Global Storm

Theodor Adorno’s Negative Dialectics

by

Dennis R. Redmond

A dissertation presented to the Program in Comparative Literature and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 19, 2000
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June 2000
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degree in the Comparative Literature Program. This dissertation has been approved and
accepted by:

Dr. Wolfgang Sohlich, Chair of the Examining Committee

Date

Committee in Charge:    Dr. Wolfgang Sohlich, Chair
                        Dr. Kenneth Calhoun
                        Dr. Forrest Pyle
                        Dr. John McCole

Accepted by:

Dean of the Graduate School
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An Abstract of the Dissertation of

Dennis Robert Redmond for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Comparative Literature Program to be taken June 2000

Title: GLOBAL STORM: THEODOR ADORNO’S NEGATIVE DIALECTICS

Approved: ______________________

Dr. Wolfgang Sohlich

Global Storm treats Theodor Adorno’s last completed work, the 1966 Negative Dialectics, as an invaluable toolbox of techniques, mediations and concepts capable of thinking through the cultural, political and social dynamics of multinational capitalism, all on the latter’s own global turf. What Adorno provides which the structuralisms, post-structuralisms and postmodernisms do not is, in a nutshell, a theory of multinational capitalism. Adorno’s notion of the constellation, the conceptual cast, and the indispensable role of critical and aesthetic theory in cognizing and transforming the total system are brought into contact with analyses of the media and consumer culture (ranging from Fredric Jameson’s notion of postmodernism and late capitalism to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the field and habitus, and to the theoretical traditions of post-structuralism and postmodernism), as well as ideologies of economic and cultural globalization (e.g. neoliberalism, the rise of information politics, world-systems theory and theories of the developmental state).
The first part of the dissertation examines the historical legacy of the Frankfurt School, analyzing Adorno’s theory of the American Empire and the culture of monopoly capitalism. The second deals with Adorno’s model-analyses of Kant, Hegel, and some future post-metaphysical space of cognition, each of which foreshadows the rise of a multinational juridical sphere, a post-American geopolitics, and a global aesthetic theory, respectively. The third applies Adorno’s concepts to three distinct moments of multinational culture: the constellation of cybernetic ideology and multinational form in William Burroughs’ three great Sixties novels (The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded, and Nova Express); the transition from autarkic to export-platform culture in three plays by East German playwright Heiner Mueller (Germania Death in Berlin, Life of Gundling Prussia’s Friedrich Wilhelm Lessing’s Sleep Dream Cry, The Hamletmachine); and the full-fledged globalism of the Information Age in William Gibson’s Neuromancer. Together, these three authors build a constellation highlighting the transition from the zenith of the American Empire in the 1960s, to the rise of the export-platform economies and developmental states of the 1970s, finally to the emergence of the European Union and a rapidly integrating East Asian polity since the mid-1980s.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Shouts go out to the professors and faculty members of Comp Lit, for teaching me how to think in more than two dimensions at once, and for sustaining and expanding one of the finest programs on the planet in the midst of asteroid-sized budget cuts; to the comrades at the GTFF, for teaching me what the stakes were, how to fight the good fight and how to win; to all my friends, for putting up with me despite my dissertation-related crankiness; and, finally, to the ever-increasing famille, for more than words can say. Peace and out.
CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: DENNIS R. REDMOND

PLACE OF BIRTH: NEW YORK, NEW YORK

DATE OF BIRTH: OCTOBER 8, 1968

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOL ATTENDED:

   University of Oregon
   Antioch College
   Carnegie-Mellon University

DEGREES AWARDED:

   Doctorate of Arts in Comparative Literature, 2000, University of Oregon
   Masters of Arts in Comparative Literature, 1994, University of Oregon
   Bachelor of Arts in Literature, 1991, Antioch College

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

   Twentieth Century Literary and Aesthetic Theory
   Twentieth Century Modernism and Media Culture
   Frankfurt School

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

   Graduate Teaching Fellow, University of Oregon, Eugene 1997-2000

   President of Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation, Eugene, Oregon 1999-2000
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Any American excursus on the work of the Frankfurt School’s most brilliant theoretician, Theodor W. Adorno, must acknowledge the unique difficulty and compensating virtue of bringing Adorno’s most realized work, *Negative Dialectics* (published in 1966), to the forefront of today’s critical agenda. The difficulty is the lack of effective translations, something typically ascribed to the dire impossibility of translating Adorno or indeed any Central European thinker of note into adequate English, but which is better understood as an interdisciplinary problem: asking a non-theoretician to translate a work of theory is like expecting a novelist to write high-level computer software programs, just because both use linguistic codes. Readers of Adorno’s German with some training in literary and aesthetic theory cannot help but be struck by the immense power, nuanced crafting, and poetic grace of texts so many academics have reproached (mostly on the basis of the afore-mentioned translations) as an incomprehensible mass of jargon. On the other hand, a reasonably dextrous set of translations exists for the major post-structuralist thinkers, who were not exactly enamored of rhetorical simplicity. This suggests, to the paranoid among us (and paranoia in late capitalism consists merely of the healthy intuition that someone, somewhere, is gunning for our slice of market share) that the contemporary marketplace of theory has its own devious priorities, which need to be carefully sorted out, analyzed and critiqued in their own right, in careful conjunction with the theories actually being discussed. Why was the oeuvre of the French post-structuralists so easily valorized on this marketplace,
but not the late works of Sartre? Why was not merely the Frankfurt School ignored, but indeed the whole corpus of Central European industrial sociology? Why the fascination with Jacques Derrida but not Pierre Bourdieu? The great East German playwright Heiner Mueller already had the goods on the Nineties theory-market twenty years before the thing existed: “Das ist eine philosophische Frage,” rejoins the nominal King of Prussia to an uncomfortably cognizant question by his not-quite-ready-for-prime-time underling in the 1973 play Germania Death in Berlin. “Dafuer habe ich keine Zeit.” [“That is a philosophical question, for which I have no time.”] When the global bourgeoisie is not preaching the virtues of anorexia to the starving, they practice the privatized socialism of an infinite credit expansion, in the realm of theory as much as in the stupendous 1990s bailouts of Eastern Europe and the Pacific Rim.

All this is closely connected with the afore-mentioned virtue of the whole enterprise: namely, the fact that America has some of the most highly-developed theory-industries (among its other business services, like software and consulting) on the planet, and thus offers the surest practical test of Adorno’s critical categories, in the form of one of the world’s most diverse and innovative mass-cultures. Theory in its broadest sense is by no means an elite activity, but is something even the humblest sports journalist and the late night talk show take the greatest pleasure in producing, and is deeply rooted in the mundane necessity of manufacturing, stocking, shipping, selling, choosing and consuming an ever more variegated and complex palette of products on the marketplace. All of this has created a plebianized zone of consumer literacy no less powerful and far-reaching than that more obvious set of cultural tastes endemic to the televisual and cinematic industries, let alone that still narrower set of distinctions (in Bourdieu’s sense of the term) retailed by the various disciplines of the university, and it is precisely the social ubiquity of consumerism, its occasionally liberating (but also dreadfully
oppressive) materiality – something caricatured rather than explained by the notion of a
regnant Anglo-Saxon pragmatism – which Adorno insists that we not simply condemn,
but carefully think through.

The usual knock against Adorno, of course, is that he failed to take his own advice
when it came to the leading works of American jazz and film modernism – which is only
half of the proverbial story.¹ Adorno also wrote some of the most wondrous and
compelling musicologies on European musical modernism ever written, e.g. In Search of
Wagner and The Philosophy of Modern Music, works whose aesthetic categories are
eminently applicable to the dialectics of jazz modernism (in particular, the increasing
antagonism between the specialized instrumental innovations of jazz composers and the
commercialism of the music-industry). That Adorno’s aesthetic horizons were largely
delimited to the Central European modernisms, from Kafka and Webern to Klee and
Brecht, was due neither to theoretical cupidity nor reactionary anti-Americanism, but to
the objective underdevelopment of German capitalism and its corresponding consumer
culture in relation to the British and later American metropoles. Germany was (much like
Japan, and Italy, and Singapore, and indeed all the industrial overachievers of the present
era) really a partly-industrialized semi-periphery in the world economy, at least until the
post-WW II boom. German culture in the Fifties and Sixties was, just like its postwar
Japanese counterpart, geared toward the necessity of building up the manufacturing base
rather than producing luxuries such as films, and indeed the history of West Germany
reflects, on the whole, a mutually self-reinforcing dynamic of economic exports to world
(at first US, and later EC) markets and cultural imports of (mostly American) films and
mass media. In the Central European context, Adorno was an amazing and intransigent
cultural radical, whose unyielding refusal to countenance the barbarities of the Eastern
bloc or to swallow the no less destructive commercialism of the West offers a powerful and still-relevant model of global solidarity for our own day.

American culture is at issue in a second and no less important way. For nowhere else on the planet do markets have such unbridled and ferocious sway, and are countervailing forces such as trade unions, Left political parties, and civic infrastructures so weak, as in the post-Cold War United States (unless one had the tactlessness to mention that other former superpower, namely Russia; but as an old joke goes, the new Russian bourgeois were bent on imitating America and, unfortunately, succeeded); nowhere else on the planet do such crass extremes of private opulence and public squalor exist; no other First World country, with the partial exception of Great Britain, has managed to plow under its industrial base and mismanage its economy so badly, to the point that in fifty years, what was once the richest, most productive economy on the planet has become the dependent ward of East Asia and the EU; and no other economic region has developed such a radical media-culture, such a sophisticated micropolitics, or such a thriving theory-scene. In short, America in the era of the Wall Street Bubble provides the social theorist with that most valuable of all tropes, an index of positively Victorian decadence by which to measure the transformations of the world-system.

“Decadence was the Fata Morgana,” wrote Adorno concerning the latter, “of that progress which had not yet begun”; the American decadence is thus something like the Fata Videoana of the ascension of East Asia and the European Union to co-hegemons of the world-economy. To that end, Negative Dialectics will be treated as a toolbox of techniques and strategies by which multinational capital is to be thought through not just as form, but as a new and historically unique content as well. All this will then feed into a series of models of multinational cultural, political and economic praxis, ranging from early postmodernism to the full-fledged globalism of the Information Age, using William
Burroughs’ three great Sixties novels, three plays from the Seventies from the late, great East German playwright Heiner Mueller, and finally William Gibson’s early Eighties masterpiece *Neuromancer* as primary texts.
Notes

1. In addition to his journalistic and sociological interventions, Adorno took great care to fine-tune his radio broadcasts to his audience. See Henry Pickford, “Critical Models: Adorno’s Theory and Practice of Cultural Criticism”, Yale School of Journalism (247-270).

2. “Die Dekadenz war die Fata Morgana jenes Fortschritts, der noch nicht begonnen hat… Dekadenz ist der Nervenpunkt, wo die Dialektik des Fortschritts vom Bewusstsein leibhaft gleichsam zugeeignet wird…” [Decadence was the Fata Morgana of that progress which had not yet begun… Decadence is the nerve-ending where the dialectic of progress lays claim, as it were, to its corporeal consciousness…] Theodor Adorno. Fortschritt, Gesammelten Schriften:10. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977 (626-627).
CHAPTER II

MONOPOLY CAPITAL AND HISTORY

Philosophy, goes the famous lament, lives on because the moment of its realization was missed. But what the contemporary theory-market has typically taken to be the leitmotif of *Negative Dialectics*, either as the resonant pathos of the mandarin European intellectuals supposedly unable to comprehend the fluorescent prefab activisms of the New Left (let alone the revolutionary dynamics of the Third World), or else as the negative theodicy of Beckett’s concentration camp dialogues, and the paralyzing existential despair shorn of the utopia of Sartre’s re-mobilizing moralism, is untrue in a double sense. Adorno was criticizing Hegel, not Marx; and the polemic target in question was the American Empire, not those Second World states which internalized the violence of the world-market in the form of late-developmental autarkies indistinguishable, in practice, from the national security states of the NATO bloc. In fact the central task of Adorno’s negative or multinational dialectics will be not merely to think through the Pax Americana, but to think *past* it, turning the categories of such against itself in order to unlock the historical energies bound up in its innermost constellations. Curious as it may seem, the confusion first-time readers and translators often experience during their initial contact with the conceptual hyperspace of *Negative Dialectics* is more than subjective shock at encountering an unfamiliar brand of thought; it is also, on a certain level, the cognition of an overwhelming familiarity, indeed the dawning realization of one’s own position amidst the dizzying expanse and astonishing complexity of the American-led total system Adorno intends to map out.
This may explain why the single most stereotypical critique of the Frankfurt School by American intellectuals – the reproach that the Frankfurters were a privileged group of Weimar German exiles, grumpily whining about the country which saved them from Fascism instead of doing anything constructive – contains a grain of truth, though not in the sense one might think. Adorno’s work in the Forties and early Fifties was already beginning to think through the seismic historical events of the Depression, Stalinism, WW II and the Cold War from a radically international perspective. But it was not the process of Americanization which primarily interested Adorno, so much as America’s role as the exemplar and incarnation of a specific, historically-bounded stage of monopoly capitalism. *Minima Moralia* is, in that sense, already an attempt to bridge the gap between the realm of radical sociology on one hand – everything from post-Weberian theories of domination and post-Freudian analyses of the culture industry to the prescient deconstruction of Fascism – and the aesthetic theory of what might, with pardonable exaggeration, be termed the radical heritage of Eurocommunism on the other (the spectrum from Proust to the second Viennese school, Brecht to Benjamin, Kafka to Klee, and Lukačs to Luxemburg). The result was an enormously productive range of new concepts, ranging from theories of monopoly subjectivity, to the identity-politics of an American consumerism just beginning to be exported around the world, and even to dissident contributions to the nascent field of Cold War area studies and geopolitics. By the mid-Sixties, Adorno will build upon this strikingly original line of thinking by zeroing in on the contradiction between the dynamics of the new industrial mass culture on the one hand, and the international matrix of productive-forces ensconced within the national-monopoly relations of production endemic to the Cold War power-blocs on the other.
The extraordinary power of this move should become apparent once we consider one other significant feature of the Cold War: not the American hegemony per se, but the worldwide economic and political subalternity of everyone else on the planet during the immediate post-1945 period. By that measure, even the most dramatic local ruptures or revolutionary innovations of the blossoming export-platform economies of Central Europe and East Asia, the classical Third World revolutions of China and Vietnam, and the state autarkies of the Eastern bloc, remained just that – local or peripheral claims, locked into a tightly-organized world-system with no real parallels to the far more loosely organized British Empire of the Victorian era. This may explain why the clash of Cold War internationalization (US military interventions as well as overseas investment in branch and assembly plants) and Bretton-Woods-style globalization (cultural Americanization, global marketing and finance) found its most productive resonances in the contested interzones between the Cold War superstates, and not in the direct confrontations of the latter. In the European context, this is most obvious in the cultural outpouring of Francophone cultural theory during and after the watershed of May 1968 (Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Lacan and Althusser are the usual names invoked here, though one should also include Sartre), which in its own way was an attempt to think the micropolitics of the Western European welfare state against the backdrop of the Eastern European dissident movements and civil insurrections. Similar tendencies were at work in the heart of the bloodiest battlefield of the Cold War of them all, namely the rapidly industrializing Pacific Rim zone located between peripheral China and metropolitan West Coast America; a region which developed a no less astonishingly diverse range of cultural, economic and social innovations, ranging from the Hong Kong movies and the Vietnamese Revolution to the 1987 South Korean democracy movement and Japanese state-led hyperdevelopment.
Indeed, one of the most intriguing consequences of Adorno’s concept of monopoly capital is the notion that the theory-market is somehow part and parcel of the logic of the total system, such that if the thing did not exist, it would have to be invented all over again. The Western European theory-boom of the Seventies, for example, exhibits an intriguing tendency to both privilege the primarily cultural concerns of the Francophone theorists over and above the industrial sociologies of the Central European economic zone (that crescent of export-platform economies snaking through the heart of Europe from Scandinavia to the Benelux countries, West Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and northern Italy, which today comprises the high-tech core of the European Union), while at the same time studiously ignoring or avoiding the pressing issues mapped out by Fredric Jameson’s luminous Seventies essays on the blockbuster Hollywood film or Pierre Bourdieu’s magisterial *Distinction*, that is to say the politics of a newly multinational consumer culture and the rise of a whole new wave of high-tech electronic and mediatic neocolonialism. It would however be unfair to argue that where the initial radical impulse of the Western European post-structuralisms, everywhere from Derridean dissemination and Kristevan semiosis to Foucauldian power-analysis, failed to rise to the concrete aesthetic analysis of the media culture or the struggles of the post-1968 identity politics, theory regressed perforce back to the multinational idealism of the Cold War power-blocs. In Derrida’s case, one could argue that to the extent that it merely reproduced the speculative nominalisms of the consumer culture rather than critiquing such, deconstruction remained a ruse of monopoly-national reason; indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that deconstruction was what Europe had instead of indigenous cable TV programming (put bluntly, a new type of high-tech or mediatic commodity).
Both represented the overdevelopment of form over anything like an adequate content, something which, to be fair to the theorists, was the hallmark of the conservative turn of the late Seventies and Eighties, everywhere from Mitterand’s Yuppie socialism to the New Southern corporatism of Ted Turner’s CNN. Post-structuralism, once the underground alternative to the cybernetic orthodoxies of Sixties consumerism (that uneasy admixture of late Fordism and early global marketing cleverly satirized by the roboticized astronauts and humanized AI mainframe in Kubrick’s \textit{2001}), is nowadays part of the new orthodoxy of Wall Street’s global informatic and credit speculations. Such antinomies are to be ascribed neither to subjective cowardice nor to political opportunism, but need to be comprehended immanently, as documents of a genuine historical contradiction – in this case, the painfully contradictory, complex emergence of a whole new transnational society out of the fifty-year chrysalis of the Cold War.

Adorno’s indispensable contribution here is this: where Fredric Jameson’s luminous evocation of the global media and consumer culture of the early Eighties decoded the locally-produced, globally-consumed Hollywood Seventies blockbuster movie as a new type of global commodity fetishism, and thus furnished a theory of postmodernism as the cultural logic of multinational capitalism, and where Pierre Bourdieu outlined a path-breaking sociology of the European Union in \textit{Language and Symbolic Power} (effectively mapping out the rise of a multinational Euroculture), \textit{Negative Dialectics} gives us the tools to analyze both the prehistory of the multinational theory-market as well as the multinational ideologies of our day.

Adorno begins not, however, with the latest products of globalization in the Sixties, but with its prehistory in the Forties, distilling a monopoly-national content content out of the set of regnant monopoly-national forms otherwise known as Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. This latter turns out to be a species of neo-national
mythos, whose cultural content was made available only in the monopoly-cultural practice of Hollywood. The summary judgement of Brecht’s Arturo Ui, that Germany had Fascism where America had the gangster film, has its logical corollary in the conjunction of early American postmodernism with the late modernisms of the European semi-periphery: fundamental ontology was the Hollywood of the Adenauer elite, precisely where Lukaçs’ ontology of labor lay claim to the radical Brechtian conscience of the Eastern culture-worker. This startling claim is made possible by Adorno’s notion of non-identity, so often misinterpreted as a mere polemic position or aristocratic gesture (the Great Refusal) rather than as a powerful aesthetic ideologeme and a nascent academic praxis all its own. Inasmuch as the contradiction is, as Adorno puts it, the index or desiderata of untruth of identity, non-identity yields that scandalous content otherwise displaced, glossed or relegated by the contradiction to the merely formal antinomy or logical aporia. This latter is by no means, as in post-structuralist dogma, to be written off as the Lacanian méconnaissance or subject-difference within a preexisting field of object-identifications (what Derrida glosses elsewhere as the trace) – something which tends to freeze the field of difference or non-identity into place, in the form of the familiar technological surplus-rent, telecommunicatory grid or cyberspace matrix. What is at issue is not multinational technology, but multinational capital itself; something which is, as Marx’s famous injunction teaches, not a thing, but a discrete social relation between a wide range of antagonistic entrepreneurial, national and monopoly-national capitals. Adorno’s first move towards decoding this latter will, logically enough, be the evocation of the global exchange-net underlying all these things:

Der Widerspruch ist das Nichtidentische unter dem Aspekt der Identitaet; der Primat des Widerspruchsprinzips in der Dialektik gibt das Heterogene am Einheitsdenken. Indem es auf seine Grenze aufprallt, uebersteigt es sich. Dialektik ist das konsequente Bewusstsein von Nichtidentitaet. Sie bezieht nicht vorweg einen Standpunkt... Widerspruechlichkeit hat vermoegende des immanenten Wesens...
von Bewusstsein selber den Charakter unausweichlicher und verhaengnisvoller Gesetzmaessigkeit. Identitaet und Widerspruch des Denkens sind aneinander-geschweibt. Die Totalitaet des Widerspruchs ist nichts als die Unwahrheit der totalen Identifikation, so wie sie in dieser sich manifestiert. Widerspruch ist Nichtidentitaet im Bann des Gesetzes, das auch das Nichtidentische affiziert. [The contradiction is the non-identical under the aspect of identity; the primacy of the principle of contradiction in dialectics yields the heterogenous within unitary thinking. By colliding against its own borders, it reaches beyond itself. Dialectics is the consequent consciousness of non-identity. It is not related in advance to a standpoint… Thanks to the immanent nature of consciousness, that which is in contradiction has itself the character of unavoidable and catastrophic nomothetism. Identity and contradiction in thinking are welded to one another. The totality of the contradiction is nothing less than the untruth of the total identification, as this is manifested in itself. Contradiction is non-identity under the spell of the law, which also influences the non-identical.] ND:17-18

The contradiction is thus the conceptual hinge by which identity, that primal ruse of reason of the bourgeois or capitalist subject (in the sense that what is seemingly most subjective or personal in commodity society, namely one’s own subjectivity, is shaped by the most impersonal social and historical forces imaginable) is able to mediate between the commodity-form and the totalizing principle of such, that is to say, the exchange-net. Simultaneously the residue of non-identity bound up in this totality, or that which exceeds, escapes or otherwise countermands the continuum of unequal exchange, either in terms of the utopian use-values of archaic modes of production, or as the occasional prefiguration of a post-capitalist exchange, returns in two ways. The first is the subjective ideology of autonomy, by which the subjective drive to self-preservation harmonizes with an objectively antagonistic equivalence-principle (in the context of German idealism, the identity of the concept with what is being thought; in our own society, the convergence of what is sold with what people have been conspicuously trained to want). The second is the objective bane or the baleful spell of the totality, namely that symbolic mystification or occultation of the totality by which the coded antagonism or hostility of the latter towards its constituent members (the brutal necessity of global corporate competition) is
transformed into a kind of surplus-consciousness. Adorno’s brilliantly Marxist point is that this consciousness, the raw material of that class ideology which can be later hammered out by empiricists and positivists alike into coherent ideologemes and philosophical systems, or else refined into new types of aesthetic experience-content, is its own worst enemy. It is a systemic subjectivity which, because it must finance its development out of the expropriation of the labor-time of others, contains the potential to turn against its own systemic character. In Adorno’s words:


Die Entzauberung des Begriffs ist das Gegengift der Philosophie. Es verhindert ihre Wucherung: dass sie sich selbst zum Absoluten werde. [To change this direction of conceptuality, to turn it towards the non-identical, is the hinge of negative dialectics. Before the insight into the constitutive character of the non-conceptual in the concept, the compulsion of identity, which otherwise carries along the concept without the delay of such a reflection, dissolves. Its self-determination leads away from the illusion of the concept’s being-in-itself as a unity of meaning, out towards its own meaning.

The disenchancing of the concept is the antidote of philosophy. It hinders its overgrowth: i.e. becoming the absolute itself.] ND:24

Note that Adorno does not wish to project some sort of historical telos here, wherein the earliest proto-national collectives of the peasant uprisings and religious wars logically turn into the national-democratic revolutions and national unifications, and where these latter amalgamate into First World mass parties, Second World developmental states and Third World decolonizations and nationalisms. Rather, the global surplus-consciousness out of which ideological systems, social theories and political movements is deeply contradictory and discontinuous: it is mediated primarily in terms of what Adorno terms subject-expression, and only secondarily as a coherent ideological field, philosophical
system or cultural tendency. The asynchronous development of theory – the necessity to use abstractions in order to comprehend a society predicated on the unrelenting accumulation of abstract exchange-value out of concrete labor – is dictated not, as the reactionary ontologies and conservative positivisms would have it, by too much consciousness or rationality, but by the crying scarcity of both. “In schroffen Gegensatz zum üblichen Wissenschaftsideal,” notes Adorno paradigmatically, “bedarf die Objektivitaet dialektischer Erkenntnis nicht eines Weniger sondern eines Mehr an Subjekt.” [In sharp contrast to the usual scientific ideal, the objectivity of dialectical cognition needs more subject, not less.] ND:50

This has its cultural model in Walter Benjamin’s notion of the radical politics of the past, indeed in the politicization of history in general amidst the increasing ahistoricism of commodity-society; it is out of the allegorical materials of Baudelaire’s fictionalized Paris that Benjamin will read, for example, the class mobilization of the French national proletariat against the national rentier and industrialist overclasses. Adorno’s key move here is to replace national-revolutionary allegory with the category of monopoly-national mythos or consumerism, whose logical complement or objective counterpart is Gesetzmaessigkeit or “nomothetism”, the institutional infrastructure of monopoly capitalism: the Benjaminic flaneur and urban arcade accede to the mall rat and the interstate highway. This insight permits Adorno to radically historicize both Weber’s sociological insight into the genesis of the Wilhelmine bureaucracy, and Nietzsche’s stinging philosophical rebuke of the liberal quotient in the Wilhelmine ideology of Bismarck’s Germany alike, by emphasizing the degree to which these concepts are really localized or partial accounts of the classic Marxian dialectic of the division of labor. This last is no longer delimited to the spinning-mill revolts, Factory Act legislations, colonial expansions or entrepreneurial ventures of Victorian capitalism, but must be rethought in
the context of the shopfloor Fordism, multidivisional corporate structures, industrial trade unionism and Keynesian consumption-politics typical of the era of monopoly capitalism.

What Adorno is saying, some ten years before the micropolitical praxis of the New Left confirmed the theoretical intuition, is that capitalist politics has been and always will be identity politics. Put somewhat crudely, identity and contradiction relate to one another in the rarefied field of monopoly-era aesthetic theory in much the same way that industrial and finance capital interact in Rudolf Hilferding’s classic exposition of Central European finance-capitalism, or indeed in the manner that the proletarian parties and bourgeois civil society in Luxemburg’s Spartacism or Gramsci’s war of ideological movement mediate each other’s positions: as a radically plebian international content confronting a compromised or otherwise subaltern (vis-à-vis industrialized Britain and America) national form. This, it will quickly be observed, has the most profound affinities to the work of two other great theoreticians of monopoly-era Marxism, namely Lukaçs’ transcendent vision of bourgeois reification and proletarian class consciousness, and Sartre’s immanent dialectic of ideological determination and mass-cultural derealization; what bridges the divide between the Eastern and Western European Marxisms is, indeed, Adorno’s Central European concept of the critical reflexion upon the national-monopoly mass party.

Put more concretely still, Adorno is insisting that we rethink the spectrum from the Leninist developmental bureaucracies to the Social Democratic and Eurocommunist parties, from the national mass media and governmental agencies of the New Deal to the national industrial unions of the steel, chemical, automobile and energy industries, and from the university professionals to self-financing institutes or foundations (such as the Frankfurt School itself) in the context of the division of labor under monopoly capitalism. What is at issue here, then, is the contradiction between the productive forces of the
multidivisional or monopoly corporation on the one hand, and the extended class
conflicts of such on the other; or what amounts to the division between applied and pure
research, scientific team-work, the emergence of national laboratories and large-scale
research institutions on the one hand, and the new social spaces created by
decolonization, the culture-industry, and the creation of the Second and Third Worlds on
the other. Interestingly, this contradiction had its subterranean debut in the progressive-
regressive method rehearsed in Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in the form of that
Mediterranean trading-zone whose currency-marketplace mediated both the colonization
of the New World and the emergence of national aesthetics proper (essentially, the
aesthetic version of the infamous economic transition to capitalism) out of the thriving
bureaucracies and subaltern mercantile bourgeoisies of the absolutist states.

This category, essentially a late or delayed variant of the Benjaminic national
allegory (and it speaks volumes about the historical position of the Central European
intellectuals, that the complete erasure of a Left national praxis amidst the catastrophe of
Fascism should redound as the crucial spur to a coherent theory of the
internationalization of capital) allows Sartre to recode or retranslate the otherwise
privatized or monadic categories of aesthetic existentialism back into a newly
internationalized and collectivized politics: the subjective surcharge of the concepts of
derealization, the project, and the imaginary merges seamlessly, at their outer limit, into
the objective relations of seriality, the practico-inert and class ideology of early postwar
consumer capitalism. It is, indeed, hardly an accident that the Sartrean mediations should
have their most powerful echo in that land of untrammeled consumerism, namely the
United States, and specifically in the work of Fredric Jameson; whom indeed may be
credited for pointing out that the much-maligned Sartrean subject, so often misconstrued
as an exiguous cultural trope rather than an unavoidable political situation, is nothing less
than the cipher of the newly hegemonic American Empire itself, rendered as a kind of motivating spirit or Weltgeist of the postwar world-system, whose superstate was charged with divvying up the world into allied or antagonistic power-blocs, and whose multidivisional corporations were to reorganize the former colonial blocs and war economies into truly multinational markets.

The existentialisms were, in this sense, the crucial mediating codes or philosophemes by which the social antagonisms and class struggles of this process – not so much the Americanization of the world as the consumerization of the world-market – could be narrated. Where Sartre’s cultural praxis confronts, at its outer limit, the self-representing nominalism of the American films, advertising and consumer goods flooding postwar Europe with that radical proletarian ghost elsewhere available in the street demonstrations of the Eurocommunist parties, and savagely repressed in America by McCarthyism, Adorno will stage his negative dialectics as the self-reflection of a theory-market out of the idealist systems and philosophic modernisms alike (everything from the Right-wing ontologies and Husserl’s logical absolutism to the proliferating varieties of Western Marxism). Where the work of both dialecticians converges is in the properly postmodern concept of historicity: the Marxist dictum that all history, including that of our own period, is prehistory, returns firstly as the Benjaminic national allegory or historical trope later taken up by Adorno’s immanent categories of monopoly capital, and secondly as the Sartrean decryption of the Gaullist state apparatus and its various external and internal decolonizations. The nation-state itself, whether coded as the Hegelian state-developmental system or the no less universalizing legal and political discourses handed down by the French and American Revolutions, is reproduced by the monopoly-formation in question as a relativized or subsidiary sub-narrative, already given over in advance to the various marketing and publicity bureaus of the media-culture: where
Genet’s novelic menagerie (the policeman, the thief, the stool pigeon, the con artist, etc.) anticipates the internationalized character-tropes of his later plays (e.g. Third World Village and First World Virtue in *The Blacks*), the stereotypes of the American war movie (the fatherly sergeant, the genteel Southerner, the Midwestern farm boy, the urban kid from the wrong side of the tracks, etc.) provide the proto-national foundation for the incipiently transnational mass-cultural tropes of the G-man, the secret agent, the suburban domestic comedy, and the film noir detective. Adorno will in fact follow a similar strategy in his 1956 *Against Epistemology*, which confronts the immanently transnational nominalism of the Fifties by recourse to the antinomies of Husserlian phenomenology: whose own repressed historicity, namely the non-identity of the logical apperception (something like the early mass-cultural version of the Kantian intuition) with the monopoly commodities issuing forth from the American metropole turns out to yield, not the things themselves, but the serialized access-codes to such – i.e. that dizzying multiplication of consumer credit typical of the global consumer society, elsewhere valorized by the equally proliferating jargons of the existentialisms and the visual tropes of the auteur films alike in a subjective or moralizing turn, as the dialectics of the gaze (window-shopping), the choice (purchasing), crime (commercial competition), guilt (debt service) and so forth.\(^3\) Although Sartre’s meditations on film, with their rich subtexts of the theatrical gaze, the national cinematic genres and the early transition to televisual or international visual forms, are clearly superior to Adorno’s own rather limited concept of the phantasmagoria, it is worth pointing out that Adorno displays an incomparable dexterity on the rather different grounds of musical aesthetics generally, and on the problem of musical organization specifically. In a nutshell, Adorno hears what Sartre sees.\(^4\) This is worth exploring a bit further in the context of the immediate successor to the 1944 *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, namely the 1947 *Philosophy of Modern Music*,
and the problematic relationship of the modernisms with the newer aesthetic technologies:

Painting a picture or writing a quartet may remain far behind the division of labor and the experimental technical organization of film, but the objective technical formulation of the painting and the quartet holds fast to that possibility of film which is disrupted by the social mode of its production. Its ‘rationality’, however chimerically wrapped up in itself and problematic in its impenetrable reserve, is superior to the rationalization of film production. These manipulate prefabricated – indeed already evanescing – objects and resignedly leave them in their externality, thus grasping the object itself only intermittently. Out of those reflexes, however, which photography powerlessly allows to fall on the depicted objects, Picasso constructs those of his which the latter themselves demand. No less is true of twelve-tone composition. What survives the oncoming ice-age may yet find shelter in its labyrinth.

What Adorno’s thought unconsciously gropes towards, without ever quite finding its object (though he does come admirably close!), is indeed that new class of aesthetic producers symbolized by the filmic auteurs, and cognized here in the significant conjunction of the mythic labyrinth – actually an inversion of a very old Goethean trope, namely the transcription of Frankfurt’s mercantile culture onto the proto-national coordinates of the Weimar principality (a.k.a. the elision of the urban-caste familial bond by the national-mercantile elective or speculative affinity) – with the Expressionist vision of a renaturalized social upheaval or monopoly-era Darwinism. What Adorno overlooks
here, of course, is the unique solution of American mass-culture in the Thirties – the prehistoric monster or science-fiction adventure narrative, whose most famous visual monument is probably the dinosaur extinction sequence of Disney’s *Fantasia*, wherein prehistorical carcasses litter the screen like the car-designs of rival automobile producers crushed or bought out by General Motors and Ford. The naturalized antipode of this socialized catastrophe was the incipiently postmodern signifier of the brimming, liquefied animated surface – whether water or lava – liberated from the specifically filmic visual commodity. Hitchcock’s early thrillers did something similar, by coding the subject as the signifying or betraying clue amidst the materials of the photographic panorama not yet dynamized into the moving surfaces of the Western or war-movie (those twin monuments to the ambiguous triumph of the automotive culture). This in turn tended to foreground, not the detective or private eye, but a new kind of collective cultural praxis, or what amounts to the sublation of the detective-narrative and the Hollywood adventure serial into the overly familiar category of the Fifties action-adventure thriller.

