living and the nonliving¹⁶ (cf., e.g., Dupré/Guttinger 2016; Pradeu/Kostyrka/Dupré 2016) and, in contrast to the conventional view of them as “distinct individuals that are entirely competitive among themselves, and entirely harmful to anything else unlucky enough to be affected by them” (Dupré/Guttinger 2016: 110), are now instead frequently seen as processes rather than things and as partly beneficial, or ‘mutualistic’ (Pradeu 2016). More than that, rather than exclusively parasitic and self-serving, viruses, like bacteria, are actually recognized as integral, possibly even vital, parts of biological systems and organisms – including the human body, in which, it is estimated, “there are about ten times as many virus particles as cells” (Dupré/Guttinger 2016: 110). Thomas Pradeu summarizes this recent rethinking of viruses and of biological entities more generally:

16 In other regards too, viruses are veritable onto-epistemic troublemakers – ‘Coviderrida’ indeed (Al-Khafaji 2022).

Viruses are everywhere in, on, and around living things, from prokaryotes to plants, fungi, and animals; they are sometimes detrimental, and at other times useful or even indispensable. By their ubiquity and diverse functional roles in every possible host, viruses extend the view that biological individuals are not autonomous but, on the contrary, heterogeneous (i.e., made of entities of different origins, often belonging to different kingdoms) and heteronomous (i.e., dependent, to some degree, on other biological entities to complete their life cycle). Moreover, ecological and evolutionary competition needs to be reconceptualized, both spatially and temporally. Competition occurs not between selfish, autonomous, and homogeneous entities, but between temporarily constituted associations or aggregates (some of them long-lasting, others transient). (2016: 86)

In our terminology, what we are thus essentially concerned with every time are *assemblages*. And all of this, importantly, means that conventional notions of health, immunity, and infection need to be rethought as well:

one should reject the dominant view according to which the normal healthy situation for a given organism, and in particular for a human being, would be the *absence of infection*. All living things harbor numerous viruses as part of their normal constitution and functioning. A healthy human is infected by more than ten permanent chronic systemic viruses (including herpesviruses, polyomaviruses, anelloviruses, adenoviruses, papillomaviruses), and this number may in fact be far higher [...]. The immune system cannot be defined anymore as a self-non-self discrimination system, given the huge number of commensal bacteria and viruses that live in a human being [...], and the fact that these genetically foreign components are not rejected, but rather immunologically regulated [...]. (Pradeu 2016: 84)

I believe that such an assemblageistic or “‘ecological’ view of the immune system” (Pradeu 2016: 85) invites yet another recalibration of the analytic of biopolitics, this time in the direction of more “microbial equality” (O’Malley/Dupré 2007: 155) – ‘size doesn’t matter’ (O’Malley/Dupré 2007). Neglect of microbes has arguably not only distorted “our philosophical view of the biological world” (O’Malley/Dupré 2007: 156), as well as “our anthropological view of the social world” (Paxson 2008: 19), but also our biopolitical view of the natural-cultural world. If microorganisms are an inescapable part of nature-cultures, then how ‘we’ live with and through them is a political question. There is a new type of ‘micropower’ to consider. Biopolitics needs to be extended into ‘*microbiopolitics*’. The management and regulation of life takes place on the microbiological level as well. As Heather Paxson, building on the work of Foucault and Latour, defines it, microbiopolitics involves “the creation of categories of microscopic biological agents; the anthropocentric evaluation of such agents; and

the elaboration of appropriate human behaviors vis-à-vis microorganisms engaged in infection, inoculation, and digestion” (2008: 17). Centrally, then, what is at stake are questions of ‘*biosecurity*’, of the narratives, technologies, and practices involved in the management of disease threats. As Paxson points out, ‘Western’ modernity has generally been characterized by a “hyper-hygienic Pasteurian social order” that is profoundly antiseptic, “bent on suppressing germs to promote human health writ large as ‘public health’” (2014: 116). It is driven by a ‘will to purity’ (Kroker/Kroker 1993) and a ‘will to closure’ (Wendy Brown qtd. in Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 533), operating through the geo(micro)biopolitical constitution of a seemingly clearly delineated healthy and clean inside opposed to a diseased and impure outside. Here, in other words, we once again encounter the immunitarian impulse already discussed above (cf. **ch. 4**). Yet, as we have seen, this notion of immunity is not only entirely illusory – it is also dangerous insofar as it is frequently precisely the very (ultimately always futile) attempt to wall in ‘good’ and wall out ‘risky’ life that itself leads to multiple health problems (e.g., destructive autoimmunity) (Hinchliffe et al. 2013). By contrast, if, following our relational and processual model, life is inevitably ‘impure’ and ‘pathological’, disease “becomes less about contamination and contagion, and more concerned with its systemic and endemic *co-generation*” (Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 537). To pick up the argument developed in pin 2, it is a question not of fortifying rigid *borderlines* (a Euclidean and geometrical understanding of space) but of managing entangled and mutable *borderlands* (a topological spatial imagination), constituted through the inter- and intra-relations of a multiplicity of actants (Hinchliffe et al. 2013). In other words, it is a question of governing the *milieu*.

An affirmative, posthumanist biopolitics would thus take ‘becoming-with’, that is, the inescapably interdependent and hybrid nature of all being, as its starting point – and hence also the state of a shared *vulnerability*, as “the very condition of possibility for every life form” (Shildrick 2022: 67) and, indeed, for all existents.¹⁷ It would proceed from the recognition that the true enemy in the pandemic was not the virus, but the currently dominant mode of governing the milieu – a mode largely operating in the service of the interests of capital. Altering this mode would involve a new, posthuman solidarity and thus a new, ‘post-Pasteurian’ (not anti-Pasteurian!) social order (Paxson 2008, 2014). The whole problematic of immunity/community as it emerges from the work of Roberto Esposito would be rethought in a resolutely

17 Yet, this quasi-ontological fact should of course not make us forget that vulnerability is *lived* in radically different ways insofar as beings are differentially exposed to risk and harm (Lorenzini 2021). Vulnerability should thus always be discussed in the plural, as *vulnerabilities*, which are socially generated, the result of processes of ‘vulnerabilization’: “it is produced through determinate actions, policies and structures that render particular bodies vulnerable in precise ways in specific, determinate situations” (Lloyd 2023: 11). In this context, cf. also Christine Daigle’s (2024) notion of ‘vulner-ability’ (which is inspired by Haraway’s ‘response-ability’).

postanthropocentric way (cf. **ch. 4**) and hence, (micro-)biopolitics would no longer only be about care of the human, whose health must be defended against all outside intruders, but about care of the entire 'mesh', the whole ecological web of life and nonlife, and therefore also about care of animals, plants, the land, infrastructures, and, yes, viruses and other microbes. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, several thinkers have expressed their hope for such a "biopolitics of entanglement" (Shildrick 2022: 68; cf. also, e.g., Bratton 2021; Daigle 2021; Di Cesare 2021; Latour 2021). Such hopes are not unfounded. Yet, all theoretico-philosophical desires for a "making wild of the master discourses" (Shildrick 2022: 68), an embrace of microorganisms as "potential friends and allies" (Paxson 2014: 116), an "opening to new forms of vitality" (Shildrick 2022: 68), and for the promises of a great 'metamorphosis' (Latour 2021) notwithstanding, Cultural Studies would always insist that it is *on the dirty and messy political ground of the conjuncture* that the fate of such dreams will be decided.

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Coda. Towards an Insurgent Zombie Collective (or, Welcome to the Zombiecene!)

Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Oligarchocene, Neganthropocene, Plantationocene, Technocene, Necrocene, Anthrobscene, Chthulucene, ... The names bloom and proliferate.¹ While some will no doubt complain about an ‘excess’ of ‘fashionable’ neologisms, this multiplication of appellations is nothing to be lamented. In fact, I believe even more names are needed. As Donna Haraway has argued, in an “urgent historical conjuncture”, new “words-to-think-with” are much needed, and pop out “from many bubbling cauldrons” (2016: 184n50). Haraway and others have emphasized the significance of such words and narratives as material-semiotic ‘worldings’, as representations that ‘matter’. “[I]t matters what stories tell stories” – “we *must* change the story; the story *must* change” (Haraway 2016: 39, 40). In particular, Haraway makes a case for what, borrowing James Clifford’s term, she calls ‘big-enough stories’, that is, stories that are “able to account for a lot, but not everything – and without guarantees of political virtue” (Clifford 2013: 201). Though many narratives of the present, taken on their own, arguably have a tendency to become somewhat ‘too big’ (possibly including Haraway’s own as well as the one I am about to develop here), it is precisely their simultaneous coexistence and the ensuing frictions, contradictions, and dialogues that bring them down to size. Consider, for instance, Christophe Bonneuil’s and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz’s (2017) marvelous multi-faceted historical account of the Anthropocene, in which each chapter – entitled “Thermocene”, “Thanatocene”, “Capitalocene”, etc. – offers a different historical narrative. Each of these constitutes a separate worlding, constructing the present in its very own terms. And yet, it is only from their conversation that a fuller understanding of the present moment emerges. Thus, though clearly not all terms that are presently on offer are to be uncritically accepted or valued equally, the analytical task today is less about choosing than about bringing them into dialogue and pragmatically working with the one (or more) big-enough story that is most helpful in a given context. In this vein, let me offer another narrative and imaginary, in the

1 For a helpful overview, cf. Chwalczyk 2020, especially the table in the appendix.

hope that it will illuminate and accentuate aspects which are absent or underplayed in other accounts.

We perceive it all around us: The present is monstrous. Indeed, “monstrosity has transcended its status as a metaphor and has [...] become a necessary condition of our existence in the twenty-first century” (Levina/Bui 2013: 2). In particular, it is the zombie that is today a veritable “everywoman and everyman monster” (Larsen 2017). No wonder we encounter it everywhere now, there’s been a ‘renaissance’ of zombie cinema (Bishop 2010) and a boom in zombie scholarship. In fact, our entire culture is obsessed with it. This is because the zombie is us. Paraphrasing Donna Haraway (2010: 2191), I want to suggest that by the early 21st century, our time, a mythic time, we are all living dead (or infected living); not the word but *power made flesh*. The zombie is our ontology, it gives us our politics. Like the cyborg, it is “a condensed image of both imagination and material reality” (Haraway 2010: 2191). ‘Thinking zombie’ thus constitutes a “valuable springboar[d] into consideration of human ontology” (Webb/Byrmand 2017). What makes the zombie so pertinent is that it is essentially a grave where binary oppositions are buried. The entire tradition of ‘Western’ metaphysics down into the hole. All the old dialectics of life and death, mind and body, subject and object, self and other laid to rest. Not ‘either/or’, but also not quite ‘both/and’, but rather the fundamentally pessimistic ‘neither/nor’ (Lauro 2017). Unlike the cyborg, in its now dominant form this version of the posthuman is not ironic or celebratory, but sinister, abject (Vint 2017). It is a *figure of crisis*. Speaking in a Gramscian idiom, today’s crisis is certainly ‘organic’, encompassing all spheres of society, whose parts – economic, political, social, ideological – no longer cohere into a whole – though they have not yet been pushed towards what Althusser called a ‘ruptural unity’ entailing the corrosion of consent and the disintegration of the molasses of societal consensus. Yet, the present crisis is also more than that: it is literally ‘organic’, biological and ecological, but also non-organic, planetary, of the Earth. And, paradoxically, not sudden and ruptural, but chronic, permanent (Shaviro 2015: 9). Zombie crisis. In the face of the looming (and already present) catastrophes, we are the walking, living dead. The zombie embodies our post-/ahuman (and posthumanist) temporality – life lived under the sign of death. It is therefore not surprising that there is a general sentiment today of ‘living in the end times’ (Žižek 2011). Bent merely on surviving, on avoiding extinction and total destruction, we “persist in a future without hope, a paradoxical future without a future” (Vint 2017). The zombie as “the degree zero of our capacity to imagine the future” (Larsen 2017). Hence the discourses of the ‘cancellation’ of the future, the exhaustion of the Utopian impulse, and so forth (e.g., Berardi 2011; Fisher 2014). “Everyone agrees that things can only get worse.” (Invisi-

ble Committee 2009: 23) Fukuyama's 'end of history' rewritten in a dystopian vein, as stasis, paralysis, apocalypse. Nothing but 'capitalist realism' (Fisher 2009). The temporality of the zombie is that of a never-ending, 'absolute present' without past or future, a perverted Nietzschean 'eternal return', in fact a time-lessness. Entrapped in the hegemonic structuration of the field of the possible (cf. Büscher-Ulbrich et al. 2021), in the 'police' order endlessly and performatively repeating "the truth of the impossibility of the impossible" (Rancière 1999: 132), we zombies of capital find it "easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson 2003: 76). In the Zombiecene, the stark material effects of this limitation of the political imagination can no longer be ignored – the image finally materializes: the end of the world.

Capitalism continues to evolve through the zombification of all that lives. As more and more beings are forced to occupy liminal positions between life and death, so that the category of 'life' itself is now put into question, the zombie form of existence becomes a universal condition. The earth itself is in a state of living death. In this situation, the biopolitical production of what Giorgio Agamben has termed 'bare life' escalates. For Agamben, developing Foucault's account of modern biopower, what characterizes modern politics is that, "together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction" (1998: 9). The zombie, this figure of undecidability and boundary confusion – neither properly living nor dead, mind nor body, inside nor outside of human community, included nor excluded from the law – is an emblem of this Agambenian 'threshold', who, similar to Agamben's *homo sacer*, is stripped of a politically qualified form of life and reduced to her physical existence. Following Agamben, who declared that, as politics becomes increasingly identified with biopolitics, today "*homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen" (1998: 171), numerous succeeding scholars have used and modified Agamben's thought in their analyses of, for instance, neoliberalism and contemporary biocapitalism and biofinancialization. Pointing to the entanglement of the politicization of life with its economization, converging on the goal of managing the processes of circulation, flux, and flow of individuals as well as populations, they have argued that it is particularly the systemic violence written into dominant modes of entrepreneurial subjectivation that reduces the citizens of the affluent 'Global North' to a state of naked life, though these are not literally divested of rights or given over to death, of course. As, for instance, Byung-Chul Han (2018) explains:

The victims of this systemic violence aren't the excluded *homines sacri* but the achievement-subjects *trapped within* the system, who, as sovereigns and en-

trepreneurs of themselves, aren't subjugated to anyone. In a sense, they are free, but simultaneously, they are the *homo sacer of themselves*. Systemic violence [...] turns everyone into *captives*, prisoners of the system that forces them to exploit themselves.

For Han (2018), the life of the *homo sacer* of the achievement society is naked not because it exists outside the legal order, but because "it has been stripped of any transcendence of *value*, reduced to the immanence of the vital functions and performance, which must be maximized with all available means". Thus subjected to the generalized "demand for performance and optimization" (*Leistungs- und Optimierungsdiktat*), Han (2018) asserts, "we have *all* become performance and health zombies" – our "lives are like those of the undead".

Analyses like these are vital. And yet, the somewhat universalizing rhetorical gestures of thinkers such as Agamben or Han should not make us oblivious to the various striations, differences, and inequalities that in fact characterize the capitalist world-system. Yes, "in our age all citizens can be said, *in a specific but extremely real sense*, to appear virtually as *homines sacri*" (Agamben 1998: 111, emphasis added), and yes, in the *Zombiecene*, "[b]are life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category" but "now dwells in the biological body of every living being" (Agamben 1998: 140). Nonetheless, it will never do in this context to speak in the same breath of, say, the 'Western' entrepreneurial subjects discussed by Han, a person in a persistent comatose state, so-called 'illegal' migrants from the 'Global South' held in a Northern detention center, a species facing extinction, and non-human animals subjected to the carno-phallogocentric animal-industrial complex. Biopower exists in different shapes or types; its forms are contextual, variable. Different forms of life (and non-life) are invested by power in each case in specific ways. Consequently, the opposition between *bios* and *zoē* is perhaps better conceived as a *continuum*, with different degrees, or kinds, of 'bare life'. Thus, not only is, as Agamben himself at one point avers, "the threshold beyond which life ceases to be politically relevant, becomes only 'sacred life', and can as such be eliminated without punishment" (1998: 139) defined differently in different contexts (national/cultural, historical) – capitalist 'zombie humanism' also produces "hierarch[ies] of liveliness" and various "balancing acts between bio- and necropolitical regimes" (Halberstam 2020: 119, 118). Instead of a neat and universal shift from the power "to take life or let live" to the one "to make live and to let die" (Foucault 2003: 241), what we can observe today, taking a perspective that is both non-Eurocentric and non-anthropocentric, is in fact a much more complex, heterogeneous picture, including a range of hybrid combinations and variations. With regards to humans, this includes, for instance, being "made to live *and* left to die" (vis-à-vis the neoliberal erosion of the welfare state in most 'Western' democracies) (Nealon 2014: 470) or the power "*to make survive*" (rather than to make live or die) (Agamben 1999: 155), as well as the violent entanglements of biopolitics with necro-

and thanatopolitics across the 'Global North' and 'South'. Hence, when speaking of the Zombiecene, it should never be forgotten that the maintenance of certain (zombified) life-worlds are today closely intertwined with and, in fact, dependent upon, the "creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 2003: 40). In this context, it is worth remembering the colonial roots of the zombie myth, which was effectively appropriated from Haitian folklore, in which it was tied to the history of slavery (cf. Lauro 2015). Not neoliberal, but neoimperial zombification: "more life for the few and living death for the many" (Halberstam 2020: 118). This zombification is captured in a striking way by photographer Supratim Bhattacharjee in the picture that won him the second prize of the UNICEF Photo of the Year competition in 2020, depicting two girls forced to work in the Jharia coalfield in India.²

