

# ‘Grey in Grey’: Crisis, Critique, Change

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*This essay reflects on the global financial crisis of 2008 as a site from which to assess a number of theorisations of critique and change, based within a broadly-defined Marxism. While the recent crisis has given traction to Marxism as a form of critique, the articulation of that critique to actual change, and especially to the prospective agents of change, has been left hanging. Charting the work of Fredric Jameson, Hardt and Negri, and others, we find an emphasis on the powers of production and life as a point of excess to fuel anti-capitalist politics. However, these images of dynamism are now forced to confront capitalism in a state of inertia and deceleration, and in so doing, they reveal their dependence on replicating or displacing the supposed ‘productive forces’ of capitalism to their own projects. Models of ‘anti-production’, such as those derived from Georges Bataille, also tend to converge on models of vital powers, although cast in forms of consumption and excess. Criticising this convergence on a mythical vitalism, this essay suggests a deflationary critique of capitalism’s ‘productivism’, and explores the potential for an anti-vitalist analysis that might better grasp the ‘mythological displacement’ of experience that operates within the frame of capitalist social relations.*

## Introduction

When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.

Hegel, 1991

At the moment of crisis we stand in a glaciated landscape of frozen abstractions. Commodities no longer get up and dance, or stand on their heads, but become fixed in tableaux turned malign and uncanny – somewhere between the fictions of E. T. A. Hoffmann and Thomas Ligotti. The equation of ‘money = excrement’ of the Freudian unconscious is enacted in social reality by devaluation and foreclosure. Now the

transfixing images of capitalist 'dynamism' peddled through the 80s and 90s, presaged in lucid fashion by William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), with its characterisation of 'Night City' as "a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button" (Gibson, 1984, p. 14), become objects of capitalist *Ostalgie*. Instead, we have the inertial intensity of the Michael Bay blockbuster, figuring the stasis of pure commodification deliberately beyond sense (Shaviro, 2010), or images of apocalypse and collapse, which mimic and efface the true rotten core of capitalist crisis: the social abandonment of those superfluous to the need for valorisation, an ageing grey capitalism, and the spectre of an imminent slaughtering of capital values. Already, in 1998, Fredric Jameson had presciently noted "Stasis today, all over the world" (Jameson, 1998, p. 4); we now live this condition as actuality and are left in the position Adorno ascribes to Little Nell in Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop*: "Because she is not able to take hold of the object-world of the bourgeois sphere, the object-world seizes hold of her, and she is sacrificed" (Adorno, 1992, p. 177).

In the period of ongoing crisis, now becoming figured in the tropes and actualities of 'austerity', we witness the disarticulation of the classical coordination of crisis, critique, and change. Crisis certainly gives traction to critique, to the point that a bemused mainstream temporarily abandons its ingrained anathematisation of Marx and we 'all', from Nicolas Sarkozy to the Pope (at least according to media reports), become 'readers' of *Capital*. And yet the strategic elements that would articulate and link critique to change, and the agency necessary to *make* that change, appear to be lacking. In a very useful survey of recent Marxist approaches to the current crisis Benjamin Kunkel (2011, p. 14) notes that: "At the moment Marxism seems better prepared to interpret the world than to change it". The traction of analysis appears to be aligned with an intractability of praxis; to complete Jameson's sentence: "Stasis today, all over the world ... *certainly seems to have outstripped any place for human agency, and to have rendered the latter obsolete*" (Jameson, 1998, p. 4) [My italics].

This intervention aims to assess and analyse the ways in which a number of contemporary theorists, identified with a broadly-conceived Marxism, have tried to address the problem of articulating critique and change. Beginning with Marx's stress on the necessary link of critique to change, guaranteed by the encrypted possibilities of change secreted within capitalism, I trace how waning faith in this guarantee forces re-articulations of the project of change. Tracking through a series of interventions, which largely pre-date the current crisis, what we find is that the link of critique and change is reposed on vital powers supposedly in excess of capitalism. These radicalised images of dynamism now confront a capitalism that appears to have rescinded its expansive circuit of accumulation, in Marx's formulation M-C-M', and has stagnated into an inertia that leaves open the question of whether capitalism can re-start this drive through another round of therapeutic creative destruction. What concerns me is the extent to which these

counter-formulations remain dependent on, or replicate, capitalism's own self-conception of dynamism to found their critiques. The very act of displacing vital powers from their capture by capitalism risks, I will argue, reinforcing a capitalism that always operates through displacing vital powers.

