

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 today (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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