The gaze of the two subaltern children in the photo again reminds us of the crass inadequacy of universalizing discourses, of the necessity of keeping what Elizabeth Povinelli calls "ordinary suffering" (2011: 14) and the manifold forms of precarious survival and endurance clearly in sight, and hence of the need to differentiate and contextualize all talk of 'zombification'. To a certain extent, something similar is achieved by the 2009 science fiction film *District 9*, directed by Neill Blomkamp. Filmed in a dirty, gritty realism and combining a number of genres or styles (mockumentary, horror, satire, splatter film, and more), the film is set in an alternate-history Johannesburg, South Africa, approximately 20 years after a damaged alien spacecraft arrived, which has since remained hovering over the city. The disoriented passengers were brought down to the surface and confined to the eponymous ghetto-like camp of District 9. The aliens, derogatively referred to as 'prawns', are subjected to all kinds of discrimination and cruel mistreatment and, as viewers come to find out, even used for gruesome medical experiments. As the film opens, they are about to be forcibly 'resettled' by 'Multinational United', a large weapons manufacturer hired by the government, to a new area outside the city – effectively, as the protagonist later admits, a "concentration camp". The film's plot revolves around the company's employee charged with the relocation process, who, searching one of the aliens' shacks, accidentally sprays alien fuel in his face and consequently begins to slowly transform into one of them. The film charts his gradual metamorphosis and shifting allegiances as he is hunted by the mercenaries of MNU – which wants to "harvest" his body, "billions of dollars worth of biotechnology" – and comes to partner with one of the aliens, whom he eventually helps to escape from the planet. At the end of the film, his transformation is complete. As Stefan

2 The photo can be found at <https://www.unicef.de/informieren/aktuelles/photo-of-the-year/contest-2020/-/supratim-bhattacharjee/230836>.

Helgesson has pointed out in his contribution to a review roundtable on the film, through its layers of grotesque, absurd humor, *District 9* effectively

counters [...] the apocalyptic mood of much contemporary popular culture in the West. If the taste for apocalypse stems from an experience that western exceptionalism is being threatened (after us, the deluge!), then the contemporary experience in the Global South – of which *District 9* is a symbolic representation – is much more complex. Whole populations in the Global South are in fact “living the apocalypse” (from the perspective of a once-dominant West), but even so, life goes on in a pragmatic, patchwork fashion. (in Valdez Moses et al. 2010: 174)

Like Bhattacharjee's photograph, the film thus challenges non-discriminating and overly generalizing usages of tropes such as the zombie, dystopia, or apocalypse, but at the same time also affirms the pertinence of the zombie figure. While it is not a zombie film in the literal or narrow sense, it can nevertheless be read as speaking to the contemporary problematics of zombification in a powerful way. As Helgesson observes, “[t]he recurrent switches between aerial views of shoddier parts of Johannesburg (no leafy northern suburbs in sight) and shots of bodies in pain, alien bodies, dead bodies, exploding bodies, body fluids, and meat, produces [sic] an edgy yet consistent rhythm in the film” (in Valdez Moses et al. 2010: 173). The numerous mockumentary-style CCTV recordings included in the film only add to this rhythm, recurrently interpellating the viewer into the ‘gaze of surveillance’ characteristic of the surveillance culture of contemporary capitalism (cf. Lyon 2018; Zuboff 2019). What all of this alerts us to is, I think, the crucial role the body and processes of life occupy today as privileged sites of political intervention. Through images, representations and discourses, pharmacology and technoscientific research, surveillance and data-mining, racialization, gendering and ‘speciesization’, as well as through deprivation, incarceration and violence, the biological life of individuals as well as collectives is here shown to be profoundly invested by power. The film is centrally concerned with modern bio- and necropolitics, corporate biocapitalism, shifting definitions of the Agambenian ‘threshold’, and with the generalization of the state of exception (the camp as the *nomos* of political space [Agamben 1998]) and the contemporary escalation of the production of bare life.³ That is to say, above all else, this is a film about bio- and necropower, about the spiraling politicization of life and the contemporary processes of zombification.

3 Through scenes like the one early on in the film in which the protagonist discovers alien eggs in one of the camp's shacks and goes on to “abort” them by cutting off the tubes through which they are nourished, *District 9* further points up what Agamben has called the “inner solidarity” (1998: 10) between democracy and liberal humanism on the one hand and fascism on the other.

Yet, the Anthropocene is really the Zombiecene not only because the dividing line between life and death is becoming ever more blurry, but also because so is another one: Wherever we look today, it is becoming increasingly clear that even the seemingly self-evident distinction between *life and nonlife* itself can no longer be taken for granted. In this way, as Povinelli (2016) has forcefully argued, we⁴ are now becoming aware of another type of power, one on which biopower has in fact always depended: ‘geontopower’, that is, the governance, not of life and death, but of the difference between life and nonlife. As Povinelli has shown, “Western ontologies are covert biontologies – Western metaphysics as a measure of all forms of existence by the qualities of one form of existence (*bios, zoe*)” (2016: 5). Yet, in the era of climate change, humankind as a ‘geological force’, the threat of the extinction of all biological life, etc., this “biontological enclosure of existence” (Povinelli 2016: 5) is crumbling.⁵ Even as many today continue to invest in the drama and mystery of life and re-constitute the boundary between the animate and the inanimate, both the material world and the (natural) sciences increasingly confront us with the actual entanglement of life and nonlife and thus reveal their separation to be the result of “a power to differentiate and control”, of a “differential distribution of kinds of entanglements” (Povinelli 2016: 21, 91). This hegemonic distribution is now being widely challenged, not least by the ‘dissensus’ (Rancière 2015) not only of nonhuman, but also in/animate (e.g., geological, ecological, and meteorological) ‘existents’, which not only claim admittance into the demos, but tend to push for a disruption of its very constitution (Povinelli 2016: 118–43) and hence for “alternative arrangements of existence” (Povinelli 2016: 28). The zombies are on the prowl.

The Zombiecene is, of course, also the age of pandemics (cf. Wallace 2016), chief among them the virus, which has been closely associated with the figure of the zombie at least since Danny Boyle’s influential film *28 Days Later* (2002). In this context, as the recent Corona pandemic illustrates very well, the workings of both, biopower and geontopower, are fairly out in the open. In particular, the virus effectively perforates the boundaries between nature and culture, life and nonlife, not only with regards to its own existence but also to others. Thus, COVID-19, for instance, has not just laid bare the biopolitical governance which is always at work, though normally in much less obvious ways, but also exposed (human) corporeality as ‘transcorporeality’, that is, as “always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (Alaimo 2010: 2). The virus confirms the new materialist argument that the ‘human’ is far

4 As is so often the case, this ‘we’ is problematic, signaling here a speaking-position located within the so-called ‘Global North’. For as Povinelli shows, this type of power has long operated quite openly in settler colonial contexts.