## I.

For Marx, the link between critique and praxis is established on the ground of the conditions posed by capitalism itself. Without such a link between these conditions and transformative praxis Marxism would decline into the position of utopian socialism, which may be "full of the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class", but as it loses contact with reality descends into "systematic pedantry" (Marx and Engels, 2000, Ch. 3). To resist the fatal detachment of utopian socialism from the conditions for its realisation, communism must find itself encrypted in the present; as Marx (1973, p. 159) puts it in the *Grundrisse*:

if we did not find concealed in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations of exchange prerequisite for a classless society, then all attempts to explode it would be quixotic.

This, however, does not require that we accept capitalism *per se* as a 'positive' development teleologically 'leading' to communism, contra the usual image of Marx. In fact, existent conditions are antagonistic and contradictory, and therefore history, Marx argues, advances by the "bad side" (Marx, 2009, p. 54). It is the very negativity and violence of capitalism, the fact that "capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (Marx, 2010, Ch. 31), that constitutes its paradoxical 'advance' and the necessity for its negation.

This is the discomfiting dialectic visible in Marx, such as in his argument that the imposition of compulsory education in the factory is the germ of the "education of the future" – the combination of productive labour with instruction and gymnastics – which would lead to "fully developed human beings" (Marx, 2010, p. 313). In this case capital wants to draw children into the factory to extract labour from them, and this extraction is 'improved' through an educational process that results in 'better workers' and hence higher levels of production and, more importantly, profit. Rather than rejecting this situation out of hand as requiring replacement by some radically alternative 'utopian' education detached from production, Marx instead, controversially it's true, argues that this form of education can be negated – that is, in the Hegelian sense, denied and also preserved – to 'produce' a communist education that would 'enrich' us through a new

form of education detached from value-production. To use Brecht's later formulation, we must found communism on the "bad new" rather than the "good old things" (Brecht in Benjamin, 2007, p. 99).

What we can note is a general loss of faith in the scenario that the contradictions and antagonisms of the present will generate the "*real* movement which abolishes the present state of things" (Marx and Engels, 1845), which is to say communism. Here teleology appears suspended, and capitalism in crisis seems to portend the "common ruin of the contending classes" rather than "the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large" (Marx and Engels, 2000, Ch. 1). In this case the negativity of capital appears as non-dialectical, or auto-destructive. One of the most extreme responses to the situation where capital appears unable to generate its own 'gravediggers', and in fact appears suicidal, is that of contemporary primitivist or anti-civilisational currents. They argue that the rot did not set in with capitalism, but with the onset of agriculture in the Neolithic age, or even in the emergence of language itself (Zerzan, 1999). These versions of what Marx and Engels called 'feudal socialism' can only imagine an exit from the malignity of capitalism through civilisational collapse, treated with more or less *schadenfreude* and *ressentiment*. In this case the inability to imagine the contradictions and antagonisms of the present leading to any radical change leads to a chiliastic vision of necessary apocalypse to bring in the reign of 'communism'.

And yet this extreme example does indicate a more general problem. Can we continue to have faith in the 'bad side' if matters only continue to get worse and no dialectical reversal takes place? To return to more sober grounds, Adorno makes a classical statement of the procedure of starting with the 'bad new' when he argues that it is only when the commodity appears as fully 'alien object', as having outlived itself as commodity, that this loss of use-value figures the promise of a new free use, without regression, *through* exchange value. Rather than the appeal to a use-value supposedly immune to capitalism, Adorno argues that capitalism itself produces the possibility of communism through its own equalisation of objects *qua* commodities. The de-privileging of particular commodities, their detachment from 'traditional' personal forms of valorisation, presages a new order of 'free' commodities. In particular, for Adorno, this requires detachment from the belief in liberation lying on the side of the subject. When objects 'grow hard', salvation instead emerges as love for the object at the expense of the subject (see Vatter, 2008, pp. 52-4). It is "only a life that is perverted into thingly form" (Adorno in Vatter, 2008, p. 47), a life that mimics the object, that can traverse the commodity. If Little Nell is sacrificed to the object-world, for Adorno we must have faith that "the possibility of transition and dialectical rescue was *inherent* in this object-world" (1992, p. 177) [My italics].

