

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-instatement 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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