Where Adorno’s concept of compositional material finds its greatest relevance, paradoxically enough, is in the trajectory of jazz modernism; though Adorno himself was as personally unfamiliar with the most progressive jazz works of his period as he was with those of the cinema, the categories of mass-cultural absorption, hit-tune versus critical musical consciousness, and the consequent isolation and specialization of musical aesthetics are eminently applicable to late jazz modernism, particularly in the transition from the late bebop of Charlie Parker and Thelonius Monk to the free jazz of John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman. Where the auteurs negated the Hollywood special effect by recuperating the photographic sublime out of the stereotypical visual trope (the panorama, the tracking shot, the close-up, etc.), bebop rescued the category of instrumental timbre out of the stereotypical scale-modulations and chromatic effects of
the big band and swing era. In particular, Parker’s annulment of the big band melody and instrumental solo in the thirty-second note and the continuous bebop improvisation paved the way for Monk’s minor-key transitions and austere piano fingerings, which dissolved the chromatic scale into serialized enclaves of dissonance, in much the same fashion that Schoenberg’s free atonality in the Expressionist work *Pierrot Lunaire* negated the harmonic chromaticism of late European Romanticism via the nascent musical seriality of twelve-tone technique. That solo founded by Louis Armstrong’s sovereign control of the melodic material over the subordinate orchestra, and carried to its height in the orchestration of Duke Ellington and Count Basie (very roughly, the transition from New Orleans to Kansas City jazz), was thereby democratized into the free-floating bebop solo, on the principle of extended improvisation, wherein each individual performer was called upon to improvise upon the harmonic raw material in question. This principle was radicalized still further by free jazz, which by degrees dissolved the last remaining neo-national harmonic and rhythmic constraints of bebop by sublating the instrumental technique of the jazz solo (always limited by the sonic possibilities of the saxophone or other instrument) into the aural palettes of a multinational studio and recording technology. This was pastiched by Coltrane in his very last works, e.g. *Manifestations*, as the iterative repetition of every possible tone-cluster at every conceivable pitch interleaved with the objective materials of Second and Third World musical styles; or put more concretely still, as the aural version of that multinational or cybernetic subject innovated by Burroughs in the early Sixties, which is brought into contact with the decolonized materials of its musical prehistory.

As a model of musical experience, this has the most striking parallel to Adorno’s initial categories of aesthetic experience in *Negative Dialectics*, namely the discrete model and the serialized ensemble. What interposes itself between the two is the moment
of cognitive distance or freedom-towards-the-object, essentially the conceptual version of what the Seventies theoreticians celebrated as the aesthetic principle of aleatory play, a.k.a. the joys of the global media culture. Against the rationalist exchange of neutralized sign-systems or the pure nominalism of rationalized signs, however, Adorno posits the historicization of the exchange-net altogether:

Versenkung ins Einzelne, die zum Extrem gesteigerte dialektische Immanenz, bedarf als ihres Moments auch der Freiheit, aus dem Gegenstand herauszutreten, die der Identitaetsanspruch abschneidet... In der Erkenntnispraxis, der Aufloesung des Unaufloeslichen, kommt das Moment solcher Transzendenz des Gedankens daran zutage, dass sie als Mikrologie einzig ueber makrologische Mittel verfuegt. Die Forderung nach Verbindlichkeiten ohne System ist die nach Denkmodellen. Diese sind nicht bloss monadologischer Art. Das Modell trifft das Spezifische und mehr als das Spezifische, ohne es in seinen allgemeineren Oberbegriff zu verfluechtigen. Philosophisch denken ist soviel wie in Modellen denken; negative Dialektik ein Ensemble von Modellanalysen. [Absorption into the particular, dialectical immance raised to an extreme, necessitates as one of its moments the freedom to also step away from the object, which cuts off the claim of identity… In the praxis of cognition, the resolution of the irresolvable, the moment of such transcendence of thought comes into play in that only as a micrology does it employ macrological means. The demand for stringency without system is that for thought-models. These are not of a merely monadological sort. The model strikes the specific and more than the specific, without dissolving it into its more general master-concept. To think philosophically is so much as to think in models; negative dialectics is an ensemble of model-analyses.] ND:39

The windowless monad and the positivistic system, the axial termini of the great 19th century philosophic systems ranging from Hegel’s mythic inauguration of the German ideology to Nietzsche’s no less mythic demolition of such, are thus superseded by the thought-model and the systematic contradiction (what Adorno calls elsewhere the critical systematic spirit, instead of the spirit of the system [ND:35]), or what amounts to the prescient anticipation of the stratospheric theory-market and rhizomic social spaces of multinational capitalism. What mediates between these two categories is not the hegemonic nominalism of the global consumer culture, but the meditation on the problem
of philosophic exposition or Darstellung, in the form of the antinomies and unlikely political peregrinations of the thought-model, or what Adorno initially designates that “geistige Erfahrung” which forms the necessary antipode to the abstraction of theory. Significantly, this had its first great exposition in Freud’s notion of sublimation – that process of internalization and subjectification whereby external laws, constraints, mores and the like are assimilated into the ego-structure of the individual (as that super-ego which adjudicates the conflicts of the ego from the position of the constitutional monarch). This striking theoretical explication of the national-monopoly political aporias of the Hapsburg Empire (the insoluble neo-nationalisms dividing its constituent ethnic groups as much as the class strife spawned by rapid industrialization) has its monopoly-national cognate in the urbanizing space of turn-of-the-century Vienna, namely that island of modernized class struggle between an industrial bourgeoisie and proletariat amidst the still-numerous peasant producers and handicrafts artisans of the Eastern European periphery. The concept of sublimation was, in this respect, the radical insight into the absolutist or nobilitarian prehistory of the national juridical sphere: conversely, the storied fabric of the great Central European mercantile speculations and bankruptcies dating back to the Fuggers could seal the emblems of a hegemonic finance aristocracy and its allied industrial rentiers, in the mold of the finance-capital populisms of the Victorian era (everything from the robber barons of the Gilded Age to Gladstone’s free-trade Liberalism to the Wilhelmine wars of unification). This trope was further developed by Walter Benjamin, particularly in the study of Baudelaire and the modernist trope of vertigo or sudden movement, a.k.a. the Surrealist shock. In Adorno’s retrospective version of this:

Demgegenüber wirft Erkenntnis, damit sie fruchtet, á fond perdu sich weg an die Gegenstäende. Der Schwindel, den das erregt, ist ein index veri; der Schock des Offenen, die Negativitaet, als welche es im Gedeckten und Immergleichen
notwendig erscheint, Unwahrheit nur fuers Unwahre. [In contrast to this, the
cognition throws itself á fond perdu [into the abyss] to objects, so as to be fruitful.
The vertigo which this creates is an index veri [index of truth]; the shock of the
revelation, the negativity, or what it necessarily seems to be amidst what is hidden
and monotonous, untruth only for the untrue.] ND:43

The point is not so much to provide the immanent index by which the transcendental
materials of the late modernisms could be measured in the first place (the implicit telos of
the unfinished Aesthetic Theory), but rather to stage the problem of interpretation as a
new type of theoretical praxis, capable of assimilating and reprocessing the essential
cognitions and conceptual innovations of the 19th century in the same manner that
monopoly capital refunctioned the aesthetic forms of liberal capitalism for its own
purposes, or indeed in the fashion that the aesthetic modernisms liberally parodied,
quoted or otherwise incorporated otherwise archaic materials into refreshingly new
forms. To use Adorno’s language, modernism set the objectified impulses of the national
culture-industry into motion towards the utopia of the international subject: the non-
identity of the two categories becomes the crucial motor (rather than any instrumentalized
telos) of a properly dialectical subjectivity. Orson Welles’ democratization of the
athleticized panorama of Leni Riefenstahl’s Olympia in Citizen Kane, Picasso’s negation
of the newsreels and radio coverage of the Spanish Civil War in Guernica, Schoenberg’s
antithesis of the Hollywood film score in the Variations for Orchestra (Op. 31), and Count
Basie’s orchestration of the swing beat in Kansas City jazz are all compelling models of
this process. This has its philosophical analogue, appropriately enough, in Adorno’s study
of Kierkegaard and the existential antinomies. Kierkegaard’s philosophic provenance had
its functional limit in the class position of that Scandinavian rentier-class condemned, in
the existentialist sense, to oscillate between those limited surplus-rents of the world
colonial trade already largely secured by the British competition, and the more lucrative
but riskier manufacturing speculation which might go awry. Kierkegaard’s ingeniously
Central European answer here is, of course, the socialization of the credit-risk by an idealism qua state-developmental bureaucracy willing to play theological investment banker to the concepts involved; something which the logical absolutists and their ontological successors would subsequently pursue in the re-nationalizing form of the monopoly state apparatus (the technocratic perspective of Husserl’s abstract Wesenschau as much as the Heideggerian Technologie).

The aesthetic consequence is that one can no longer speak of the drive towards a monadic totality but rather several semi-autonomous drives or tendencies, each of which finds its truth-content only in the discrete intersections and contingent conjunctions of an irrevocably multinational historical process. This indeed is the genesis of the Adornic constellation, so often misinterpreted as a static hermeneutic or theological trope, but which functions rather as a kind of heuristic register or aesthetic range-finder roughly corresponding to Sartre’s stinging retort to the Vietnam-era PCF in *Search for a Method*: “...there are [only] proletariats.” CRD:75 The irreducible multiplicity or heterogeneity concealed beneath the totalizing veil of the exchange-net is not simply the abstract or Lukaçsian negation of this latter, but is the necessary antipode of such: without the exchange-net, the non-identical would be as impossible as a national proletariat without a national bourgeoisie. Sartre’s point, that the relative underdevelopment of the latter in the Russian or Brazilian context was only the flip side of the imperial overdevelopment of the British and American (or indeed French) overclass, has its Central European echo in Adorno’s decryption of the embryonic forms of global capitalism amidst the primal vortex of export-platform neo-nationalism and free-trade internationalism characteristic of the postwar EC. From such a standpoint, the emergence of the European Union out of this latter was not in the least bit foreordained; it was, rather, the contingent end-result of Central Europe’s location between the hammer of Eastern bloc ideological competition
and the anvil of unrelenting American corporate competition. Caught in the firefight between the Taylorist Hegelians of the Eastern bloc apparatchiks and the cybernetic production strategies of the Americans, Central Europe had to be more socialist than the Soviets and more capitalist than the Americans, if it was not to be permanently absorbed into either bloc a la Latin America or the Soviet Asian republics. This ideological crisis is something Adorno initially identifies as the ontological need, i.e. the necessity to legitimate international accumulation structures out of whatever local or proto-national materials were handy, and which will later drive those successive waves of existential, structuralist, deconstructive and postmodern theory which narrated the rise of the European superstate step by step out of a pool of international, neo-Gaullist, post-Gaullist and ultimately post-American cultural registers.

Conversely, that informatic ideology of the global rentiers which attempts to privilege the mass-cultural surplus or technology-rent over the production-system in question, by cloaking genuinely multinational productive forces in the guise of neonational relations of production, has its concrete negation in the production-networks of those nascent subjects of post-national history, the multinational corporations themselves. Adorno’s key innovation will be to derive the non-identical element out of this latter, or what amounts to a further division of intellectual labor to a position both locally immanent to the multinational agency (in the sense of the multinational class praxis of the global rentiers, the technology-rents of the multis, and the oppositional projects of micropolitical groups and global trade unions) and globally transcendent to the world-market as a whole (the space of a world government, trade regulations, a juridical system and the like). Such a projected rethinking and extension of the national and international Marxisms is not without consequences for the vocation of theory, and
indeed Adorno will ground the necessity for a negative or post-national dialectics on precisely this point:

As with some dazzling computerized optical effect or early flight simulator, which generates multiple perspectives of a greatly simplified object-field depending upon the position of the viewer, so do the idealistic or neonational codes of the existential or Sartrean field of possibility, the theoretical concept, and the nominalistic, autonomizing name turn out to be only the flip side of the overtly multinational consumer-subject, the postmodern theory-market and the cybernetic, self-iterating text respectively. The antipodes of neonationalism and multinationalism are in this sense derived out of that quite real contradiction between the cultural and political hegemony of the Cold War superstates and the rising power of the interlocking export-platform economies of the 1960s. Put another way, the essential precondition for the planetary cyclone of guerilla struggles, comprador repressions, and national anti-colonial revolutions which raged through the Sixties was indeed what the economists politely term the further integration of the raw materials peripheries of Southeast Asia, Latin America and Africa into the
world-economy, but which is best understood as a kind of postmodern primitive accumulation.

This by no means took a single predetermined form, but was mediated by a host of proto-national, neo-national and international class formations, ranging from that military developmental state which organized the slaughter of a militant Chinese minority in Indonesia, to the developmental states of Singapore and Taiwan, all the way to the cadre politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, wherein ceaseless purges permitted a heretofore unknown upwards mobility of the middle peasant classes (whose most famous alumnus was Mao himself). Similar processes were undoubtedly at work in the more straightforward nationalizations instituted by Allende and Castro, and on a still deeper level the agrarian socialisms and semi-autarkic collectivizations of post-colonial Africa. That many if not most of these attempts at creating genuinely local accumulation were ruthlessly smashed by global finance capital in much the same way that the newly independent 19th century Latin American economies were crushed under the heel of British and American finance imperialism is neither a license to write off the Third World generally nor political party-building locally, but merely underlines the need for new types of multinational organization and solidarity (not to mention a correspondingly multinationalized culture and theory). Conversely, the developmental state is reducible neither to Confucian value-systems nor to Cold War conspiracies, but represents the extension of state-monopoly relations of production long taken for granted in the global metropoles to the peripheries – something which occurred not merely in conjunction with the revolution in the productive forces of the First World (very schematically, the transition from cybernetic to informatic work-processes) but as its logical antipode: the farming-out and subcontracting of low-profit manufacturing and assembly tasks to a henceforth planetary labor pool. What was new about this situation, as compared to the
market-driven 19th century national unifications of Italy, Germany and the United States, was the mediating presence of the global semi-peripheries: not simply the Second World of Cold War vintage, but the loose collocation of the export-platform industrializers of Central Europe and Japan and the semi-peripheries of Eastern Europe and the Asian tiger economies.

This is something which Adorno will rehearse in typically elliptical fashion, as the dialectic between the various philosophic identities (from Hegel’s deferred patriotism to the cybernetic ideologies of the Cold War monopoly-state) and their intermediating national moralities (from Kant to the mass-cultural ontologies and existentialisms), all mediated by the extended array of models of multinational dialectics with which Negative Dialectics will close. Where Sartre analyzed the cinematic unconscious of a Gaullist state caught between an external decolonization and an internal EEC-ization, Adorno does something similar for the philosophic unconscious, as it were, of that Central European developmental state forced to oscillate unhappily between the dream of a catastrophic autarky (the Heideggerian ontologies as much as the Diamat orthodoxies of the GDR) and the catastrophic reality of the Pax Americana. The result is the sublation of Soviet autarky and the American hegemony alike in an initial scansion of the nascent world-system of the Fifties, as in the semiotic rectangle displayed by Figure 1:
Where Lukaçs of History and Class Consciousness posited, for the first time, the ontology of that theoretical labor (in honorable opposition to the parties which bureaucratically proclaimed themselves as the embodiment of such) which Gramsci later reconfirmed as the cornerstone of revolutionary class consciousness, Adorno is specifically democratizing or plebianizing such, by insisting that the utopian moment of theory is not reducible to a party platform or a proscriptive morality. Rather, it hinges upon the further reflection and meditation upon an entire constellation of class praxes, indeed on their vital (one would not want to go so far as to say, Althusserian) interrelation and intermediation. Though this is something which is practically taken for granted nowadays, in the experience of micropolitical alliances and grassroots activism, the
heterogenous solidarities of the welfare states and a rapidly multinationalizing union movement, it’s worth stressing the degree to which such a multinational dialectics represented a shockingly scandalous break from the national-monopoly corpus of the Leninist and Social Democratic political traditions. Crucial here is the subtle reconfiguration of one of the oldest themes of Adorno’s work, namely the antagonism between the high modernist avant-garde and an irredeemably compromised culture industry, into the more complex constellation of the marketplace of cognition on the one hand – not merely the vocation of theory, but the subjective response to the relentless aestheticization of the life-world under late capitalist consumerism more generally – and the flourishing mass-cultural nominalisms, mediatic sign-systems and modes of signification on the other (the multiple musical revolutions of atonality or jazz as much as the informatic ones of the various software languages).

The immense productivity of this move can perhaps best be grasped in connection with the competing critical methods of the day, e.g. the heuristic minimalism of New Criticism, whose notion of a reading frame or objective authorial presence exorcised of any compromising political or social content reads like the literary version of what Cold War area studies did to radical sociology, or indeed what the Hollywood blockbuster of the Fifties did to the film classics of the silent film era (one is tempted to extend the metaphor to the heroic motor car and aeroplane entrepreneurs of the Twenties, replaced by the multidivisional corporate bureaucracies of postwar GM, BMW and Toyota): i.e. retrofit a wide range of local and regional innovations into a mandatory monopoly-national cultural matrix. Something similar is true for the abstractive oppositions and difference engines of Sixties structuralism, whose signifying object-codes eagerly combed the heritage of those indigenous and Third World narrative raw materials a la Levi-Strauss’ classic *Tristes Tropiques*, or else sought out new meanings in extraneous or
marginal forms, as in Barthes’ nostalgic Polaroids or gender-bending white writings, only to rediscover, to their surprise, that the same national-monopoly mythologies they thought they had left behind in the capitalist metropoles were operative in the micro-cultures of the global periphery as well. Where the objective element in New Criticism – namely, the text shorn of any presumably Communistic extra-textual mediations – was all too subjective, the subjective element in structuralism (the signifying structure or foreground against which the totality was to be construed) was all too objective.

That the solution to such ideological aporias is neither to blindly condemn the formal techniques of literary analysis nor to simply trash structuralism altogether, but to radically historicize both on the grounds of their own privileged mediations (what Bourdieu would call the self-reflection of the fields of literary criticism and anthropology, respectively), is probably not a scandalous assertion in the context of our own post-structuralized present. The scandal, indeed, lies elsewhere: namely, in the stubbornly Marxist insistence, in the teeth of the most ferocious repression and outraged denials by the Cold War apparatchiks and functionaries of the national security states, and the no less ferocious budgetary repressions and vengeful neonationalisms of present-day neoliberalism, that every theory is always and everywhere both an artifact of and a claim upon class struggle. This is, indeed, the radical sting at the heart of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s generally underappreciated analysis of the Enlightenment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: that objectivity accorded to a scientific knowledge which was not the monopoly of a priestly caste, but was answerable to the democratic proof of the empirical case study or experiment, itself one of the key political demands of the pre-1789 Enlightenment, became counterrevolutionary the moment this objectivity was signed over to the marketplace of opinion, i.e. turned into a species of positivism. Although we will have more to say about this in the future, for now it’s worth noting that, as Fredric
Jameson pointed out in his *Late Marxism*, positivism was something like the postmodernism of Adorno’s era, i.e. an all-embracing ideology or tidal trend rather than a voluntary ideological option, whose power was rooted not in some free-floating technocracy or managerial elite, but in the overwhelming ubiquity of the nationally-based, globally-expanding multidivisional corporation and its attendant Fordist division of labor (certainly, the postmodern managerial ideologies of innovation and total quality control role could be read as the spin-off and subcontracting out of the Fordist bureaucracies of shopfloor surveillance and control, as independent industries).³

What this means in concrete terms is that while no theory can avoid staking a claim on class struggle, the reverse is certainly not the case: class struggle is not primarily about theory, in the sense of the post-structuralists or the Habermasians, who imagine that all social conflicts can be mediated or translated on some level into nominalistic or linguistic terms, i.e. that we’re all free to shop in the global village (something as true and as false as the existence of privileged elites who do indeed mortgage globally and shop locally); the point is, as Adorno urgently reminds us, theory is by no means reducible to mere ideology. The latter maps out a given position in a given field of class struggles and social antagonisms, and is in that sense merely a moment of the former, not its terminus. Practice is not to be privileged over theory, nor is theory to be privileged over practice; rather, both antipodes must be turned against the principle of privilege altogether, i.e. against the blind, prehistorical necessity which forces us to choose this or that topic as worthy of thought and theoretical explication in the first place, either as (1) the price of professional survival, as with the intellectual division of labor prevailing, say, in a US university system increasingly defined by proletarianized Ph.D.-holders working at contingent jobs; (2) the price of personal survival, as with the Russian or Central European intelligentsia in the Thirties, the Chinese intellectuals in the Sixties; or (3) both,
as with the Second and Third World professional classes radically impoverished by the brutish austerity programs of the IMF and World Bank in the Eighties and Nineties, everywhere from Moscow to Bangkok. Whereas the formation of the New Critical interpretive canon is not to be separated from the rise of the American monopoly-national consumer and advertising culture which formed the peculiar substructure of such, any more than structuralist anthropology can be isolated from the larger trajectory of the Americanization of the post-WW II world generally (a.k.a. the occasionally overt, generally latent antagonism between the multidivisional corporation and its international management techniques, and the anti-colonial revolutions, national rebellions and revolutionary parties of the Third World), nor are these things simply to be collapsed into one another, either. The sectarian Left orthodoxy which tarred all theory with the broad brush of class collaboration was merely the flip side of the malignant orthodoxy of the Cold War Right, to whom Lukačs or indeed the practitioners of Western or any other Marxism were simply enemies to be liquidated with properly Zhdanovite dispatch. The choice between East and West Germany was, quite simply, no choice at all.

It is worth emphasizing how closely Adorno’s solution to this dilemma – the turn towards the micrology and the constellation – dovetails with the later work of surely the greatest dialectician of false consciousness and mass-cultural reification of the Sixties, namely Jean-Paul Sartre. Though the analogy should not be drawn too closely, there is indeed a sense in which The Family Idiot, with its ceaseless shuttling between the multiple antinomies and clashing imaginaries of the boarding school as an agency of class conflict and class mobility, 19th century medical discourses and scientific positivism, child-rearing practices of the French bourgeoisie, and a para-feudal sibling rivalry on the one hand, and the shock-waves of 1848, the railroad boom and the rise of the great urban financiers and speculators, the Second Napoleon and the German national
unification, and the specter of the Communards on the other, offers one possible confirmation and working-out of Adorno’s meditations on modernist aesthetics, only from the standpoint of the origins of modernism rather than the late musical and theatrical manifestations of such. To be sure, Sartre’s multivolume effort was hardly the end of the matter, but turned out merely to augur that theoretical space later occupied by Bourdieu’s *The Rules of Art*, the astringent sociological corrective to the aporias of Sartre’s late work – in particular, the problem of the multiplicity of determinations, which tend to bog down in abstract reiterations of the machinery of self-reflection (i.e. Flaubert’s gratuitously selfless autobiographical project) instead of rising to the concrete mediations of the Parisian arcades, street-walkers, flaneurs and journals evoked by Benjamin’s wondrous analysis of Baudelaire, or the no less remarkable salons, art-markets and stock markets of the aesthetic mapped out by Bourdieu.

What Sartre did pull off in grand fashion, however, was the leveraging of Adorno’s concept of the non-identical in the demesne of the psychobiography (whose distinguished genealogy stretches back to Erikson and Freud), as opposed to the aesthetic excursus per se; Sartre’s version of this is the central and suggestive interrogative refrain of *The Family Idiot*, “what can be known about a man”, which – overlooking the implicit sexism of the question – in due course redounds as the inconceivable inhumanity of the social forces which necessarily produced someone like Flaubert. Adorno will go one better than this, by asking Sartre’s question in reverse: not what can be known about any individual, but what can be known by theory and theoretical experience generally, as refracted through the self-reflective instrumentarium of a powerfully reenergized, multinational dialectics. With typical far-sightedness, Adorno will begin this task not, as one might have expected, with the American Empire or its Second World analogues, but
by engaging with the archenemy of the century itself, namely German fascism, and the peculiar case of fundamental ontology.
Notes

1. Even the normally acute Terry Eagleton called *Minima Moralia* a “bizarre blend of probing insight and patrician grousing” and had this to say about Adorno’s contemporary irrelevance: “It is by now widely agreed that Adorno’s experience of fascism led him and other members of the Frankfurt School to travesty and misrecognize some of the specific power-structures of liberal capitalism, projecting the minatory shadow of the former sort of regime upon the quite different institutions of the latter. Much the same confusion is inherited by some post-structuralist theory, with its perilously indiscriminate conflation of widely divergent orders of power, forms of oppression and modalities of law. The breathtaking subtlety of Adorno’s disquisitions on art are in inverse proportion to the two-dimensional crudity of some of his political perceptions. Indeed these two facets of his thought are closely intertwined, as a defeatist politics generates a compensatorily rich aesthetics…” *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Basil Blackwell, Cambridge, MA: 1990 (359). And somewhat later: “If Adorno can detect the longing for happiness in some bureaucratic edict, he is also depressingly skillful at discerning the rapaciousness which lurks within our most edifying gestures. There can be no truth without ideology, no transcendence without betrayal, no beneficence which is not bought at the cost of another’s happiness. If the skein of history is meshed as fine as this, then to tug on any one thread of it is to risk unravelling some rare design in the name of unpicking an obstructive knot. Textuality, with Adorno as with some later theorists, thus becomes a rationale for political inertia; *praxis* is a crude, blundering affair, which could never live up to the exquisite many-sidedness of our theoretical insights. It is remarkable how this Arnoldian doctrine is still alive and well today, occasionally in the most ‘radical’ of circles.” Ibid. (363). Eagleton completely misses the point that Adorno does not privilege theory over praxis, but wants us to rethink both these things in the context of a monopoly capitalism which is very different indeed from its liberal predecessor.

2. “Das System ist der Geist gewordene Bauch, Wut die Signatur eines jeglichen Idealismus.” [The system is the Mind turned belly, rage the signature of every idealism.] ND:34 The objective rapacity of American capitalism thus had its subjective expression in the national security state apparatus charged with managing the flow of raw materials and the cheap labor pools of the global semi-peripheries (in the Fifties, this meant Japan and Western Europe; something later extended, at the zenith of the American Empire, to East Asia and Central and Southern Europe in the Sixties). Put another way, the American superstate was forced to undermine its own long-term hegemony precisely in order to maintain its short-term control over potential defectors to the state-autarkic camp; a paradox nicely captured by Adorno’s meditation on the concept of continuity in late capitalism, or what amounts to the antinomies of extended accumulation: “Die Antinomie von Totalitaet und Unendlichkeit – denn das ruhlose Ad infinitum sprengt das in sich ruhende System, das doch der Unendlichkeit allein sich verdankt – ist eine des idealistischen Wesens. Sie ahmt eine zentrale der buergerlichen Gesellschaft nach. Auch diese muss, um sich selbst zu erhalten, sich gleichzubleiben, zu ‘sein’, immerwährend sich expandieren, weiternahmen, die Grenzen immer weiter hinausrücken, keine respektieren, sich nicht gleich bleiben.” [The antinomy of totality and infinity – for the
restless Ad infinitum explodes the self-contained system, which yet exists solely thanks to the infinite – is that of idealistic essence. It mimics a central feature of bourgeois society. This, too, must continuously expand, to keep going, to push its borders ever further, respecting no boundaries, and not remain the same, precisely in order to preserve itself, to remain identical to itself, indeed to exist at all.] ND:37 The American Empire had to destroy itself in order to save itself.

3. Adorno’s own version of this is, by contrast, delimited to the juridical categories involved, rather than the cultural forms which evolved out of these things: “Auch ihr [Husserl’s] System gleicht, moderner gesprochen, einem Kreditsystem. Ihre Begriffe bilden eine Konstellation, in der ein jeglicher die Verpflichtung des andern einloeset, obwohl die Darstellung den Prozess verbirgt, der zwischen ihnen anhaengig ist. Ausdruecke Husserls wie Erfuellung – die eines Vertrags –; Evidenz – das Beweisstueck –; Urteil – das eines Prozesses – konstruieren ungewollt Erkenntnistheorie analog zu einem universalen Rechtsverhaeltnis. Am Ende verstaeckt sich womoeglich noch die Aehnlichkeit durch archaisierende Zutaten aus der Rechtssprache wie Domaene und Stiftung.” [His system too resembles, in more modern parlance, a credit system. Its concepts form a constellation, in which each one vouches for the obligations of every other, although the representation of the process conceals that which interlinks them. Husserl’s expressions such as fulfillment – that of a contract; evidence – that of juridical proof; judgement – that of a courtroom procedure –unwittingly construe epistemology as analogous to a universal juridical sphere. In the end the similarity is if anything strengthened by such archaicizing ingredients from juridical discourse such as domain and lien.] Theodor Adorno. Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie. Gesammelte Schriften Vol. 5, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970 (33-34).

4. The phantasmagoria, which dates back to Adorno’s diagnosis of the Wilhelmine ideology in In Search of Wagner, has its determinate negation in the radically autonomized or late modernist aesthetic work, which responds to the intolerable claim of the totality (the objective socialization of the aesthetic material) by a kind of mimetic reflex, i.e. that internal scission or renewed aesthetic division of labor by which the modernist work of art created an experimental or innovatory aesthetic language on the grounds of the cast-off, suppressed or otherwise antagonistic materials of the national mass-culture or consumer culture in question. “Entaeusserte wirklich der Gedanke sich an die Sache,” notes Adorno concerning the politics of interpretation, “gaelte er dieser, nicht ihrer Kategorie, so begaenne das Objekt unter dem verweilenden Blick des Gedankens selber zu reden.” [If the thought truly disclosed itself in the thing, were it valid in such and not merely its category, the object itself would begin to speak under the thought’s leisurely glance.] ND:38 Aesthetic theory is consequently, as Benjamin never tired of pointing out, hardly a luxury of the national intellectuals but in reality the most urgent and pressing task of Left praxis generally; which indeed goes far towards explaining the identical defamation of radical art by state bureaucracies of both Stalinist and Fascist stripe. The interpretive is the political.

[The freedom towards the object, which in Hegel ran overboard into the demoralization of the subject, is first of all to be constructed. Until then, dialectics diverges as method and as one of the materials at hand. Concept and reality are of the same contradictory essence. What the society tears apart antagonistically, the dominating principle, is the same thing which, spiritualized, temporalizes the difference between the concept and that which is subordinated under it.]

6. Intermediate cases might include South Korea, where rival military and political elites battled for control of an American-funded developmental state for decades, as well as Hong Kong, a wealthy colonial entrepot whose transition to export-led accumulation combined a liberal market ideology with Swiss-style interventions in property and currency markets. In certain cases, e.g. Turkey, the two could even coexist: as with Istanbul’s mercantile elites and the Kemalian traditions of the military, which could be reconciled only by common threats elsewhere, i.e. Kurdish nationalists in the hinterland or fundamentalism in the urban slums. Israel’s ascent to the Europeriphery courtesy of American military-rents and cheap Palestinian labor is another good example here. All would-be late industrializers, whether of Communist or ASEAN ideological hue, mobilized national monopoly-rents for development; what determined the relative success or failure of the strategy in question was the objectively multinational constellation accorded to such. The global semi-periphery, in short, was in the most violent competition with itself (in the form of the two Germanies, Koreas and Vietnams, and the three Chinas) as much as with First World multinationals.

7. One should not lose sight of the fact that France was, as late as 1960, a cultural coeval but an industrial semi-periphery in relation to the Pax Americana. Levi-Strauss’ honorable political commitment was based at least in part on this insight: that the urbanizing masses of Latin America, Asia and Africa were locked into struggle, not just with a comprador bourgeoisie, but with a global developmental ideology as well. Something similar was undoubtedly at work in the semiotic inquiries of a Barthes or an Eco: the intuition of the non-identity of French or Italian aesthetics, even its mass-cultural dimension, in relation to a hegemonic US media export machine, is recouped from the standpoint of the theoretical reflection and meditation on culture per se. The insider joke, that if Barthes had been an American, he would’ve written just another Updike novel instead of S/Z., finds its ultimate confirmation in Eco’s The Name of the Rose, written for a European culture-market which has clearly caught up with its erstwhile American mentor.

8. Adorno goes further than explicitly denouncing the technocratic aspect of anthropology, and in fact identifies such as the American version of German fundamental ontology, i.e. the naked academic justification of existing exploitation: “Was der Mensch
sei, lasst sich nicht angeben. Der heute ist Funktion, unfrei, regredierte hinter alles, was als invariant ihm zugeschlagen wird, es sei denn die schutzlose Bedürftigkeit, an der manche Anthropologien sich weiden. Die Verstümmelungen, die ihm seit Jahrtausenden widerfahren, schlept er als gesellschaftliches Erbe mit sich. Wurde aus seiner gegenwärtigen Beschaffenheit das Menschenwesen entziffert, so sabotierte das seine Möglichkeit… Je konkreter Anthropologie auftritt, desto trügerischer wird sie, gleichgültig gegen das am Menschen, was gar nicht in ihm als dem Subjekt grundet sondern in dem Prozess der Ensubjektivierung, der seit unvordenklichen Zeiten parallel lief mit der geschichtlichen Formation des Subjektes.” [What human beings are, is not to be presumed. This nowadays is mere function, unfree, regressing behind everything with which it is stamped as invariant, be it even the unprotected neediness, on which many anthropologists swear. The disfigurements practiced on it over millenia, it carries along as a social legacy. If the essence of humanity were deciphered from its contemporary constitution, this would sabotage its possibility… The more concrete anthropology steps forwards, the more deceptive it becomes, indifferent towards that in human beings which is by no means grounded within them as the subject but rather in the process of desubjectivization, which since time immemorial ran parallel with the historical formation of the subject.] ND:130
CHAPTER III

ONTLOGIES OF EMPIRE

If it has become a truism that Disneyland is the fundamental ontology of the American Empire, the kernel of truth in our culture-industry’s ever more ephemeral claim to an ever more eternal fame is, indeed, that unashamed commercialism which everyone knows to be fraudulent already, and is therefore not a truth-claim in that sense, but which signifies instead that very different thing, the mediatic version of the multinational surplus-rent. The global consumer culture fetishizes neither the exigencies of the choice so beloved of the existentialists nor the Husserlian post-haste pursuit of the things themselves, but rather the keys and access-codes to the realm of things, that is to say the credit-system by which these are made available to the consumer. The ideology of credit is not simply stamped onto the consumer good, like a manufacturers’ certificate or a safety compliance code, but innervated into the innermost aspect of design and production; something registered most acutely by the mass-cultural slang which disparages shoddy or inferior entertainment (which Disney’s slick, complexly-choreographed wares are really the furthest thing from) as “Mickey Mouse” productions. Design, as the software engineers are wont to say, is law, and not vice versa, in a phrase Adorno would have delighted in showing to be more diabolically expressive of the logic of late capitalism than such engineers would ever want to know.