Again, the difficulty lies in grasping the inherent nature of this dialectical rescue, and imagining *who* is to be the agent of this dialectical transition. To embrace the

object has to be distinguished from a mere sacrifice of the subject to the object, as in the case of Little Nell. To take one of the key dimensions of the current crisis, we could say that the house or home ‘grows hard’ in the form of the unpayable mortgage – its ‘value’ becomes detached from its ‘use’, or its radical fluctuation of value prevents its use. Of course, if we follow Adorno, this realisation of exchangeability, the positing the house or home as ‘pure’ exchange value, could indicate an order where the house or home can be ‘loved’ as exchangeable, and the mortgage abandoned as ‘investment’ for another relation of living, in which housing is open to all. The problem is that, without intervention by subjects, the more likely result appears to be the simple *loss* of living space – eviction and foreclosure.

## II.

If the faith in the inherent possibilities of transition through the ‘bad new’ has waned, then new resources need to be found to re-start and link critique to change. Returning to Fredric Jameson’s prescient detection of the fundamental impasse and stasis imposed by financialisation on political praxis, he solves this problem by resorting to “Brecht’s Chinese dimension” (Jameson, 1998, p. 3); by supplementing the dialectic with an appeal to a metaphysics of change. In a lyrical sentence (which continues from the previous quotation) Jameson (1998, p. 4) argues:

This is why a Brechtian conception of activity must today go hand in hand with a revival of the older precapitalist sense of time itself, of the change or flowing of all things: for it is the movement of this great river of time or the Tao that will slowly carry us downstream again to the moment of praxis.

We cannot simply depend on contradictions and antagonisms of capitalism, on the ‘bad new’, or the inherent possibilities of the object-world but, instead must bolster and supplement this with a precapitalist metaphysics of time as flux, to free us from the stasis of the false image of perpetual revolution represented by capital.

The difficulty is to imagine exactly how we can recover and then instantiate this sense of precapitalist time in capitalist conditions. Jameson’s solution is to suggest that despite his deliberate resort to archaism, this metaphysics of time as change will correspond to a future post-capitalist communism (Jameson, 1998, p. 12). Living in such a communist society would involve living the Tao as everyday reality, as the ideology or metaphysics commensurate with communism. The obvious problem, however, is that such a sense of time is required as the condition to carry us downstream to the praxis that would achieve that order. We are trapped in a temporal paradox or loop, whereby the

sense of time needed to achieve the future can only come from the future. The result is curiously free-floating; a metaphysics that lacks any social grounding and becomes a mere placeholder for the necessary faith to shake the present.

The way out of this aporia is by what Jameson (1998, p. 83) refers to as a “constructed contradiction”: we have to couple together the ‘Chinese’ or ‘peasant’ Brecht of the pre-capitalist sense of time, with the productivist Brecht who embraces the contemporary ‘bad new’. This requires that we link this metaphysical change to the potential vitality of capitalist production, a production always ‘fettered’ by the conditions of capitalist value-production. To use the imagery of Charles Olson’s poem ‘The Kingfishers’ (1949) – itself in part a response to the Chinese revolution and an answer to the claims of cultural sterility advanced in Eliot’s ‘The Wasteland’ (1922) – we have to suppose that “What does not change / is the will to change” (Olson, 1997, p. 5), and that this ‘will to change’ can only be founded “[o]n these rejectamenta” (Olson, 1997, p. 6), on the detritus of the capitalist present. In reply to the stasis of the capitalist present, with its image of hyper-production and new cybernetic frontiers that conceals a fundamental inertia, we have to find an image of ‘higher’ and more vital production; it is Brecht’s incipient ‘accelerationism’ (see Noys, 2010, pp.4-8), the recourse to radicalising the possibilities released by capitalism as the path to communism, that is required to free us from stasis and into the production, construction, and novelty of a plebeian postmodernity.