5 The ‘eerie Thanatos’ that Mark Fisher (2016: 82–97) has identified in the realm of cultural production can be understood as another symptom of this erosion of Western biontology.

from a closed, self-contained, and self-sufficient entity and that its borders are actually porous and permeable, as it is caught up in pervasive processes of ‘influx and efflux’ (Bennett 2020) that thwart any attempt to clearly demarcate an ‘inside’ from an ‘outside’. It reveals “the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (Alaimo 2010: 2) and that it only ever exists in and, indeed, *as* a human-nonhuman ‘assemblage’ (Bennett 2010). The human is re-located on “a continuum that elides conventional dichotomies of life and matter, organic and inorganic, subjective and objective, agency and structure” – yet, whereas for a neo-vitalist thinker like Jane Bennett this continuum is always thought as one of “*lively bodies and forces*” (2020: xi, emphasis added), so that vitality, vibrancy, and life come to be the defining features of all existents, I believe that, following Povinelli, we should allow this continuum to include nonlife, thus not “denying the ability of other forms [of existence] (the not-Life not-Nonlife) to undefine, redefine, and define us” (2016: 55). Is it a coincidence that the Coronavirus afflicts the respiratory system? After all, like eating and drinking, breathing is one activity that troubles the artificial division between inside and outside, between life and nonlife, effectively breaking the “epidermal enclosures” (Povinelli 2016: 42) we have constructed. As Povinelli asks: “Where is the human body if it is viewed from with [sic] the lung?” (2016: 42) The lung, Povinelli maintains, is “the most appropriate organ for the Anthropogenic climate change era because it points to the openness of all beings to their surroundings” (2016: 51). Like the virus, it compels us to ‘unskin’ entities, to look beyond the imaginary epidermises and borders and become aware of a “radical open field” (Povinelli/Coleman/Yusoff 2017: 180). In the age of the virus, we understand that we are zombie bodies, all of us, infected by the outside from the beginning. What we need is not an object- but a zombie-oriented ontology or ecology – the zombie as “the inhuman reality of the body” (Cohen 2017).

But the meaning of the zombie is far from exhausted by these reflections on bio-, necro- and geontopower. In the *Zombiecene*, zombification extends to virtually all social spheres:

Politics

Politics, for instance, is today thoroughly zombified, dominated everywhere, as Henry Giroux (2014) and others have shown, by zombie politicians and policies, zombie values, zombie culture, zombie ideologies, and zombie violence. This “casino capitalist zombie politics views competition as a form of social combat, celebrates war as an extension of politics, and legitimates a ruthless Social Darwinism in which particular individuals and groups are considered simply redundant, disposable” (Giroux 2014: 2). As Giroux points out, “the mutually determining forces of economic inequality, corporate power, and a growing punishing corporate state [have]

become the defining features of zombie politics” (2014: 36). In the era of Trumpism, this politics has arguably reached a zenith. The countless popular cultural renditions of Trump as a zombie figure hit the mark. As Fintan O’Toole has observed in an instructive essay on Trump’s ‘afterlife’, “[l]ife after death is [Trumpism’s] governing trope”. In particular, it

has fully assimilated the outward appearances and forms of the dead Republican Party to a new body, a duplicate that looks the same but has in fact been hollowed out. [...] [W]hat has been excised in this process is the most basic assumption of electoral democracy: that the majority wins and the minority, however, [sic] disappointed, accepts the legitimacy of its victory and its right to govern. (O’Toole 2020)

It is in Trump’s transformation of this tactic into a long-term political strategy, a post-democratic structure of permanent minority rule, that the move towards authoritarianism is rooted – the GOP becoming the “RIP party – repressive in perpetuity” (O’Toole 2020). As O’Toole argues, it is this anti-democratic culture established by Trump, his “unabashed demonstration of the relatively unbounded possibilities of an American autocracy”, that now needs to be uprooted – “the long posterity of Donald Trump”. Beyond the resuscitation of the corpse of the former American conservative party, there is another important element of Trumpism that clearly marks it as a brand of zombie politics: “Its core appeal is necromantic. It promised to make a buried world rise again” (O’Toole 2020). This, of course, is a key characteristic of the contemporary ‘new right’ in general. Virtually all over the globe, these new zombie politicians are engaged in black magic, summoning ancient specters, attempting to bring back to life the dead (essentialist) referents of nation, *Volks*, race, sex, gender, etc., whose refusal to rest in peace is accompanied everywhere by escalating violence. This necromancy goes hand in hand with a shift in the public mindset at large, in which, particularly after the experience of more than 30 years of neoliberalism and its politics of precarity (cf. Marchart 2013), the future is not associated with improvement and progress anymore but with decline and retrogression, and hence no longer a site of hopes and expectations but fear. The popular mentality performs a U-turn, so that positive affects are now invested elsewhere: in the past. Thus, with utopia buried, the ‘retrotopia’ has emerged: “visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future” (Bauman 2017: 5). As Zygmunt Bauman remarks, the impact of this shift “is visible and palpably felt *at every level* of social cohabitation” (2017: 6f) – wherever we look, the garbled and toothless, rotting, hideous face of the zombie past glares at us. Yet, in the age of global hypercapitalism and biopolitics, the great referents of liberalism (freedom, reason, equality, individualism, etc.) seem equally exhausted,

tenuously living on as mere simulacra in political rhetoric and ritual. *What way out of this omnipresence of different kinds of zombie politics?*

Economy

Already Marx himself frequently used Gothic imagery in his critique of political economy. In each period, there are different ‘monsters of the market’, ‘embodying the violent contradictions of the system’ (Latham 2002; McNally 2011; Newitz 2006). The central figure of global (neoliberal) capitalism is the zombie. Consider, for instance, its insatiable appetite, its boundless, self-replicating nature, its parasitic and alienating character (esp. in the exploitation and ‘ossification’ of ‘living labor’), the domination of life by ‘dead labor’ as well as the ‘necrocapitalist’ extraction of surplus value from the *actual* death of laboring bodies (Tyner 2019), the obliteration of the distinction between subject and object through the dynamics of the fetishization of the commodity and the reification of the worker, the cruelty and lack of empathy in the generalized ‘war of all against all’, the perpetual drive for ever more (‘mindless’) consumption as well as the ‘self-consumption’ of the contemporary aesthetic subject in the experience or attention economy (Larsen 2017), the dialectics of massification and individualization, ongoing cannibalistic as well as zombifying neoimperialism, the colonization of the brain in ‘immaterial labor’, the fabrication and control of the ‘subject’ (*subjectum/subjectus*) through virtually all-powerful material-discursive-media-techno-pharmaco apparatuses or assemblages (we are far removed from ‘freedom’ or ‘free will’ here!), as well as the fact that, from a critical, ecological/archaeological point of view, none of the innumerable products manufactured by the system ever really dies, but decays, rots, and stays as dangerous residue (‘zombie media’ etc.) (Hertz/Parikka 2011, 2012). At the same time, this system has for some time now been in severe crisis. After 2007/08, some commentators began to speak of ‘zombie banks’, but really, what we are faced with today is an entire zombie system (Harman 2010).⁶ Moreover, as McKenzie Wark (2019) has argued, with information now no longer being an emerging but, in fact, the dominant force of production, and with the ‘vectoralist class’, which owns and controls the vectors along which information is gathered and used, having become the new dominant class, it seems that, for all intents and purposes, ‘capital is dead’. While it continues to lumber on – after all, every social formation is a hybrid of coexisting and overlapping modes of production – the actual center of power and of the creation of surplus value has shifted elsewhere.

6 As a matter of fact, insofar as the equilibrium model which is hegemonic within economic theory is really a ‘great delusion’ (Harman 2010) since destruction and crisis are built into the system, capitalism may be said to be a ‘zombie system’ by nature.

Culture

From films to television commercials, from novels and comic books to music and video games, from the visual arts to political caricature, from hand sanitizers to baby onesies, from garden gnomes to energy drinks – in both, so-called ‘high’ as well as ‘popular’ culture, the zombie is everywhere today.⁷ This cultural omnipresence is symptomatic and expressive of the fact that zombification has by now become a near-universal condition, not just of humanity but virtually all existents, that we are indeed in the Zombiecene. It indexes something like a ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams 1977: 128–35), marked by “deep anxiety in contemporary Euro-American culture over things that refuse to die, on the one hand, and things that occupy a realm between life and death, on the other” (Halberstam 2020: 148). Importantly, this structure of feeling also involves a strong sense of exhaustion, paralysis, inertia, even belatedness (cf. Han 2015, 2018). And this, too, can be related to culture, namely to the fact that, beyond its obsession with the zombie, cultural production at present is *itself* thoroughly zombified. As critics such as Simon Reynolds (2011) and Mark Fisher (2014) have pointed out, the general “temporal pathology” (Fisher 2014: 16) of the ‘cancellation of the future’ (Berardi 2011) that characterizes our present moment manifests in 21st-century (popular) culture as ‘retromania’, that is, as the persistence of old forms that keep coming back from the dead. Fisher explains: “While 20th-century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion.” (2014: 8) Gone is all sense of radical rupture, innovation and future shock; instead, culture suffers from an “epidemic of nostalgia” (Boym 2001: xiv), so that “cultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity” (Fisher 2014: 9). The avant-garde has turned into an arrièrè-garde, the exploratory impulse become archaeology (Reynolds 2011: xx).⁸ As Fisher, drawing on the work of Fredric Jameson, observes, the ‘nostalgia mode’ that dominates our present has little in common with the psychological or the political forms of nostalgia of earlier cultural moments. Instead of an actual yearning for the past, it is a mere yearning for a *form*, emptied of any coherent sense of historical time. What we have today, then, is the universalization of Jameson’s (1991) ‘waning of historicity’: the naturalization and ubiquity of anachronism, the endless late-capitalist recycling of old formulas and techniques, severed from any explicit reference to the past. When the very distinction between past and present is thus broken down, we find ourselves in the age of the zombie.