It is therefore all the more striking to observe that Adorno’s project of a multinational dialectics begins not with the culture-industry per se (the predominant strategy of the Eighties post-modernisms), but with Heidegger and the ontological
categories of the Thirties, in a situation where both of these things have seemingly been
driven from the field by Anglo-Saxon pragmatism and the various Western European
existentialisms. One might immediately point to our old friend, the asynchronous
development of the productive forces – in particular, the underdevelopment of the Central
European culture and ideology industries in relation to those of the American hegemon,
acutely visible in Adorno’s lack of a theory of film or jazz modernism, and occasional
cantankerousness vis-à-vis Brecht’s theater – and argue that the ontologies were what
Nazi Germany had instead of a Disneyfied film and consumer culture, which comes very
close to the mark, but is not quite the whole story, either. For one thing, the consumer
cultures of the Forties and Fifties were hardly engines of cosmopolitanism, but were
highly militarized, rationed and deeply nationalistic affairs; more importantly still,
asynchrony is hardly a self-explanatory concept, but needs to be fleshed out in the
specific context of the political discourse, economic formation, or intellectual field in
question.

In fact, it is precisely the displaced or prematurely annulled vocation of the
national philosopher (and it’s worth recalling Jameson’s brilliant insight in his Late
Marxism, that Heidegger was the reigning philosopher of the Thirties) which permitted,
paradoxically enough, a post-national division of intellectual labor to emerge in the first
place, in the form of the Frankfurt School. Where Horkheimer navigated the financial and
legal details necessary to keep the members of the collective not just solvent but out of
the hands of the Gestapo, Marcuse did the hands-on marketing for the School’s vision of
a revitalized (one would like to say, Benjaminized) Marxism, and Pollock and others
provided detailed economic and sociological analyses of state-monopoly capitalism,
Adorno himself manufactured the conceptual mediations which tied all these things
together, i.e. transformed the heritage of national and international philosophy into the
building-blocks of multinational theory. Consider, for example, Adorno’s keen dissection of the ontological need, which is by no means the same thing as consumerism, but refers rather to the historical necessity for state-monopoly superstructures explicitly designed to socialize the crises of the liberal marketplace via new types of collective or monopoly praxis. Ontology, then, is not simply a philosophic grounds for debate so much as an occasion to theorize the liquidation of the remnants of the liberal subject by a new set of monopoly-ideologies: “Machtergreifung”, notes Adorno, subtly avoiding any direct reference to the Nazi regime, “rechnet mit den anthropologischen Endprodukten der buergerlichen Gesellschaft und braucht sie.” [The power-seizure reckons with the anthropological end-products of bourgeois society and uses them.] ND:97 All of which is another way of saying that the savage philistinism of Fascism turned out to be merely the forerunner of that broader and far more effective demolition job otherwise known as the Americanization and Stalinization of Western and Eastern Europe respectively.

Heidegger, to put it bluntly, will be the door through which Adorno ambushes the Disney ideology on the unexpected terrain of the American Empire’s ideological prehistory.¹ Witness the deft interweaving of theory, class agency and micropolitical practice in the following gem, wherein the ontologies function as the bridge between Kierkegaard’s idealism and the New Age ideolects:

nehe reale Gefangenschaft. [The philosophical leap, Kierkegaard’s ur-gesture, is itself the caprice which attempts to escape the subjugation of the subject under Being… The kitsch-laden exoticism of handcrafted weltanschauungen sheds light on the restorative philosophies of the present, as in the astonishingly marketable Zen-Buddhism. Just like these, each simulates a position of thought which makes it impossible to absorb the history stored up in the subject. The delimitation of the Mind to that which is open and achievable according to its historical level of experience is an element of freedom; non-conceptual hyperenthusiasm embodies the opposite of such. Doctrines which voyage through the cosmos with no concern for the subject are, along with the philosophy of Being, more easily harmonized with the fossilized state of the world and indeed its chance of success in such, than the smallest fragment of self-determination of the subject by itself and indeed its real imprisonment.] ND:76

Neither the Sixties sublime of the body (the protest against labor, period) nor the bogus rebellions of the enlightenment-industry (the manufactured and regressive protest against the division of labor) escapes the net here; both turn out, on closer examination, to be local manifestations of the Marxian organic accumulation of capital within the subject. But where a Freudian discourse would delimit this process to the internal division of labor in the psyche (that is to say, the sublimation or domestication of internal drives which are palpably threadbare allegories of larger social conflicts), and where a Parsonian sociology would portray the Taylorization or Fordization of the subject as a self-correcting or cybernetic sequence of processes rather than as the violent and compulsory form of alienation which it indeed is, Adorno cannily puts the question of class agency and Marxism back on the front burner – not, as Lukaçs does in the pages of History and Class Consciousness, by positing the national mass party as the thinking or solidarizing subject – but by means of the wondrous abstraction of that “Geist” (the mind or spirit) brought into play at the center of the passage. Instead of merely reclassifying a social and intellectual division of labor taken for granted, we are asked to rethink the categories of the corporeal and the nominalistic, the psychological and the realistic, and the individual and the collective from the standpoint of those thinking bodies in which all these
categories find their content: bodies which collectively labor, and whose thoughts are just as much the historical products of this labor-process as they are the individual and improvised achievements of the subjects involved. Hegel’s Geist, in short, turns into Marx’s Kapital, and the veiled master-slave dialectic of late feudalism turns into the unrepentant class struggle of national and international bourgeoisies and proletariats.

By the same token, conservativizing ideologies are characterized not merely by the denial or repression of labor – the straightforward subordination of wage-labor under the currency or credit markets as much as the formal abnegation of intellectual activity in the face of whatever political, social or cultural marketplace is at hand – but by the substitution or displacement of the laboring body which thinks by something else. For the ontologies, this can be nothing less than the subjectless subjectivity or ultramodern archaicism of the Heideggerian neologism, which yokes the Teutonic populism of the verb to the Fascist power-claim of the qualifying gerund, in much the same way that the WW II propaganda film integrates the montage technique of Surrealism and the mobilized camera of Expressionism into that new aesthetic genre, the newsreel from the front (the faces of ordinary soldiers, pilots and marines interspersed with panoramas of moving tanks, airplanes and transport vehicles, all paced by the stentorian voice of the announcer-qua-drill-sergeant). Just the opposite strategy was employed by the progressive existentialisms, e.g. the Sartre of Being and Nothingness, wherein the exigencies of wartime occupation and the life-and-death solidarities of the Resistance had their terminus in the existential conditions of the choice, the commitment, and the project (the subject’s attempt to outwit, negate or otherwise rebel against Authority); a not unrelated line of resistance can also be discerned in the great New Deal comedy-dramas, e.g. the Marx brothers’ A Day at the Races and Frank Capra’s It Happened One Night, in
the form of the plebian rebellion against a literally and figuratively discredited Twenties culture of finance capital.

Tempting though it is to ascribe cinematic qualities to the ontologies (something displayed in the pop cultural explanation of Fascism as the culmination of a congenital Teutonic militarism, as well as the WW II agitprop films which cast Nazi elites as a lugubrious Cosa Nostra in unusually resplendent uniforms), it should be emphasized here that the ontological systems were in no way, shape or form a substitute or replacement for film or any other aesthetic media; indeed ontology was, much like the political regime to which it gave its notorious sympathies, deeply hostile to aesthetic expression as a whole. In this the ontologies carried out a tendency already latent in the phenomenologies which historically preceded such; what little Husserl had to say about aesthetics was geared not towards the great German films of the silent era (whose greatest and unacknowledged theorist was undoubtedly Walter Benjamin) or the fiery meteor-trail of Surrealism but to the fearsomely dull photographic reprints of the 19th century landscape named by the Wesenschau (a.k.a. Neue Sachlichkeit), and Adorno’s *Jargon of Authenticity* meticulously documents the process by which logical absolutisms and the various positivisms sought to rebel against the encroachments of a rising monopoly capitalism by regressing back to the mythical gold standard of an ontologized authenticity.²

Nowhere is the contradiction between a state-monopoly capitalism which required aesthetic mediations to valorize its products and the ultimately self-destructive Fascist censure of mediation more apparent than in the meaning-fundament of Heidegger’s oeuvre, the infamous Sein or Being, which is, like the Fuehrer or the NSDAP, invested with absolute powers of authority and authenticity, but is never permitted to be concretely identified with any given policy decision or political event. Rather, the word is supposed to non-conceptually embody the thing itself, just as the radio broadcasts which spouted
forth nonsensical tirades about Blut und Boden were, in the end, the realest thing about that particular ideology: “Sein lockt,” notes Adorno devastatingly, “beredt wie das Rauschen von Blättern im Wind schlechter Gedichte.” [Being teases, eloquent as the rustle of wind-blown papers in bad poems.] ND:83 Ontology consequently ends up reconfirming precisely the trashy and debased mass-culture which it allegedly condemns; the monopoly-commodity is denounced by means of an ontological ground which is at its core nothing but the self-abnegation of thought, the patent refusal to think through the commodity form or its relevant social formations. Conversely, the social antagonisms of the latter are scapegoated onto dissident intellectuals and indeed any creative intellectual activity whatsoever:

Reification is not merely an indispensable index of the antagonistic development of the intellectual relations of production vis-à-vis the intellectual productive forces, or what might be termed the dialectic between Gramsci’s organic intellectual and Sartre’s engaged writer or playwright on the one hand, and theories of the culture of monopoly capitalism on the other. It is also an essential corrective on the orthodox fetishization of those productive forces, something which has significant consequences for the project of
a global-trending Marxism. “So wenig aber wie die Pole Subjekt und Objekt laesst Vermittlung sich hypostasieren; sie gilt einzig in deren Konstellation,” notes Adorno, “Vermittlung ist vermittelt durchs Vermittelte.” [Mediation does not permit itself to be hypostatized, any more than the poles of subject and object; they matter solely in their constellation. The mediation is mediated through that which is mediated.] ND:106 This insistence on the historical weight and density of the concept stands in dire contrast to the vast bulk of the post-structuralisms and postmodernisms, whose greatest failing was their lack of precisely such a sophisticated concept of mediation, i.e. their inability to ground a particular theoretical practice either internally, that is to say in the context of what has become in the meantime a clearly global theory-market, or externally, in the workings of the multinational consumer culture. This is not to say genuinely progressive thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault were completely insensitive to aesthetic issues, as evinced by the former’s meditation on self-disseminating philosophemes schooled in the honorable subversions of Genet and Magritte, or the latter’s utopia of non-surveillance (what might be called the non-opticon of an emancipatory homoeroticism or sphere of countercultural pleasures), but merely to underline the fact that their aesthetic mandate, much like the political one of the Seventies social democracies and Left movements to which they symbolically corresponded, was fatally limited to a more or less progressive neonationalism. This latter was all too easily absorbed or outflanked by the logic of an American and, somewhat later, European and East Asian multinational capitalism – comparable to the way that the limit-point of Mitterand regime’s Yuppie socialism was Eurocapital’s drive towards Maastricht monetarism. The critique of the late capitalist totality which does not adequately reflect upon its own particularity, that is to say its historically specific and mediated relationship to the hegemonic social tendencies of the day (it being understood that these latter are not a synonym for the prevailing norms or
fashions, but are defined by what they exclude or stigmatize as non-hegemonic, emergent or archaic), ends up as all too totalizing. Though this is most obvious in the work of Deleuze and Guittari, busily retailing one marketable fragment or glib New Left press release after another across the thousand plateaus of a clearly European capitalism, something similar is at work in the garden-variety post-structuralism of the American scene, where a certain glib marketing rhetoric merely recycles the latest media mantras or sportscaster buzzwords instead of reflecting upon such. The postmodern dissolution of the monumental or ontological in favor of the fragmentary or ephemeral stops precisely where it should start: at the borders of a theory of the totality. Mediation is both the motor of abstraction as well as the valorization of such into the concrete contradiction, i.e. the materialities of global aesthetics as much as the abstractions of theory. The result is that Derrida’s trumping of Heidegger’s ontological difference (the dubious shuttling between the ontologic Sein and the ontic Seiendes, which Adorno diagnoses as the keynote of Heidegger’s system) with the notorious differànce (the no less problematic shuttling between the disseminatory sign-system and the dissemination) preserves precisely that ontological framework Derrida sought, at the outer margins of Glas, to escape; exactly the same is true of Foucault’s thematics of the prison and madness, which continuously reconfirm those disciplines (both punitive and academic) practiced by the archeologies of knowledge supposedly being dismantled.

Dialectics, on the other hand, demands not merely the shuttling or transference of categories, but their analysis and critique by new ones – both as the active intermingling of new concepts with the old, the archeological spadework or reconstructive dig which theorizes the hitherto untheorized, and as the meditation on those theoretical insufficiencies and aporias which are the invaluable and priceless historical symptoms of the non-identity of theory with whatever is being thought. Thus Adorno’s canny
decryption of the constellation underlying Heidegger’s violent suppression of the reality of the commodity form: “Sein ist die Kontraktion der Wesenheiten. Ontologie geraet aus der eigenen Konsequenz in ein Niemandsland.” [Being is the contraction of essentialities. Ontology ends up due to its own consequences in No-man’s-land.] ND:85

Because ontology does not permit itself to fundamentally know anything at all, let alone to speculate on what someday might be, it declares war on theoretical cognition in general, by raising the motif of Stimmung or latent mass-cultural affect to a regimenting norm. The gesture recalls to mind the fate of the officer caste of the Wehrmacht, who were required at the very beginning of the 1933 Nazi seizure of power to swear a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler. The archaicism of the gesture was the perfect product of Enlightenment modernity: Hitler, as the lowly trench soldier of WW I become absolute ruler, thereby literally and figuratively rendered the emergency solidarity of the trenches a universal condition. Instead of ascribing this universality to the preternatural daemon of German nationalism (whose concentration camps merely systematized that genocide the allegedly arch-democratic Western Europeans had practiced as an entrepreneurial pastime for centuries on the indigenous peoples of Africa, Latin America and Asia), Adorno insists that we return to our earlier point concerning the possible cinematic quality of the ontologies, and to ask our question in reverse; to consider, in short, what is alarmingly ontological and deeply Heideggerian about the American culture industry:

Wollte man eine Ontologie entwerfen und dabei dem Grundsachverhalt folgen, dessen Wiederholung ihn zur Invariante macht, so waere es das Grauen. Vollends eine Ontologie der Kultur hauete aufzunehmen, worin Kultur ueberhaupt misslang. Ort philosophischer legitimer Ontologie waere mehr die Konstruktion der Kulturindustrie als die des Seins; gut erst dass das der Ontologie Entronnene. [If one wished to draw up an ontology and thereby pursue the constitutive grounds, whose repetition makes it into an invariant, this would be that of horror. Only an ontology of culture could take up, where culture utterly failed. The realm
of philosophically legitimate ontology would involve more the construction of the culture-industry than that of Being; that which is good, is that which has well and good escaped ontology.] ND:128

The military Keynesianisms and national security states of the Axis powers thus paved the way for the permanent military and scientific mobilizations of the superstates, in the same way that Hitler set the unwitting precedent for those other plebian soldier-politicians who would formally manage the American and Soviet superstates, i.e. Eisenhower and Brezhnev, both of whom would seal the non-identity of their respective Empires by means of the identical threat of thermonuclear annihilation at their fingertips. Such elective affinities extend even to the characteristic Fifties ideologeme of an anxious or claustrophobic prosperity, spawned by the dizzying upwards mobility of white-collar engineers, technicians and scientists in the context of Government-funded research laboratories and civil engineering projects, and financed by a monumental flood of public and private debt backed by the full faith and credit of Governments rather than individual banks or a long-vanished gold standard. The narrative of upscaling expressed in concentrated form the tremendous geographic expansion of monopoly class relations into every nook and cranny of the world-system, from Eastern Europe to China, and from the semi-autarkic Latin American regimes to the future export-platform economies of the Pacific Rim. The archaic aspect of Fascism was not its policy of expansion per se, which merely echoed the imperative of the total system to constantly enlarge its markets, but the unprofitable and ultimately suicidal reinstitution of liberal-era primitive accumulation (slavery and the plunder of the death-camps) onto the semi-peripheries of the world-system, precisely where the US underwrote a spate of New Deal-style monopoly accumulation strategies in Japan, South Korea, Italy and West Germany, and where the Soviet Union and post-revolutionary China installed autarkic military-industrial regimes in the true peripheries of Eastern Europe and the southern Chinese coast. Considered as
the prehistory of the Cold War, therefore, the ontological systems can be mapped out as follows:

**Ontologisches Bedürfnis:**
- state-monopoly ideology

**Dasein** (subject)  vs.  **Sein** (monopoly object)

**der Sprung** (commitment)

**not-object:**
- **Machtergreifung** (state-monopoly revolution)

**not-subject:**
- **ontologische Differenz** (aesthetic technology)

**Existenz** (consumer culture)

**Ursprünglichkeit:**
- the nation-state

**FIGURE 2. Antinomies of the ontological system.**

Adorno will turn this prehistory against the realized constellations of state-monopoly capitalism using two key bridge mediations. First, the thinking bodies of laborers are conjoined to the notion of expressivity, or what amounts to a rewriting of the earlier Frankfurt School concept of a well-nigh anthropological mimesis transduced by national bodies of capital (conservative mythologies of patriotism and imperialism as much as the progressive ones of the general strike or the scientific inevitability of socialism) in an international turn. The expressive serves the same function vis-à-vis the philosopheme of a hegemonic or Cold War American culture-industry as the technician-hero or scientist in the nuclear war films and science fiction spectaculars of the Fifties, i.e. the interpretive
key or code of a mediating technocracy, which is meant to reconcile the interests of a top-
level manager or executive (the social space of corporate marketing or innovation) and
those of the field-agent of the Cold War bureaucracy in question (the social space of an
administered production and distribution apparatus). Such actants did not simply certify
that broader post-WW II division of global labor between the raw materials neocolonies
of the Third World, the cheap skilled labor of the Second World, and what US elites
presumed were the permanent high-technology rents and credit surpluses of the Anglo-
American metropoles, but rather mediated the surplus-rents of globalizing American
firms in a variety of creative and occasionally even progressive ways, everywhere from
the informed pacifism of The Day the Earth Stood Still to clever retakes of the postwar
occupation film such as the The Teahouse of the August Moon (what might be termed the
global and local poles of resistance to a worldwide American Occupation).

Adorno’s second key mediation will refunction one of the central tropes of the
existentialisms, namely that abstract or serialized collectivity which stands in an
antagonistic relationship with the thinking individual, in a materialistic vein: “Kein Sein
ohne Seiendes.” [No Being without existents.] ND:139 These latter are not to be
confused with existential conditions or situations, but with existents, i.e. that multiplicity
of objects or object-experiences not yet stamped and shelved away in the bustling psychic
supermarket of the late capitalist subject, but not quite subsumed under the academic
discipline or philosophical methodology, either. The existent, put simply, is Adorno’s
scansion of what theorists term nowadays the global consumer culture: it is that
omnipresent and unavoidable matrix of mediations which confronts the subject in late
capitalism at every step, from automobile traffic to shopping malls, and from air pollution
to the mass media. All this in turn drives what Bourdieu calls the social accumulation of
capital from within the subject, a process which begins with toilet training and language
acquisition and later extends to the formal demands of the educational system and the quest for professional qualifications.

It is precisely such local mediations which form the building-blocks of those larger and far more complex abstractions otherwise known as gender, ethnic and national identities, and not the other way around; indeed, class identity, far from being the simple fact or received stereotype trumpeted by Diamat dogma, is the most complex, subtle and polyvalent abstraction of them all. Adorno’s indispensable point here is that inasmuch as this abstraction is also and everywhere the realest and most concrete thing imaginable – as concrete as the ubiquitous commodity form itself, and yet just as uncannily impalpable and abstract as the global stock, currency and credit markets themselves – both poles of the analysis need to be thought through simultaneously, without privileging one over the other. Hypostatizing the concreity would be as disastrous as fetishizing the abstraction; while the former dead-ends in a dessicated positivism and the mere cataloguing of what already exists, the latter sinks into the trackless ontological swamps: “Der Begriff von Seiendem schlechthin ist nur der Schatten des falschen von Sein.” [The concept of the simply existent is only the shadow of the false one of Being.] ND:142 All this chimes well with Sartre’s famous definition of Marxism as that untranscendable horizon of intellectual discourse, beyond which only a society free from the ravages of capital could go; conversely, reactionary ideologies will attempt above all else to block or extirpate such horizons, either through the crude censorship of the Eastern bloc or the ideological ghettoization practiced by the ontologies, which banish the non-identical to the purgatory of the ontical (or what amounts to Husserl’s facticity divested even of the thinly extenuating materiality of the investigative subject). What has not already been annexed into the totalizing demesne of Sein is not permitted to exist – whether as the innermost core of the concept, or as the inmates of the railroad cars destined for Treblinka. Adorno’s
pulverizing conclusion: “Die ontologische Differenz [between Sein and Seiendes] wird beseitigt kraft der Verbegrifflichung des Nichtbegrifflichen zur Nichtbegrifflichkeit.” [The ontological difference is annulled by means of the bad conceptualization of the non-conceptual into non-conceptuality.] ND:123 Ontology certifies stupidity to be the highest form of reason and crowns inhumanity as the culmination of humanity, in a dire formulation which a future half century of repressive ideologies, from Zhdanovism to the Latin American comprador militarisms, and from the Chinese Cultural Revolution to McCarthyism, would not hesitate to raise to their ruling principle: the symbolic affirmation of untrammeled class domination.

This may explain why non-identity becomes so crucial for the resistance to that domination: the fate of what the early Frankfurt School called critical reason, and what Adorno will identify as the thinking subject, is also the fate of real bodies, bodies which labor and which think. Just as the laboring body cannot ultimately be separated from the cognizing body, nor the individually-mediated labor of cognition from the socially-mediated labor of the production and reproduction of the subject, so too is the work of theory not to be separated from the practical matter of organizing trade unions, waging political campaigns and building Left parties: both are forms of thinking labor. Nor is this latter to be glossed by a rhetorical sleight of hand, i.e. in the injunction to a specifically multinational class praxis, presumably conjoined to the specific constellation of whatever contradiction (the local versus the global, the concrete and the abstraction, appearance as against essence, the empirical as opposed to the nominal) is at hand. Where the thought overshoots its material, i.e. does not touch base with the larger constellation in which it its embedded or dogmatically takes such for granted, the analysis runs aground on the speculative abstraction; the argument becomes just that – an argument, an aesthetic presentation or a mere point of view devoid of theoretical stringency. Where the thought
undershoots its material, i.e. subordinates itself to an existing thought-structure or discipline without bothering to think the details of the latter through in relation to what is being investigated, the result is an empiricism run wild, a.k.a. the conceptual fetishism of the Lockean tabula rasa or the up-to-the-minute market-report.

Adorno’s ingenious way out of this dilemma is to historicize both of these antipodes in the context of the classically Hegelian problem of the relation of Darstellung and Vorstellung (crudely translated, “presentation” and “representation”, with the proviso that the former is an empirical depiction and the latter a realized imagining or thought-portrayal). But where Hegel offered up the dubious synthesis of that mediating Geist which, by knowing and representing everything in advance, thus served as both the Napoleonic actor and English-nobilitarian playwright of the theater of History, and ended up delimiting the historical process to the static commemoration of the French and American national-bourgeois revolutions, Adorno will strategically deploy Marx’s notion of that great-grandmother of all global mediations, namely das Kapital, against such – not simply to countermand Hegel, but to think the Hegelian system of national mediations through, all the way to Marx’s indisputably international world-court of History, wherein the various modes of production battle it out before the proletarian jury with all the raging fury and spiraling violence of the American Civil War, the Italian and German wars of national unification, and the wars of the Latin American independence movements. Far from merely applying a certain 19th century Marxism onto an external cultural field, or substituting the class struggle of aesthetics for the class struggle in the streets, as both conservative and radical detractors of the Frankfurt School are wont to aver, Adorno is rethinking the world-market and monopoly capital as a new kind of narrative form and content respectively. Or, put more concretely, the Marxian prosecution of the liberal-era commodity-form provided the historical model and forerunner for
Adorno’s decryption of the twists and turns of the monopoly-commodity, a.k.a. the identity-principle. “Identitäet,” says Adorno bluntly, “ist die Urform der Ideologie.” [Identity is the Ur-form of ideology.] ND:151 No translation can do justice to the full flavor of “Urform”, which connotes a kind of prehistorical realm or an activated geological eternity, suspended deftly between the overinflated Charybis of “Identity is the primal scream of ideology” and the underdone Scylla of “Identity is the forest primeval of ideology”. One of the most important aspects of the project of a negative or multinational dialectics, as we shall see, will be the inception of a retrospective or restitutive dialectic, a kind of reverse time-machine designed not to build vast syntheses or draw the usual sweeping conclusions, but to disassemble such into their constituent microhistories.

The result might almost be taken for the spatialized or asynchronic version of what Benjamin criticized as “dialectics at a standstill”, if not indeed the prototype of that self-indulgent theodicy of despair which so many critics have accused the Frankfurt School of practicing, were it not for the materialist bedrock upon which the entire critique is anchored: “Ihre [negative Dialektik] Logik ist eines des Zerfalls: der zugeruesteten und vergegenstaendlichten Gestalt der Begriffe, die zunachst das erkennende Subjekt unmittelbar sich gegeneuber hat. Deren Identitaet mit dem Subjekt ist die Unwahrheit.” [Its logic is that of dissassembling: the outfitted and objectified shape of the concepts, which immediately face the cognitive subject. The identity of such with the subject is untruth.] ND:148 Not the merely untrue, but the universal condition of untruth itself will be the providential corrective upon the truth-seeking element of cognition generally, and not just in the Goethean sense of the Mephistophelean lie, i.e. the productivities of a marketplace of belief no longer tied to the liturgical verities of faith but not yet reduced to the free-floating class ideologies of the postmodern period. Identity is not simply a matter
of reconciling conflicting superstructural claims, i.e. those of science versus those of
culture, or sociology versus psychology or what have you; rather, inasmuch as every late
capitalist superstructure is an ideological, cultural and juridical instance (read:
battleground) in that vast machinery of repressive collectivization and expropriation
otherwise known as global capitalism, identity functions as the bearer of equivalence
between subjects locked into furious competition with one another – or something like
the money-form of the subject’s claim to autonomy, a.k.a. Bourdieu’s cultural capital. It is
precisely the high-tech Internet speculation and the merchandising endorsement which
ultimately vouches for the culture of the high-tech information specialist and the
professional sports athlete (e.g. the small business letter of credit at a local bank and the
multi-year NBA contract) and not the other way around; the speculation precedes the
anticipated return on the investment. This is not to say the exigencies of the former
always outweigh those of the latter, or that speculation can run riot with no regard to
economic fundamentals, but merely to underline the fact that the movement of capital is
not merely spatial, but temporal as well. Time, after all, is money, both in terms of the
competition between the various capitals (the unceasing struggle to accelerate the
turnover of capital and reduce the time required for its valorization) as well as the
competition of entire modes of production in their own right (e.g. the weekly rhythms of
the print periodicals characteristic of the 19th century, as compared to the daily newspaper
and radio broadcasts of the monopoly era, or indeed the well-nigh continuous updates of
the Internet).

It follows that one of the key aspects of the resistance to capital will derive from
the non-identity of market time with the temporality of lived experience. The suburban
automobile owner who drives aimlessly up and down the countryside, the TV viewer who
counters the fifteen-second attention span of the mass media with the ten-second urge to
channel-click, and the link-hopping Internet search are only the most mundane examples of this; Adorno seems to have a specifically aesthetic strategy in mind here, namely the Proustian discourse of a time lost and improvisationally regained. All this resonates suggestively in Adorno’s use of the term Zerfall, whose usual English translation, “disintegration” or “decay”, does not come even close to the intriguing patina of the German word, which is wreathed in an almost sumptuous aura of Venetian decadence and decline, and is something like the objective-sociological equivalent of the more subjective-immanent “Verfall”. Zerfall connotes an explicit and conscious alternative to the regressive and militaristic mythos of temporality purveyed by the Spenglerian “Untergang” or “Niedergang”, and bespeaks the patient excavation of an archeological dig or else the slow aging of a superb wine, wherein the accretion of small additive abrasions gradually tempers and wears away the repressive apparatus in which the subject is encased, or else leaches out the primordial structures of violence internalized into the subject proper without doing harm to the surrounding tissue. The spell of prehistory cannot be broken by the violent recourse to posthistory, but only by the re-making of history itself: the nurturing, in the midst of and with the best part of the old, of the fragile possibility of the historically new. Hope resides not in the expectation of a totalizing Revolution – totalization is the essence of capitalism, namely the incessant expansion of the relations of capitalist production at the expense of the potential solidarities of the laboring subjects and the potentialities of the productive forces alike, punctuated by the demolition of whatever stands in the way of this process – but in a plurality of micrological revolutions against the totality, or what in retrospect is clearly a cipher for the civil rights movements, human rights protests, and nonviolent direction actions of the New Left.
In one of the most provocative passages in all of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno lays his cards on the table, and elaborates not merely the complex linkages between the identity-principle and late capitalism (something which in any case is never decided for once and for all, but must be rethought in the context of each historical period, each work of art, and each psychological case study in question) but the unforeseen ways in which the identity-principle, as much a product of the rule of capital as the proletariat itself, actively resists capital’s rule:

Das Tauschprinzip, die Reduktion menschlicher Arbeit auf den abstrakten Allgemeinbegriff der durchschnittlichen Arbeitszeit, ist urverwandt mit dem Identifikationsprinzip. Am Tausch hat es sein gesellschaftliches Modell, und er waere nicht ohne es; durch ihn werden nichtidentische Einzelwesen und Leistungen kommensurabel, identisch. Die Ausbreitung des Prinzips verhaelt die ganze Welt zum Identischen, zur Totalitaet. Wuerde indessen das Prinzip abstrakt negiert; wuerde als Ideal verkuendet, es solle, zur hoeheren Ehre des irreduzibel Qualitativen, nicht mehr nach gleich und gleich zugehen, so schufene das Ausreden fuer den Rueckfall ins alte Unrecht. Denn der Aequivalententausch bestand von alters her gerade darin, dass in seinem Namen Ungleiches getauscht, der Mehrwert der Arbeit appropriert wurde. Annullierte man simpel die Massskategorie der Vergleichbarkeit, so traeten anstelle der Rationalitaet, die ideologisch zwar, doch auch als Versprechen dem Tauschprinzip innenwohnt, unmittelbare Aneignung, Gewalt, heutzutage: nacktes Privilieg von Monopolen und Cliquen. Kritik am Tauschprinzip als dem identifizierenden des Denkens will, dass das Ideal freien und gerechten Tausch, bis heute bloss Vorwand, verwirklicht werde. Das allein transzendierte den Tausch. [The exchange-principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract generality of average labor-time, is the ur-relation of the identification principle. It has its social model in exchange, and would not be without such; through it, non-identical specific essences and achievements become commensurable, identical. The spread of the principle conditions the entire world to the identical, to totality. If the principle was in the meantime negated merely abstractly, if it were proclaimed that things would no longer go like for like out of presumed honor to the irreducibly qualitative, this would create the excuse for the regression back into past injustice. For the exchange of equivalents consisted from time immemorial exactly in the fact that the unlike was exchanged in its name and the surplus-value of its labor appropriated. Simplistically rejecting the measurement-category of comparability would certify immediate seizure, violence, the naked privilege of today’s monopolies and cliques, instead of that rationality which, even though it is ideological, is also imbued with the promise of the exchange-principle. The critique of the exchange-principle as that of the identifying one of thought aims at
realizing the ideal – till this day merely a pretext – of free and equal exchange. That alone would transcend exchange.] ND:150

Here at last a genuinely multinational Marxism emerges from its Central European chrysalis to beat its fledgling wings in the gale force winds of history, setting all our usual received categories of micropolitics, the global market and multinational class struggle into motion – not by virtue of any internal subjective caprice or scheme of ideals, but by revealing such categories to be, in their limited and fragmentary way, allegories of that collective praxis which may yet someday work humanity’s weal out of its continuum of woe. Among the startling reversals Adorno stages here, note first that the exchange-principle is not the model for the social continuum of exchange; rather the process of exchange is literally the “social model” or mediated instance of the generalizing abstraction of capital.⁴ Second, that capitalist posthistory posited by the various monopoly capitalisms (the utopia of the new consumer ideologies) turns out to be the most savage prehistory, with the Soviet nomenklatura merely replicating the rule of the US Cold War Establishment, or what might be termed the GM autoklatura. Third, the very notion of the totality, that is to say the exchange-net of the global market, is not identical to a simple logic of accumulation, any more than multinational capital might be reduced to the machinations of a single multinational corporation or the dynamics of the financial market to simple greed. Rather, the totality moves, not in a single direction but via multiple and antagonistic logics.

All this is powerfully confirmed in a field of human endeavor which may seem at first sight to utterly confound Adorno’s particular brand of dialectics, and that is that favored avatar of a revamped capitalism, the information industry. It is not merely that the triumphalism of the Silicon Rentiers in a global economy where the US is running enormous trade and current account deficits with the new metropoles is a contradiction
even on its own dubious terms, or simply that the neoliberal notion that, even if humble proles will never get the chance to run the latest telecom or software startup, let alone codetermine the conditions of their workplace or receive the full value of their day’s labor, they can at least speculate on the shares of such (the value of which, as mutual funds punters constantly reassured US investors at the peak of the Wall Street Bubble, will grow thirty percent a year for at least the next thousand years), is sheer economic insanity, which of course it is; rather, the aporia runs deeper still, and touches upon the underlying contradiction between an American-inspired cultural and ideological neonationalism and the financial and industrial multinationalism of the Pacific Rim and the European Union. The rentiers trumpet their stock returns because, in a very real sense, they have nothing else left to trumpet; East Asia and the EU are the hegemonic industrial powers of the day and dominate almost every industrial and financial category one could name, ranging from autos to trucks, electronics to food processing, and energy to heavy electrical equipment. What this means, in a nutshell, is that the much-ballyhooed “information culture” to emerge in the Nineties is directly linked to the new metropoles, in the form of publicly-funded or otherwise socialized networks of industrial investment and innovation, everywhere from Japan’s semiconductor consortium to the Singapore public holding companies to the EU’s lush undergrowth of regional, national and EU-wide innovation networks.