Such a metaphysics has little of the serenity one might impute to the *Tao Te Ching* (1993), but may in fact be more faithful to the actuality of a text that places a certain adherence to the ‘flow’ of the Tao within a practice of statecraft and intervention. In Jameson’s terms the metaphysics of the Tao commits us to a ‘forcing’ (to borrow Badiou’s term) that can tease out the true experience of change from the false capitalist image of change: the truly new emerges from within the radicalised acceleration of the ‘bad new’. In Brecht, according to Jameson (1998, p. 17), we find “the sheerest celebration of change, change as always revolutionary, as the very inner truth of revolution itself”. Jameson’s dialectical flexibility, in which every thinker has his or her day – today Adorno’s pessimism (Jameson, 1990), tomorrow Brecht’s productivism – itself occupies a ‘flattened’ temporality of postmodernity. Of course, this, for Jameson, is its merit. The spatial dialectic of postmodernity operates *on* and *in* postmodernity (Jameson, 2009). The ‘turn’ of each thinker depends on their therapeutic grasp on a present moment, and their ability to shake us free from that moment. And yet the rapidity of shifts in attack and approach by Jameson might give pause about the grip of this dialectic on actuality.

In the case of Jameson’s Brecht the difficulty, as Jameson recognises, is the congruence of the metaphysics of radical change with capitalist dynamism:

Yet the celebration of change itself – whether in the form of the Tao or some other chronotope – may be open to all kinds of other doubts and suspicions, particularly in a society whose current economic rhythms perpetuate and thrive on permanent change: capital accumulation, investment and realization, the dissolution of stable firms and jobs into a flux of new and provisional entities, awash in structural unemployment, its cultural infrastructure committed to permanent revolution in fashion and to the imperative to generate new kinds of commodities, when not, in deeper crises, to invent or exploit wholly new production technologies. (Jameson, 1998, pp. 169-70)

The problem is devastatingly stated, but not adequately answered. While Jameson's work of this period is highly prescient concerning the stasis and drift underpinning images of dynamism, which have become realised in the crisis of financialisation, his alternative is still posed in terms of a metaphysical dynamism that does not seem able to escape its congruence with the 'permanent change' inherent to the capitalist mode of production.

What is left unspecified is exactly *how* we are to tease out 'change as revolutionary' from this capitalist 'permanent change'. Instead, in the name of Brecht we are being called to return to the 'heroic' values of communism – of production, novelty, change, and the new – to allow ourselves to imagine a way out of the present deadlock. The difficulty is not that there may be possible utopian resources in Brecht; it is that this reference risks not only repeating capitalism, but also returning us to that twentieth-century communism of the 'passion for the real' and the installation of utopia anatomised by Badiou in *The Century* (2007) (in which Brecht is a central representative figure), without any real analysis of its failures. This 'back to the future' option appears as fatally temporally confused. Returning to an ancient metaphysics, that is supposed to correspond to a future communist society, we are at the same time recalled to images of dynamism associated with capitalism and a modernising 'communism', leaving us with a receding grasp on our own temporal moment.