7 For many more, often curious, examples, cf. Lauro 2017.

8 For a related argument, though one that reads these changes in somewhat more ‘neutral’ or even optimistic terms, cf. Nealon 2012: 43–65.

Theory

Similar to culture more generally, theory (including this very essay) is at present under the zombie's spell. Not only has there been a surge in zombie scholarship – as a trope, the zombie now also creeps into all kinds of texts otherwise not directly concerned with it. But, in a sense, theory *itself* today exists in a zombified state, too. After all, in the past three to four decades, it has been pronounced dead several times. Terry Eagleton, for instance, writing in 2003, declared that “[t]he golden age of cultural theory is long past” and that “we are living now in the aftermath of what one might call high theory” (2004: 1, 2). However, as John Mowitt has pointed out, “[i]f theory must be repeatedly killed anew, it is because it stubbornly survives its death”. Theory, he concludes, “has assumed the restless, even perpetually agitated, status of the living dead”. Yet, for Mowitt, there is a potential here: “Theory is not simply in Limbo, it *is* Limbo in the sense that it has come to designate the zone of indistinction, the *limbus*, between life and its others. This legacy of theory, precisely to the extent that it haunts its contemporary pedagogy, is one that deserves more of our attention.” (2006: 272) Christian Haines and Sean Grattan agree, arguing that such an approach is a productive one as it

situates theoretical practice in a position where it does not simply mourn the death of ‘Theory’ but rather interrogates the very conditions of theory’s vitality: theory’s encounter with its others, its constantly finding itself between states, is also its ability to reconstitute itself, to work through the problems it poses itself without simply devolving into a neurotic compulsion to repeat. (2017: 28n2)

This, then, is perhaps also the moment of ‘low theory’, a mode of theorizing advanced by critics such as Jack Halberstam or McKenzie Wark which breaks with the zombifying “repetition of received ideas, narrative forms that resolve in predictable ways, a culture of exegesis that reproduces sameness” (Wark 2019: 12). Low theory “is always a kind of *détournement* or highjacking [sic] of high theory for other purposes” (Wark 2017: 231). Building on the work of Stuart Hall, Halberstam and Wark develop this model of thinking as one that is, precisely, “interstitial, its labor communicative rather than controlling” (Wark 2016: 218), that works at many levels at once, moves across disciplinary boundaries and refuses established hierarchies of knowledge, is flexible and open-ended, and “designed to inform political practice rather than formulate abstract thoughts for the sake of some neutral philosophical project” (Halberstam 2011: 16).

Here, then, the zombie is given a new twist – the opening of a space of possibility, the emergence of something new. We will explore this other side of the zombie in a moment.

Academy/Ideology

Working at a European university in the early 21st century, particularly in the so-called ‘humanities’, it is certainly hard to resist the title of a collection of essays: *Zombies in the Academy* (Whelan/Walker/Moore 2013). Faced with the brutal neoliberal restructuring of the university, speaking of ‘living death in higher education’ is immediately plausible. This corporate university as a ‘state apparatus’ (i.e., in the structuration and organization rather than the content of knowledge production) as well as the ideological make-up of the common sense at large are today still largely organized around that most zombified of all entities: the *individual subject*. Even though this fabrication of liberal-humanist discourse has for a long time been more or less taken apart by both, evidence in the material world as well as science and theory – with all the other binarisms related to its strict opposition to the ‘object’ equally demolished (inside/outside, private/public, man/woman, human/animal, ...) – it stubbornly clings on, refusing to die. One reason for this, of course, has to do with the dominant forms of neoliberal subjectivation. In other words, even as, at some levels, including those belonging to what was once called the material ‘base’, contemporary capitalism is, in all kinds of ways, itself engaged in the unremitting deconstruction of the unified, sovereign subject, at others, especially the ‘super-structural’ level of the hegemonic discourses and representations, it continues to keep the corpse alive for the purposes of (self-)control and (self-)exploitation. Here, ‘zombie humanism’ (Halberstam 2020: part 2) is still the order of the day. This fact has led some critics to recode the zombie: Since it is a “boundary figure”, an “unbecoming”, indeed, an “antisubject” (Lauro/Embry 2008: 90, 94n24, 87), could it not also be a *figure of resistance*?

“Single vision produces worse illusions than double-vision or many-headed monsters” (2010: 2196), Haraway declared. Accordingly, her cyborg was both, a figure of control, but also of the potential for emancipation and new ways of being. In a similar vein, the zombie, too, represents not only “a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality” but also “an imaginative resource” (Haraway 2010: 2191) for a novel kind of politics. Today, as the zombie hordes shamle forwards, what slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? Things fall apart, the center cannot hold? Very well. At last, let the falcon be released. Perhaps, a shape with lion body and the head of a man, a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun – this *humanimal-geo assemblage* – is just what is needed to finally bring 20 centuries of zombifying anthropocentrism to an end. We should not forget that, from the first, the zombie narrative was not just connected to subjection (slavery), but also to revolt (slave rebellions, the Haitian Revolution) (Lauro/

Embry 2008). Often, therefore, as in Romero's classic *Living Dead* trilogy, the zombies allure as much as they frighten us, they appall but also seduce; they "exercise too strong a pull, too strange a fascination", so that "identities and identifications are increasingly dissolved" (Shaviro 2017). As Halberstam points out:

The zombie must not be read as simply the human emptied of will or subjectivity; the zombie is a kind of parahuman force, a collective subject reaching from beyond the grave to exact bloody revenge from regimes of law, order, and truth. The zombie is part of a wild otherworld suppressed by white, rational thought and returning to partial life in order to dispossess humans.⁹ (2020: 166)

In short: "Every zombie represents a critique of the human." (Halberstam 2020: 166) Time to lay the human to rest. Against zombie humanism, then, a *zombie antihumanism*. The 'anti-' also dominates Lauro's and Embry's important reading of the zombie: As "anticatharsis" and "antiresolution", that is, as an "enactment of negative dialectics", the zombie represents "a paradox that disrupts the entire system" – "a subject that is not a subject" (2008: 93, 91, 94). In this way, the zombie invites us "to throw off the illusory chains of an 'identity' based on the division between subject and object" (Lauro/Embry 2008: 107). In light of the continuing dominance of the ideology of the Subject and the attendant ideologies of race, gender, ability, etc., and of its still central role in the machinery of capital, this is certainly vital – even though I am skeptical about Lauro's and Embry's claim that the destruction of the individual will automatically entail the end of capitalism (2008: 96, 106). After all, as I have pointed out, in many regards – though not at the level of the dominant ideologies – contemporary capitalism itself appears quite happy to shatter the illusion of the unified individual and to work with and through the 'dividual' (Deleuze 1992) instead.¹⁰ Nevertheless, as Hardt and Negri similarly argue, the "revolutionary process of the abolition of identity" (2009: 339) is without doubt a key element in the struggle against capital and control at large. From down in the abyss, the zombie calls out to us, who are standing on the brink: "Don't try to save yourself – in fact, your *self* has to be sacrificed!" (Hardt/Negri 2009: 339) 'Anthropological exodus' (Hardt/Negri 2001: 214–18). For Lauro and Embry, the zombie is a figure of pure negativity and as such cannot be linked to a "call for positive change, it calls only for the destruction of the reigning model" (2008: 91). The zombie, they argue, alerts us to the fact that "the posthuman is endgame: it is a becoming that is the end of becomings" (2008: 106).

9 These remarks resonate particularly strongly with Jordan Peele's stunning 2019 horror film *Us*.

10 On the important notion of the 'dividual', cf. also Denson 2020: 51–72; Ott 2018; Raunig 2016. Cf. also the contributions of all three scholars to a special issue of the journal *Coils of the Serpent* exploring the contemporary relevance of Deleuze's "Postscript on the Societies of Control", in which he advances this concept (Cord/Schleusener 2020).