This begs the crucial question, of course, of the specifically political vectors of this transformation: what, to be blunt, do the business practices of SAP, Intel and Sony really have to do with the emergent political practices of newly multinational human rights, environmental and labor movements, aside from the mushrooming telecommunications infrastructure or global markets in which both can be said to operate? A significant clue to the answer is contained in the classic invention of Gibson’s
Neuromancer, namely the “matrix” of cyberspace. This fascinating re-appropriation of a technocratic or mathematical term (a matrix is simply a data-set organized in a certain pattern or relation) by a mass-cultural one is replicated in the subterranean etymology of the term “logic”, which, in one of the rare boons proffered by an otherwise astringently pragmatic English language upon the discourse of theory, has lost its original meaning of a dustily dry epistemology or formalized mathematical procedure and acquired the holographic sheen of an upstart silicon industrialism, thanks to the “core logics” of constantly-redesigned memory chips and microprocessors. The informatic metaphor becomes even more suggestive given the fact that hardware infrastructures, as expert users will attest, are only as efficient as their superstructural software and that the needs of software codetermine the latest hardware advances; the superstructural version of this dialectic of overtly self-propelling and covertly socialized productive forces is probably most apparent in the Pacific Rim economies, where powerful developmental states and gigantic keiretsu financial structures turned out to be far more entrepreneurial in the auto, electronics and electrical industries than the supposedly world-beating Anglo-Saxon entrepreneurs themselves.

From an ideological perspective, all this may explain why the myth of the entrepreneur has become one of the crucial mediations which enables the multinational corporation to rule as handily over a worldwide sea of less competitive, technologically dependent and exploitable subcontractors as it does; it is precisely because entrepreneurs are so obviously not in control of the world-system that they provide the perfect foil for the rule of the multis. That is, the entrepreneur is supposed to automatically embody the free, creative labor and independent spirit which large corporations just as automatically exclude; they are thus the official non-identity of corporate identity, in much the same sense as those 19th century British Liberals who styled themselves as Her Majesty’s loyal
opposition. Dialectics, warns Adorno, must avoid hypostatizing the non-identical as much as identity itself:

Der blosse Versuch, den philosophischen Gedanken dem Nichtidentischen zuzukehren anstatt der Identitaet, sei widersinnig; er reduziere a priori das Nichtidentische auf seinen Begriff und identifiziere es damit. Derlei einleuchtende Erwaegungen sind zu radikal und sind es darum, wie meist radikale Fragen, zu wenig… Nicht waere das Ziel, in den Ursprung, ins Phantasma guter Natur zurueckzufinden, sondern Ursprung fiele allein dem Ziel zu, konstituierte sich erst von diesem her. Kein Ursprung ausser im Leben des Ephemeren. [The mere attempt to turn the philosophic thought to the non-identical instead of identity is wrongheaded; it reduces the non-identical a priori to its concept and identifies it with such. Such illuminating considerations are too radical and therefore, like most radical questions, not radical enough… The goal is not to find the way back to the origin, into the fantasma of a beneficient Nature, rather the origin would devolve solely upon the end-goal, constituting itself first from such. No origin outside of the life of the ephemeral.] ND:158

What is ephemeral in late capitalism is, indeed, the life-cycle of the average consumer commodity, whose accelerated obsolescence is merely the flip side of the unimaginably complex and interlocking set of supply, transport and distribution networks which form the circulatory system of the planetary economy. Such networks are tied in turn to production-centers of what the mainstream economics literature has variously termed, with its usual tendency to uncritically ratify whatever capital happens to be doing at the moment, regimes of post-Fordism, flexible accumulation, lean production, or simply Toyotism, all of which are said combine entrepreneurial agility and engineering skill with unmatched guarantees of product quality and long-term customer service. Such glowing accounts of high-tech Nirvana need to be tempered, to be sure, with the less newsworthy but far more accurate Marxist cognition that global capitalism has meant intensified exploitation – union-busting, declining real wages, and outright social decay and economic collapse – for workers in the Anglo-American zones, Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe and much of Asia, as well as the creation of enormous pools of footloose
speculative and financial capital controlled by a narrow strata of rentier and keiretsu elites.

All this sheds significant light on the aporias of that more generalized rentier ideology of the Nineties, a.k.a. the multinational successor to Anglo-American Thatcherism, or neoliberalism. It is the very unfreedom of the market, namely the totalizing impulse of the exchange-net which subordinates the field of action of even the most powerful firms and financiers to the narrow dictates of accumulation, upon which neoliberal ideology stakes its utopian claim. This may explain why the central narrative of neoliberalism is not really an unthinking panegyric to the market, but in fact its canalized critique: what the global rentiers and their henchpersons in the IMF and World Bank consistently demand, aside from the usual ritual obeisances in the general direction of US capital markets, is “fiscal accountability”, “prudence” and, above all, “transparency” – goals which can only be realized, of course, by the selfsame state machinery and governmental agencies neoliberals have taken such painstaking care (via direct military interventions in Central America, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and so forth, as well as IMF structural adjustment policies and debt embargoes) to utterly demolish. The brutish neocolonization of Latin America, which has followed rentier orthodoxy to the letter, illustrates the paradox quite well: accountability has meant in practice guaranteed bailouts for irresponsible First World speculators; prudence, cuts in education, social funding and wages; transparency, the auctioning off of state assets to multinationals at firesale prices. The result has been horrific social polarization, a selective boom for well-connected elites and raw materials exporters, and the impoverishment of the vast majority, accompanied by an ever-increasing dependency on global financial markets. True booms have occurred not in neoliberal countries, but in precisely those Southeast Asian and Eastern Europe countries which most fully regulated
and controlled their markets via powerful developmental states or nascent social democracies. The conclusion is inescapable: the global rentiers’ concept of accountability is unaccountable, their concept of prudence is the sheerest recklessness, and their concept of competition is the most nakedly self-interested monopoly imaginable.

Something similar is at work in the typical rentier argument that the US can afford to ignore the decline of its currency, because of the hitherto unquestioned role of the dollar as world reserve currency, when in fact the long-term slide of the dollar is simply the flip side of equally long-running US trade, capital and productivity deficits vis-à-vis its East Asian and Central European competitors. The point is not that the ideology is untrue, but that there are very good reasons indeed why Anglo-American rentiers could not help but believe in their own mythology. Japanese-style export-platform development was never an option for US elites given the autarkic industrial structure and Iron Triangle pork-barrel spending of the US military-industrial complex; the European solution, of an expansive welfare state and a heavily regulated financial sector, was equally unpalatable to a ruling class unwilling to grant workers even the most basic economic rights to organize unions and collectively bargain, let alone grant the sort of universal health insurance coverage, national pensions, and electoral systems of proportional representation now commonplace throughout the entire Continent. In fact the rentier position makes sense only when one considers the financial dependence of the contemporary American economy on its own former postwar semiperipheries: this is the shocking fact that in 1985, the US became a net global debtor for the first time since the late 19th century. The slide accelerated during the Wall Street Bubble, with the US borrowing roughly $150 billion a year from Japan and the future EU to finance its sizeable current account and trade deficits; according to the IMF, the net US international investment position reached minus $2 trillion as of December 1998. Amazing as it
sounds, the US ruling-class is, globally speaking, just another brutish and degenerate comprador bourgeoisie.5

Yet if the myth of the entrepreneur really is a kind of ideological placebo or symbolic wish-fulfillment designed to assuage still deeper anxieties about the market—the luxurious anxiety of the global rich, fretting over the latest take-over attempt, as much as the material scarcities burdening the global poor, who dream of consuming the global commodities they produce but are not permitted to afford—this is not, surprising as it may seem, entirely to the thing’s discredit. Ideologies are oftentimes never truer than when they are most false; i.e. where the thing momentarily contradicts, however briefly, what truly exists and thus opens the door to alternatives. The mythology of the entrepreneur is thus no mere fiction or passing episode of bad faith, it is a powerful identity-politics tied to a truly utopian piece of cultural praxis: the flip side of the quite understandable desire to be a free agent in a world owned and operated by multinational corporations and banks is the corresponding and logically inevitable fetishization of those quintessentially capitalist agencies of ownership and investment, the stock and credit markets.

The entrepreneur is, in short, the cultural avatar of the Wall Street stock and real estate bubbles: a regressive speculation grounded on the earnings-stream of futures past (a return to the glory days of the 19th century robber barons) rather than present-day market share, only with the Internet instead of the railroad, junk bond buyouts instead of robber baron scams, and the electronic colonialism of the IMF instead of the Great Game of the Victorians. This aporia was probably more obvious in the context of the early Enlightenment, when the trading ventures of small-scale entrepreneurs were at the mercy of the weather, scurvy and disease, not to mention the colonizing bureaucracies of the mercantilist states: just as the utopian moment of Robinson Crusoe is the shipwreck which cuts him off from a repressive civilization, and not necessarily that subsequent toil
which attempted to reproduce English commercial society in the tropics, so too does Rousseau’s tale of the noble savage stake its claim to authenticity on the colonial citizens of a virginal Nature, as opposed to the national-metropolitan naturalized citizen. The contemporary version of Defoe’s tale would probably be the mythology of the bootstrap globalizer, the entrepreneur who builds a powerhouse multinational corporation from scratch, a la Hewlett and Packard, Bill Gates, or Konosuke Matsushita; while Rousseau’s Romanticism might have its counterpart in the Third Way ideology propagated by the progressive foundations set up by billionaire hedge fund speculator George Soros, wherein the institutional heritage of the civil society and welfare bureaucracies devised by the various monopoly-national capitalisms is refurbished and renovated much like the historical museums, opera houses and public parks established by the enlightened robber barons of a bygone era.

But things really start to get interesting only when we move from the rarefied eyrie of the entrepreneur to the gritty realities of the multinational corporation or multi. Two of the most innovative forms of anti-market resistance, namely the multicultural and ecological movements, do not simply discard the entrepreneurial narrative as a form (i.e. critique the greed of the business leaders involved) but push beyond this to the central internal contradiction of the multi: the antagonism between an explicitly transnational managerial culture on the one hand, and the multinational workplace culture of the average employee on the other. Whereas the mythology of the entrepreneur is a patent wish-fulfillment of managers who dream of ascending, Gates-style, into the upper ranks of the bourgeoisie, but who will for the most part remain forever locked into the lower and middle ranks of the corporate bureaucracy, the culture of the employees runs in the opposite direction, towards the egalitarianism of the engineer-tweakers and software hackers so evident in the Unix-culture of the Internet or the free-floating groups of
volunteers who produced the Linux operating system. Something similar is at work in the 
polarization of the environmental movement between corporate-funded national 
foundations or mainstream lobbying groups such as the NRDC, the World Wildlife 
Foundation and the Sierra Club on the one hand, and the environmental justice, 
sustainable development and Green political movements on the other; where the former 
are generally located in the neo-national habitus of national and international regulatory 
agencies, the latter tend to be associated with specifically multinational social ecologies 
(e.g. the favelas, Fourth World movements and radicalized professional-class workers). 

In this context, multiculturalism is far more than just the logical and necessary 
antipode to the culture of the multis; it is the strategic bridge between the daily praxis of a 
multinational workforce still comprised of innumerable national and subnational cultural 
groups and not yet cognizant of itself as a world proletariat, and the more specialized 
cultural praxis of the various professional-class workers (programmers, clerical workers, 
teachers, and so forth). One excellent example of this dynamic is the rise of a 
multinational hip hop musical culture, wherein peripheralized cultures created by the 
storm and stress of globalization (the African American, Latino American, African French 
and Turkish German communities, among so many others) recuperated a host of 
neonational and international blues, R & B and jazz materials in the context of a 
transnational recording and studio technology, conjoining innovative multinational 
musical forms with spoken texts which were simultaneously entertainment, political 
protest and educational instruction. Still another would be Saskia Sassen’s sociology of 
mass immigration and urban restructuring, wherein the massive importation of guest-
workers in Switzerland and West Germany in the Sixties and Seventies, the internal 
movement of uprooted farmworkers and rural residents in Japan and France through the 
mid-Seventies, and of course sustained global immigration throughout the entire First
World since the early Eighties, is revealed to be an unashamedly economic strategy by which the keiretsu structures and developmental states of East Asia and Central Europe, as well as the rentiers of the US, could counteract the rising real wages of the 1945-75 boom by importing an unskilled, super-exploited labor force (i.e. essentially creating a global reserve army of the unemployed). A third would be the right to asylum and sanctuary movements which emerged in the US in the context of the Pax Americana’s brutal counter-insurgency wars in Central America, and in the EU in the context of the Yugoslav civil wars and the terminal economic crisis of the Eastern bloc, and which may yet emerge in Japan as a consequence of the Southeast Asia economic crisis. This latter is also closely linked to the fact that continuous immigration, far from being a unique attribute of the American national character – a preconception still shared, alas, by all too many Japanese and Europeans themselves – has become a First World norm: in addition to the sizeable numbers of EU citizens living in their non-native countries, France and Italy are host to millions of immigrants from Francophone Africa and the Maghreb, forty percent of present-day Berlin is of Turkish or Near Eastern descent, and of course hundreds of thousands of Eastern Europeans, Africans, and Asians arrive in the EU every year.

Remarkably, it is precisely in the context of the new, multinational Europe, a Europe he did not personally experience and could not directly foresee on that level, that Adorno’s thought resonates with one of its most powerful insights; this is the notion of multiplicity or diversity by which the Benjaminic idea divests itself of its theological context and embraces a new kind of utopic claim:

Sie [Ideen] sind weder chôris [by themselves] noch leerer Schall sondern negative Zeichen. Die Ideen leben in den Höhlen zwischen dem, was die Sachen zu sein beanspruchen, und dem, was sie sind. Utopie wäre über die Identität und über dem Widerspruch, ein Miteinander des Verschiedenen. [They are neither chôris [by themselves] nor empty noise but are negative signs. The ideas live in the
The identity-principle turns the knife-edge between what things claim to be and what they really are into a space for critical reflection, organization and activity – something which could almost be mistaken for a properly Social Democratic utopia, of an organized workforce taking the reins of national industries, were it not for the subtlety of Adorno’s phrasing, which denotes a commingling or togetherring of an unimagineable diversity rather than any compulsory membership. Such a diversity sheds new light on that most notoriously complex of all Adorno’s concepts, the constellation. So often misunderstood as a simple conjunction of unrelated concepts or, at best, the systematic mapping of a serialized concept over a number of topoi, the constellation or conceptual cast is designed above all to differentiate between concepts, to reveal each one in its own uniqueness in relation to the forcefield of all the others, and to thereby spring history out of the prison-house of the abstract cognition, ideologeme or representation in question. The process can also work in reverse, of course, such that a given historical process, an aesthetic work or a systemic ideology can be dissolved back into its constituent conceptual and representational building-blocks (this is the usual vocation of Marxist demystification going all the way back to Marx’s 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire, by the way, i.e. the problematic of diagnosing and decoding specific class identities and projects out of a welter of empirical materials). What is important to stress here is the degree to which the truth-content of this diversity – the terminus of non-identity – represents a fundamental limit-point of the constellation as well: what is meant is that utopian moment wherein the various aesthetic, political or other concepts bound up in the various constellations cease their primordial antagonism and incessant competition with one another, each seeking to replicate itself at the expense of others like some viral code, but peacefully coexist. Such a moment, or
what Adorno will call the reconciliation, is to be understood neither as the positivistic freezing of the contradiction in place, i.e. the utopian sheen of yet another dismal commodity fetishism, nor as the purchasable nunc stans of global stock market and credit bubbles, but which corresponds rather to the Hegelian moment of the transformation of quantity into quality, and the more familiar Marxian terminology of class revolution. Reconciliation denotes the cessation of class struggle, the end of class conflict and all its subforms (racism, sexism, and a thousand other oppressions new and old) amidst the dawning of as yet unknowable forms of cooperation, economic democracy and collective solidarity – not the conclusion, in short, of history, but the winding-up of a properly Marxian prehistory. Strikingly, Adorno immediately grounds this essential insight not, as one might expect, in any rarefied field of philosophy, but in the materiality of language itself:

Modell dafuer ist das Verhalten der Sprache. Sie bietet kein blosses Zeichensystem fuer Erkenntnisfunktionen. Wo sie wesentlich als Sprache auftritt, Darstellung wird, definiert sie nicht ihre Begriffe. Ihre Objektivitaet verschafft sie ihnen durch das Verhaeltnis, in das sie die Begriffe, zentriert um eine Sache, setzt. Damit dient sie der Intention des Begriffs, das Gemeinte ganz auszudruecken. Konstellationen allein repraesentieren, von aussen, was der Begriff im Innern wegeschnitten hat, das Mehr, das er sein will so sehr, wie er es nicht sein kann.

[The model for this is the conduct of language. It offers no mere sign-system for cognitive functions. Where it reveals itself essentially as speech, becoming depiction, it does not define its concepts. It procures its objectivity through the relationship in which it sets the concepts, centered around a thing. Therein it serves the intention of the concept, to completely express what is meant. Constellations alone represent, from outside, what the concept has cut away within, the surplus, which it so wishes to be, which it can not be.] ND:164

This wondrously beautiful reflection laments just long enough over the impossibility of the possible to make us realize that the only true impossibility is the permanence of what we have come to blindly accept, on ephemeral appearances only, as “the possible” of late capitalism, i.e. that multinational consumer culture which systematically buries the
expressive potential of the subject under a flood of icons, signs and goods, but which at
the same time offers an unparalleled storehouse of material for a potentially emancipated
subjectivity. In this situation, the concept is far more than just a set of tools for mediating
and regulating the accumulation of cultural capital, as the day before yesterday’s
positivists, yesterday’s cybernetic technocrats and today’s neoliberal info-ideologues
incessantly proclaim; it is also the crucial link between aesthetic content and its
subjective reception, that is to say its specialized reading key or interpretive code. In turn,
the aesthetic is the essential corrective to the concept, transmitting a content which,
precisely because it cannot be abstracted in that sense (i.e. novels are not their own plot
summaries and videos are not their own storyboards), provides that index of the concrete
by which the hegemony of the abstraction in a society founded on totalizing abstractions
of all kinds can be measured and, indeed, resisted.

This is a significant and provocative rewriting of the role of language and
linguistic expression sketched out by the *Three Studies on Hegel*, which delimited the
constellation to the internal equivalences of one linguistic system with another (what
might be termed the problem of translating specific words or phrases across national
boundaries, which implies a reasonably standardized or compatible set of cultural fields,
if nothing else). What is clearly at issue here is a plurality of constellations, each one of
which must be carefully thought out in conjunction both internally, i.e. as a set of
contradictory concepts in motion towards and against one another, as well as externally,
i.e. as a set of no less mobile and mobilizing constellations. The truly dialectical insight
would therefore be something like the Benjaminic lightning-bolt which flashes from the
micrological concept to the macrocosmic ensemble of constellations and back again,
illuminating both while consuming neither. But this is not the end of the story either: far
from delimiting the insight to the realms of aesthetics and philosophy, Adorno explicitly
identifies a third and heretofore unremarked mode of cognition, derived from the fields of the social and natural sciences, which turn out to be one of the most systematically productive (as well as systematically underappreciated!) sources of conceptual innovations of all:


Wie Gegenstaende durch Konstellation zu erschliessen seien, ist weniger aus der Philosophie zu entnehmen, die daran sich desinteressierte, als aus bedeutenden wissenschaftlichen Untersuchungen; vielfach war die durchgefuehrte wissenschaftliche Arbeit ihrem philosophischen Selbstverstaendnis, dem Szentivismus voraus.

[Perceiving the constellations in which the thing stands means so much as to decode that which it bears within itself as historically-become. The chorismos of outside and inside is for its part historically conditioned. Only knowledge can unleash the history in the object, which the historical place-value of the object in its relationship to others currently has; the contemporanization and concentration of that which is already known, which it transforms. Cognition of the object in its constellation is that of the process, which it has stored up within itself. As a constellation the theoretical thought circles around the concept, which it would like to open, hoping, that it springs ajar like the lock of a top-secret safe: not only by means of a single key or a single number, but a number-combination.

How objects are to be disclosed through constellations is to be gathered less from philosophy, which is disinterested in such, than from scientific investigations of consequence: in many cases the achieved scientific work was ahead of its scientistic, philosophical self-understanding.] ND:166

The metaphor of the safecracker, with its echo of the existential films and of Beckett’s prison-camp dialogues, accedes to the James Bond-style information hijacker, who unlocks the potential of the scientific concept by means of its own stored-up
Such potential is not merely a question of expanding the frontiers of science, but also of enlarging the inner realm of the subject: Adorno uses the word Wissen (literally, “knowledge”) instead of Wissenschaft (“science”), and thereby invokes the entire scientific revolution handed down by the Enlightenment in all its theoretical, experimental and practical complexity, as opposed to the relatively narrower phenomena of the rise of the scientific profession or its attendant discourses per se. This suggests that the constellation functions very much like Bourdieu’s field of cultural or symbolic capital, that is to say a transnational discourse organized around a neonational class fraction or multinational niche market; something supported by Adorno’s subsequent citation of Weber’s concept of ideal types, as a kind of bridging mediation which can vitally enrich the Marxian concept of class, fleshing it out with a whole new set of sociological tools and heuristic registers, but which also needs to be analyzed in the context of the insights and aporias of the sociological field in general (as with the newly spatial dimension of the urban sociology of a Mannheim or Simmel, or the Dialectic of Enlightenment’s own initial foray into the sociology of mass-culture).

There remains the intriguing problem of the analysis of ensembles of constellations, which at first sounds like a dead ringer for the space of our own contemporary global theory-market; in fact, Adorno has something more complicated in mind than the trafficking of the concept per se. The field of constellations will provide the strategic staging-grounds for a rethinking and reappropriation of the henceforth globalized commodity form from a qualitatively new perspective: not quite that of the multinational corporation, but something strongly associated with its emergence, which we will need to identify in the pages ahead.
Notes

1. This is not to say Adorno was not concerned with the local or German pole of the critique of the ontologies; this takes place elsewhere, in Adorno’s short study *Jargon of Authenticity*, written in the early Sixties and designed, as Adorno notes in the preface to that work, to be more of a public and sociological intervention in the prevailing conditions of the Bundesrepublik – characterized at that time by a truly dreadful and stifling conformity on both sides of the Berlin Wall – than a full-fledged philosophical meditation. Indeed, part of *Jargon of Authenticity* was published in the Neuen Rundschau in 1963. With typical subtlety, Adorno makes the obligatory bow to Marx’s own notorious journalism in his subtitle: “On the German Ideology”!

2. This lack of aesthetic registers tends to undercut even Husserl’s most progressive moments, e.g. the visual moment of the Wesenschau or apperception: “Dem physiognomisch Aufblitzenden wird von Husserl, wie den Kantischen synthetischen Urteilen a priori, umstandslos Notwendigkeit und Allgemeinheit wie in Wissenschaft zugeschrieben.” [That which flashes from the physiognomy is ascribed by Husserl, just as in the a priori Kantian synthetic judgement, to unencumbered necessity and universality, as in scientific knowledge.] ND:89 What is not wished to be seen by the ideolect in question – physiognomy is a secret synonym for Genet’s cinematic close-ups and the American actors displayed on cinematic wall-posters – is deemed unviewable.

3. Aesthetics becomes thus something like the objective working-out or emancipated content of those social contradictions which philosophy would otherwise render as abstract concepts or ideas, and which a reigning positivism (or today’s postmodern consumerism) would reduce to a politically neutralized and unthinking nominalism: “Philosophie ist weder Wissenschaft noch, wozu der Positivismus mit einem albernen Oxymoron sie degradieren moechte, Gedankendichtung, sondern eine zu dem von ihr Verschiedenen ebenso vermittelte wie davon abgehobene Form. Ihr Schwebendes aber ist nichts anderes als der Ausdruck des Unaussprechbaren an ihr selber. Darin wahrhaft ist sie der Musik verschwistert. Kaum ist das Schwebende recht in Worte zu bringen; das mag verursacht haben, dass die Philosophen, ausser etwa Nietzsche, darueber hingweggleiten. Eher ist es die Voraussetzung zum Verstaendnis philosopher Texte als ihre buendige Eigenschaft. Es mag geschichtlich entsprungen sein und auch wieder verstummen, wie der Musik es droht.” [Philosophy is neither scientific procedure nor the thought-poetry to which positivism, with a ludicrous oxymoron, would like to degrade such, but is a form just as mediated by what it is differentiated from as by what it ennobles. Its insubstantiality is nothing less than the expression of the inexpressible in itself. Therein truly is it the cousin of music. The non-substantial is barely able to be given speech; this may have caused the philosophers, with the partial exception of Nietzsche, glide away from such. It is the prerequisite for the comprehension of philosophic texts rather than its identifying characteristic. It originated historically and may yet fall silent, just as music threatens to do.] ND:115-116
4. This is nicely anticipated in a comment on positivism: “In gewissem Betracht ist die dialektische Logik positivistischer als der Positivismus, der sie aechtet: sie respektiert, als Denken, das zu Denkende, den Gegenstand auch dort, wo er den Denkregeln nicht willfahrt. Seine Analyse tangiert die Denkregeln. Denken braucht nicht an seiner eigenen Gesetzlichkeit sich genug sein zu lassen; es vermag gegen sich selbst zu denken, ohne sich preiszugeben; waere eine Definition von Dialektik moeglich, so waere das als eine solche vorzuschlagen.” [To a certain extent dialectical logic is more positivistic than the positivism which condemns the former; it respects the object which is to be thought, as thought, even where it does not obey the rules of thought. Its analysis circumscribes the rules of thought. Thought need not remain self-contained within its own nomothetism; it has the capacity to think against itself, without sacrificing itself; were a definition of dialectics possible, this might be one worth suggesting.] ND:144

5. This casts a revealing light on the trajectory of arch-marketeers such as Jeffrey Sachs from rabid partisans of an unrestricted neoliberalism in the early Nineties to staunch defenders of a decidedly non-market civil society which is supposed to ameliorate the worst excesses of capital accumulation: the civil society in question is a polite euphemism for the social and economic infrastructure of the new metropoles, i.e. the keiretsu creditors of the global economy, to whom US capital must swear financial but not yet ideological fealty, at least until the euro arrives. For the institutionalized version of the same phenomenon, see the 1998 report of the World Bank: “…Weak economic growth in Japan and Europe since the early 1990s led to accommodating monetary policies and low interest rates. These factors, combined with international investors’ aggressive search for high returns in emerging markets, led to a situation in which not only more investment flowed into the region’s economies than could be profitably employed at a reasonable risk, but also inefficient allocation resulted from structural weaknesses in countries’ financial system.” World Bank Annual Report 1998: East Asia & Pacific. Washington DC: The Bank, 1998 (2). A year earlier, the World Bank was praising East Asia’s sound management of its economies to the skies and recommending the further deregulation of capital flows; a year later, the darlings of the market can suddenly do no right and, anyway, the disasters of deregulation are all Japan and Europe’s fault. The World Bank is not this stupid, of course; they would like the EU and Japan to socialize Asia’s losses in order to further pad the profit margins of US multinationals in the region – something the EU and Japan, being much smarter than the flacks of the World Bank could ever possibly know, are indeed preparing to do, but in the context of padding their own profit margins.

6. This chimes nicely with Adorno’s comment, “Dialektik bedeutet objektiv, den Identitätszwang durch die in ihm aufgespeicherte, in seinen Vergegenständlichungen geronnene Energie zu brechen.” [Dialectics signifies, objectively, the bursting of the compulsion of identity through the stored-up energies of its objectification.] ND:159 This theme of the subversive power or historical (that is to say, history-making) potential stored up in the embodied labor of the commodity form will form the basis for a later meditation on the preponderance of the object, that is to say the form that the hegemony
of the commodity form takes in late capitalism, i.e. the division of labor and the sociological spaces of the multinational corporation.
CHAPTER IV

LABORS OF THE CONCEPT

Adorno would be the first, of course, to minimize his own share in the theorizing of the constellation, insisting at regular intervals that the original insight was Benjamin’s and that constellations are simply the objective form which critical thinking must take at a certain stage in a relentlessly integrative and integrating late capitalism. In fact, Negative Dialectics will drastically expand upon the critique of the totality famously handed down by Benjamin’s theses on history, and on two distinct levels. Firstly, the aesthetic positivity still latent in Benjamin’s notion of the revolutionary rupture or messianic coupûre (a.k.a. the Surrealist fragment or mass-cultural aesthetic commodity) is negated by a concrete theory of the commodity-producer under monopoly capitalism: this is the signal service rendered by the Philosophy of Modern Music, wherein the various competing styles of musical composition turn out to have a deeply politicized content – Schoenberg’s ultrasectarianism thus reads as a kind of musical Trotskyism or Spartacism, precisely where Stravinsky’s calculated primitivism resonates with the catastrophic national-authoritarian regression of a Celine, with Berg and Webern offering the Austrian social democratic and Swiss cantonal-corporatist compromises between these two poles. Secondly, and even more significantly, Adorno reappropriates Benjamin’s intriguingly spatialized notion of clashing or antagonistic modes of aesthetic reproduction (as with the notion of the aura, that Expressionistic compromise between those medieval pageants still available, even today, as Central Europe’s street-carnivals and historical monuments, and the properly cinematic close-up) onto the unexpected
terrain of the theoretical cognition: this is the explicit mandate of critical theory as something necessarily separate from and antagonistic to the larger fields of social criticism, theoretical production and cultural interpretation in which theory is embedded. It follows that no history of the concept is conceivable outside a history of the division of conceptual labor, whether as the history of the production and reproduction of knowledge (the various academic and scientific fields, the mis-named marketplace of ideas which is not really about any kind of straightforward process of accumulation, but is rooted in the social practices of a given community of concept-workers, or what Bourdieu would call the habitus of conflicting, antagonistic results, conjectures and methodologies of a given cultural or scientific field) or else as the no less complicated aesthetic cognitions and mediations by which all these things are grasped, disseminated and debated. The middle and later passages of Negative Dialectics are, as we shall see, designed to generate a complex webwork of mediations capable of handling such problems, by shuttling incessantly between the larger constellations of the social and natural sciences and a variety of local nodes or micrological studies. These micrological models in turn permit the local analysis to access the powerful heuristics and hermeneutical registers of the larger constellations in question. In order to think larger, one must first think smaller, and in order to grasp the smallest element of a given model, one needs the comparative measure of the largest structure in question. Such models are thus not constants in their own right, but are more like the legible tracks or traces of historical contradictions not immediately perceptible as such, or at least available only by way of considerable conceptual effort.

To take only the most obvious example, neoliberalism and neocolonialism are not simply the computerized updates of 19th century Manchester liberalism and Victorian-era Empire-building that they advertise themselves as being, but derive much of their content
from the mythos of the (franchise) entrepreneur and the economics of the informatic speculation. Somewhat further afield, this may explain why the contemporary analogues of Darwin’s speciated Nature and Freud’s hydraulic Unconscious, namely Stephen Jay Gould’s punctuated equilibrium of eco-systems and Fredric Jameson’s mediatic unconscious of late capitalism, do not simply extend a given conceptual structure or tweak a few details of a fundamentally static set of insights, but transform a multiple set of concepts simultaneously, leveraging the insights of each to push the envelope of all the others, and thereby generating a powerfully new kind of conceptual praxis. The parallels to Adorno’s notion of the constellation are not merely suggestive, but positively incriminating: one might note that where Gould brought the fields of paleology, carbon-dating, molecular biology, evolutionary theory, the statistics of variance, the social history of science and generous helpings of literary history and popular culture into contact with one another, Jameson synthesized an equally wide-ranging array of mass-cultural analysis, film theory, formalism,structuralism, post-structuralism, architecture, the various 20th century Marxisms, and the work of countless other disciplines into the first coherent diagnosis of the global media culture, a.k.a. Eighties postmodernism. All this is powerfully anticipated in passages such as this crushing critique of social Darwinism here:

Der Primat von Subjektivität setzt spiritualisiert den Darwinschen Kampf ums Dasein fort. Die Unterdrückung der Natur zu menschlichen Zwecken ist ein blosses Naturverhältnis; darum die Superiorität der naturbeherrschenden Vernunft und ihres Prinzips Schein... War Herrschaft über die Natur Bedingung und Stufe der Entmythologisierung, so hätte diese auf jene Herrschaft überzugreifen, soll sie nicht doch Opfer des Mythos werden. [The primacy of subjectivity extends the Darwinian struggle for existence still further. The subjection of Nature for human ends is a mere relation of Nature; that is why the superiority of a nature-controlling Reason and the principle of such is an illusion... If domination over Nature was a condition and stage of
demythologization, this latter would have to reach beyond such domination, if it is itself not to fall prey to mythos.] ND:181

This chimes well with Gould’s revelation that evolutionists, as the historians of natural history, do not simply reduce a given set of data to an evolutionary scheme, but must actively read, infer, research and intuit a complex set of processes extending over millions of years from a data-set which itself changes over time (thanks to new theories, better fossil records, more thorough collection and research techniques, etc.). Where the anti-historians of Nature, namely the creationists, simply disallow any argument except their own, Gould’s marvelous essays show time and time again that not only are the insights of evolution accessible to everyone, but that the limit-point of creationism is its essentially mythological thought-process; it is not an “alternative” to evolution in that sense, but is rather the extra-scientific attempt to crudely impose a subsection of the narrative field (the interpretive machinery of a 19th century Christian religious discourse) onto the field of natural history, in the disastrous traditions of the Inquisition, Lysenkoism, sociobiology and the modern-day pseudoscientific racisms, sexisms, homophobias and the like. This chimes well with Adorno’s own position, namely that the instrumental domination of Nature by human beings – a.k.a. the evils of technology – is not identical with the field of social domination, but must be understood as our very own form of social mythology, as a social history which we cannot help but perceive, thanks to the division of labor in late capitalism and the incessant struggle of each against all on the marketplace, as a kind of primordial natural history, a.k.a. the rule of inhuman market forces over the destinies of human beings. The moment of truth in the hegemonic mythos of national-monopoly capitalism and, indeed, in ontological thought generally, is thus the insight into the powerlessness of the subject in actually existing prehistory; its moment of untruth is the blind ratification of this prehistory as something subjectively willed and
indeed wished for (the naked and self-sacrificing identification of the subject with the strongest power-constellation at hand, whether this be a national bureaucracy, a political mass party, or a corporation) when in fact it is objectively produced out of historical necessity. Of course, social domination is by no means natural history, any more than the dinosaurs in Disney’s ground-breaking *Fantasia* signify real dinosaurs; they merely represent our intrinsically social, historically-charged and paleologically-informed conceptions of such. Consequently the resistance to domination must insist not just on the unreality of our socially constructed reality (what Sartre called the trope of derealization), but must stake its claim on the historicity of the real, both as a category and as a concept. Gould does exactly this, by answering the creationists upon their own cultural grounds and actively transcribing the hidden prejudices, errors and moments of insight of scientists past and present, not to mention the insights of poets, scholars and thinkers into the scientific process, onto the essay as a form; interestingly enough, Jameson’s essays on the Seventies blockbuster films did something similar, by rendering the works of Sartre, Adorno, Bloch, Lukaçs and Benjamin accessible to an entire generation of American theorists in the Seventies and Eighties via that new aesthetic form, the theoretical hypertext, which somehow combines the clarity of the French precis and the rigor of the German theoretical explication with the breezy chattiness and accessibility of the American how-to guide.