### III.

This mood of 'productivism' as solution to stasis that Jameson caught in his characterisation of Brecht is much more widespread than his indications of a rapprochement between Brecht and Deleuze suggested (Jameson, 1998, p. 79). All around us there is a (theoretical) emphasis on novelty, production and the new as the core affirmative values that should perform our detachment or subtraction from the 'limits of capital'. In the recent work of Hardt and Negri (2009) we find hymns to the

‘productive’ powers of the multitude that lie ‘beyond measure’. Various other neo-Spinozist and neo-Nietzschean forms of ‘affirmationism’ can be identified in the current conjuncture, which also imply an outbidding of capitalist ‘dynamism’ by the *dynamis* of a vital or ontological ‘Life’. Miguel Vatter (2009) has noted the contemporary tendency to make the transition from ‘surplus value’, negatively correlated to the extraction of value from labour, to the concept of ‘surplus life’, as an affirmative statement of what exceeds capitalist value-extraction. In this model there is something ‘in’ life that always exceeds ‘capture’ by capitalism, an irrecoverable ‘resource’ of ‘expanded productivity’ that “can never be eclipsed or subordinated to any transcendent measure or power” (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 38; See also Anon, 2010).

These critical conceptualisations are deliberately designed to be politically motivational by breaking the sense of powerlessness and inertia built-in to what had seemed a globally triumphal, and triumphalist, capitalism. Even in the face of capitalist crisis they can still maintain their appeal by their insistence on a power of production that capitalism no longer seems able to provide. As crisis rips away the capitalist integument of ‘productivity’, a true ontological or vital productivity is revealed. I want, however, to suggest caution over these claims. In the genuine desire to develop a radical break with the conditions of capitalism, the unfortunate irony is that such motivational benefits come at the high cost of replicating a bewitchment with production *qua* value, or with production supposedly exacerbated to the point of the transvaluation or destruction of all values. Also, the question of the political organisation and structuring of this supposed omnipresent ‘surplus’ is evaded, to be replaced by the myth of ‘Life’ as permanent excess.

What such theorisations fail to grasp is the simultaneous appearance of labour-power as both a source of wealth *and* denuded experience of “*absolute poverty*” (Marx, 1973, p. 296). Instead this dialectic is *deliberately* broken, to valorise the one side of ‘labour’, now in excess of its own position as labouring subject, at the very time when capitalism enters, or more precisely reveals, its own decelerative phase (Balakrishnan, 2009). The seeming ‘failure’ of capitalism to develop the productive forces, made visible in the devalorising moment of crisis, leads not to a questioning of those forces, but to claims to reinscribe them under a new productive communism. Coupled at times to an unlikely Sinophilia, with ‘China’ as the (fantasmatic) site of true productivity, we are promised ‘communism’ as the re-starting and excess of capitalism, in which we return to the productive forces that have to be developed to their maximum so humankind can solve the problem of capitalism, to paraphrase one of Marx’s own most accelerationist texts – the 1859 Preface (Marx, 1999a).<sup>1</sup> The “rose in the cross of the present” – to use Hegel’s (1991, p. 22) phrase referring to the moment of rationality within the actual – is, on this reading, the accelerative moment of re-starting production or creative destruction, even if this is now posed at the abstract ontological level of the productiveness of ‘Life’ itself.

As I have noted, the difficulty is that this wager on a hyper- and excessive production, whether ontological or exceptional to ontology, recapitulates the very ‘creative ideology’ of contemporary capitalism – which posits labour as the constitutive ‘outside’, as the source of “fructifying vitality” (Marx, 1973, p. 298). For capitalist ideology this positing of labour as outside, as free of the usual despotisms of production, only serves to subject the worker more through their own self-subjection as ‘free’ creative worker. As Marx (1973, p. 308) remarks in the *Grundrisse*:

[t]hose who demonstrate that the productive force ascribed to capital is a *displacement, a transposition of the productive force* of labour, forget precisely that capital itself is essentially this *displacement, this transposition*, and that wage labour as such presupposes capital, so that, from its standpoint as well, capital is this *transubstantiation*; the necessary process of positing its own powers as *alien* to the worker.

Instead of analysing this congruence between capitalism and its supposed ‘opponents’, instead of recognising that “[t]he bourgeois have very good grounds for falsely ascribing *supernatural creative power* to labour” (Marx, 1999b, Ch. 1), today’s radicals all too often ascribe ever *more* ‘supernatural creative power to labour’. This is the difficulty of the valorisation of ‘surplus life’, which although often couched as anti-capitalist, insufficiently interrogates this congruence. The cure is more of the disease, and in a period of ‘creative destruction’ we might wonder whether such resorts to a metaphysics of change and production can truly overcome the stasis of the present, or merely, and typically, allow for communism or socialism as the panacea to regenerate capitalism itself.