In other words: If the zombie is ‘a subject that is not a subject’¹², then surely we are allowed, even compelled, to ask: *what, then, is it?*, as well as: *what could it become?* After all, even in the case of the zombie, “the decentring of the subject is not the destruction of the subject” (Hall 1996: 13). Rather, it signals a shift from the subject of liberal humanism (individual, unitary, sovereign, and opposed to its objectified others) towards a posthumanist, postanthropocentric, material becoming. “We need a subject position worthy of our times” (2019: 41), Rosi Braidotti declares. This, as she goes on to explain, means emphasizing “the embodied, embedded and transversal selves that we are, bonded by ontological relationality” (45). In the Zombiecene, the subject, following Braidotti, must be reconceived as “a dynamic convergence phenomenon”, “a *zoe*/geo/techno-mediated being, immanently related to and hence inseparable from the material, terrestrial and planetary locations that we happen to inhabit” (41, 63). With the old ontological distinctions undone, “[a]t this particular point in our collective history ‘we’ simply do not know what our enfleshed selves can actually do” (63). Consequently, we are today called upon to experiment with what we are capable of becoming. The zombie – she of all entities! – recoded as a figure of *potentiality*. Thus, practice now moves center stage. As Braidotti observes: “Posthuman subjectivity is a practical project. It is a praxis. What matters is to negotiate collectively about *what* exactly we are in the process of becoming” (74). Similarly, Hardt and Negri argue that “what is required is a shift of emphasis from knowing to doing, generating a multiplicity of beings constantly open to alterity that are revealed through the perspective of the body, which is an assemblage of affects or ways of being, which is to say, forms of life” (2009: 124). As Braidotti as well as Hardt and Negri note, such experimental becoming may well

12 Lauro's and Embry's phrase is symptomatic of our profoundly ambivalent situation in which we are forced to have recourse to our received linguistic register despite the fact that it (its terms as well as its grammar) is wholly inadequate to what we are trying to theorize. This general problematic is more explicitly taken up in Jane Bennett's book *influx & efflux* (2020). Like Derrida, our only option seems to be to put all these terms 'under erasure'.

be violent, painful, traumatic, monstrous: “Revolution is not for the faint of heart. It is for monsters. You have to lose who you are to discover what you can become.” (Hardt/Negri 2009: 339f)

This statement could well serve as a sort of motto for Alex Garland’s fascinating 2018 science fiction horror film *Annihilation*. Based on Jeff VanderMeer’s novel of the same name, it tells the story of a scientific expedition into the ‘Shimmer’, an anomalous and quarantined zone that emerged after a meteor landed on the coast of the southern United States and is continually expanding. As the group advances deeper into the area, they encounter all kinds of strange, mutating plants and animals, and eventually come to realize that the Shimmer functions like a prism ‘refracting’ all DNA and thus transforming everything within it. Inspecting their own bodies, they note that this increasingly also applies to themselves. At the end, only Lena, the protagonist of the film, escapes, having unintentionally destroyed the Shimmer, while of the other members of the expedition, two have been killed, the mind of one has been refracted into a mutant, bear-like creature, one has been transformed into vegetative matter, and another disintegrated into a glowing nebulous structure. Yet, as the final shot of the film, in which Lena’s irises weirdly shimmer, makes clear, she too has been changed or is changing.

The Shimmer is a ‘hyperobject’ (Morton 2013) (in fact, some commentators have chosen to read it as a figuration of climate change): it is ‘beyond’ the human and our categories of knowledge, it possesses agency, it brings about ‘the end of the world’, that is, of the ‘Great Divide’ (Latour 1993) between nature and culture, where ‘world’, ‘environment’ or ‘nature’ function as a clearly separated background for the human drama in the foreground, it puts an end to anthropocentrism and correlationism, flattens ontology, and catches humans in the ‘mesh’ of things. If, for Deleuze, film is philosophy, then *Annihilation* is a form of ‘ecological thought’ (Morton 2010). This, surely, is ‘Anthropocenema’ (Kara 2016; Neilson n.d.), or rather: *Zombiecenema*. Whereas *District 9* presents the zombie as a figure of biopolitical control, Garland’s film invokes it as a figure of violent transformation, of potential and newness, of a monstrous, posthuman becoming.

There is a strong sense of the uncanny to the film. In an article entitled “Generation Anthropocene”, writer Robert Macfarlane referred to the philosopher Glenn Albrecht’s concept of ‘solastalgia’ as part of an “emerging lexis” for the Anthropocene. A term coined to describe a “distinctive kind of homesickness”, “the unhappiness of people whose landscapes [are] being transformed about them by forces beyond their control”, solastalgia “speaks of a modern uncanny, in which a familiar place is rendered unrecognisable by climate change or corporate action: the home become suddenly unhomely around its inhabitants” (Macfarlane 2016). To a certain extent, the film’s landscapes and beings, remade as they are by the Shimmer, may be said to evoke a similar uncanny – “the strange *within* the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange” (Fisher 2016: 10). In fact, already early on in the film, as we

observe Lena in her house, and her husband, who had left as part of an earlier expedition into the Shimmer one year before and never come back, suddenly returns home, unable to remember or explain what has happened (in a dialogue that is itself deeply uncanny), already then, the 'homely' (familiar and familial) appears to the audience as thoroughly alien. This may leave viewers digging for the buried processes of repression that, in the Freudian model, lie at the root of the uncanny (Freud 2003). Perhaps, they might even make a find; after all, there is quite a lot here that may provoke a psychoanalytically inspired reading: the emphasis on trauma, the repetitions and doublings (esp. the doubling of the house and Lena's *doppelgänger* at the end), the suggestion of unacknowledged or unconscious drives and desires, the theme of (hetero-)sexuality and betrayal, the suggestion of the entanglement of affection and aggression (or Eros and Thanatos), and so on. Yet, I believe that attempts to resolve the events of the Shimmer psychoanalytically should be resisted. In fact, as I see it, psychology is not only not a primary concern of the film – certainly, the characters are not the 'rounded' figures of conventional realism, expressive of the ideology of bourgeois individualism – more importantly, as the story progresses, it even stops being an adequate model for thinking about human subjectivity altogether. There is no neat resolution, no deep and hidden truth, in the sense of a psychological interiority, here. Because of this, a psychoanalytical, 'paranoid' reading (Sedgwick 2003: 123–51) inevitably falters. In its place, *Annihilation* requires, indeed, invites, alternative protocols of reading – ones that do not resolve its provocations by "looking inside (the characters) for some final key" (Fisher 2016: 58f), but rather attend to the ways in which these provocations problematize the very distinction between an inside and an outside.

Thus, instead of the uncanny, the film is more productively thought about in terms of what Fisher has called the 'weird' and the 'eerie', aesthetic modes that are driven by "a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience", and that "allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside" (2016: 8, 10). While, according to Fisher, the weird always involves a sense of *wrongness*, of something that does not belong, with the outside making an irruption into the familiar, and hence leads us to question our received frameworks and conceptions of the world, the eerie is constituted by *failures of absence or presence* – a presence where there should be nothing, an absence where there should be something – and thus is intimately tied up with the problem of agency and the forces governing our lives and world, evoking, for instance, the question of the agency of capital or of the nonhuman. It is obvious that, even more than the uncanny, the weird and the eerie are the domains of the zombie. Importantly, Fisher points out that both are by no means exclusively distressing or even terrifying. Instead, they provoke fascination, a *jouissance*-like mixture of pleasure and pain. After all, "there is an enjoyment" in being in the presence of the new, "in seeing the familiar and the conventional becoming outmoded" and in "escap[ing] from the confines

of what is ordinarily taken for reality" (Fisher 2016: 13). In all of this, the weird and the eerie, rather than the uncanny, prove to be the defining modes of Garland's film, allowing us to engage with its enigmas and provocations in much more productive and, I would claim, appropriate ways. Approaching the text in this light permits us, for instance, to understand its concern with trauma not so much in terms of repression and repetition compulsion, but of a kind of "transcendental shock", of "ruptures in the very fabric of experience itself" (Fisher 2016: 22), opening the subject up more strongly and explicitly to the outside. Similarly, the already mentioned shots of Lena's house early on in the film assume new meaning as well. As Andrew Hageman astutely observes:

The shots are tightly framed and from perspectives that are in threshold spaces inside the house such as corridors and openings between two distinct rooms. As a result, *Annihilation* conjures the feeling of home in a thoroughly eerie way. It does not, however, do this conventionally. Rather than emphasizing spookiness contained within the house as seen from outside (as in Hitchcock's *Psycho* [1960]) or the interior as a bulwark against spookiness without the house (as in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* [1968]), this montage establishes the house/home as *in itself* permeable and permeated. Put another way, the architectural artifact typically associated with dividing inside from outside, private from public, and so on, is implied to be much more porous than all that. And by leaving this focalising agency unidentified, the film enables readers to fill in the blanks of what crosses thresholds and coexists with human beings, from microbes and viruses to ghosts and water vapor. (in Crosby et al. 2019: 259)

Here, as elsewhere, the "interpretive machinery of the uncanny", which "inherently domesticates" (Luckhurst 2017: 1052), breaks down. If anything, we are confronted with China Miéville's 'abcanny', which moves Freud's notion "from simple inversion to odd mutation" (Luckhurst 2017: 1052) and aims "to en-Weird ontology itself" (Miéville 2008: 113). Such weirding of ontology is *Annihilation*'s main concern. In true (new) 'weird' fashion, the film is dedicated to 'veering', to perversity and transgression, "a fiction of strange zones and borderscapes, its monsters boundary-crawlers that slime all over generic quarantines, making borders less lines of separation than promiscuous contact zones" (Luckhurst 2017: 1055). As Roger Luckhurst notes, it is only fitting that weird film and fiction should have become a privileged area of the speculative theoretical and philosophical endeavors associated with the nonhuman turn (resulting, e.g., in Graham Harman's [2012] 'weird realism') – it appears to be "a form peculiarly suited to addressing the hybrid world of the Anthropocene" (2017: 1056).

As we have observed, from the beginning, with the first shots of the home, *Annihilation* undoes stable notions of inside and outside. The heterotopic zone of the Shimmer is itself emblematic of this: an extraterritoriality that is also an in-

tratrterritoriality, offering a vision “of alternate orders that are neither quite utopian nor dystopian but instead suggest a weirded interstitial alterity” (Luckhurst 2017: 1057). Throughout, but of course above all through the manifold mutations occurring within the Shimmer, the film, as Hageman puts it, “invites spectators to re-envision the home, whether house, ecosystem, or planet, as an intersection of insides and outsides that flow and mix” (in Crosby et al. 2019: 260). In fact, the Shimmer can be read as a spatial figuration of the Zombiecene itself: here, the received ontological boundaries between life and death, human and nonhuman, subject and object, organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate are cancelled out. This applies equally to the body of ‘individual’ organisms. What we can glimpse in the Shimmer’s monstrous shapes is a view of the body akin to the one proposed by (feminist) new materialism mentioned earlier, which conceives it as ontologically unstable, impure, porous, leaky, and permeable. In this way, the film reveals “the fraught and fragile nature of individuation” (Bennett 2020: xvii) and instead emphasizes transcorporeality, interdependence, symbiogenesis, becoming-with, and the ontological entanglement of all existents.¹³ One memorable, disturbing scene has the members of Lena’s group watch a found recording of an earlier expedition, in which one man cuts open the abdomen of another to reveal within, in the place of internal organs, the constant squirming and wriggling of eel- or worm-like organisms. Working through the figure of the tentacle – which has been recognized as a signature of weird fiction and cinema (Luckhurst 2017: 1054) and promoted as an image both for understanding and thinking in the Anthropocene (Cord 2026; Haraway 2016: 30–57) – this Cronenbergesque scene of body horror presents the zombie body as a ‘body without organs’, “not a dead body but a living body all the more alive and teeming [because] it has blown apart the organism and its organization” (Deleuze/Guattari 1987: 30). There is no *inside* here – no stable, ordered, and sealed-off corporeal or mental interiority. No closed borders. Instead, the monstrous enmeshing and continuous becoming of all kinds of forces, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, socio-cultural and natural, etc.

Monstrous? Yes, but, as I have argued, only from the point of view of the old, liberal-humanist subject.¹⁴ Once this defensive perspective, which was always, in the Lacanian sense, ‘imaginary’, is abandoned, the meaning of the changes occurring within the Shimmer shifts from signaling a horrifying destruction of the self to

13 Roger Caillois’ surrealist-speculative reflections on mimicry, homomorphy, and phagocytosis, recently discussed by Bennett (2020: 74–78), which assume a continuity between human, animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds and postulate a universal drive towards ‘becoming unbounded’ inherent to all organisms, could be productively read as an intertext of Garland’s film.

14 Of course, the category of the ‘monstrous’ has long been investigated and deconstructed in all kinds of fields, including psychoanalysis, gender and queer studies, postcolonial and critical race studies, disability studies, posthumanism, and, of course, teratology.

marking a moment of transformation and metamorphosis (cf. Hardt/Negri 2009: 332–40). As Hardt and Negri observe: “The anthropological exodus is important primarily because here is where the positive, constructive face of the mutation begins to appear: an ontological mutation in action” (2001: 215f). “This creative evolution”, they continue, “does not merely occupy any existing place, but rather invents a new place; it is a desire that creates a new body; a metamorphosis that breaks all the naturalistic homologies of modernity.” (2001: 216) The film itself strongly suggests such a reading: For not only does the Shimmer contain as many wonders as horrors – as Lena remarks towards the end, some things were “nightmarish”, others “beautiful” – after having left the area, she – and the viewer with her – also increasingly comes to understand the mutations in just such terms. This becomes particularly clear in the scenes showing how Lena is interviewed after her return. Here, the contrast that is set up between herself and the man questioning her is striking: Whereas the latter, effectively representing anthropocentric, liberal-humanist ideology and the scientific-military complex it underpins, inquires about the nature of her double (“Can you describe its form?”, “Was it carbon based?”, “What did it want?”) and insists that “it came here for a reason”, “it attacked you”, “it was destroying everything”, Lena replies: “I don’t think it wanted anything. [...] It wasn’t destroying. It was changing everything. It was making something new.” This, in fact, is what *annihilation* comes to mean: not (only/primarily) destruction, but – as in particle physics, where it denotes “the process that occurs when a subatomic particle collides with its respective antiparticle to produce other particles” (Wikipedia) – (also) creation. Creative destruction – destructive creation. *Making something new*¹⁵ – such are the ‘promises of monsters’ (Haraway 1992).

In this way, Garland’s film encourages audiences to imagine an alternative (to the) Zombicene, something more akin to Haraway’s (2016) vision of the Chthulucene. Specifically, through its insistent focus on bodies and their shifting ontologies, *Annihilation* invites a posthuman materialist approach which can perhaps be characterized as ‘vital(ist)’ insofar as the Shimmer appears as an endlessly productive, transversal, and rhizomatic force interconnecting and entangling all matter – *vibrant matter* indeed (Bennett 2010). Hence also the frequent references to cancer, viruses, etc., and the subtle recurrence of the figure eight or symbol of the ouroboros in the weirdly proliferating tattoo – as Lena says: “continuous mutation”. The film suggests an ontology centered on *zoe*, on becoming, networks, and assemblages, but also, moving beyond biontology, on *geos*, nonlife, and unbecoming, thus provoking awareness of Povinelli’s “radical open field” (Povinelli/Coleman/Yusoff 2017:

15 One is tempted to cite Salman Rushdie’s famous words on “the absolutism of the Pure” and hybridity and impurity as “how newness enters the world” (1992: 394) here and give them a posthumanist twist. In general, there are significant overlaps and dialogues, but also important tensions between posthumanism and postcolonialism.