The flip side of this hybridization of form is a no less powerful pluralization of content, wherein the insights, heuristics and concepts of specific fields begin to be translated and transcoded across all manner of disciplinary lines and entrenched divisions of intellectual labor, and at an accelerating rate. Theory becomes plebianized, in much the same way that successive waves of increasingly sophisticated consumer and information technologies drive forwards an ever more ubiquitous multinational cultural literacy. As
Adorno notes, in a one-liner worthy of Richard Feynman: “Ihre [die Physik] Entwicklung seit Einstein hat mit theoretischer Stringenz das Gefäcengnis der Anschauung sowohl wie der subjektiven Apriorität von Raum, Zeit und Kausalität gesprengt.” [Its development [that of physics] since Einstein has, with theoretical stringency, blasted apart the prison of the intuition as well as the subjective apriori of space, time and causality.] ND:188 One need not delimit this insight to the powerful social transformations wrought by, say, nuclear physics in the context of the Cold War; one could also argue, much more subtly, that by disproving Kant’s immediate identification of philosophic reason with a certain phase of post-mechanistic natural history (the interregnum between 17th century mechanism and 19th century positivism which we know today as Lockean empiricism, and which Adorno gives the tag of “Verwissenschaftlichung” or scientifization ND:214), quantum mechanics did not merely liberate physics from the fetters of an archaic Newtonian ideology, but aided the emancipation of the Kantian categories from the Leibnizian straitjacket of the monad in which they were unwittingly bound. We are able to grasp, as if for the first time, the juridical aspect of the Kantian antinomies as the essential prehistory of those profound questions of freedom, human agency, and legal responsibility which form the central terrain of the human rights campaigns, environmental justice movements, labor organizing and other struggles of our own day.

This suggests that any account of the deconstructive or demystificatory pole of thought – the juridical procedure of proof and disproof which requires the winnowing away of irrelevancies and false leads as much as the cognitive one of the case study which necessitates the powerful abstraction of the experimental situation, both of which have their philosophical analogue in the determinate negation – needs to be complemented by the constructive pole of the speculation, something Adorno locates between the antipodes of creative play (of the sort found both in children's games, which
imaginatively mimic but do not conform to the adult reality around them, and in the heights of Hegelian idealism, with its inexhaustible panoply of forms and transmutation of essences) and the objective field of aesthetics proper. The mere formulation of this problem – the abstract possibility of bridging the divide between the scientific analysis and the aesthetic speculation – would be a significant achievement in its own right; but Adorno does not stop here. With characteristic ingenuity he proposes that what mediates between these two constellations is neither a set of extraneous abstractions (the ontological answer, which cannot see the trees for the forest) nor a multiplicity of ahistorical constants (the positivistic answer, which cannot see the eco-system for the wood chips), but a third and entirely autonomous constellation: nothing less than the commodity-form of late monopoly-capitalism itself, or what Adorno terms the “preponderance of the object”. 'This preponderance is neither an object in its own right, nor merely the adaptation of the subject to the commodity-form, but is probably closest to the notion of hegemony handed down by Raymond Williams’ literary criticism and Antonio Gramsci’s political meditations. Preponderance is not identity; it means the commodity form has the dominant share in subjectivity and the process of subject-formation, but faces continuous challenges from archaic and regressive social forms as well as progressive and socialist ones:

In Marx bereits spricht die Differenz zwischen dem Vorrang des Objekts als einem kritisch Herzustellenden und seiner Fratze im Bestehenden, seiner Verzerrung durch den Warencharakter sich aus. Der Tausch hat als Vorgaengiges reale Objektivitaet und ist zugleich objektiv unwahr, vergeht sich gegen sein Prinzip, das der Gleichheit; darum schafft er notwendig falsches Bewusstsein, die Idole des Marktes. Nur sardonisch ist die Naturwuechsigkeit der Tauschgesellschaft Naturgesetz; die Vormacht uber Oekonomie keine Invariante. [Already in Marx the difference is expressed between the preponderance of the object as something to be critically constructed and its remnants in the existent, its distortion by the commodity-form. The exchange has, as a transaction, real objectivity and is nevertheless objectively untrue, violates its own principle, that
This simultaneously resolves a number of the thorniest problems in the heritage of Western Marxism. For one thing, the central aporia of Lukačs’ ontology of labor, which runs aground on the machinery of the one-party-state which is supposed to subjectively embody the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, but ends up merely objectifying and administering such, turns out to be its inability to construct a corresponding ontology of capital. Stalinism, the self-administered primitive accumulation of the semi-peripheries of the capitalist world-system, could not and did not abolish capitalism per se; all it could do was to replace one form of class struggle for another, i.e. upgrade a feudalistic-tinged liberal capitalism with a cadre-tinged monopoly capitalism. Another case might be the signal inability of Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* to concretely relate the function of the practico-inert (essentially a cultural construct) to the suggestive remapping of liberal capitalism’s prehistory in the international trading-zones of the Mediterranean economies. Sartre is surely on the right track when he attempts to refute the dogmatic notion of the mode of production, that is to say the canard of an all-powerful base and a mendacious or irrelevant superstructure, by a more sophisticated dialectic of tools and tool-using on the one hand, and the anthropological function of violence as socialized scarcity on the other. The problem is, this scarcity merely extends the existential category of Being-for-others or alienation over a set of irreconcilably heterogenous historical periods, instead of imaginatively and concretely historicizing such in the way that Fernand Braudel’s longue durée or Perry Anderson's *Lineages of the Absolute State* can be said to operate. The end-result is Sartre’s appeal to a no less problematic group seriality or esprit de corps which, by definition, can exist only in revolutionary situations
(and as Jameson cannily pointed out, only bourgeois revolutions at that!), and which is supposed to collectively reembody the alienated subjects of a society of atomized, disembodied producers. Whereas for Lukačs the Party embodies the revolutionary proletariat, for Sartre the Revolution embodies the party of the proletariat; both viewpoints run aground on precisely the national social formations, i.e. the class rule of Hungary’s Second World apparatchiks and de Gaulle’s First World technocrats, which needed to be explained in the first place. In fairness to Sartre, on some level he did grasp this and attempted to make the Copernican turn towards the postmodern subject in the latter pages of The Family Idiot; still, the sociological thematic in question will be left unresolved until Bourdieu’s key innovation of the field of symbolic capital in the mid-Seventies – or what, from our perspective, reads as the application and extension of Adorno’s micrology to the Sartrean concept of the class project.

More significant still is the recuperation of Lukačs’ notion of reification in the context of the radically alienated somatic aspect of the body: the insight, first posited by History and Class Consciousness and later suppressed by the apparatchiks, that laboring bodies think. In fact Lukačs’ late ontology of labor was very much a belated attempt to emancipate the laboring mind from the party apparatus which treated the consciousness of its constituent individuals as so much raw material, to be molded and remolded at the behest of an unaccountable party leadership in the East and equally unaccountable multinational corporate bureaucracies in the West. It would thus be doubly wrong to accuse Lukačs of not making the transition from the laboring mind to the thinking collectivity per se, or what amounts to the situation of the post-Stalinist thaw which created a limited political space for maneuver within the cadre-state (the social basis for the Prague Spring and goulash communism alike) as compared to the 1989 revolutions against the cadre-state altogether. In the first place, if Lukačs and others like him had not
struggled mightily for the former, the latter would never have happened; there would be no Velvet Revolution without an Alexander Dubček. Secondly, such a position patently ignores the significant work of Kristeva in the Seventies and Zizek in the Nineties (Kristeva’s chora, for example, posits a zone of utopian signification with remarkable parallels to the underground unions and dissident intellectual groups of the Eastern bloc; while Zizek reappropriates Lacan’s punishing critique of Gaullism in the context of the dismal post-Yugoslav neonationalisms).

By contrast, Adorno will push Lukačs’ insight in the other direction, not towards the pageant of collective protest but towards the microforms of juridical, sociological and aesthetic resistance:

Both, body and mind, are abstractions of their experience, their radical difference a decree. They reflect the historically-achieved ‘self-consciousness’ of the mind and the casting off of that which it negated, due to its own identity. Everything spiritual is modified corporeal impulse, and such modification qualitatively redounds into what is not merely such. Compulsion is, according to Schelling’s insight, the forerunner of mind.

The presumed essential facts of consciousness are anything but. In the dimension of pleasure and displeasure, the bodily reaches deep into them. All pain and all negativity, the motor of dialectical thought, are the ceaselessly mediated, occasionally unconscious shape of the physical, which like all happiness aims at sensual fulfillment and garners its objectivity by it. If any aspect of happiness is frustrated, then it is none whatsoever.] ND:202
It follows that happiness or sensuous satisfaction is just as much a constellation as that negativity by which the lack of happiness is made apparent to us; or put more concretely still, happiness and unhappiness are historical categories. The unthinking or somatic aspect of the body is reducible neither to a marketplace of prefabricated sensations or aesthetic constants circulating through an unknowably digitalized sensorium – as all too much post-structuralist theory tends to assume – nor to a simple production-module of larger systems of reproduction (as the informatic ideologies of the biotech startup or the Internet speculation would aver), but is the logical and inevitable antipode of thinking bodies in a society where mental tasks are strictly separated from and privileged over manual ones. Put bluntly, where post-structuralism fails to cognize the managerial function of cultural signification in late capitalist society (i.e. the fact that marketing is there to sell you things, not to make your life easier) and thus unwittingly converges with the ubiquitous multinational ideologies of self-advancement and a Silicon upwards mobility, the fetishization of a specific technology or scientific advance is no less culpable in privileging the technological surplus-rent or specific product innovation over and above the processes of unequal exchange which valorize such.

Both ideologies privilege the moment of the innovation-rent at the expense of the grim realities of the larger marketplace in question, that is to say the fate of those laboring bodies caught up in an increasingly multinational competition for jobs, stock options, career opportunities and media play. The compulsion Adorno identifies above is thus a polite synonym for the drastic polarization of the global market of intellectual laborers since the late Sixties, wherein a few lucky superstars ride their chosen speculative bubble to riches, while the vast majority of academics, culture-workers and information professionals around the world make do with falling real wages and rising working hours.
All this suggests that post-structuralism and the Wall Street Bubble have some deeper historical affinity, particularly in regards to the sophisticated managerial strategies of the sphere of finance and marketing. These need not be inherently reactionary or pro-capitalist, as innumerable Greenpeace campaigns and EarthFirst! civil actions go to show; indeed many of the more prominent post-structuralisms tend to function as the radical counterpart of the Wall Street speculation, or what could be termed the potentially progressive managerial speculations of the aristocracy of global labor. “Keine Theorie darf agitatorische Schlichtheit zuliebe gegen den objektiv erreichten Erkenntnisstand sich dumm stellen,” notes Adorno cogently. “Sie muss ihn reflektieren und weitertreiben.” [No theory may for the sake of propagandistic simplicity play dumb in the face of the objectively-achieved state of knowledge. It must reflect upon such and drive such further.] ND:206 This Marxian notion of unbinding or unleashing the productive forces of the intellect has its most striking echo in the powerfully subversive and democratizing undercurrents crisscrossing contemporary informatic ideology, and particularly the utopian moment of the tools and access codes of consumer appliances, computers, software and hardware of all kinds which forms the essential bedrock of multinational science-fiction. At its outer limit, such forms are not merely antagonistic to the agenda of the Wall Street rentiers, they are its direct political negation: they offer a set of multinational use-values which stubbornly resist the hegemony of multinational exchange-values, and in a variety of interesting and as yet little-understood ways, everywhere from the struggle for open-source software and freeware to multinational labor organizing, and from global human rights campaigns to the environmental justice movement.

If theory cannot do without the cognition, neither can it accept the insights of the latter uncritically. Just as neither the strategic management strategies of the global factory
nor the specialized cognitions of R & D thinktanks and managerial elites would be, strictly by themselves, capable of generating real insights into the total system, nor could a sociology which limited its study of multinational corporations or “multis” to the utterances of the universally monochrome, fanatically workaholic personality profiles of the top business managers and CEOs (as opposed to shopfloor work practices, industry-level financial structures, customer service strategies and the like) really say anything meaningful about how the multis really operate. No less is true of the dogmatic position that assembly line workers are the source of all exchange-value, let alone the technocratic analysis which ranks professional and service-sector workers higher than line-workers and executives alike. All such viewpoints unwittingly share the quasi-Weberian fetishization of a given power-authority or hierarchy; where the former position believes, wrongly, that the forces of production dictate the simple reversal of the existing relations of production (factories run by committees rather than bosses) rather than the collective negation of these relations, the latter confuses the technology-rent for exchange-value and thus unfairly privileges the moment of invention over deeply collectivized processes of scientific research, development and innovation.

Such conceptual blindness converges, at its outer limit, with the discourse of neoliberalism itself, that is to say the narrow self-interest of global finance capital in funneling the surplus-value extracted from workers into ever more manic financial speculations, as opposed to investment in plant and equipment or those longer-term rhythms of global industrial accumulation under which every speculation, no matter how vast or grandiose, is ultimately subsumed. It almost goes without saying that this self-interest is narrow only in comparison with that larger matrix of global accumulation in which global financial capital is situated; though the Wall Street Bubble might be wildly irrational on its own terms, it does indeed have a core of economic rationality, namely the
firesale of the assets of the US Empire to the new global creditors (US Treasury bills, stocks and corporate bonds are thus transformed, via the magic of unequal exchange, into assets on the books of those EU and Japanese banks who – and this is no exaggeration, but a cold economic fact – own and operate the credit superstructure of the world-system).

All of this can be said another way, by noting that whereas neoliberalism is predicated on a fundamental hostility towards thought – in the field of ideology, the crudest consignment of all aspects of human society to the most violent and self-destructive market competition imaginable; in the realm of culture, the blanching of cultural utopias and scientific achievements into mere marketing schemes; in the economic sphere, the mantra of “increasing shareholder value” at the expense of employees, consumers, and the planetary ecology – radical and progressive ideologies have an indivisible affinity with the emancipation of the concept, an affinity which runs much deeper than the embryonic links being forged between Left thinktanks, university programs and free-floating intellectuals with national and international bodies of trade unions, Left parties, civic organizations and the like. What is at issue is the overwhelming fact of the multinational workplace itself, that prismatic arcology of proliferating networks, data-warehouses, mediatic and electronic technologies crisscrossing the globe, transforming all our received notions of time, space and bodily experience into the materialities of continuous product updates, Internet hosts and DNA maps. In the world of multinational capitalism, theory is no longer a luxury, but is as necessary and ubiquitous (not to mention as unequally distributed) as jet travel and email accounts – indeed, critical theory would accord it the status of a human right, the right of laboring subjects to freely reflect upon their labor. It follows that the task of historicizing the present, in the context of what has to be the most totalizing system humanity has ever had
the fortune (or misfortune) to know, does not necessarily hinge upon the capacity of
theory to imagine a position outside of the system; something which begs the question of
what exactly that system is, and how we can possibly know its limits if we haven’t taken
the time to study it in detail. Rather, the test of theory would be its capacity to traverse
the integuments of the total system, to navigate within it and somehow comprehend its
dizzying internal logics, without falling prey to the illusion that this knowledge equates to
control over such. Theory must, in short, be as radically rootless and cosmopolitan, and
yet as grounded and concretely localized, as the social relations of global capitalism
themselves; it must know the total system, without itself being total. Only by shying
away from the totality can theory do justice to that non-theoretical particularity which is
its form of hope.

It is precisely here, at the point where most discussions of global capitalism turn
into abstract techno-utopianism (a theory abstracted of praxis) or no less dogmatic
invocations of global class struggles to come (a praxis abstracted of theory) – that Adorno
asks us to abruptly halt, and to resist the well-nigh universal tendency to mimic the total
system by blindly equating the particular with the totality. Just consider the pernicious
commonplace, undoubtedly as prevalent in the 1890s as in the 1990s, that we really are
living in a New Age, regulated by entirely new laws and processes, and that the past has
become, if not Bartleby the scrivener’s notoriously dead letter, then surely an
unprofitable, irrelevant sideline in the struggle for political and intellectual market-share.
This is in complete contradistinction to Marx’s point in the 18th Brumaire, i.e. the fact that
the feudal past weighing like a nightmare upon the brains of the 19th century European
bourgeoisie was itself the most powerful index of that present; what we call history is the
battleground of antagonistic class identities, ideologies and struggles, within which
historical subjects both new and old make their praxis in conflict and struggle with the
baleful spell of a Necessity which they themselves did not and could not choose. This Necessity is historical through and through; it is, as Adorno would put it, simply Hegel’s world-spirit shorn of the latter’s understandably naïve infatuation with the Prussian developmental state, or what amounts to Capital red in colonial-speculative tooth and military-industrial claw (the polemic target, of course, of Marx’s epic broadside on the German ideology). It is not so much that theory cannot decode the history of external events without first accounting for its own inner historicity, so much as that there are no “first principles” (what the existentialists would have called meaning-fundaments, and what postmodernism called master narratives) for truly critical thinking: the external must be thought through simultaneously with the internal, in the same way that the writing of history is itself an irremediably historical act, requiring the most acute awareness and laborious analysis of the cultural and social slippage between that writing (the academic division of labor, preexisting traditions of scholarship, evidentiary standards and the like) and the historical period in question.

Adorno thus cannily turns the preponderance of the object against itself, by relocating the moment of utopian aspiration or transcendence – that point at which most postmodern narratives turn into mere machineries of signification or computation – as something quite particular, i.e. as the moment where thought somehow grasps its own historicity and thereby thinks something genuinely new. This is the genesis of the “materialistic longing” or expressive desire to think, in whatever aesthetic language, political discourse or conceptual vocabulary is handy:

Die materialistische Sehnsucht, die Sache zu begreifen, will das Gegenteil [von Verordnen]: nur bilderlos waere das volle Objekt zu denken. Solche Bilderlosigkeit konvergiert mit dem theologischen Bilderverbot. Der Materialismus saekularisierte es, indem er nicht gestattete, die Utopie positive auszumalen; das ist der Gehalt seiner Negativitaet. Mit der Theologie kommt er
dort uberein, wo er am materialistischesten ist. Seine Sehnsucht waere die Auferstehung des Fleisches; dem idealismus, dem Reich des absoluten Geistes, ist sie ganz fremd. Fluchtpunkt des historischen Materialismus waere seine eigene Aufhebung, die Befreiung des Geist vom Primat der materiellen Beduerfnisse im Stand ihrer Erfuellung. Erst dem gestillten leibhaften Drang versohnte sich der Geist und wuerde, was er so lange nur verheisst, wie er im Bann der materiellen Bedingungen die Befriedigung der materiellen Beduerfnisse verweigert. [The materialistic longing to grasp things themselves intends just the opposite [of subsumption]; the entire thing could only be thought outside of images. Such indescribability converges with the theological ban on the graven image. Materialism secularizes it, in so far as it forbids Utopia to be concretely detailed; that is the content of its negativity. It hovers closest to theology where it is most materialistic. Its longing would be the resurrection of the flesh; this is utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of the absolute Mind. The sanctuary of historical materialism would be its own sublation, the emancipation of the Mind from the primacy of material necessities in the condition of their fulfillment. Only with the satiation of bodily compulsion would the Mind be reconciled to itself, becoming that which it so long merely proclaimed, but which thanks to the baleful spell of material conditions renounces the satisfaction of material necessities.] ND:207

Significantly, Adorno explicitly refuses to delimit this longing with a given genre, medium or material, preferring instead the non-pictorial realm of “Bilderlosigkeit” – a rather stronger term than the literal translation of “imagelessness” or “non-pictoriality”, connoting something which is almost beyond our capacity to imagine. No less striking is the specific mention of the religious ban on the graven image, something which resonates everywhere from the liberation theology of an Ernst Bloch to the platforms of the socialist, Communist and progressive movements which paced the great anti-colonial revolutions of the Third World. Religion in this sense is not simply a code-word for those preindustrial folk and agrarian cultures, still engaged in resisting the spread of capital from the European, US and later Japanese metropoles, though it surely ought not to be completely disengaged from this context; nor is it merely the ideology of nascent proletarians, cloaking modern class struggles in archaic Biblical registers. It is, rather, the cultural praxis of that strange new thing, the ideology of self-proletarianization or post-
WW II Communism, which served roughly the same progressive function for the 20th century comprador peasantries as the ideology of immigration to America served for the Central and Eastern European peasantries of the 19th century, i.e. as a belief-system of global upwards mobility. Whereas the American frontier offered the irresistible prospect of instant land acquisition for peasants being expropriated by primitive accumulation, legitimated by a proto-national allegiance to a country-in-formation charged with managing land accumulation, the Communist regimes offered the no less irresistible prospect of internal land redistribution from greedy, unproductive landlords to the hardworking majority of peasants, legitimated by a neo-national allegiance to an indigenous state apparatus-in-formation charged with socializing primitive accumulation. Where the frontier did not exist, it had to be invented.

Such relatively Fanonesque accounts of decolonization need to be completed, however, by reference to one of the most crucial and under-theorized historical actors of the 20th century: this is the Second World developmental state which mediated, on countless levels, that struggle between First World metropoles and Third World revolutions otherwise known as the Cold War. Where the progressive forces of the Second World were blunted, defeated or otherwise recontained, as in Latin America and Eastern Europe, nascent developmental states were destroyed or uprooted by the US and USSR alike; something as applicable to the US interventions and CIA destabilizations of Brazil in the Sixties, Chile and Argentina in the Seventies, Central America in the Eighties, and Cuba since 1961, which imposed increasingly neoliberal market models on what were already desperately inequitable and impoverished societies, as to the crushing of the Hungarian uprising and the Prague Spring, which mandated the continuation of Eastern bloc military-industrial autarky. This may explain the curious conundrum that it was precisely those developmental states on the contested border-zones of the Cold War,
e.g. Finland, Austria, Italy, West Germany, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, which turned out to benefit the most from Cold War surplus-rents and American military Keynesianism. In true dialectical fashion, the semi-peripheries which were the most politically constrained by the battle between the Soviet and American hegemons turned out to be ideal hothouses for the most far-reaching economic innovations.

Fascinatingly, this slippage or decalage, in Bourdieu’s words, between American monopoly-nationalism and the economic multinationalism of the developmental state is something encoded into the narrative DNA of *Negative Dialectics* in the most intriguing way, namely the formal mutation from the philosophic content of first half of the excursus (i.e. the progression from the introduction to the critique of the ontologies, and to the discussion of negative dialectics, which sketches out a fairly transparent Hegelian triad of international thesis, neo-national antithesis and multinational synthesis) to the theoretical models of the latter half, viz. the critique of Kant, Hegel and the concluding meditation on metaphysics. Whereas the first half of the book energetically maps out the constellations of the American Empire, the three models of the second half somehow transform and transcode those constellations beyond all recognition, leaving us with a seemingly unconnected and asynchronous set of meditations on Kant’s notion of freedom, Hegel’s world-spirit and natural history, and the space of a post-philosophical metaphysics. One’s first temptation is to explain away this rift as some sort of teleological progression, wherein the heyday of bourgeois ideology in Kant could be said to lead to the antithesis of the thing in Hegel’s philosophic idealism, and finally to some sort of restorative neo-Hegelianism in the conclusion; likewise, a contemporary postmodernism would code this as a specifically informatic teleology, i.e. the sublation of a set of ethical provocations and historical observations into the realm of meta-theory.
Everything changes, however, if we recall that Adorno came not to praise the Pax Americana, but to bury it. Upon closer inspection, each of the three models is clearly meant to identify a site of social conflict no longer delimited to a specific national context: the aporias of personal ethics in Kant are tied to a contemplation of the entire juridical sphere of late capitalism; the obsolescence of Hegel’s notion of national history turns out to be the flip side of a post-national natural history; and the decline of the national philosophical traditions becomes a mandate, midway through the very last section, for some future post-metaphysical theory. But why are these specific discourses mentioned, whereas others – most notably, the fields of aesthetics and sociology – glaringly absent? Returning to our earlier point, the whole point of thinking through the concept of the Second World is not merely to draw a line between the First and Third Worlds in a spatial sense, but to grasp these latter as antipodes, that is to say, as the poles of a dynamic contradiction. One of the more productive applications of this concept has been Immanuel Wallerstein’s notion of the semi-periphery in the capitalist world-system; historically, semi-peripheries (sometimes a specific nation, and other times groups of nations) either grow to challenge and ultimately displace the reigning core, or decay into true peripheries, and are thus the crucial index by which core and periphery can be measured. Culturally speaking, the Marxist notion of hegemony innovated by Antonio Gramsci, and later refined by Raymond Williams and significantly expanded upon by Pierre Bourdieu’s Distinction, follows an analogous trajectory, wherein the classical antagonism between high and low culture (the core and periphery of cultural capital, as it were) is played out on the intermediary terrain of middle-brow fashion and plebian taste.

What Adorno provides in this context – and this is a point we will return to in future chapters – is a way of grasping the antipodes of the Cold War not in terms of the US versus the USSR, but in terms of those Second and Third World battlefields which
served as the front lines of the Cold War: juridical revolutions, cancelled-out nationalism
and post-national ideologies are the unmistakeable hallmarks of the two Germanies, the
two Koreas, the two Vietnams, and the four Chinas. This suggests further that the three
models are not meant to be a diachronic progression per se, so much as a kind of
synchronic map of three separate but interrelated templates, each of which needs to be
viewed in context with all the others simultaneously, like a set of transparencies. Such a
map is not meant to delimit the analysis to a specific moment or concept of temporality
(say, the May 1968 uprising), but is intended to historicize such from within, thereby
setting the synchronic in motion towards its diachronic antipode. Instead of blindly
reproducing the binary split between the US and the USSR (something all too apparent in
the hoary ideologeme of Eastern Europe vs. Western Europe, not to mention that
distinction between North Vietnam and South Vietnam which was formulated not by the
Vietnamese themselves, but by the bureaucracies of the US national security state), we
are being asked to perceive the one-party state of East Germany in the unexpected light
of the Austrian developmental state, thereby mapping the reciprocal interaction of both in
the larger framework of the European Economic Community; the rise of the Singaporean
developmental state vis-à-vis post-colonial Malaysia in the Sixties, amidst the rise of an
East Asian trading-zone well on its way to becoming a metropole, would be still another
intriguing variation on this theme.\textsuperscript{6}

Put more concretely still, Adorno is tracing out the non-identity of Cold War
geopolitics with the technocratic and cybernetic forces of production, i.e. excavating the
antinomies of the Kantian and Hegelian systems in the context of the post-Bandung
nation-state and the multinational cultural marketplace respectively. These latter are
something like the indices or heuristic registers by which the rise of the multinational
marketplace can be measured; indeed, one could go so far as to argue that Kant and Hegel
haunt the battling neonationalisms and internationalisms of the Cold War period in much the same way that the specter of Marx (that convenient shorthand for the unruly and uncontrollable specter of Adorno and the entire heritage of Western European Marxism) haunts the global neoliberalisms and multinationalisms of our own day, i.e. as that inflection-point or moment beyond which a previously unthinkable narrative, an unknowable historical coupure or an unforeseeable political or economic event suddenly turns out to be terrifyingly thinkable, knowable and visible after all. This moment – what Marx canonized as the moment of social revolution, or the Promethean bursting of the fetters of the old society by the political, economic and cultural productivities of the new – is hardly an absolute, but needs to be historicized in its own right; it is not for nothing that Marx staunchly defended the revolutionary aspects of bourgeois society, i.e. its perpetual vocation to revolutionize the mode of production, while at the same time condemning its expropriations and violences. What is revolutionary is measurable only against what is not revolutionary, and one can legitimately argue that Marx talks about crises the way Adorno talks about contradictions, i.e. less as chronological or statutory events than as periods when the struggle between antagonistic class formations suddenly becomes acutely visible. Put bluntly, every revolution is a crisis, but not every crisis is a revolution; just as Marx points out over and over again that capital accumulates through constant micrological crises, a.k.a. market competition between competing capitals which ultimately drives the larger, systemic rhythms of the business cycle, so too will Adorno insist that systemic contradictions are hardly barriers to the total system, but in fact are the essential fuel which powers the further expansion of such.

All this relates back to the Kantian system in the most intriguing way, namely in the disjuncture between pure and practical reason – that embryonic aporia, not yet become a full-fledged Hegelian contradiction, between the abstract or nomothetic
lawgiver on the one hand, and the juridical systems charged with interpreting, embodying and executing such on the other. This is also the genesis of the notorious Kantian disjuncture between a doom-laden causality on the one hand, and that royal road to freedom which the self-sacrifice of the nascent bourgeois subject to a system of moral obligations on the other, is supposed to open up; the chasm, in other words, between the petty autocracies of the squabbling German principalities, and that mercantile class which could not as yet impose its Bismarckian will upon the former. This, of course, is the genesis of the rationalistic, systemizing element in Kant’s thought, or what amounts to the aporia of an empirically progressive nationalism without a correspondingly empirical nation-state; thus the notorious attempt to domesticate the unruly, chaotic categories of a nascent national history by means of an equilibrating causality as a proxy of Prussian virtue. “Die Kantische Kausalitaet,” quips Adorno, “ist eine ohne causa.” [Kantian causality is one without cause.] ND:246 To paraphrase Nietzsche, what logically ought to have fallen in the course of the French and American revolutions, namely the German principality, was instead pushed by the Napoleonic Code into overdrive, i.e. the accelerated competition of the various Central European mini-states which resulted in the German and Italian national unifications, which both paced the launch of the autonomous industrialization of the Scandinavian countries and were themselves paced by the overtly colonial-territorial imperialisms of Belgium, the Netherlands, the USA and Great Britain. This has interesting consequences for the original Marxian notion of prehistory, not to mention its indispensable cognate, the notion of Nature itself. Both are indexed in the common currency of a specifically national juridical system which is somehow irrevocably linked to an extra-national content, in the same way that the institutions of the British Empire tied together the metropolitan speculations and imperialist acquisitions of the 19th century:
Die Subjekte werden der Grenze ihre Freiheit inne an ihrer eigenen Zugehörigkeit zur Natur wie vollends an ihrer Ohnmacht angesichts der ihnen gegenüber verselbständigtgen Gesellschaft. Die Universalität des Freiheitsbegriffs jedoch, an dem auch die Unterdrückten partizipieren, wendet sich umschlagend gegen Herrschaft als Modell von Freiheit. Als Reaktion darauf freuen die Privilegierten der Freiheit sich daruber, dass die anderen zur Freiheit noch nicht reif seien. Das rationalisieren sie einleuchtend mit der Naturkausalität. Nicht nur sind die Subjekte mit der eigenen Koerperlichkeit fusioniert, sondern auch in dem durch Reflexion muehsam von der Koerperwelt gesonderten Seelischen waltet durchgaengige Gesetzmaessigkeit. [Subjects innervate, in view of the self-constituted society opposing them, the bounds of their freedom as utter powerlessness, as their own compulsory participation in Nature. The universality of the concept of freedom, however, in which the oppressed also participate, turns itself decisively against domination as a model of freedom. In reaction to this, the privileged celebrate the freedom they have to discern that others are not yet ready for freedom. They rationalize this, revealingly enough, as natural causality. Subjects are not only fused with their own corporeality, but even that spirituality so painstakingly separated from the immediate world of the bodily by reflection turns out to be thoroughly infiltrated by nomothetism.] ND:220

This last comment puts an unexpectedly juridical spin on one of the classic formulations of the early Frankfurt School, namely that increasing disjuncture or division of labor between the proliferating fields of the natural and social sciences (the sociological and methodological forms by which we claim to know things) and the concrete content of the various aesthetic modernisms (the content of those cognitions, which would have to include both the emergence of mass radio, film and television, as well as the specific innovations of a Paul Klee, Charlie Chaplin, Louis Armstrong and so forth) which made it necessary to invent critical theory in the first place, i.e. a set of concepts capable of outflanking the Scylla of positivism as well as the Charybdis of consumerism. Given that nomothetism is thus something like the internationalized, juridical antipode of the various national culture-industries, or what amounts to the bridge-mediation between the world-market and the various national and international state-accumulation regimes, we are
evidently dealing with some sort of scansion or gloss of the total system, whose content we still need to specify.

It is difficult, in this era of the Internet, satellite downlinks and rampant globalization, to adequately appreciate the staggering audacity of Adorno’s argument – an argument which crosses almost every major disciplinary, cultural and political line available in the late Sixties, and which even today tends to be misread as the worst sort of hubris – to wit, not only had the East become exactly like the West in terms of technocracy and military-industrial development patterns, but both shared an ideology as well: the ideologeme of state-monopoly freedom. Bizarre as it may sound to describe the era of Zhdanovism and McCarthyism as one fixated on freedom, there is a profound sense in which it was indeed precisely that: how else, one might well ask, could the popular experiences of Depression-era deprivation, wartime sacrifice and the horrors of the death camps have been possibly assimilated next to the miraculous consumerism and breakneck economic expansion of the Fifties? It is the singular merit of the postwar philosophic and aesthetic existentialisms (that spectrum from the early Sartre to film noir, and from the Resistance to McCarthyism in the US to the anti-colonial mass movements in a suddenly-restive Third World) to have grasped this in a concrete fashion, generally in the form of a meditation on the antagonism of the total system (the Army, the Police, the Law, etc.) to the isolated, lone existential rebel. This, of course, is also the central thematic of the great filmic works of the Fifties auteurs (Hitchcock’s Strangers on a Train and North by Northwest) as much as the plays of Genet and Beckett, and it’s worth emphasizing that despite Adorno’s own disinterest in cinema and existentialism, the categories Adorno invokes in his essay on Endgame are, ultimately, deeply cinematic and existential ones. Thus the thematic of the existential wasteland of “Schund” or junk, which is basically an unwitting cognition of the film noir mise-en-scene (the seedy hotel
room, the garish, neon-lit urban jungle, the urban alley strewn with rustling newspapers and tattered posters, etc.), or the no less interesting contamination and littering of language by a commercial mass-culture (the jarring, bebop rhythms of screeching automobile chases, gunshots and breaking glass in film noir, or the explosive dialogue, juridical puns and visual clues of a Hitchcockian script).