#### IV.

If ‘productivism’ is in congruence with the fantasy of capitalism, with its own mythology, is it possible to break with this structure, to re-imagine the ‘rose in the cross of the present’? Georges Bataille (1985, p. 14) writes, apocryphally as it turns out, of:

[t]he disconcerting gesture of the Marquis de Sade, locked up with madmen, who had the most beautiful roses brought to him only to pluck off their petals and toss them into a ditch filled with liquid manure – in these circumstances, doesn’t it have an overwhelming impact?

Writing in the late 1920 and 1930s, exactly across that ‘other crisis’ of 1929, Bataille articulated a vision of anti-production, of loss and excess, that articulated itself in an

'economy' of the excremental, the perverse, and all elements that could not be coordinated with utility. Proposed in terms of 'heterology' (Bataille, 1985, pp. 137-160), this 'cloacal' critique targeted the stabilisations of value accumulation and labour through an avant-garde 'base materialism' (Bataille, 1985, pp. 45-52), which refused the materialist idealisation and stabilisation of 'matter' by exchanging it for an image of 'matter' as active, unstable and excessive (Bataille, 1985, p. 15). Obviously, and directly, borrowing heavily from Freud, while re-inscribing the concept of the unconscious under a general heterology, Bataille aimed at an active and excremental concept (or anti-concept) of 'matter' that would escape the usual conceptual prisons of a 'materialism' always structured by its opposition to 'idealism'.

Of course, as Jean-Joseph Goux (1990) would later note, Bataille's economy of excess might have had traction on the asceticism of the Protestant ethic of accumulatory capitalism, but seems to come into strange congruence with a 'postmodern' capitalism of realised excess. One has only to read the life story of Don Simpson (Fleming, 1999), the producer of so-called 'high concept' films during the 1980s, to note how a transgressive and excessive world view (coupled to the self-discipline and self-punishment of the gym and plastic surgery) can conform to capitalism's fantasmatic self-image as liberatory and excessive.<sup>2</sup> This is, of course, before we turn to the more quotidian fact that those abandoned by capitalism, as 'surplus humanity', often live, literally, in shit (Davis, 2006, pp. 137-150). Instead of the excremental and perverse setting out some alternative space to capitalist modernity it becomes coded within it, as its inherent and licensed transgression (Žižek, 2004, p. 213), and hence reconnected to value production but at the level of 'pure' speculation and excess. Here, certainly, the so-called 'sound investment' can turn into excrement, but also excrement or waste can suddenly become a speculative resource.

The impasse of Bataille's critique is not only that it has been outpaced by a 'cloacal' capitalism, a capitalism that thrives on excess and waste, but, more damagingly, that it also appears to be mired in a similar productivism to that of accelerationism, only cast in the neo-primitivist or mythological register of excessive anti-production. This critique does not exhaust the scope of Bataille's writing, which often problematises this recourse to myth, life, and production in profound ways (see Noys, 2000, pp. 117-124), but the tendency of his work to appeal to a 'higher' (solar) or 'lower' (excremental) production that always exceeds the 'restrictions' of capitalism can result in a kind of anti- or hyper-vitalism that hardly seems to shatter the 'mirror of production', as Baudrillard (1975) claimed. The dissolution of agency into evasive molecular flows of intractable 'matter' might seem to offer lines of flight from capitalist capture, but also it opens up new codings for speculation and investment (as Deleuze and Guattari (1983) insisted, deterritorialisation is always accompanied by reterritorialisation). While it promises the 'rejuvenation' of a life of excess, or an excess of life, outside of capitalism, the risk is that

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the excremental, the elements of 'anti-production', will become more manure to generate another round of accumulation through repeated 'creative destruction'.