180). It is a 'nomadic' film, to the extent that 'nomadic thought', as it is developed in Braidotti's (esp. 2011) work, "rests on estrangement as a method to free subject formation from the normative vision of the self" (Braidotti 2009: 527). It calls upon us to "become more ontologically inventive and sensible" (Haraway 2016: 98), to cultivate new forms of kinship, assemblages, and alliances – "disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling" (Haraway 2010: 2193) – and provokes disidentification, the deterritorialization and nomadization of the human – "cultivate your inner housefly or cockroach, instead of your inner child" (Shaviri 1995: 53). For this purpose, the film mainly uses and reworks the aesthetic mode of the *grotesque* – a mode that has a long tradition which typically involves the juxtaposition of 'usually' incompatible elements (e.g., human and animal, the ludicrous and the disgusting and terrifying) and the violation of the 'laws of nature', thus opening up new spaces of possibilities which force us to question established conceptions of the normal and the human (Edwards/Graulund 2013). In particular, the grotesque is deeply materialist, built around what Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) famously called the 'material bodily principle'. Grotesque bodies are non-normative, transgressive, even excessive: ugly, deformed, monstrous, disproportionate, filthy, revolting, incomplete. Unlike the "bourgeois conception of the completed atomized being" enshrined in the now dominant, 'classical' image of the body which presents it as "entirely finished, completed, strictly limited", the grotesque image "ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body" and instead shows an "unfinished and open body [...] not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries" but "blended with the world, with animals, with objects" – "a body in the act of becoming" (Bakhtin 1984: 24, 320, 317, 26f, 317). What, I think, emerges in *Annihilation* and other recent works of art and fiction, most explicitly in those associated with body horror, is a distinctly *posthuman grotesque* which, to develop Peter Stallybrass' and Allon White's (1986) important rereading of Bakhtin, can be understood as involving or pointing to what we might call an 'ontological' or 'onto-political unconscious' revolving around ontological hybridity as well as the complex interplay of disgust and desire. Yet, if the posthuman grotesque as it appears in the film inevitably includes a deconstruction of the human(ist) subject, the focus here, as we have seen, is also on a *reconstruction*, on 'making something new'.¹⁶

The aesthetics of Garland's film are, however, not exhausted by body horror and grotesquerie. These are rather combined with multiple other modes and styles, including the visual creation of an overall surreal(ist), hypnotic, dreamlike atmosphere, which is primarily the result of the camerawork, the lighting, and the

16 Arguably, this is in keeping with the more general shift in recent theory and culture away from critique (only) towards more affirmative, reconstructive modes discussed in ch. 3 and the excursus (though of course, *deconstruction* was never *destruction*). Indeed, for Haines and Grattan (2017: 28n1), posthumanism as a whole should be considered part of this shift.

often stunning shapes. In fact, there is a certain correspondence here between signification or the signified on the one hand and the materiality of the signifier on the other. The film's sensuous visual style (as well as its extraordinary music, composed by Ben Salisbury and Geoff Barrow) chimes perfectly with its thematic concerns – “corruptions of form” (Lena) everywhere. For instance, the omnipresent rainbow-like light is, of course, a result of ‘refraction’, and contributes to the general impression of a liquid, kaleidoscopic, and vibrant world, a realm in flux, where nothing is definitively fixed or finished and where all things flow into each other. Neither epistemologically – “I don’t know” must be the most often uttered words in the film – nor ontologically is there any certainty here. Like the omnipresent lichens in the Shimmer¹⁷, there is just a ceaseless becoming. In both, form and content, no unity, stability, or completion then – only “echoes” (Lena). In all of this, I believe the film effectively gestures towards something like an emerging *écriture posthumaine*, echoing and ‘refracting’ *écriture féminine*, as it emerges in the work of Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva, and others.¹⁸ It raises the question: *Comment parler-zombie? Comment parler-posthumain?*

The postanthropocentric, posthumanist imaginary of the film owes much to Surrealism – but also, or, perhaps better, including, the work of J.G. Ballard (after all, Ballard himself was heavily influenced by Surrealist art). The alligator-filled swamps at the beginning of the expedition, recalling Ballard's *The Drowned World*, or the wondrous crystallized structures on the beach towards the end, strongly reminiscent of his *The Crystal World*, are two cases in point. Beyond this, almost all the names of the film's characters are derived from Ballard's writings. This is only appropriate because, like *Annihilation*, this is Zombie-fiction. Writing for the Zombiecene. "Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash. During our friendship he had rehearsed his death in many crashes" (Ballard 2008: 1). *Crash*, like Ballard's other texts from the 1960s and 70s, are 'thanato-narratives'. His protagonists are the undead, they are us, remade in all kinds of human-nonhuman, organic-inorganic becomings. As ontologies are unsettled and shifting, they, like Lena, like us, are trying to cope, to adapt, to transform, to 'make something new'.

Yet, while Ballard's work and Garland's film are all about the monstrous undoing and transformation of the human(ist) subject, this *making*, that is, the practical and experimental aspect highlighted earlier, is still rather timid in both. Today, the zombie must get more active. It must create a collective. That is to say: We have to

17 Because of their fascinating mode of existence, lichens, like fungi more generally, have attracted considerable attention in recent posthumanist thought. Haraway, quoting Scott Gilbert, declares: "We are all lichens." (2016: 30)

18 In this context, it is also noteworthy that the expedition team of which Lena is part is an all-female group.

move beyond “the happy and hopeless posthumanism that is content with counting and recounting the connections between humans and nonhumans” and instead fashion what Dimitris Papadopoulos calls “insurgent posthumanism” (2010b: 148). As Papadopoulos, whose work is crucial in this context, asks: “How can left politics become more posthumanist (again) and how can posthumanism become more left again?” (2010b: 144) Certainly, this includes conceiving biopolitics in radical nature-cultural ways, by developing “a perspective on the personal-collective that, without neglecting human individual bodies, doesn’t start *from* these bodies but from awareness of their more than human interdependency” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 167), and aiming at ‘alterbiopolitical’ interventions that create new world-making relationalities. *Ontology is political*. It “is not a description of a final state of things, but of processes that includes alternative possibilities of world-making” (Papadopoulos 2014: 71). Thus, what we need today is an active ‘ontological politics’, a deliberate politicization of *matter*. While the ‘cosmopolitics’ or assembly politics of actor-network theory and others remain important, we must also go beyond these and commit to a *materialist politics* worthy of the name in the Zombiecene: a politics “not primarily performed as a politics of institutions but as the fundamental capacity to remake and transform processes of matter and life” – “an activist engagement with matter itself” (Papadopoulos 2018: 8). Such a ‘politics of matter’, in other words, aims at changing the very materiality of lived spaces and bodies – “material transformation as constituent political organising” (Papadopoulos 2014: 75). Experimental practice, “the material worlding of existence” (Papadopoulos 2014: 76), is central here (Papadopoulos 2018): It is through actively remaking our embodied existences, experimenting with bodily practices and material alliances, and through collectively redrawing the immediate conditions of everyday experience that ‘alterontologies’ are created. This fashioning of alternative forms of life, a reordering of the very constitution of being, effectively materializes ordinary relations of justice. This is a material, processual, ‘thick’ justice; the crafting of material worlds allowing formerly ‘invisibilized’ actants to thrive (Papadopoulos 2010a, 2014). If we are to survive the Zombiecene, this will be one critical way: onto-resistance against onto-power; “terraformation from below” (Papadopoulos 2018: 48); the collective making of a self-organized common world – the creation, not just of the social commons, but of the *ecological commons* (Papadopoulos 2010b). Yet, whereas Papadopoulos tends to consider the politics of matter an *alternative* to forms of left politics that more overtly target power and the state, following Gramsci and his notion of the ‘integral state’, I believe that the making of the eco-commons actually requires a combined struggle on several fronts, including more direct acts of opposition and resistance. It has often been noted that the zombie frequently appears in the common spaces of the public sphere: in city squares, streets, schools, shopping malls, etc. There is the embodied and everyday making of alternative ontologies here, but also interruption, occupation, a reclaiming and reappropriation of the regimented spatialities and temporal-

ities of the late-capitalist cityscape (cf. Nyong'o 2017; Orpana 2017) – an active struggle against the current s/State (ontological/political 'state of affairs') (Badiou 2005). The zombie today must organize. Take up arms. Form the Undead Liberation Army.

Like earlier monsters, such as the vampire at the end of the 19th century, the 21st-century zombie is a figuration of, not *the* end, but *an* ending. The term 'Zombiecene' reminds us that what we are living through is precisely *not* the Anthropocene, but its termination: the end of the obscene scene of Anthropos. Yet, this ending is drawn out, reluctant, agonizing. Anthropos, this master zombie of our time – *why won't he die?*

As the zombie itself, we are at present in between, in limbo. The old is dying and the new cannot be born; this is the time in which "a great variety of morbid symptoms" (Gramsci 1971: 276) appear – or, in Žižek's (2010: 95) loose translation of Gramsci's famous words: the time of monsters. All you zombies show your faces. Together, let's make sure this is truly the end of Anthropos. And, finally, the beginning of the *Post-Anthropocene*.

Winter is here. We are on the Road. Things that cannot be put back or made right again. It's high time for something new. Unleash the zombie swarms. Good riddance, Robert Neville. Welcome to the Zombiecene.

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