Indeed, this is perhaps the place to put the incessant accusation made against Adorno, to the effect that he was just another German mandarin, clueless about jazz and cinema and therefore unqualified to say anything about aesthetics, period, in its proper perspective. Adorno does not offer us a theory of the novel, a la Lukács, nor a theory of national high-culture, as in Sartre’s stunning psychobiography of Flaubert, nor even a theory of national mass-culture, as with Levi-Strauss and the structuralist critique of signification; what the Frankfurt School does offer is an invaluable corrective to existentialism’s unwitting and thoroughly Kantian identification of causality with freedom. In a nutshell, Adorno insists that our fantasies (both positive and negative) of the System cannot be separated from those of the Rebel; the former is the objective precondition for the latter’s subjectivity, and this is the essential limitation on the various existentialisms’ political and aesthetic praxis. Endgame and The Blacks conclude with powerfully neo-nationalistic decolonizations (Irish theater vis-à-vis a hegemonic British-American film industry on the one hand, and a Parisian gay subculture vs. French Gaullism on the other); Hitchcock’s films aspire to the triumph, if not always the realization, of Justice; James Dean’s character in Rebel Without a Cause ultimate reproduces the nuclear family structure he allegedly rebels against; and the jazz modernisms of Monk, Parker and Mingus preserved the utopia of a reconciliation of the emancipated solo with the jazz tonality handed down by the era of big band and swing,
i.e. orchestral harmony retained its primacy even amidst the wildest instrumental outburst or melodic improvisation.

This is not to claim that Adorno says any of these things directly, but merely to note that, in best dialectical fashion, the objective limitations of Adorno’s position as an intellectual in the Central European semi-periphery – the lack, that is, of the sort of mass-cultural mediations available to a Sartre or Levi-Strauss – redounded as an incomparable advantage in the specialized field of the philosophic modernisms, i.e. the existentialisms, ontologies and Western European Marxisms. Returning to our previous point, namely the problem of relating the antipodes of positivism and consumerism, Adorno will avoid the false problem of being forced to choose between options already defined in advance by the total system, but will instead seek to ground the moment of theory on something else entirely: nothing less than the hegemonic political praxis of the American Empire itself, a.k.a. the reconstruction of the world-economy on behalf of American monopoly capitalism. The Kantian problematic of freedom is significant here, and on two levels. First, the notion of the free will, or the subjective freedom engendered by a moralized necessity (the germ-cell of Hegel’s notion of that world-spiritualizing logic which attempted to paper over the rift between a universalizing Mind and a subordinate, mutely resistant worked matter) turns out to be the historical prototype for one of the key social fault-lines of the Pax Americana: this is the conflict between the world-market per se and the bureaucratic institutions and state structures which regulated such. Though this is usually conceived of in terms of the Fifties mass-cultural theme of the “Organization Man” or the cybernetic sociology of a Parsons, what was really at stake was the internal transformation of the bourgeois civic sphere into demesnes of competing state bureaucracies (the national security state, the welfare state, and the various legislative and juridical agencies). Second, the notion of an objectively moral necessity or set of moral
responsibilities, which relies upon a universalized and universalizing power of judgement (the Kantian Urteilskraft) – a fancy way of saying, the rule of law – offers the most suggestive analogues to that avalanche of universalizing institutions, everywhere from the United Nations to international arms control treaties, and from the COMECON to the capital controls of the EEC, which gradually expanded from a minor footnote in the epochal struggle between the superstates into semi-autonomous infrastructures in their own right.

This sheds new light on the Bandung-era revolutionary movements, for example, which explicitly recuperated the juridical categories of American consumerism from the standpoint of a national-revolutionary subject: the Soviet New Man and New Woman, the Chinese model worker, and the Vietnamese peasant-revolutionary were by no means the utopian propaganda of the national mass parties and state-autarkic accumulation structures sweeping the length and breadth of the Third World, as the elite managers of the American national security state thought they were. Rather, they were these structures themselves. What seemed to be international, namely that so-called Communist conspiracy which was merely the paranoid mote in Corporate America’s media-schizophrenic eyes as it set about civilizing the planet via foreign direct investment, the Alliance for Progress and B-52 carpet-bombings of Third World villages, was really national (the industrialization drive of the peripheries); and what was superficially national, namely the revolutionary processes themselves, was authentically international (the political and economic drive for autonomy from the metropoles). Such processes of integration were even more pronounced, to be sure, in the metropoles, where the national security state effectively abolished the distinction between a domestic economy powered by the military-industrial complex and a foreign economic policy driven by military-industrial competition. “In der totalen Gesellschaft,” notes Adorno grimly, “ist alles
The Pax Americana’s external interventions into the Latin American, Middle Eastern, Asian and African peripheries cannot be separated from the internal investments in the American educational system inaugurated by the GI bill and the post-Sputnik military research boom, the creation of mass homeownership via Federally-backed savings and loans institutions, and the motorization of America via publicly-subsidized highway and construction schemes. Both were tied together not merely by a hegemonic military Keynesianism (Federal military spending comprised between eight to ten percent of total US economic output during the Fifties and Sixties) but by a no less hegemonic American consumer culture (in 1960 average US wages were three times the average European wage, and probably eight times the average Japanese wage; the US economy was at that time responsible for around forty percent of the economic output of the globe); to this extent, the ideology of the Cold War was not tangential to the ideology of international consumerism, it was this consumerism, through and through.

It’s intriguing to speculate that the aesthetic and political resistances to the superstate did something similar, by developing a unique and specialized set of narrative instruments capable of navigating the fault-line between the national-monopoly relations of production and an internationalized set of productive forces. Just think of the Krell technologies of extended reproduction (cf. Robbie the Robot) and the obscurely relevant
philological profession of Dr. Morbius in the science-fiction classic *Forbidden Planet*, wherein the glaring contradiction between the productivities of the new cybernetic factories and the archaic Freudian neuroses which fatally delimit or restrict the potential of such are resolved by recourse to Altura’s utopian character-actant, a.k.a. the prototypical postmodern consumer (the single child of the upper-middle-class Fifties household, whose familiarity with electrical appliances and television sets is the flip side of a hygienized sexuality). Consumerism is also the central issue in *Rebel Without a Cause*, where a Fifties youth culture polarized between the pulse-pounding automotive action and the dismal alienation registered by the planetarium sequence finds its content, at the end, in a new kind of solidarity: one which is staged on the grassy lawn between the space of a cancelled-out or displaced domestic sphere (henceforth the technological space of suburbia, nicely symbolized by the planetarium), and the police-controlled street—a powerful anticipation of the Sixties counter-culture, if there ever was one. On a more mundane level, the alien invasion narrative of Fifties horror-sci-fi is clearly accessing a pervasive set of anxieties about the commuter-centered developmental model of postwar America, wherein the exogenous suburban developments planting themselves like the landing-strips of otherworldly cultures which, on a certain level, they indeed were, could be rationalized in a socially acceptable fashion (thus the inevitable scene where the sole witness to the invasion tries to convince the authorities that something is drastically wrong; the primary evidence, of course, is always that everything is so *terrifyingly normal*). Normality in the Cold War was just another word for thermonuclear-tipped crisis.

The rift between national-monopoly and international coordinates is at issue in still another important respect, and that is the political content of the global juridical sphere inaugurated by the resplendent UN Declaration on Universal Human Rights of
1948. Desegregation and the civil rights movement, for example, did more than simply provide a venue of solidarity for the decades-long South African anti-apartheid struggle and innumerable African and Caribbean anti-colonial liberation movements alike; in crucial respects, it also mediated the political and aesthetic content of those movements (everything from the organizational form of the national revolutionary party to international jazz modernism and, somewhat later, a multinational hip hop postmodernism). Even more striking is the tendency of such micropolitical forms to spawn new and farflung cultural nodes of resistance in their own right: thus the sanctuary movement of the Eighties highlighted the political agenda of the Central American liberation movements (from Sandismo to liberation theology) via a thriving Latino American multiculturalism; while in the Nineties, the sophisticated political interventions and media strategies of Amnesty International, Greenpeace and countless other non-governmental organizations counterpointed the equally sophisticated Ogoni struggle in Nigeria, the Chiapas revolution in Mexico, the East Timorese resistance in Indonesia, and so forth.

This raises the intriguing question of how such micropolitical processes concretely relate to the central logic of transnational capitalism, a.k.a. that startling expansion of trade, investment, cultural and capital flows since the Sixties otherwise known as neoliberalism. Though we will have much more to say about this issue in the next chapter, suffice to say that it is no accident that Fredric Jameson’s masterful essay on postmodernism explicitly named the latter as the hegemonic cultural logic of multinational capitalism. “Logik,” as Adorno notes, “ist eine wider sich selbst abgedichtete Praxis.” [Logic is a praxis sealed off from itself.] ND:229 It’s probably not too shocking to claim that neoliberalism, the hegemonic logic of global capital, is a praxis sealed off not only from itself, but from the sources of its own hegemony; a fancy way of
saying that the multis cannot help but be the unwitting tools (and occasional victims) of the transnational market competition they so fervently espouse. What we have not yet considered, however, is the possibility that micropolitics might be constrained by a similar and no less powerful contradiction, that is to say, might also express the political logic of a praxis unable to disclose its true agency. But whose praxis, precisely, and what social agency or actor could micropolitics possibly be acting on behalf of, without that agency’s knowledge? As Brecht might have put it, where does micropolitics stand in the class struggle, anyhow?

The first hypothesis we can discard right from the start is the comforting notion, beloved of conservatives everywhere, that we are somehow experiencing a renaissance of the traditional nation-state and of national culture generally. Micropolitics is not centered around a metropolitan nationalism or the national mass-party, and whatever local ideological or cultural provenance it may bear is tied directly to an explicitly global political sphere: the Zapatistas marched through Mexico City, but Subcommandante Marcos’ wondrous Net-monologues were emailed to the entire world; and ecological movements around the world defend the most specific and localized ecosystems with the most complex media activism imaginable. No less dubious is the mainstream celebration of a sheer technical progress which has, for the umpteenth time, suddenly rendered politics obsolete, i.e. the naïve identification of micropolitics with a presumably beneficient, entirely objective and politically neutral network of cultural or informatic dissemination (whether cable and satellite TV, the Internet, or the latest cellphone gadgetry) – a deeply irrational technofetishism whose flip side is the equally irrational finance-fetishism most recently evidenced in the Internet bubble of early 1999. This is not to say that local identities and global technology are unimportant, but merely that both need to be thought in context with one another. The gay and lesbian liberation
struggle, feminism, and the various Fourth World and indigenous peoples’ movements, to take only the most prominent examples, are all somehow located at the fault-lines between various local and regional identities on the one hand, and multinational institutions and bodies of capital, ranging from the IMF and World Bank to Shell and Mitsubishi, on the other.

This suggests that more was at stake in the wave of student protests and labor militancy which rolled throughout the length and breadth of the East Asian and European semi-peripheries in the late Eighties and early Nineties, everywhere from the trade union and democracy struggles in South Korea to the Velvet Revolutions of Eastern Europe, than economic nationalism or the wiring of the planet. It is usually assumed, for a variety of openly ideological reasons – historical nostalgia for a national-revolutionary Left politics as much as for a reactionary Cold War pa(y)triarchy – that the 1987-91 revolutions represented the triumph of Hayek, Smith and privatization over Keynes, Marx, and socialization. But one need look no further than the Warsaw entrepreneurs wading through the thousands of pages of EU environmental norms and consumer regulations, or the Taipei foundry firms attempting to land a chip production contract from one of the major Japanese keiretsu, to discover that there is nothing free or even the remotest bit liberal about the neoliberal free market. As befits an era of the most extraordinary contradictions, every single piece of historical evidence used to support the neoliberal case has its dialectical antithesis: the disintegration of the Soviet Union was clearly part and parcel of the reintegration of the European Union; the senescence of the Southeast Asian semi-autarkic revolutions paced the rise of an internationally-integrated export-platform economies; even the triumph of market forces in the guise of Thatcherism in Britain and the USA was the flip side of the rise of multinational controls over those forces, in the guise of the social democratic and state-developmental
accumulation regimes of East Asia and the European Union (regimes which have already, among other things, bailed out the entire Visegrad region in 1992-95 and most of Southeast Asia in 1997-98); and the overweening Wall Street Bubble is a monument to the mortgaging of the US credit structure to overseas creditors.

Micropolitics, in short, is the flip side of some new sort of macroeconomics, and one which derives its content as much from the political practices and economic structures of the new metropoles as from the cultural innovations of the former American metropole. As to what this might concretely entail, Adorno gives us a first hint in this delicately nuanced meditation on Marx, pointing out that the revolution against Capital cannot be anything else than a revolution against the tyranny of compulsory labor:

Das Telos der ihm [Marx] zufolge faellen Praxis war die Abschaffung ihres Primats in der Gestalt, welche die buergerliche Gesellschaft durchherrscht hatte. Kontemplation waere moeglich ohne Inhumanitaet, sobald die Produktivkraefte soweit entfesselt sind, dass die Menschen nicht laenger von einer Praxis verschlungen werden, die der Mangel ihnen abzwingt und die dann in ihnen sich automatisiert. Das Schlechte an der Kontemplation bis heute, der die Kontemplation bis heute, der diesseits von Praxis sich genugend, wie Aristoteles erstmals als summum bonum sie entwickelt hatte, war, dass sie gerade durch ihr Gleichgeltigkeit gegen die Veranderung der Welt zum Stueck bornierter Praxis: dass sie Methode und instrumentell ward. Die mogliche Reduktion von Arbeit auf ein Minimum muesste den Begriff Praxis radikal affizieren. [The telos of such a resultant praxis was the abolition of its primacy in the shape which had dominated bourgeois society. Contemplation without inhumanity would be possible just as soon as the productive forces are unfettered, so that human beings would no longer be devoured by a praxis extorted from them by scarcity and which is then autonomized in them. The bad side of a contemplation which, to this day, contented itself to this side of praxis, or what Aristoteles first outlined out as the summum bonum, was that because of its indifference to the transformation of the world it became instrumental, a method, a piece of sabotaged praxis. The possible reduction of labor to a minimum ought to radically influence the concept of praxis.] ND:242
It is extraordinarily significant that the concept of utopia is attached to the dawning possibility of an undreamt-of amount of leisure time, rather than an unheard-of productivity or an unparalleled level of consumption. Naturally Adorno would be the first to insist that all these things hang together; only a regime of greatly expanded productivity could provide such amounts of leisure time while improving living standards for all. Conversely, such leisure would necessarily involve the consumption of unprecedented amounts and types of use-values, on a scale which we cannot even begin to imagine. Nevertheless, the thought touches upon one of the most profound leitmotifs of the embryonic Euroleft: the legislative and contractual reduction of labor-time, something which includes the various forms of conceptual and cultural labor, too. In the three decades since Adorno’s comment, the mighty European trade unions have begun to realize this utopia, by systematically fighting for and winning reduced working-hours at no loss in pay. The average workweek in the EU is now 37 hours and is headed down to 35 hours and even lower, while EU workers enjoy the longest vacations in the world; none of which has decreased productivity in the slightest, but has spurred Central Europe to the highest annual productivity increases in world. It is this new and unexpected mutation of the class struggle – the transition from the merely quantitative issues of wages, benefits and workplace grievances, and towards the qualitative dimension of workplace culture, identities, management practices, and investment decisions – to which Adorno will now turn.
Notes

1. “Durchgeführte Kritik an der Identität tastet nach der Praeponderanz des Objektes. Identitätsdenken ist, auch wenn es das bestreitet, subjektivisch. Es revidieren, Identität der Unwahrheit zurechnen, stiftet kein Gleichgewicht von Subjekt und Objekt, keine Allherrschaft des Funktionsbegriffs in der Erkenntnis: auch nur eingeschränkt, ist das Subjekt bereits entmachtet... Objekt kann nur durch Subjekt gedacht werden, erhaelt sich aber diesem gegenüber immer als Anderes; Subjekt jedoch ist der eigenen Beschaffenheit nach vorweg auch Objekt. Vom Subjekt ist Objekt nicht einmal als Idee wegzudenken; aber vom Objekt Subjekt.” [The thorough-going critique of identity grasps for the preponderance of the object. Identity-thinking is, even where it claims otherwise, subjektivistic. To deny this, to accuse identity of untruth, establishes no equilibrium between subject and object, no almighty dominion of the functional concept in the cognition: even where it is only slightly infringed upon, the subject is already disempowered... The object can only be thought through the subject, but preserves itself in relation to this always and only as the Other; the subject is, however, according to its own constitution, already in advance an object. The object is not to be wished away from the subject, even as an idea; but certainly the subject from the object.] ND:184 The preponderance of the object is much more than simply an objective corrective on the overweening claims of the idealistic subject; it is the indispensable negation of the Hegelian Mind, which allows us to historicize such as the first sustained and only partially successful attempt to think through what Marx later identified as Capital (not a thing, but a set of social relations): “Index für den Vorrang des Objekts ist die Ohnmacht des Geistes in all seinen Urteilen wie bis heute in der Einrichtung der Realität. Das Negative, dass dem Geist mit der Identifizierung die Versöhnung misslang, dass sein Vorrang missriet, wird zum Motor seiner eigenen Entzauberung.” [The index of the preponderance of the object is the powerlessness of the Mind in all its judgements hitherto in the construction of reality. The negative, which misconstrued the reconciliation of the Mind with the identification, indeed which its preponderance led astray, becomes the motor of the breaking of its own spell.] ND:187

2. This is not to argue that Sartre was being irresponsible, but merely to note that the aesthetic concepts he employs tend to outrun, media-culture-style, the political and social constellations in which they are embedded. In fact Adorno's own formulation of the relation between theory and praxis is deeply and profoundly Sartrean: “Der versoehnte Zustand annektierte nicht mit philosophischem Imperialismus das Fremde, sondern haette sein Glueck daran, dass es in der gewaehrten Naehe das Ferne und Verschiedene bleibt, jenseits des Heterogenen wie des eigenen.” [The condition of reconciliation does not annex that which is foreign by means of a philosophical imperialism, but finds its happiness in this, such that it remains a treasured nearness amidst the faraway and the multiple, beyond the heterogenous as much as itself.] ND:192 “Condition of reconciliation” is the Central European version of Sartre’s Anglo-French “determination of determinations”; it is the utopian moment of a given political situation or aesthetic problematic, a moment which is never immediately given but needs to be deciphered by the labor of theory.
3. This is closely tied to what Adorno terms the redemptive dignity of the body: “Dass die
cognitiven Leistungen des Erkenntnissubjekts dem eigenen Sinn nach somatisch sind,
affiziert nicht nur das Fundierungsverhältnis von Subjekt und Objekt sondern die
Dignitāt des Koerperlichen. Am ontischen Pol subjektiver Erkenntnis tritt es als deren
Kern hervor. Das entthront die leitende Idee von Erkenntnistheorie, den Koerper als
Gesetz des Zusammenhangs von Empfindungen und Akten, geistig also, zu konstituieren;
die Empfindungen sind bereits an sich, was die Systematik als ihre Formung durch
Bewusstsein dartun moechte.” [That the cognitive achievements of the cogitative subject
are, according to its own meaning, somatic, influences not only the foundational
relationship of subject and object but also the dignity of the corporeal. It steps forwards
as the kernel of the ontic pole of subjective cognition. This overturns the favored notion
of epistemology, which constitutes the body as the juridical context of sensations and
acts, i.e. as spiritualized; sensations are already in themselves what the systematic
approach would like to establish as its formation through consciousness.] ND:194

4. The lineage of this category goes back much further than one might suspect, all the
way back to Alfred Bester’s mid-Fifties classic, The Demolished Man, which is chockful
of exactly the sort of urban airmobility, crackling televisual dialogues, regnant Cold War
power-bureaucracies and warring interstellar (read: multinational) corporations which
would later appear, in a much more realized form, in William Burroughs’ Nova Express
trilogy in the early Sixties.

5. The Bank of International Settlements (over at http://www.bis.org) conducts detailed,
 thorough annual studies of the global banking system; by the late Nineties, the EU banks
had become the largest single source of bank credit and liquidity in the world-system, the
Japanese banks were second, while American banks were a distant third. This is true not
just globally, but even within each specific periphery: one would expect the EU to be the
biggest creditor to Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa. But nowadays even Latin
America, the quintessential backyard of the Pax Americana, owes more to the EU than to
the US; the EU is also the biggest creditor in Southeast Asia, where one might expect
Japan reign supreme. Finally, as of 1998 the US is a global debtor to Japan and the EU, to
the tune of some 1.8 trillion euros.

6. This analysis need not be limited to rising metropoles; take, for example, the
integration of Vietnam into the East Asian production-complex in the Nineties, wherein a
nascent Nippokeynesianism is starting to play the same role in Vietnam’s industrial take-
off as the Pax Americana’s cement, machinery and construction orders played in Japan’s
Korean War-era boom. It’s worth pondering as to whether Vietnam’s feat might be shortly
duplicated by Cuba, whose main trading partner is the EU and which is beginning to
receive significant amounts of European direct investment, trade and development funds.

7. Adorno will later make the explicit connection between rationality (Vernunft) and
Nature: “Das Vernunft ein anderes als Natur und doch ein Moment von dieser sei, ist ihre
zu ihrer immanenten Bestimmung gewordene Vorgeschichte. Naturhaft ist sie als die zu
Zwecken der Selbsterhaltung abgezweigte psychische Kraft; einmal aber gespalten und
der Natur kontrastiert, wird sie auch zu deren Anderem. Dieser ephemer entragend, ist
Vernunft mit Natur identisch und nichtidentisch, dialektisch ihrem eigenen Begriff nach.
Je hemmungsloser jedoch die Vernunft in jener Dialektik sich zum absoluten Gegensatz
der Natur macht und an diese in sich selbst vergisst, desto mehr regriediert sie, verwilderte
Selbsterhaltung, auf Natur; einzig als deren Reflexion waere Vernunft Uebernatur.” [That
rationality is something other than nature and yet still a moment of such, has become part
of its immanently defined prehistory. By nature, it is that which lends itself to the purpose
of self-preservation by means of channeled mental power; but once split away from and
contrasted with nature, it becomes its Other. Almost eclipsed by such, rationality is
identical with nature and yet non-identical, dialectical according to its own concept. The
more relentlessly rationality makes itself to the absolute opposite of nature, and forgets
itself in such, the more it regresses, as self-preservation run wild, into nature; reason
would be supranatural solely as the reflection on such.] ND:285

8. Witness Adorno’s analysis of the Kantian thought-experiment in a footnote, which
hovers at the very margins of an implicit analysis of existential aesthetics in the realm of
theater: “Die Kantischen Gedankenexperimente sind nicht unähnlich der existentialisten
Ethik. Kant, der wohl wusste, der gute Wille sein Medium in der Kontinuität eines
Lebens hat und nicht in der isolierten Tat, spitzt im Experiment, damit es beweise, was es
soll, den guten Willen in die Entscheidung zwischen zwei Alternativen zu. Jene
Kontinuität gibt es kaum mehr; darum klammert Sartre sich einzig an die Entscheidung,
in einer Art Regression aufs achtzehnte Jahrhundert… Frei waere erst, wer keinen
Alternativen sich beugen mußte, und im Bestehenden ist es eine Spur von Freiheit,
ihnen sich zu verweigern. Freiheit meint Kritik und Veraenderung der Situationen, nicht
deren Bestätigung durch Entscheidung inmitten ihres Zwangsgefüges. Als Brecht dem
kollektivistischen Lehrstück vom Jasager, nach einer Diskussion mit Schülern, den
abweichenden Neinsager folgen liess, hat er jener Einsicht, seinem offiziellen Credo
trotzend, zum Durchbruch verholfen.” [The Kantian thought-experiments are not
dissimilar to existential ethics. Kant, who well knew that good will had its medium in the
continuity of a life and not in the isolated deed, draws the issue to a head in the
experiment, so that it should prove what it ought to, good will in the decision between
two alternatives. This continuity hardly exists anymore; this is why Sartre clings
steadfastly to the decision, in a kind of regression to the 18th century… Only those who
would not have to accept any alternatives at all would be free, and in the existent it is a
trace of freedom, to refuse such. Freedom means critique and transformation of
situations, not their confirmation through a decision reached within their mandatory
apparatus. When Brecht, following a discussion with students, allowed the teaching-play
of the Yes-man to be followed by that of the circumspect Nay-sayer, he helped this
insight to break through in spite of his official credo.] ND:225-6

9. The conservative distrust of overtly political utopias far predates the national security
state, to be sure. Something similar can be observed in the central antinomy of the
Kantian notion of freedom, namely that the freer the abstract law or principle in question,
the unfreer the subject. The upshot was Kant’s famously schizophrenic attitude towards
happiness, i.e. a kind of secret sympathy, shot through with resentment and hostility: “Er
[Kant] moechte die Idee der Menschheit weder an die bestehende Gesellschaft zedieren
noch zum Phantasma verfluechtigen. Die Spannung steigert sich bis zum Zerreissen in
seiner Ambivalenz zum Glueck. Einerseits verteidigt er es im Begriff der
Gleuckswuerdigkeit, andererseits verunglimpft er es als heteronom, etwa dort, wo er
sogar die ‘allgemeine Glueckseligkeit’ fuer untauglich zum Gesetz des Willens
befindet… Die Modifikationen seiner Stellung zum Glueck im Fortgang der Kritik der
praktischen Vernunft sind keine nachlaessigen Konzessionen an die Tradition der
Gueterethik; vielmehr, vor Hegel, Modell einer Bewegung des Begriffs. Moralische
Allgemeinheit geht, gewollt oder nicht, zur Gesellschaft ueber.” [He neither wished to
cede the idea of humanity to the existent society nor dissolve such into a phantasm. The
tension rises to the breaking point in his ambivalence towards happiness. On the one hand
he defends such in the concept of being worthy of happiness, on the other he disparages it
as heteronomous, especially where he finds ‘general happiness’ to be inapplicable to the
law of the will… The modifications of his position towards happiness in the course of the
critique of practical reason are no backpedaling concessions to the tradition of the ethics
of the Good; on the contrary, before Hegel, the model of a movement of the concept. The
moral generality moves, whether willed or no, towards society.] ND:256 Kant shies away
from happiness like the bourgeois fleeing from his finger-wagging wife: the panegyric on
the joys of matrimony is not supposed to be interrupted by the mundane details of the
family budget.

10. The Internet mania created paper billionaires out of companies which were not only
deeply unprofitable, but were not expected to make actual money for years to come;
Microsoft's market capitalization alone reached some $500 billion in mid-1999, or
roughly 25 times its annual revenues. This stock bubble has spawned in turn a vast credit
bubble, as punters and financiers feverishly borrow money to gamble on even wilder
price increases; much of this credit ultimately comes from overseas lenders. In essence,
the Wall Street Bubble is world history's biggest Ponzi scheme, ever. If this is rational
market behavior, one shudders to think of what irrationality might look like.
CHAPTER V

BEYOND THE NATIONAL SECURITY STATE

The history of modern capitalism is full of instances where a vanished prehistory turned out to be newer than the latest posthistory; in the cultural field, one thinks of the invention of medieval studies in the course of an increasingly rationalized and rationalizing 19th century, the Irish identities collocated out of the international linguisms, historical para- ligomena and comic strip mythologies of Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, or indeed the additive rhythms and Africanized instrumental palette of Coltrane’s final works, as these latter cross the infinitesimal divide between late jazz modernism and early hip hop postmodernism. Wallerstein’s genealogy of capitalist world-systems offers the sociological variation on this theme, wherein the prehistories of rising semi-peripheries like Elizabethan England and the American colonies turn out to overdetermine, in theoretically productive ways, the post-historical twilight of the Spanish Empire or Victorian Britain (for one thing, the position of metropole is mediated primarily through competition amongst and between the semi-peripheries, and not necessarily between a true periphery and a metropole). Put another way, every aesthetic, economic and political prehistory is someone else’s posthistory; the scandal of prehistory is thus the covert, barely-repressed intuition, as unnerving as it is unavoidable, that our own living, breathing present has been mysteriously transformed into a kind of past, and a past owned, to boot, by an alien present. What needs to be clarified, then, is how exactly the prehistory of the EU relates to the posthistory of the Pax Americana. It was the special merit of the Frankfurt School to have emphasized the crucial function of
mediation in thinking through all such theoretical (but also deeply political) problems, i.e.
the task of drawing out the equivalences and solidarities between unlike things, while at
the same time respecting their non-identity and historical distance from one another.
Nowhere is this more obvious than in the central, mesmerizing skandalon of Negative
Dialectics: the fact that an obscure work by a Central European intellectual, ostracized by
the official Left on both sides of the Berlin Wall, and limited to the theoretical resources
of the international philosophical schools, could foresee the bursting of the containment
vessels of the national security states by a transnational capitalism gone supernova –
a.k.a. the decades-long rise of East Asia and the EU from ruined, bombed-out semi-
peripheries of the American Empire to thriving junior partners in the Imperium, and most
recently to global creditor status and actual dominion over this latter, to the point where a
newly multicultural, entrepreneurial and fantastically wealthy European Union has
become more American than America itself.¹

To paraphrase Jameson, the scandal of Adorno in the 1960s is to have been the
theorist of the 1990s. Put even more provocatively, Adorno’s project of a multinational
dialectics does not stand or fall on what the Nineties inherited from the Sixties, but rather
on what the Sixties imported, as it were, from the Nineties. If Americanization was to the
Sixties what globalization was to the Nineties, i.e. the hegemonic umbrella concept and
pop historical icon of the day, endowed with the miraculous ability to function as noun,
verb, adjective, encomium and epithet all at once, and the nominalistic tag around which
a whole series of otherwise disparate or disconnected discourses, cultural fields and
micropolitics can be organized, then it does not necessarily follow that the content or
function of such icons are similarly identical. No two moments of accumulation in the
world-system are truly alike; whereas Americanization was tied to a single, well-
organized national security state and a monopoly-national accumulation model, genuinely
multinational accumulation is tied to a wide array of developmental and social
democratic states, scattered across the globe and linked only by a common keiretsu accumulation model. This suggests not only that the Nineties were the era of a transition towards multinational state-formations, rather than any showcase for the achieved thing itself, but that national political, economic and cultural structures had a fundamentally different role to play in the rise of the new metropoles as compared to the American Empire. This was not primarily a matter of the discrediting or uprooting of militarist traditions or xenophobic nationalisms in the former Axis powers, so much as the flood of American films, television series, and consumer goods which directly mediated the process of US-led economic reconstruction: regimes in Taiwan, Japan, West Germany and Italy were not only authorized to nationalize key industries, control domestic banking and credit systems, make long-term investments and in general violate every cardinal principle of free trade in the Manchester book in order to rebuild, they were given vast amounts of capital to do so (via the Marshall Plan, overseas military bases, Cold War grants, privileged access to US equipment and export markets, etc.). The American culture-industry, in other words, provided the cultural capital which jumpstarted indigenous consumerisms elsewhere.

One of the great ironies of this process was that since the US was naturally exempt from the political and cultural subalternity which its Empire visited upon the rest of the world, it was not until the era of US decline in the mid-Eighties that Americans directly experienced the freezing shock of globalization which so many European and Asian countries had already navigated in the Fifties or Sixties, i.e. the traumatic encounter with a qualitatively superior mass of capital, whose dictates could no longer be ignored, kept at bay or otherwise recontained by the machinery of even the mightiest national security state. In the context of a blossoming media culture, and the generous military-industrial surplus-rents of Thatcherism, the economics of globalization for most Americans seemed to mean a change in consumption patterns – the arrival of Walkmans
and car stereos, Hondas and cable TV, VCRs and the earliest personal computers – rather
than a directly political or social transformation; as if to compensate for this, the sphere
of American identity-politics became hypersensitized to the mediatic aspects of
globalization. The paranoid mythology of a monolithic Japan Inc. retailed by the
American mass media and selected auto manufacturers during the era of the Japanese
bubble economy, for example, although ludicrous on its own terms (even at the height of
the bubble, Britain remained by far the largest single overseas investor in the US), at least
registered the fact that numerous Hollywood studios – not to mention vast swathes of the
US industrial base! – were indeed being bought out, bankrolled or otherwise incorporated
by non-American firms, something impossible for an Anglo-American Thatcherism
besotted with fantasies of national-Imperial rebirth to even admit to itself. Likewise with
the corporate-sponsored multi-cultural diversity touted by the management literature of
the early Nineties, which was progressive to the extent that it highlighted the
extraordinary and quite real expansion of the cultural sphere in the post-Cold War era,
everywhere from the accelerated importation of films, novels and other aesthetic works
from the EU, Eastern Europe, China, Hong Kong, Japan, etc. on the one hand, to the
equally striking expansion of the micropolitical field via the institutionalization of
feminism, the African American, Latino American and Asian American studies, gay and
lesbian studies, postcolonial studies and countless other disciplines on the other.

In that case, one would want to know in greater detail how the mass-cultural
relates to the micropolitical, or more precisely, how a multinational culture-industry shot
through with neo-national contradictions relates to a neo-national marketplace of theory
seething with multinational contradictions. Adorno’s ingenious suggestion here is to
backtrack for a moment and rethink a crucial aspect of prehistory we have taken for
granted: this is the unspoken assumption that some sort of temporal telos or inevitable
progression is at work here, i.e. the comforting thought that prehistory always precedes
posthistory, when in fact it is the latter which will occasionally predate the former (a polite way of saying, regression is necessarily built into the capitalist version of progress, everywhere from the horrific internal social polarization created by unfettered market forces, to the neocolonial plundering of entire subcontinents by metropolitan finance capital). Causality, in short, must be thought against itself:

Causality has its moment of truth in the identification of what necessarily happened; it is powerless over what could have happened or what might yet happen (what the existentialists called contingency, and what Adorno terms the possible). The possible is much more than simply a revolutionary chance which was missed; it is the latent historical energy stored up in the object, whose unrealized potential emanates from the harsh conditionalities of a dominated nature like some invisible background radiation, in what amounts to the late 20th century update of Marx’s ringing invocation of a social history which is constantly at the point of leading us out of the toils of natural history. Meanwhile that realm of freedom which a humane praxis was to wrest from the inhuman clutches of historical Necessity, i.e. the moment when the limits of those conditionalities are breached and the immutable-natural turns into the socially-constructed, returns as
Adorno’s space of the concrete negation, or the cognitive moment which negates the preponderance of the object. This explains why the Kantian notion of causality is so deeply and necessarily antithetical vis-à-vis its utopian pole, the juridical ideal of subjective freedom: it is not merely that causality unnecessarily restricts the potential of the latter (in the sense of bad laws which ought nevertheless to be obeyed lest the body politic dissolve into chaos), or that freedom always overshoots its potential boundaries (in the sense of good fences making good neighbors), empirical objections which Kant could easily sidestep by pointing to the necessity of a subjective moral scale by which objective laws and subjective ethics are adjudicated. The difficulty is, rather, that Kant is forced to define freedom as the identity of the subject with natural causality, in order to make this freedom juridically stringent, i.e. to defend the claim of such against the direct expropriation practiced by the Absolutist states, feudal principalities and hieratic institutions of the 18th century. Yet once freedom is delimited to a kind of property which is to be acquired by the self-possessed subject (whether as the infamous imaginary thalers of Kant’s thought-experiments, or as an accumulated sense of inner self-worth), then the index of this freedom necessarily becomes the free accumulation of that property. Free accumulation taken to its limit sabotages freedom; someone must lose, in every system of unbridled competition, in order for someone else to gain, otherwise there would be no competition, but instead a cooperative sharing of resources. There is a similar antinomy at the heart of the Ur-bourgeois fiction of the social contract, which vouchsafed the right to private property by raising property rights to the level of the contractual universal. In order to be juridically binding, the universal necessarily preempts the sway of any particular agreement, thus abrogating the specific freedom of contract it was meant to uphold; the absolute will of the nation-state ultimately replaces the willful Absolutism of the proto-national monarch, at the price of universalizing the social contradictions merely latent in the latter. Put another way, the civic prehistories of labor have been locked in
constant struggle with the juridical posthistories of capital since the very dawn of world accumulation, everywhere from the breaking of the political, economic and juridical monopolies of the Absolutist sovereigns in the 18th century (fuelled by popular rebellions against consumption taxes and the militance of the sans-culottes), to the overthrow of slavery and serfdom in the late 19th century (the tocsin of the rise of genuinely national proletariats), to the ongoing revolution against the patriarchal family structure in the late 20th century (the refusal of women to serve as a source of unpaid domestic labor any longer, amidst the class struggles of an enlarged welfare state).