The result is that although we have traced Bataille's anti-productivism as an alternative path it actually tends to converge with a Brechtian productivism, which, as Badiou (2007, p. 45) notes, also regards the decline of capitalism as generating "a nourishing decomposition". What is shared here is a particular conception of capitalism as 'fetter', or 'decomposing' order, which then tries to break this 'constraint' through excess production rather than the critique of production itself. Of course Bataille did offer material for a more direct critique of production, and it would be rash to claim his work is exhausted by its own residual productivism, or by recuperation through the capitalist cunning of reason. My argument is, however, that the contemporary use of such theoretical resources, whether 'productivist' or 'anti-productivist', requires a more thorough-going self-critique of the penetration of thinking by the 'grammar' of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism's 'State phobia', its subjection of the 'social' to conditioning by the market, its anti-naturalism, and its multiplication of the 'enterprise', make it a form of 'rationality' organised through multiplicity and difference (see Foucault, 2008). As a result, often our supposedly critical concepts of *exit* from capitalism – freedom, difference, excess, the multiple, and flight – all-too often lead back *in* to capitalism. In particular, the notion of a 'surplus life' can find itself correlated with an excess inventiveness and capacity that always remains available as a resource awaiting transposition into the market. Again I would insist this is not to make neoliberal capitalism, or capitalism itself, some untranscendable horizon of our time, in a gesture of fatalism or recuperation. Instead, it is a matter of grasping the capillary forms and functions of neoliberalism, and capitalism, as they penetrate and shape potential modes of resistance.

## V.

We have arrived at the symmetry of an aporia: neither the radicalisation of the productive forces, nor the resort to anti-production seems able to grasp or escape the bewitchment of capitalism as a system of crisis and creative destruction. This reflects, however, the real problem of the disarticulation of crisis, critique, and change in the present moment. While crisis gives traction to critique, and would classically seem to promise the moment of change, the strategic elements that would re-articulate critique with agency are lacking. Instead of a tracing of the opaque stasis of the present, the almost horrifying fact that 'things as they are' remain as such, faith is retained in the old models of dynamism.

The vitalist models of the 'passion for the real' that Badiou identifies with the 'short twentieth century' have displayed remarkable persistence – as Badiou (2007, p. 14)

notes: “in part, we still belong to this vital century”. In Badiou’s analysis the revolutionary passion for the real coordinated the “structured and living power” (Badiou, 2007, p. 14) of life with history by inscribing ‘Life’ as a point of rupture and revolution. In the contemporary context we find a new coordination of the power of life with history, which lies in the promise of this ‘living power’ as the means to overcome the stasis of capitalism in crisis through an imaginary ‘forcing’, or nostalgic return, to the “becoming of affirmation” (Badiou, 2007, p. 14). This is because in the moment of crisis we find the abandonment of living labour, and the treatment of labour as external or surplus to the requirements of capital’s self-valorisation (Endnotes, 2010). The result is that the stasis of capitalism in crisis appears as living proof, to use a deliberately ironic phrase, that capitalism is merely external and vampiric over the excessive power of life. Capitalism appearing as ‘dead labour’ personified results in the vitalist personification of living labour as an external ‘force’, as that living labour is abandoned. In this way crisis reinforces vitalism, as the mythological means to free us from the dead hand of capital, by encouraging a new belief in the ‘supernatural creative power’ of labour that capitalism no longer seems able or willing to harness.

This coordination can be disrupted if we reconsider Badiou’s inscription of vitalism as the operationalisation of ‘Life’ and ‘History’ as the means to overcome nihilism. In a critical review of Badiou’s *The Century*, Gopal Balakrishnan argues that this linkage of ‘Life’ and ‘History’ could be reformulated if we think

Life was the name for the compulsion of self-valorizing Value, and History the combined and uneven development of the vital or ‘productive forces’ that this compulsion set into motion. (Balakrishnan, 2010)

Unpacking this critique, we see the hymning of ‘Life’ is an attribution error, which ascribes to ‘Life’ the powers of *Capital*. At the same time the inscription of this vitalism in ‘History’ again involves a certain mistaken attribution of the functioning of ‘productive forces’ across the temporal and spatial axes of capital; one tendency was mistaken for the whole. This mistaking of vitality for valorisation and of history’s mandate for a particular configuration of productive forces led to the miring of the ‘will to change’ in capitalism’s ‘bad new’ of compulsive motion.

In the case of Badiou, we can note the distance he tries to take from this configuration, precisely by rejecting the validation that vitalism took from history (i.e. capitalism). Yet, while the stringency of Badiou’s alternative of ‘subtraction’ has much to recommend itself, precisely in its refusal of any myth of production and superior value of life, its own variant voluntarism fails to grasp what Balakrishnan (2010) calls “the erratic, violent universalization of capitalist civilization”. That is to say, Badiou’s own ‘political Marxism’, a Marxism that *tends* to insist on detachment from economic analysis and the

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'purely' political composition of a Marxism irreducible to the history of capitalism (see Badiou, 2009), itself remains subject to capitalism because it is not able to think capitalism. The result, according to Balakrishnan (2010), is that it is unable to "prepare us to explore the objective and subjective dimensions of an enigmatic present of stasis and impending catastrophe".

To grasp this 'enigmatic present' requires a rather different form of critique. Borrowing a characterisation of the films of Jia Zhangke by Zhang Xudong, I would propose that the task of contemporary critique can be defined as: "to capture a reality that is simultaneously slipping away from experience and coming back to haunt and overwhelm it at an abstract, mythological level" (Xudong, 2010, p. 78). Contrary to the inflationary founding of critique on myths of production, excess, and capital 'L' 'Life', or to mirror images of 'Life' *qua* viral apocalypse, rot, or undead exhaustion, both often justified on the grounds of supposedly motivational power, sometimes with surprising cynicism, we might better paint 'grey on grey' and analyse the production of experience as abstract and mythological, rather than feeding another round of mythological accumulation. In fact, these abstract myths are the *result* of the slipping away of experience, the very displacement of capitalist production, and destruction, to the ontological level of the subject, which then overwhelm the subject by being cast as potential sources of liberation.

The 'reality' that is in fact slipping away from experience is the reality of the real abstraction of labour and its contradictory existence, as both "the *living source* of value" and "*absolute poverty*" (Marx, 1973, p. 296), which is stretched to breaking point in the current crisis. As we have seen the new vitalists valorise labour as the 'living source', without being able to simultaneously grasp its 'absolute poverty'. In doing so the *unity* of the abstraction, which stands out starkly in and through the devalorisation of labour by the crisis, is occluded. Of course, the grasping of this loss of experience and its return at the level of the abstract and mythological should not be expected to solve the riddle of agency and praxis. At least, however, it refuses to conflate a mythological and inflationary fantasy of agency, which is only one side of the 'moving contradiction' of capitalism. Instead, by tracing the crisis as devalorisation, with all its compensatory fantasies, this analysis of the 'grey in grey' of abstraction offers us resources to better begin to strategically think forms and conditions of resistance against a devalorising and decelerating capitalism.

## Notes

1. Such a position was essayed by Nick Land during the 1990s (see Land, 2010), and has recently been re-stated by several of those presenting at the CCS event 'Accelerationism' (Goldsmiths, 14 September 2010).
2. To take just one index, Simpson's autopsy reports and pharmaceutical records reveal that during the summer of 1995 he:  
was on a regimen that included multiple daily injections of Toradol, for pain; Librium, to control his mood swings; Ativan, every six hours, for agitation; Valium, every six hours, for anxiety; Depakote, every six hours, to counter 'acute mania'; Thorazine, every four hours, for anxiety; Cogentin, for agitation; Vistaril, every six hours, for anxiety; and lorazepam, every six hours, also for anxiety. He was also taking, in pill and tablet form, additional doses of Valium, plus the pain relievers Vicodin, diphenoxylate, diphenhydramine and Colanadone, plus the medications lithium carobonate, nystatin, Narcan, haloperidol, Promethazine, Benztropine, Unisom, Atarax, Compazine, Xanax, Desyrel, Tigan and phenobarbital. (Fleming, 1999, pp. 8-9).

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