This is not without consequences for the Kantian utopia of equality before the law, or the juridical subform of identity: “Noch in seine äussersten Abstraktheit ist das Gesetz ein Gewordenes,” notes Adorno enigmatically, “das Schmerzhafte seiner Abstraktheit sedimentierter Inhalt, Herrschaft auf ihre Normalform gebracht, die von Identität.” [Even at its most abstract the law is a becoming; the anguish of its abstraction, the sedimented content, domination brought into its normal form, that of identity.] ND:268 Behind the forging of the instrumentality we call the law – that ever-expanding body of jurisprudence, prosecution and legislation whereby the intricate particulars of ownership rights, property and legal claims over the commodity form are formally vested – stands a specific logic of historical necessity: as the realm of competition expands, so too must the juridical apparatus charged with administering such. Simply, the greater the quantity of commodities being exchanged, the denser the resultant exchange-net, and the more complex the division of labor, the greater the potential disruption if any given element of interlocking networks of production, consumption, and accumulation breaks down; economic conflicts and crises are no longer limited to local producers, as in a guild or handicrafts economy, but are transmitted throughout the entire exchange-net. Strange as it may seem, capitalist competition is not really in opposition to the managerial authority of the state, but requires the constant
intervention of the latter for its proper and fullest development, as the state-chartered trading companies of the 18th century, the sterling-based currency standard and colonial bureaucracies of the 19th century, or indeed the heavily subsidized state-monopoly markets and military-industrial research bureaucracies of the 20th century all go to show.

The apparatus of the nation-state is thus both essential to the existence of capital, as well as in constant contradiction to such, both in the sense of regulating local or private interests for the sake of the system as a whole (legislative agencies and court systems), as well as the creation of specialized semi-autonomous fields (the realm of the political, academic, scientific, symbolic, etc.) increasingly exempt from the direct play of the market forces. It is the harmonization of these two tendencies, i.e. a transcendent capital-logic and an immanent cultural logic of capital respectively, which particularly interests us here; in marked contrast to the medieval canons of reciprocal familial obligations, the hieratic tenets of the Church or the political jousts of the nobility vis-à-vis the Absolutist monarchies, the 18th century revolutions did not need to incarnate or symbolically represent their claim to universality. Rather, the revolutionary process directly embodied this universality, in the same sense that the capitalist nation-state did not accidentally stumble upon its universal content, but was this content. The state produced the nation, but the nation also produced the state, everywhere from the Napoleonic levee en masse and the civic republicanism of the British Empire to the popular mobilizations of revolutionary America. The shocking but irresistible conclusion Adorno draws from this is that Kant’s post-Absolutist morality is the legislative prehistory of English-metropolitan nationalism.

It is precisely here, where one would expect either the pithy denunciation of these nationalisms (their subsequent transformation into the Napoleonic wars of plunder, British imperialism and the American frontier annexations) or the whole-sale dismissal of the Kantian categories as the extinguished and irrelevant thought-forms of a decadent
bourgeoisie, that Adorno unexpectedly asks us to pause for a moment and to think nationalism through from quite a different perspective: namely, that of Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud’s concepts were meant to negate Absolutism’s notorious claim of “L’etat, c’est moi” [I am the state] with the insight that the bourgeois self is organized very much like a miniature state, with rulers (the superego) and the ruled (the id), a process of legitimation (the mediating ego), and a complex symbolic economy (cathexes) predicated on the psychic accumulation of pleasure (the Trieb or drive) – the photographic negative, in short, of the turn-of-the-century Hapsburg civil society of Vienna, whose latent contradictions (a decaying monarchy just barely recontaining the claims of budding nationalisms) could be registered in micrological form. Adorno will push this insight further, noting that to the extent that the superego is merely the identification of the ego with patriarchal authority, it is simply the imprint of social domination, i.e. identical to the mandate of the juridical sphere; it is only where the ego differentiates itself from this identity (in Sartrean terms, that point at which the subject attempts to mobilize the law as a practico-inert in the context of a given project) that anything like a genuine subjectivity can come into existence. Not the monumentalized superego but the free-floating, quicksilver realm of the conscience – that specialized psychic space of reflection wherein the contradiction between individual desires, wishes and needs and the prevailing social order and its repressive norms can be registered in the first place – is the true reservoir of subjectivity (“Das Gewissen ist das Schandmal der unfreien Gesellschaft.” [The conscience is unfree society’s mark of shame.] ND:272). This space of reflection is not the subjective monopoly of a few fortunate or well-adjusted individuals, but a genuine collective achievement, c.f. the creation of national intellectual, aesthetic and political marketplaces out of their regional and local predecessors, immemorialized by the conceptual leap from Kant to Hegel, the aesthetic trajectory from Mozart to Beethoven, and the political passage from nobilitarian to
Constitutional rule. The triumph of capitalism thus involves not just an objective or diachronic set of revolutions, though these are hardly unimportant, but subjective and synchronic ones as well: the conscience registers, in a particularly acute form, the most profound and far-reaching spatialization of subjects previously delimited to the temporal registers of familial or hieratic allegiances. The seismic eruption of national capital out of its proto-national, regional and urban predecessors was, in short, the zero-hour of an identity-politics of the national subject.

It is here as perhaps nowhere else in *Negative Dialectics* that one feels the covert presence of Sartre, whose iridescent dialectics of bad faith, political engagement and the cultural practico-inert gleam fitfully at the horizon of the text like the cosmological promesse du bonheur of alien solar-systems. In fact Adorno’s relationship to the French theorist runs far deeper than the superficial affinities between Adorno’s radio broadcasts and musicology and Sartre’s wide-ranging polemic and journalistic interventions, or between the former’s astringent valorization of late modernism and the latter’s no less austere aesthetics of commitment. What is at issue is not merely the tradition of the national intellectuals handed down by the French and German Enlightenment, or indeed the nationalisms-in-exile of a Heine or Hugo, but the specific vocation of the late modernist or cosmopolitan intellectual in the midst of an international consumer culture of radios, planes, petrochemicals and automobiles, riven by the clash of state-monopoly capitals. What seems at first glance to fundamentally separate the two thinkers – Adorno’s uncompromising defense of the autonomy of the late modernist work of art, or what amounts to a kind of semi-autarkic delinking from the culture-industry, as opposed to Sartre’s more nuanced strategy of a selective engagement which seeks to push the progressive features of the Francophone cultural zone in a radical direction – is really what most closely unites them: both strategies are designed to bring a series of regional, national and para-national cultural forms (Central Europe and Western Europe,
respectively) into contact with their international content, thereby turning the hegemony of an American-led monopoly capitalism against itself, in what amounts to a kind of Americanization-in-reverse.

This is most obvious in the case of Sartre’s path-breaking analysis of Genet, and in particular, that field of international cultural capital which permitted Sartre, as one of the leading dramatists, novelists and philosophers of the Resistance, to counter the conventional process of canonization by marketing St. Genet as the logical fusion of the existential anti-hero and Hollywood star, some twenty years before the counter-culture would raise this technique to its guiding principle. More was at stake here than simple opportunity: what permitted Genet’s nascent theater of gay liberation to reappropriate the pompes funèbres of the Algerian and Vietnamese resistances to French imperialism in the iconography of a French national cinema was the fact that the latter was locked into an equally desperate struggle against a flood of outrageously well-financed Hollywood imports. American cinema, by contrast, had the requisite cultural surplus to create semi-autonomous film languages within mainstream pictures themselves (not just the gender-bending of Some Like It Hot, but that whole range of ingeniously disguised gay subtexts, plots and tropes of the studio films, which a post-Stonewall generation of theorists would formally decode as the disguised signs of resistance they indeed were). In fact, it would not be too outrageous to claim that radical modernist theater – the continuum from Brecht to Beckett and Genet – is what Continental Europe had in the Fifties in lieu of an autonomous culture-industry all its own. Adorno’s musicology, however, shows that this is not the whole story, either, or more precisely, that the radical aesthetic modernisms have more to do with the various critical and theoretical modernisms than one might otherwise assume.

The great historical parallel to Sartre’s engagement with Genet is, of course, the priceless musical and critical assistance Adorno rendered to Thomas Mann during the
composition of Doctor Faustus, and it is striking indeed to see how the didactic, pedagogical project of the Frankfurt School so deeply harmonized with the magnificent, *cri de coeur* of the latter: “– es soll nicht sein,” [were it not so] cries an anguished Adrian Leverkuehn.⁴ Mann indeed takes back the Enlightenment brotherhood posited by Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, only not as Verneinung, repudiation, but as the properly Brechtian Umkehrung or redirection of such: this is both the posthumous lament for the Weimar Republic, as well as the intellectual blueprint for a humane reconstruction of the defeated Axis powers. Radical aesthetics is as one, at that moment, with radical theory, and indeed with a praxis which is no longer a message in a bottle from the survivors of the wreck of the S.S. Weimar, but not quite that political promissory note issued by the existentialists some two decades before its redemption by the counter-culture, either. Nor is theory the worse for this newfound interdependence with aesthetics. Quite the reverse: in fact the extended division of intellectual labor involved here turns out to spawn a new and productive set of resistances, as with Adorno’s discussion of the utopian moment of role-playing, which bears unmistakably Sartrean fingerprints:

Das befreite Ich, nicht laenger eingesperrt in seine Identitaet, waere auch nicht laenger zu Rollen verdammt. Was gesellschaftlich, bei radikal verkuerzter Arbeitszeit, an Arbeitsteilung uebrigbliebe, verloere den Schrecken, die Einzelwesen durch und durch zu formen. Die dingliche Haerte des Selbst und dessen Einsatzbereitschaft und Verfuegbarkeit fuer die gesellschaftlich erwuenschten Rollen sind Komplizen. Auch im Moralischen ist Identitaet nicht abstrakt zu negieren, sondern im Widerstand zu bewahren, wenn sie je in ihr Anderes uebergehen soll. Der gegenwaertige Zustand ist zerstoerend: Identitaetsverlust um der abstrakten Identitaet, der nackten Selbsterhaltung willen. [The emancipated ego, no longer interned in its identity, would no longer be condemned to roles, either. What was socially left behind of the division of labor, given radically reduced labor time, would lose the terror which forms specific beings through and through. The thingly hardness of the self and its capacity to be deployed in the field and its availability for socially desired roles are accomplices. In morality, too, identity is not to be negated abstractly, but is to be valorized in resistance, if it is ever to cross over into its other. The contemporary state of affairs is destructive: the loss of identity for abstract identity, for the sake of naked self-preservation.] ND:275
Not working hours (Arbeitsstunde) but the unapologetic Marxian concept of labor-time serves to complete the existential notion of alienation, not by dismissing the concept out of hand but by bringing this latter into contact with its own microhistory. It is precisely because alienation, the feeling of not belonging, is such a universal experience in a culture in thrall to the ruthless mandate of accumulation, that it necessarily contains the seeds of its own negation: almost everyone, at one time or another, knows what it is like to be noone, which is in turn the essential motor of the utopian drive to be someone. The same principle is at work in that existential ethics which sought to dramatize the moment of choice facing the shopper before competing commodities, the worker before competing labor markets, and the capitalist in the midst of market competition: the point is that the choice is itself choosing the chooser, and not the other way around. The freedom of the marketplace is not really freedom at all, but is merely the index of that internalized, everyday scarcity Sartre diagnosed as violence. Nor is this index to be dismissed as mere ideology, but is itself the necessary infrastructure of a specific superstructure, namely the juridical sphere which adjudicates all such choices, and in fact Sartre will dwell upon the objective-temporal consequences of socialized violence at some length, especially in the notion of a compulsory seriality or the extended reproduction of class ideology throughout every nook and cranny of monopoly capitalism, no matter how small or insignificant (and one could argue here that seriality is Sartre’s specialized term for a state-monopoly consumerism not yet become a politics of multinational consumption).

Adorno will arrive at very similar conclusions, only from a very different starting-point, which will put a unique spin on the valence of his argument: not merely subjective violence, but the violencing of the subject, that is to say its internal reconfiguration, rezoning and refabrication into a system of semi-autonomous cybernetic machineries, whose functioning invariably recoils into the direst natural prehistory (something
captured most acutely by the early Nineties American slang term of “wilding” to describe the rampages of youth gangs, the purest product of the social catastrophe of global primitive accumulation in the American inner cities), turns out to be equally crucial to the internationalization of the subject. Adorno’s gloss on this last, namely the aesthetic motif of schizophrenia, is however not to be confused with the schizophrenic sublime celebrated by Seventies theory and incarnated in the nominalism of the media-culture of that period, i.e. the interstellar light-show of the stadium concert thematized by Close Encounters of the Third Kind (a movie which is, literally and figuratively, a series of set designs in search of a plot), the dizzying aerospace sublime celebrated by Star Wars, or the packed, teeming densities of the suburban megamalls which began to be built in that era. Schizophrenia has a specifically musical provenance for Adorno, which derives from the concussive sussuration of Stravinsky’s reactionary shock-aesthetics, or what we call the musical aesthetics of Fascism. By brutally razing the tonal forms handed down by the 19th century instead of developing them further, Stravinsky falls prey to the same aesthetic sterility and mass-cultural monotony against which he reacted so vehemently in the first place; put bluntly, Stravinsky’s pieces are wannabe film scores, in dire contrast to the works of the Second Viennese School, which develop a vast new range of sonic possibilities out of the materials of European tonality, in much the same way that the masterpieces of cinematic and jazz modernism drew upon the traditions of popular photography and African American blues, gospel and marching band music respectively to create powerful, specialized aesthetic languages all their own (in film, the close-up and the panoramic tracking shot; in jazz, the instrumental solo and the specialized ensemble, to name just a few). This is not to say that Adorno knew or properly understood film or jazz, which he clearly did not, but merely to reemphasize that parallel processes (radical modernisms battling repressive culture-industrialisms) were at work throughout the entire length and breadth of mid-20th-century aesthetics.
Adorno’s position makes more sense when we consider the utopian negation of Stravinsky-era schizophrenia: this is the *musique informelle* or post-aleatory period of aural improvisation heralded by Stockhausen, Cage and electronic music, or what amounts to the European version of the studio technology which would enter into its content only much later, in John Coltrane’s expansive final compositions and the path-breaking works of Jimi Hendrix and the Velvet Underground. But this model (in Adorno’s sense of the term, as the micrological cast or instance of a macrological set of constellations) is by no means the ethical platform or set of philosophical postulates we might otherwise expect; it is rather a specifically aesthetic construct, which registers the emancipation of the musical forces of production during the era of atonality. It is then the most salutary kind of shock to discover that, in the middle of an excursus advertised as an exploration of the Kantian concept of freedom, Adorno has secretly pulled the rug from underneath our feet by revealing the specific antinomy of Kant’s ethics – the irreconcilable gap between the imperative of the system and the specificity of the individual interest – to be neither more nor less than a stillborn or historically foreclosed aesthetics! Where Adam Smith’s Invisible Hand was armed with the musketry of British colonial surplus-rents, and where the French and American Revolutions derived their rhetorical universalism from the groundswell of the patriotic levee-en-masse, Kant’s systematized ethics had no other recourse against the twin threats of superior French military organization and equally superior British economic development than the utopian aesthetics of the sublime. This last registered the cognitive surcharge of an identity-politics no longer tied to the patronage of a specific nobilitarian house, but not yet tied to a coherent nation-state, in the same way that the Ding-an-sich communicated the social energies being unleashed by the British textile commodity: both are the premonitory neo-nationalisms of the German principalities, visible everywhere from Hegel’s panegyric to the Prussian state to the revolutionary nobilitarians of Schiller’s.
plays, and from Goethe’s cosmopolitan Mephisto to Beethoven’s sublimely awkward Viennese waltz forms.

This sheds an intriguing light on the historical moment of existentialism, and in particular that rift between the relations of intellectual production (the vocation of the national intellectual as much as the national aesthetic traditions) and the internationalization of the intellectual productive forces (the philosophic, critical and aesthetic modernisms) so apparent in the pages of *Being and Nothingness*, wherein Sartre feverishly mines over a hundred and fifty years of French identity-politics, ranging from Hugo to the second Napoleon, Marx and the Commune, the imperialist expansion into North Africa and Indochina, Zola and the early trade union movements, the Dreyfus affair, the Great War, the interwar ontologies and phenomenologies, as a kind of raw material for an international ethics of engagement. In raising the translucent manifestos, existential plays, and emergency solidarities of the Resistance to the level of broadcasts from an underground radio, in a coded language, to a hidden audience, Sartre secretly fulfills the unwritten charter of the Kantian sublime, by demystifying the abstract moral imperative as the power-claim of the concrete juridical procedure. Existentialism’s great insight was that the Occupation did not, contrary to countless B-grade war movies, make ethical or heroic choices possible; rather, it made these utterly obsolete. There could be no moral choices amidst the clash of gigantic armies, the thunder of bombing raids, and the bone-chilling horrors of the Gestapo’s torture-cellars, only more or less immoral ones. The existential engagement is thus a kind of anti-ethics or juridical mise-en-scene, which registers the non-identity of the specific individual moral claim or principle in the context of the collective antagonisms of monopoly capitalism (whether demographic, sociological or political in nature) by means of a self-reflexive aesthetic cognition – viz. the theatrical absurdities of Beckett, the slapstick antics of Chaplin’s tramp, or the cinematic flourishes of Genet’s urban outlaws.
This comes very close indeed to the Frankfurt School’s notion of the mimetic function of radical art, namely its capacity to energize the critical faculties of the subject and inform a project of collective resistance. But where Sartre’s famous double gambit – critiquing an encrusted PCF orthodoxy from the standpoint of a Marxist existentialism, while at the same time deploying an existentialized Marxism against the Gaullist technocracy – is an undeniably aesthetic strategy, specifically attuned to the fortunate instance of Sartre’s own status as a privileged culture-worker, Adorno will take the more dialectical (if less journalistically marketable) stance that authentic works of art are not only always and everywhere theoretically mediated, to their innermost core, but absolutely require the labor of theory in order to fulfill their social vocation. From this standpoint, it is not the observer who sees the world differently after viewing a painting by, say, Picasso; it is really the painting, as the specular embodiment of aesthetic labor, which views the world of society through the ever-changing lens of the observer! What is true for cultural mediations is even more true for political ones: the political resistance to the total system is not derived from a discrete location or institution, party or class structure, nor even a single historical moment or theoretical discourse. Rather, all these things form the set of constellations which activists, radical artists, and critical intellectuals must think through, using whatever conceptual mediations are at hand or inventing new ones as needed; thinking is never the static repetition of concepts, but their active rethinking and reconfiguration. Resistance to the total system is necessarily total, else the system would not cohere as a totality. In a more contemporary parlance, all politics is indeed local, but only because the local is the ineluctable particularity of the global.

It is therefore the specific rift separating the local and the global, or the contradiction between the prehistories of labor-power and the posthistories of accumulation mentioned earlier, which ideologues of the total system will attempt to
symbolically resolve, efface or otherwise paper over. Adorno’s first target is the classic Cold War ideologeme of the open, democratic West versus the closed, totalitarian East: “Nirgendwo auf Erden ist die gegenwärtige Gesellschaft, wie ihr szientifische Apologeten bescheinigen, ‘offen’; nirgendwo auch entformt.” [Nowhere on Earth is contemporary society, as its scientific apologists vouchsafe, ‘open’; nowhere deformed, either.] ND:280 What prevents this insight from being yesterday’s news in a postmodern age thoroughly debriefed on the Ultra experiments, CIA destabilizations, Watergate, nuclear contamination, and the monstrosities of the US war on Vietnam is Adorno’s explicit refusal to countenance the obvious alternative, namely the neoliberal assertion that the Soviet and American national security states were the same thing all along, i.e. that the total system was the malicious offspring of identical Governmental bureaucracies rather than identitarian market forces. This, of course, is utter nonsense, and not just in the sense of the lush commercial contracts ladled out by the American military-industrial complex or the successive national-autarkic industrialization programs launched under the rubric of Soviet military modernization. The ideology of convergence is just that: ideology. In reality, the commercial antagonisms of globally-mediated unequal exchange did not resolve the state-monopoly antagonisms of the Cold War era, but in typical capitalist style merely expanded the scale and intensity of such. The hulking bureaucracies of the national security states gave way to the nimbler, more dextrous and hence deadlier bureaucracies of the giant financial and industrial multis; localized trade deals and comprador financial schemes acceded to the wholesale liberalization of trade and capital markets, making it almost impossible for individual countries to copy the sort of state-led accumulation structures, intelligent industrial policies and long-term investment strategies successfully carried out by semi-peripheral East Asia and Central Europe in the Fifties and Sixties (with the significant exception of China, which had the good fortune to have Hong Kong and Taiwan on hand to finance the grafting of a genuine
developmental state onto an indigenous national security state). Meanwhile the occasionally generous subsidy programs extended by the Cold War blocs to favored client states have been replaced by the continuous micromanagement of the global periphery by the IMF and World Bank, via the crushing $2 trillion in hard currency obligations the latter owe to metropolitan banks and governments – debts incurred largely because of the declining terms of trade afflicting raw materials and energy producers vis-à-vis high-tech exporters.

Neoliberalism does, however, have an ironic truth-content, in the form of the identity-politics it unwittingly identifies as the locus of subjectivity in the world-system: this is the vocation to think globally and act globally, if for no other reason than sheer self-preservation. Adorno captures this aporia perfectly in an aperçu on the global factory: “Die Welt wie sie ist wird zur einzigen Ideologie und die Menschen deren Bestandteil.” [The world as it is, is becoming the sole ideology, and human beings the inventory of such.] ND:271 This leads one to suspect that the resistance to that factory ought, in best dialectical fashion, to be at least as categorical an imperative as the brute fact of factory-discipline itself. Yet if the reality of consumerism is indeed the ideology of consumer capitalism, then the reality of this capitalism must itself be out-and-out ideological: ideology, by this measure, is no mere phantasm or delusion, but is really one of the many forms of surplus-value extracted by unequal exchange from the working-class! Shocking as it may seem to think of the ideological and cultural instrumentarium of the American Empire as just another stockpile of cultural capital, to be bought and sold like film stocks or software algorithms, this is indeed the central political fact of the post-1985 decay of the Pax Americana and its official demise in 1999, marked by the inexorable onslaught of a euro-powered EU on the last bastions of US industrial hegemony (software, semiconductors, telecoms) as well as Japan’s no less audacious and far-reaching bailout of the entire East Asian economy.
To see how this works in practice, consider the curious repoliticization of the Federal budget deficit in the course of the Eighties: deficit spending not only powered four decades of highly successful military-Keynesianism, but financed the most advanced university research institutions in the world, a world-class aerospace industry, and of course that miracle of state-subsidized innovation otherwise known as Silicon Valley. In strictly economic terms, the deficit was virtually meaningless, since it was comprised of Treasury bonds (so-called T-bills) backed by the full faith and credit of the largest and wealthiest economy on the planet and anchored by the dollar’s status as world reserve currency. It was only during the late Eighties, when the US lost its status as a global creditor and began to run enormous trade deficits, that the alarm bells rang; the dollar still reigned supreme, but now an ever-increasing percentage of T-bills (though by no means the majority) were being purchased by overseas creditors. Since the biggest single creditor was Japan, the general response of the mainstream business press was either hysterical Japanophobia, i.e. the ludicrous notion that Japan was buying up the entire United States, or else deficit hysteria; both are intriguingly neo-national reaction-formations to the loss of US economic hegemony, which transform the latter into an ethical issue (the machinations of unscrupulous Japanese executives or witless US Treasury bureaucrats, as opposed to the pressures of the global marketplace). This suggests that deficit hysteria, along with its concomitant agenda of welfare cutbacks for the poor and tax breaks for the wealthy, was something like the motivating phantasm or ideological fiction by which the slow obsolescence of the American superstate – its literal and figurative declining creditworthiness – could be at once acknowledged and symbolically recontained; thereby displacing the threat of the multinational marketplace onto a series of neo-national villains, everywhere from the fanatical, robotic Japanese sararimen subconsciously relayed by the early Eighties return-to-Vietnam action flicks, to Arnold Schwarzenegger’s indomitable Central European cyborg in The Terminator.
Ripley and Rambo were not G-men or Bond-style exemplars of a reasonably proficient spy agency, but were semi-privatized free agents, professionals locked into battle with the mysteriously teeming, well-nigh biological antagonists of a crisis-ridden national security state which noone quite believed in anymore, but which noone could quite bring themselves to disbelieve, either.

Nor can it be an accident that, barely a decade later, such neo-national cultural tropes had faded almost completely from the cultural scene. The reason was that US trade deficits were now accompanied by massive current account deficits, resulting in at least one episode of panicked currency speculation (both the deutschmark and the yen reached record highs against the dollar in 1995, only to be forced lower by the EU and Japan, in order to protect their currency-sensitive export industries). In a nutshell, domestic austerity was being cancelled out by massive external borrowing, and by May of 1999 Alan Greenspan, Ueberrentier of the Federal Reserve, formally passed the torch of hegemony by noting in a public speech that the US economy was dependent on $300 billion of annual capital inflows from Japan and the EU for the foreseeable future. Total Government debt was still over seventy percent of GDP, but this was deemed unimportant, due to the fact that the discourse of multinational credit consumption (the Bubble-ideologies and the manic accumulation of private-sector debt, the volume of which is more than twice the size of total public debt) had in the meantime supplanted the discourse of neonational credit production (deficit hysteria and investment in military-industrial assets). The cultural equivalent of this transformation was the obsolescence of the technical-military pyrotechnics of the Eighties cyborg, that unstable compromise between an internalized multinational aesthetic technology and an external neo-national cultural body, in the face of the fully informatic action stars of the Nineties, everywhere from Chow Yun-Fat and Tony Leung in John Woo’s thriller classics and the icons of the 3D action-adventure videogames (Tomb Raider’s Lara Croft, Quake’s nameless Marine,
Halflife’s Gordon Freeman) to the cosmologic hip hop persona of Dr. Octagon (rap artist Kool Keith).

Although we will examine the ideologies of the Bubble and the specific ideological provenance of the new metropoles in more detail in the chapters to come, it should be noted that Adorno is particularly intrigued by the specific link between the politics of the national security state and its economic foundation, the military-industrial complex. Probably the most notorious single character-actant capable of narrating this link was, of course, the Bond secret agent, with its canny reappropriation of the stolidly loyal Organization Man who is also a secret rebel and individualist, and its fusion of the WW II thriller and the existential anti-hero on the unlooked-for terrain of an international consumer culture (military combat plus exotic sets, exoticized women, and thermonuclear gadgets). Bond was, in effect, the universal quotient or mediating subjectivity of the national security state, whose non-identity in relation to the security agency or power-bureaucracy in question ran the gamut from a dystopian or threatening neo-nationalism (e.g. Goldfinger and Dr. No as Central European and East Asian villains) to the utopian registers of a multinational consumerism (the aerial troupe of Ms. Galore). To the extent that the Bond blockbusters projected, at their outer limit, a distinctly post-Cold War aesthetic space, the secret agent was the negative conscience of the superstate; something intuited most profoundly by the great counter-cultural works of the Sixties, most notably Patrick McGoohan’s wondrous TV series The Prisoner and William Burroughs’ Nova trilogy. But where McGoohan’s masterpiece stages Ireland’s postcolonial guerilla struggle against an Anglo-Saxon media culture, and where Burroughs transcribes an incipient micropolitics of gay liberation out of the great anti-colonial movements of North Africa and Latin America, Adorno out-existentializes the existentialists, by recuperating the Kantian registers of the conscience from the standpoint of a multinational content we will specify somewhat later:
Moralische Fragen stellen sich buendig, nicht in ihrer widerlichen Parodie, der
sexuellen Unterdrueckung, sondern in Saetzen wie: Es soll nicht gefoltert werden;
es sollen keine Konzentrationslager sein, wahren all das in Afrika und Asien
fortwahrt und nur verdraengt wird, weil die zivilisatorische Humanitaet wie stets
inhuman ist gegen die von ihr schamlos als unzivilisiert Gebrandmarkten… Das
Ungetrennte lebt einzig in den Extremen, in der spontanen Regung, die,
ungeduldig mit dem Argument, nicht dulden will, dass das Grauen weitergehe,
und in dem von keinem Anbefohlenen terrorisierten theoretischen Bewusstsein,
das durchschaut, warum es gleichwohl unabsehbar weitergeht. Dieser
Widerspruch allein ist, angesichts der realen Ohnmacht aller Einzelnen, der
Schauplatz von Moral heute. [Moral questions are stringent not in their dreadful
parody, sexual repression, but in sentences like: torture ought to be abolished;
concentration camps ought not to exist, while all this continues in Africa and Asia
and is only repressed because civilized humanity is as inhuman as ever against
that which it shamelessly brands as uncivilized… That which is undivided lives
solely in the extremes, in the spontaneous impulse which, impatient with the
argument, does not wish to permit the horror to continue, and in the theoretical
consciousness unterrorized by any urge, which perceives why it nonetheless goes
unforeseeably on. This contradiction alone is, in sight of the real powerlessness of
all individuals, the scene of morality today.] ND:281-282

Put another way, no moral instance or categorical imperative can possibly mediate
between the theoretical reflection and the actionist impulse; indeed, it is the sheer
irreconcilability of these two things which drives forwards the thinking of the
contradiction, as that necessity for action which is, at some other level, always and
already the working-out of historical necessity. If Kant’s heroic attempt to raise this
necessity to a moralized a priori failed, this is not to morality’s discredit, but simply goes
to show that morality, where it is most authentic, is the protest against all forms of
necessity (even, and especially, the moral kind: for Adorno, Kant is never more
progressive than at those moments when the latter pugnaciously insists, against the logic
of his own system and his class prejudices, that what one practices is not to be separated
from what one preaches). The category of moral selflessness is the utopia of bourgeois
selfishness: it is the touchingly naive belief that the unmitigated exercise of one’s own
self-interest is identical with everyone else’s self-interest. Interestingly enough, the
existentialist insight into the nature of violence in monopoly capitalism rehearses a
similar antinomy, by recouping the concept of a socialized scarcity from the standpoint of
the engagement or existential commitment – that cipher of the anti-hero or underground
rebel, whose very identity is not to have one in the first place. Adorno’s allergic reaction
to this latter, something closely related to his otherwise inexplicable unwillingness to sign
off on Brecht’s magnificent late works, is due less to the nascent mass-cultural categories
of the anti-hero (e.g. the cinematic tropes of the American GI of the Forties and the
Organization Man of the Fifties) than to the positivistic concept of contingency covertly
smuggled in by such. On this view, the anti-hero can afford to dispense with a coherent
identity only to the degree that everyone has already been made fungible,
interchangeable, an exemplar of the gigantic, warring bureaucracies Beckett’s Watt
satirized as the ineffable Mr. Knott; Beckett’s plays decode the truth-content of this state
of affairs as a well-nigh cosmological perpetuity of decay, where the more things fall
apart, the slower their isotopic rates of decay.

One could argue, with some justification, that this misses a fundamental point
about Brecht and the musical and cinematic modernisms of the Forties, from early bebop
to film noir, namely the plebianization and democratization of form unleashed by the
early consumer culture; still, one should be careful of doing the American culture-
industry all too much justice, inasmuch as what is at issue are the late modernisms of the
Forties which anticipated the earliest postmodernisms of the Fifties (the tectonic fault-
line between the earliest novels of Beckett and Genet, and their later plays). If Negative
Dialectics is not primarily about inventing a multinational aesthetic theory capable of
decrypting the Bond narratives as the Cold War fairytales they indeed were, it more than
makes up for this fact by its principled refusal to assign any sort of ethical valence to the
national security state, insisting that we treat this latter as an immanent feature of
monopoly-capitalism, i.e. as a specific historical stage in the development of the relations
of production. This is not to say that particular acts of a given state apparatus are exempt from ethical judgements, but merely to note that such judgements are crucially dependent on the historical consciousness (by no means a given) of the universal; even at its historical zenith, the Pax Americana merely carried out the dictates of the post-WW II division of international labor. It was not a suprahistorical principle beyond such. It follows that morality can only exist multinationally, as the resistance to the logic of multinational capital, if it is to exist at all, in the same sense that an adequate critique of the metropole must also criticize what that metropole has made of its peripheries. This, of course, is the radical insight of the global human rights movement which would flower some twenty years after the publication of Adorno’s text: inasmuch as the universal claim of even the most basic juridical right is the mediated form of a particular social praxis, all human rights are particular. Contra Kant’s deterministic amphiboly between a post-mechanist rationalism and Hume’s indeterminable skepticism, no peremptory principle or regulatory procedure, no matter how totalizing, can replace the concrete work of the juridical instance in societies founded on an advanced division of labor. The regular elections, referendums, and other forms of permanent political mobilization instituted by autocratic regimes on both sides of the Berlin Wall were not simply empty propaganda, as both pro-Soviet and pro-American ideologues constantly insisted about the productions of their opposing number; they were an indispensable component of the class struggles of the Cold War era, the necessary fictions of social antagonisms which could not have been narrated in any other way. The epic clashes of JFK and Khruschev, Ho Chi Minh and LBJ, Mao and McArthur were the nominalistic expression of the cellular micropolitics of executive committees, national security agencies and military-industrial development strategies; the more these latter converged in practice, the greater the ideological effort expended to differentiate the former. This is actually a general tendency throughout the entire consumer culture, where an increasingly diverse set of branding and advertising
campaigns are required to retail an increasingly identical series of commodities, and in fact Adorno’s final meditation on Kant will home in on this central antinomy of the consumer society with radar-guided precision, deciphering the brute, hulking substructures of a compulsory self-interest lurking beneath the marketized utopia of freedom:

Der Widerspruch von Freiheit und Determinismus ist nicht, wie das Selbstverständnis der Vernunftkritik es mochte, einer zwischen den theoretischen Positionen des Dogmatismus und Skeptizismus, sondern einer der Selbsterfahrung der Subjekte, bald frei, bald unfrei. Unterm Aspekt von Freiheit sind sie mit sich unidentisch, weil das Subjekt noch keines ist, und zwar gerade vermöge seiner Instauration als Subjekt: das Selbst ist das Inhumane. [The contradiction of freedom and determinism is not, as the self-understanding of the critique of reason wished, one between the theoretical positions of dogmatism and skepticism, but one of the self-experience of the subject, now free, now unfree. Under the aspect of freedom they are non-identical with themselves, because the subject is hardly one yet, and indeed precisely by virtue of its instauration as subject: the self is the inhumane.] ND:294

The subtle pun on “self-understanding” underlines the fact that class struggle is to be understood as having two sides: the first is the familiar scenario of the collective unbinding of the proletariat from wage-slavery, while the second refers to the micrological emancipation of subjects from a subjectivity in thrall to an accumulation-process as blind and irresistible as the natural world which human beings so recently emerged from. Social prehistory leads back into natural history, just as the prehistory of nature accedes, at its outermost limit, to the naturalization of the social. But in that case it is no longer possible to speak of morality in its original sense of a rationalized, post-hieratic (or as Brecht would put it, Galilean) set of instrumentalized ethical principles; by resisting the total system, morality does far more than offer refuge to the hunted or solace to the lost. It also prefigures that moment of collective healing which we honor with the name of justice. Morality at its truest is the aesthetics of revolution. This is why it is just as historically fragile and susceptible to cooptation as this latter; in a capitalist mode of
production which ceaselessly revolutionizes itself, any concept of justice must reach beyond the isolated moral judgement and the narrow functionalism of legislative and juridical procedures, if it is not to fall prey to precisely the petrification of its content it wishes to criticize. The restitution of the dispossessed, the healing of the wounded, the mending of the broken: it is not for nothing that these central motifs of Benjamin’s revolutionary allegories, later taken up by the Frankfurt School and so ably extended by Adorno, are also and already an aesthetic program of reconstruction. The aesthetic constellation supersedes the moral instance, by identifying the particularity of the latter as the potential negation of the oppressive universal; the radical modernisms did not simply demystify the freedom to consume homogenized mass-cultural products as the most terrifying sort of unfreedom, but emphatically staged the prison-break from such in whatever local materials were at hand (painting, music, theater, film, etc.).

By theorizing the transition from Kantian systems of morality to a Hegelian systemic aesthetics, Adorno bequeaths us two indispensable bridge-mediations: the first is the notion of a restitutive history, by which the antipodes, say, of Kant’s provincial moral-universal and Hegel’s forthrightly expansionist World-spirit can be grasped as the mediated expressions of an urban or mercantile capitalism locked into struggle with its emergent national successor; something with obvious applications to the situation of postwar Europe, and the transition from national-monopoly capitalism to the internationalized version of such. The second and no less important one is the power of the negative, defined as the historical counterweight to the total system, i.e. the global resistance to late capitalism, however that might be defined. Both converge in the objectivity of the world-spirit: “Der Weltgeist ist, aber ist keiner, ist nicht Geist, sondern eben das Negative, welches Hegel von ihm abwaeltzte auf diejenigen, die ihm parieren muessen und deren Niederlage das Verdikt, ihre Differenz von der Objektivitaet sei das Unwahre und Schlechte, verdoppelt.” [The world-spirit is, yet is not; is not the Mind, but
precisely that negative, which Hegel shuffles off from himself onto those who must counter him and whose downfall renders the verdict, that its difference from objectivity is the untrue and bad, double-sided.] ND:298 The counter-argument is that of Kant, of course, whose immeasurably immodest modesty concerning the limitations of thought, supposedly unable to transcend those presuppositions which Kant’s labyrinthine qualifications take the greatest pleasure in covertly transcending anyway, uncannily harmonizes with the anti-market rhetoric and democratization wrought by the American Occupation and the subsequent Christian Democratic, corporatist and Social Democratic regimes throughout the Continent. These regimes praised the market while rejecting its values, preached public austerity while extensively subsidizing national industrial policies, swore fealty to the Pax Americana while adopting radically democratic electoral systems of proportional representation, and in Central Europe, even introduced the codetermination laws which trade unions would come to regard, in later decades, as a universal right of labor. In short, they practiced limited forms of the state socialisms which the self-anointed socialist bloc claimed to have already transcended; in reality, the latter had merely deep-frozen their own relations of production in the glacial ice of neo-Stalinist military-industrialism. Why and how this seemingly unpromising configuration turned out to be the perfect gestation-chamber for a 21st century superpower is the central issue of Adorno’s subsequent excursus on Hegel.
Notes

1. This is, of course, a generalization; the financial and industrial vectors of the catch-up process ran on different clocks, with the former generally leading the latter by a number of years. Financially speaking, the first major blow to the Pax Americana dates back to 1971, when persistent current-account difficulties forced Nixon to jettison the Bretton Woods system of dollar-pegged fixed exchange rates in favor of floating rates; the result was a massive devaluation of the dollar and an equivalent appreciation of the Central European and Japanese currencies. This forced the latter zones to both globalize their production bases, shifting plant and equipment abroad to offset rising domestic labor costs and cheaper American goods (Japan invested heavily in Eastern Asia, while Central Europe developed extensive trade links with Southern and Eastern Europe), while also giving a vital impetus to the project of European monetary unification. In strictly industrial terms, both regions were still very much advanced semi-peripheries until the late Seventies, and did not achieve parity until the mid-Eighties. According to research by Lawrence G. Franko, professor of finance in the College of Management at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, US firms have continued to lose market to their competitors since then (see “Global Corporate Competition II: Is the Large American Firm an Endangered Species?”, Business Horizon, November-December 1991, Vol. 34, No. 6, pp. 14-22 and also “The Japanese Juggernaut Rolls On”, Sloan Management Review, Winter 1996, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp. 103-109). The financial end of the Empire can be dated far more precisely, back to 1985, when a US economy reeling from Thatcherite-induced deindustrialization first become a net debtor nation and began to borrow huge amounts of capital from the East Asian and EC economies to finance its expansion; industrially speaking, East Asia and the EU swept the field by the early Nineties, and have continued to pad their lead since. The next stage of this process was the introduction of the euro in 1999, which effectively takes away the last remaining Imperial privilege of the US, i.e. the dollar’s status as world reserve currency (a polite way of saying, the unconstrained ability to print greenbacks to pay foreign creditors); this will put additional pressure on East Asia to form its own currency bloc, most likely ten to fifteen years in the future.

2. This in turn may explain why capitalist ideology is structurally incapable of grasping the concept of cooperation or its cognates, inequity or injustice; it is not so much that the bourgeoisie, then as now, consider poverty and inequity to be the moral choice of and/or the deserved punishment for the poor (though they certainly believe this, too) so much as that, from the standpoint of individual capitalists, society as such really and truly does not exist. Instead, there are only individual customers. History has its revenge on the bourgeoisie, however, in the antinomy between the individual capitalist and the capital of the entire class. To the entrepreneur, shareholder or rentier, capital is fetishized as a thing, a species of property; as an investment, it is to be fetishized, but as a social relation, it is to be feared (simply because it represents, in mediated form, the threat of other capitals, or expropriation via competitors or an unforeseeable market downturn). The Wall Street cliché, that markets are driven by contrasting frenzies of fear and greed, is correct to this extent; each is the necessary antipode of the other. Certainly by the end of 1998 most individual investors had realized that the US stock market was insanely overvalued, but
no one wanted to be the first to head for the exits; the result was that most institutions held onto their positions, which permitted the bubble to reach even more fearsome heights of lunacy in early 1999. The drive for maximum individual self-preservation rebounds into collective catastrophe.

3. Adorno channels this insight, with characteristic ellipticism, via Nietzsche: “Ihr heteronomes Gesetztessein, die Nietzscheschen Neuen Tafeln waeren von Freiheit das Gegenteil. Jene muss aber nicht bleiben, worin sie entsprang und was sie war. Vielmehr reiBt in der Verinnerlichung gesellschaftlichen Zwangs zum Gewissen mit dem Widerstand gegen die gesellschaftliche Instanz, der jene am eigenen Prinzip kritisch misst, ein Potential heran, das des Zwangs ledig waere. Kritik des Gewissens visiert die Rettung solchen Potentials, doch nicht im psychologischen Bereich sondern in der Objektivitait eines versoehnten Lebens von Freien… Kant spricht, fehlbar und entstellt, was gesellschaftlich mit Grund zu fordern waere.” [Their heteronomous nomotheticism [referring to values], Nietzsche’s New Commandments, would be the opposite of freedom. These need not however remain where they originated and what they were. On the contrary a potential arises out of the internalization of social compulsion into the conscience along with the resistance against the social instance, which this conscience, critically speaking, after its own principles, does without, and which would yet dispense with compulsion. The critique of the conscience intends the salvation of such potential, only not in the psychological realm but in the objectivity of a reconciled life among the emancipated… Kant expresses, haltingly and distortedly, what ought indeed to be demanded from society.] ND:271-272

4. Pg. 725-726, *Doktor Faustus*. Thomas Mann, Bermann-Fischer Verlag © 1948, Stockholm. Arguably this is the late modernist version of James Dean’s great line to his parents in *Rebel Without a Cause*, just before the scene where he decides to tell the police about the catastrophic drag race: “We’re all involved.”

5. Adorno postdates Kant’s implicit insight into the present: “Die Menschen, keiner ausgenommen, sind ueberhaupt noch nicht sie selbst… Jede menschliche Regung widerspricht der Einheit dessen, der sie hegt; jeder Impuls zum Besserung ist nicht nur, kantisch, Vernunft, sondern vor dieser auch Dummheit.” [Human beings are above all, and without exception, not yet themselves… Every human impulse contradicts the unity of that in which it is embedded; every impulse towards improvement is not only, Kantesque, reason, but before this also stupidity.] ND:274

6. That is, where the West had the social surplus to legitimate the rule of the market forces in the guise of an all-embracing consumer culture, the less wealthy East disguised the rule of the market by means of an all-embracing cadre culture: “Dass in den Laendern, die heute den Namen des Sozialismus monopolisieren, Kollektivismus unmittelbar, als Unterordnung des Einzelnen unter die Gesellschaft, anbefohlen wird, straft ihren Sozialismus Luegen und befestigt den Antagonismus. Die Schwaechung des Ichs durch eine vergesellschaftete Gesellschaft, die unermuedlich die Menschen zusammentreibt und, woertlich wie uebertragen, unaehig macht, allein zu sein, manifestiert sich in den Klagen ueber Vereinzelung nicht weniger als die wahrhaft
unerträgliche Kälte, die mit dem sich expandierenden Tauschverhältnis über alles sich verbreitet, und die im autoritäreren, gegen die Bedürfnisse der Subjekte rückichtslosen Regiment der angeblichen Volksdemokratien prolongiert werden... Kollektivismus und Individualismus ergänzen einander im Falschen.” [That in the countries which today monopolize the name of socialism, an unmediated collectivism is ordained as subjugation of the particular under society, gives the lie to their socialism and rigidifies the antagonism. The weakness of the ego through a socialized society, which unremittingly drives human beings together and, literally as conveyed, makes them incapable of being alone, manifests itself in the complaints about isolation no less than in the truly unbearable coldness which expands itself everywhere along with the expanding exchange-relations, and which is merely prolonged by the authoritarian and inconsiderate regimentation of the alleged peoples’ democracies against their subjects... Collectivism and individualism complete one another in falsity.] ND:279-280

7. Central bankers are noted for the Delphic quality of their oratory, but in this case Greenspan was surprisingly blunt: “Our negative personal saving rate indicates that the wealth effect is alive and well. The latter has unquestionably been a key factor in the rise in domestic demand, which despite productivity improvements has exerted increasing pressure on labor markets. Thus, should equity markets retrench, consumer and business investment demands would, doubtless, weaken considerably.

A more distant concern, but one that cannot be readily dismissed, is the very condition that has enabled the surge in American household and business demands to help sustain global stability: our rising trade and current account deficits. There is a limit to how long and how far deficits can be sustained, since current account deficits add to net foreign claims on the United States. It is very difficult to judge at what point debt service costs become unduly burdensome and can no longer be sustained.

There is no evidence at this point that markets are disinclined to readily finance our foreign net imbalance. But the arithmetic of foreign debt accumulation and compounding interest costs does indicate somewhere in the future that, unless reversed, our growing international imbalances are apt to create significant problems for our economy.” Alan Greenspan. The American Economy in a World Context. (Speech given by Alan Greenspan at the 35th Annual Conference on Bank Structure and Competition of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois on May 6, 1999). The full text is online at: http://www.bog.frb.fed.us/boarddocs/speeches/1999/19990506.htm

8. This is most obvious in Kant’s notion of the intelligible character, that philosophic lightning-bolt between the objective unreason of history and the subjective impulse to make sense of such: “Wollte man es wagen, dem Kantischen X des intelligiblen Charakters seinen wahren Inhalt zu verleihen, der sich gegen die totale Unbestimmtheit des aporetischen Begriffs behauptet, so waere er wohl das geschichtlich fortgeschrittenste, punktuell aufleuchttende, rasch verloeschende Bewusstsein, dem der Impuls innewohnt, das Richtige zu tun. Er ist die konkrete, intermittierende Vorwegnahme der Moeglichkeit, weder fremd der Menschen noch mit ihnen identisch.” [If one dared to wager what the Kantian X of the intelligible character might subsume under its true content, which maintained itself against the total indeterminacy of the aporetic concept, it would probably be the historically most advanced, periodically
flaring, swiftly fading consciousness, in which the impulse to do the right thing is inherent. It is the concrete, intermittent anticipation of the possibility, neither foreign to human beings nor identical with them.] ND:292

9. This insight is hardly limited to the specific situation of the Cold War, but can be discerned even amidst the primitive accumulations at the very dawn of the capitalist world-system: “Selbst die Konquistadorenüberfahle auf das alte Mexico und Peru, die dort muessen erfahren worden sein wie Invasionen von einem anderen Planeten, haben, irrational fuer die Azteken und Inkas, der Ausbreitung der bürgerlich rationalen Gesellschaft bis zur Konzeption von one world [in English in original] blutig weitergeholfen, die dem Prinzip jener Gesellschaft teleologisch innenwohnt.” [Even the assaults of the conquistadors on ancient Mexico and Peru, which must have been experienced therein like invasions from another planet, murderously advanced the expansion of rational bourgeois society – irrationally for the Aztecs and Incas – all the way to the conception of ‘one world’, which was teleologically inherent in the principle of that society.] ND:297
CHAPTER VI

THEORIES OF THE NEW METROPOLES

The zenith of the British Empire proclaimed its rule via its world-scouring warships and sailing vessels; its American successor was borne aloft on the wings of the fighter squadrons and bombers blotting out the skies of war-torn Europe and Asia. By contrast, the zero-hour of the world’s newest superpower, the European Union, was as subtle and innocuous as the nimbus of a cirrus cloud: a pale, insignificant streak of color against the Indian summer sky of the Pax Americana, which suddenly turns out to be the majestic vapor-trail of an Airbus 300. Not the least of the paradoxes the EU has in store for the unwary observer is the fact that each of the factors which dictated its subaltern status during the Cold War – its externally-imposed military weakness, its lack of indigenous democratic traditions, and the loss of its overseas colonies and Eastern European markets – turned out, in best dialectical fashion, to be crucial to its subsequent renascence. Lacking the military-industrial monopoly-rents available to US firms, the future EU would go on to specialize in the civilian goods sector; the dismantling of militarist and caste hierarchies permitted the importation of the latest and most sophisticated models of democratic governance and shopfloor organization; while the loss of colonial surplus-rents and the glittering allure of American living standards spurred the internal democratization of consumption, via welfare and corporatist states.

Nor can it be an accident that the social fabric of the EU (its social democratic DNA, as it were, as opposed to its euro-based financial mitochondria) was peculiarly
invisible to the mass-cultural radars and detection systems handed down by the Cold War – interpretive systems designed, quite frankly, to retail the sort of cinematic spectacles of violence (read: military-industrial consumerism) and military-industrial espionage (read: high-tech fetishism) relayed by the Bond blockbusters of the Sixties, rather than the humdrum vicissitudes of the export-platform accumulation model or the politics of shopfloor productivity. Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a deeply conservative, corporate-run and reactionary American mass media continued to portray the end of the Cold War entirely in terms of a shift in consumption-patterns, a.k.a. the triumph of silicon over steel, Nasdaq stock over Federal bonds, and manic speculation over long-term savings; by contrast, a far more diverse European press, less beholden to business interests, narrated the same moment in terms of a stark political choice between the revitalization of a preexisting public sphere on the one hand, nicely symbolized by the construction of the European Parliament building in Strasbourg, and the nightmarish relapse into market-barbarism symbolized by the demolition of Sarajevo, former Olympic city, during the breakup of Yugoslavia on the other.

In fact, one can argue with a great deal of justification that the formal emergence of the EU dates back not to the dissolution of the Eastern bloc or the arrival of the euro, nor even to the inception of the European Monetary System and EC-wide developmental grants in the Seventies, but rather to the state-led creation of the Airbus airplane-manufacturing consortium back in 1967. At first ridiculed as an expensive monument to French etatisme, and later valorized as the linchpin of a common Franco-German industrial policy, by the mid-Eighties Airbus had become the showpiece of the Central European export-platform economy and, by the late Nineties, the pillar of an unstoppable Eurocapitalism. Airbus is, indeed, the prototypical Euromulti, the product of decades of Government-sponsored research grants, long-term corporate investment strategies, a
heavily unionized and high-skilled labor force, quasi-keiretsu financial links (most notably to Daimler), and of course a booming civilian market for air transport, international tourism and jet travel.

This suggests that the single most generic narrative of the post-Cold War era – the neoliberal notion of a sweeping, transhistorical globalization, whose flip side is a bold new leap (or frightening regression, depending on one’s point of view) of an uncompromised American hegemony – is false, and on two levels. In the first place, the nation-state is far from obsolescent; nation-states continue to wield vast powers over global markets, capital flows and investments, something true even of the most heavily globalized sector of all, namely finance capital. The meltdown of the Japanese real estate and stock bubbles of the Eighties, for example, primarily affected Japan, and not the rest of the world; the Wall Street Bubble has been limited to US equity markets; while one of the most important and least-known aspects of the euro is that it has created the largest internal market in the world (though individual EU countries trade heavily with one another, IMF statistics show that only 10% so of the EU economy as a whole is exposed to trade with extra-EU countries, a percentage roughly equivalent to the external trade levels of the US and Japan). Secondly, and in complete contradistinction to neoliberal dogma, the rise of multinational capitalism has nowhere been accompanied by the rollback of the state, but has in fact been an essential spur to the continued expansion of such. This is true everywhere from environmental regulations to construction codes, and from pollution abatement programs to state-sponsored bailouts of financial speculators. The wonders of the neoliberal free market were built squarely on the backs of publicly-funded bailouts of private financial manias gone bust, everywhere from the $150 billion bailout of the S & L’s in the US in the late Eighties to the $50 billion nationalization of the bulk of the Scandinavian banking system in the early Nineties, and from the $50
billion nationalization of the South Korean banks to the stupendous $500 billion Japanese bank bailout from 1997-1998, to name just a few of the innumerable rescue operations of the past decade.\footnote{1}

Why, then, do the neoliberals froth at the mouth (e.g. the ravings of the Wall Street Journal’s editorial pages; as the famous joke goes, editorials are what the Journal has instead of a comics page) at the very mention of the regulatory powers of government, when the state has proven over and over to be their most reliable friend? The question could also be asked in reverse: why does Wall Street, that symbolic code word for the loose-knit business coalition of silicon industrialists, old-line rentiers and parvenu speculators which has run the American economy since the early Eighties, engage in a never-ending symbolic effort to discredit, disparage or otherwise dismiss the power of the state, given the indisputable fact that late capitalism is nothing less than state-sponsored bailout socialism for the rich? In part this is due to the fact that neoliberalism is less a single species of ideology than a generalized ideological field, encompassing a wide range of antagonistic class interests in constant struggle with one another. The biggest boosters of global free trade schemes in America, for example, are the aerospace and computer industries, sectors which flourished thanks to decades of vast public subsidies (thanks to the Pentagon and the post-Sputnik educational boom). This is in marked contrast to the Japanese keiretsu, the Korean chaebol or the Taiwanese state-affiliated business networks, which built their economic success on exports to US markets and powerful developmental states; keiretsu-style neoliberalism means coordinated and state-guaranteed investment policies in Southeast Asian factories. Similarly, neoliberalism in the EU, though decidedly hostile to the national welfare state, has in fact been the driving force behind the construction of a multinational state apparatus, everywhere from the
acquis communautaire and European Parliamentary directives to the ongoing bailout of Eastern Europe via grants and loans from the European Investment Bank.

The kernel of truth buried in the neoliberal critique of the state is, therefore, the non-identity of the multinational state with its national and international predecessors. Put bluntly, the European superstate is not the Pax Americana writ Teutonic, any more than the East Asian economic region is the Pax Americana writ in kanji. The antinomies of the nation-state were already a significant issue in Adorno’s excursus on Kant, where the juridical superstructures of the superstates are turned against the political and cultural formations of such, effectively demolishing the Cold War binary ideology of freedom vs. totalitarianism both from within (as a species of ideology which was itself as totalitarian as what it claimed to combat) and from without (in the name of those global civil and human rights movements, which held fast to the radical non-identity of the multinational subject). Nevertheless it is not until the second set of model-analyses in Negative Dialectics, provocatively entitled “World-spirit and Natural History”, that Adorno directly confronts the Cold War superstate, by moving from the juridical sphere to the question of state formation proper. One of the crucial bridge-mediations here will be Hegel’s doctrine of world-history, which will serve as a kind of theoretical Geiger counter capable of registering the cultural and economic fault-lines already beginning to open up between the American Empire and its erstwhile semi-peripheries in the Sixties. Adorno’s very first move here is to recuperate the unfashionably orthodox Marxian categories of the productive forces and relations of production in the context of a specifically multinational social contradiction, ingeniously turning one of the favorite agitprop terms of the Eastern bloc cadres against themselves:

Entfaltung und Entfesselung der Produktivkraefte sind nicht Gegensaetze derart, dass ihnen wechselnde Phasen zuzuordnen waeren, sondern wahrhaft dialektisch.
Die Entfesselung der Produktivkräfte, Tat des naturbeherrschenden Geistes, hat Affinität zur gewaltaetigen Herrschaft ueber Natur. Temporaer vermag sie zuruecktreten, nicht aber ist sie vom Begriff der Produktivkraft wegzudenken und am letzten von dem der entfesselten; im blossen Wort klingt eine Drohung mit…. Zuzeiten werden die technischen Produktivkrafte gesellschaftlich kaum gehemmt, arbeiten aber in fixierten Produktionsverhaeltnissen ohne viel Einfluss auf diese. Sobald die Entfesselung der Kraeke von den tragenden Beziehungen zwischen den Menschen sich sondert, wird sie nicht weniger fetischisiert als die Ordnungen; auch sie ist nur ein Moment der Dialektik, nicht deren Zauberformel.

[The development and unbinding of the productive forces are not opposites of the sort which could be subsumed as alternating phases, but are truly dialectical. The unbinding of the productive forces, deed of the Mind which masters natural forces, has an affinity to the violent dominion over nature. Though it may conceal itself from time to time, it is not to be thought away from the concept of the productive force and least of all from that which is unbound; the very word resonates with a threat… At times, the technical forces of production are hardly restrained socially, but work in fixed relations of production without much influence on these. As soon as the unbinding of the forces separates itself from the constitutive relationships between human beings, it becomes no less fetishized than the traditional social stations; it, too, is only a moment of the dialectic, not its magic formula.] ND:301-302

More is at stake here than the mundane cognition that unchecked, raging industrialism has taken a horrific ecological, cultural and psychological toll on human beings. The quasi-Foucauldian pun on the word Kraft ("force", in the sense of a material energy or power) is meant to underline the fact that labor-discipline is not the same thing as the division of labor; each is mediated by quite separate microhistories of production, consumption, and distribution, not to mention quite different roles within juridical structures, networks of exchange and the like. This is not to say that these two have nothing at all to do with one another, but merely to note that neither confronts the other directly, but only through the further mediations of the relations of production and the forces of production, respectively. This hearkens back to Marx’s great insight, namely that there is no direct exchange of commodities in the capitalist marketplace, only mediated ones; that is, a given quantity of capital embodied in one set of commodities is exchanged for another and not necessarily equal quantity of capital (money for food,
credit for a machine-tool, stocks for bonds, labor-power for a wage, etc.). It is only by tracing the movement of capital through the spheres of production, distribution and consumption that Marx was able to analyze the phenomenon of value, and thereby invent the categories of the expropriating entrepreneur and the expropriated proletariat in the first place; the individual entrepreneur is not the truth-content of capitalism, rather, the capitalist mode of accumulation is the truth-content of the entrepreneur.

In Adorno’s version of the same problematic, the specific juridical decision or Kantian judgement is not the truth-content of the juridical sphere as such; rather, the juridical sphere as a totality is the truth-content of the judgement. “Recht ist das Urphenomenon irrationaler Rationalitaet”, notes Adomo acidly, “In ihm wird das formale Eequivalenzprinzip zur Norm, alle schlaegt es ueber denselben Leisten... Das juristische Gesamtbereich ist eines von Definitionen.” [The law is the Ur-phenomenon of irrational rationality. In it the formal principle of equivalence becomes a norm, everyone is treated according to the same standard... The totality of the juridical realm is one of definitions.] ND:304 It should not surprise us that this point was ultimately as scandalous to those Eastern bloc countries which claimed to have abolished the commodity form by means of an all-encompassing state apparatus, as it was to those countries of the Western bloc which claimed to have abolished class relations by means of an all-encompassing consumerism: on a certain level, the fetishization of the productive forces by the former was the inevitable and necessary flip side of the fetishization of the relations of production typical of the latter.

Put more concretely still, whatever their superficial differences, the Cold War politics of Eastern state formation and Western consumerism did indeed converge on the level of what can be termed state-monopoly infrastructures of production. Where the holy trinity of privatized American consumerism, namely the automobile, the
supermarket and the suburb, rested physically on publicly-subsidized highways, land speculation, utility and power grids, post offices, publicly leased TV and radio broadcast frequencies, and financially on publicly-subsidized research universities and home mortgages, the hegemonic institutions of the Eastern bloc – the single national Party, the armed forces and the far-from-secret police – relied upon a similar and no less contradictory mobilization of a vast and ultimately privatizing educational, cultural and scientific production-apparatus, something captured fully perhaps only by Heiner Mueller’s stinging witticism, to the effect that the leading industry of East Germany was always the production of state enemies. By the same token, what separated the Imperial heartland from the Eastern bloc periphery was precisely the military-industrialism which united them; relatively little of the vast social surplus generated by the massive credit expansion of the 1945-70 boom would be harvested by the state structures which engineered such, rather the bulk of such would be reappropriated domestically by the spin-off industries of the Cold War (especially the US high-tech sector) as well as the East Asian and EC export-platform economies.  

This brief gloss on the internal machinery of competing superstates which, due to the historicity of their internal structures, are themselves hardly free agents, but are tightly integrated into the larger social processes they unwittingly set into motion, suggests in turn that our received notions of the Cold War, inclusive of its political analysis and cultural periodization, need to be rethought from a new and presumably multinational perspective. Adorno’s very first move here is to ask us to reconsider, for a moment, the era of untrammeled American supremacy at that seemingly most undialectical of all things, namely its face-value: “Was strahlt, als waere es ueber den Antagonismen, ist eins mit der universalen Verstrickung. Das Allgemeine sorgt dafuer, dass das ihm untergeworfene Besondere nicht besser sei als es selbst. Das ist der Kern
aller bis heute hergestellten Identität.” [What radiates, as if it were beyond all antagonisms, is one with the universal entanglement. The generality ensures that the specific subjugated under it is no better than itself. That is the kernel of all hitherto constructed identity.] ND:306 On one level, no better diagnosis of the mythology of an onrushing, sweeping, irresistible Americanization-qua-globalization could be imagined; on another level, such a judgement can work its magic and break the spell of multinational capital only to the extent that we are capable of acknowledging and interpreting that generality as a spell-binding universal. This issue is closely linked to what countless critics have considered to be the fatal flaw of the Frankfurt School, namely its supposedly self-defeating insistence on not putting the cart of mass protest ahead of the negative-dialectical horse; how is resistance to the totality even possible, one might ask, if only those at the very heart of the system are really capable of diagnosing the workings of such?

Adorno’s answer is to insist that we rethink what we mean by resistance (that code word for that most complex and rarefied of all mediations, class struggle itself), by separating the function of theoretical cognition from the function of micropolitical practice. That labor of cognition otherwise known as theory is not the same thing as the cognition of labor which one might call, for lack of a better term, a global-trending micropolitics. Both diverge in time and in place; neither is to be collapsed into the other. Indeed, their social distance from one another (the distance from the centers of theory-production, currently concentrated in the global university system, from the trade unions, civic organizations, micropolitical collectives and nongovernmental organizations or NGOs of the global polity) is a product of a quite real division of labor – a division which is an indispensable index and diagnostic symptom of the total system in its own right, and the key to unlocking its historical content. This is why it would be a mistake to titrate out
any particular sociological or political collectivity in the Cold War – say, a given agency of the American national security state of the Fifties, or the underground media arm of the Polish labor-movement of the Seventies – in an effort to identify a specific factor or element of the total system as the determining or explanatory factor of such (a practice most evident in a certain conservative historiography, which postdated the 19th century historiography of kings and battles with the fanciful arts of Kremlinology and hysterical intelligence reports on Chinese weapons-systems capabilities, as much as in a certain dogmatic materialism, which sees nothing but ruling-class conspiracies where it should see historical structures). It is not merely that Cold War consumerism unknowingly created the global financiers and multinational corporations which would wrest control of the world-system from the business elites of the Pax Americana in the Nineties, just as the Eastern bloc cadre state unwittingly generated that modernized and politicized working-class which, in classic Marxist fashion, would overthrow the one-party state in the course of the 1989-1993 revolutions; Adorno’s scandalous contention would be that each was the precondition for and necessary motivating instance of the other.

What is at issue here is the role of immediacy in global capitalism, or more precisely, the role of the immediate as a category vis-à-vis the shadowy, uncharted realm of the multinational. For starters, one should note that the multinational is not really a category or constellation but rather a set of constellations, which encompasses the multinational commodity-form, multinational finance capital, multinational bodies of capital and much else besides. Theory, in turn, confronts none of these things directly, but relies on two additional sets of mediations. Following Bourdieu’s terminology, theory is first of all part and parcel of the specialized fields of cultural critique and ideological production (this would include the particular valence of its micropolitical charge as much as its localized function within whatever national or international mediatic, educational or
cultural niche market is at hand). Secondly, every act of theory is an intervention, whether willed or no, in the global habitus of a consumer culture which produces, distributes and retails all manner of cognitions, ranging from the hourly newscast to the blockbuster sports broadcast. Both mediations converge in theory’s status as a form of multinational cultural capital designed to access (and occasionally even subvert) what Spivak famously called the teaching machine. Theory, in short, has one foot in the daily management of the global factory, and another in the plebian work-rhythms and mediatized resistances of the global employee; the internal distance between its specialized production-networks and the things it reflects upon is no subjective delusion, but supplies the internal index of that external social polarization which rendered a specialized marketplace of theoretical-interpretive mediations necessary in the first place. In Adorno’s words:

Im Geist ist Einstimmigkeit des Allgemeinen Subjekt geworden, und Allgemeinheit behauptet in der Gesellschaft sich nur durchs Medium des Geistes, die abstrahierende Operation, die er hoechst real vollzieht. Beides konvergiert im Tausch, einem zugleich subjektiv Gedachten und objektiv Geltenden, worin doch die Objektivitaet des Allgemeinen und die konkrete Bestimmung der Einzelsubjekte, gerade dadurch, dass sie kommensurabel werden, unversoehnt einander opponieren. [In the Mind the compulsorily unitary nature of the general becomes subject, and generality maintains itself in society only through the medium of the Mind, the abstracting operation, which it really and truly fulfills. Both converge in exchange, in that which is simultaneously subjectively thought-out and objectively valid, wherein the objectivity of the general and the concrete determination of the individual subject are rendered commensurable and yet, for that reason, irreconcilably oppose one another.] ND:310

Though Adorno had the unreflective nominalisms of the philosophy-industries of the Fifties and Sixties in mind here, it’s worth remembering just how far ahead of the curve this passage really is compared to the post-structuralist theories of form which began to emerge in the early Seventies, everywhere from Foucault’s archeologies of power, which
are really social genealogies organized around the micropolitics of gay liberation, to Kristeva’s Eastern European version of a radically dissenting realm of samizdat or international signification, all the way to Lacan’s televisual mirror-stages, icons of that henceforth cinematic French political unconscious which came to light in the great anti-colonial struggles of the Gaullist era. None of these theories acknowledged the problematic of exchange as a theoretical issue, nor developed a metric capable of not only explaining why the total system is indeed total, but measuring this totality in the first place. This had the fateful consequence that post-structuralism never developed a true theory of multinational aesthetics or of multinational micropolitics comparable to, say, Bourdieu’s analysis of the multinational habitus or Jameson’s excursus on global postmodernism, but tended to recycle a wide variety of neo-national mediations or modernist source-texts in lieu of such (e.g. Derrida’s notion of the ashes of meaning first outlined in *Glas*, which is forced to substitute the burning or consumption of sign-systems in lieu of a viable account of the temporality of the consumer culture; or Lacan’s recycling of Barthes’ mythic photographs into the cinematic backdrops of the Symbolic and Real). Post-structuralism’s critique of the total system, to the extent it lacked a concept of systematicity, remained all too structuralist.

Systematicity, however, is precisely what Hegel’s concept of universal history focuses on, and for a very good reason. Simply, universal history plays much the same role in the Hegelian system as the mathematicized natural sciences play in Kant’s philosophemes, i.e. provides the arch-mediation which, by virtue of its abstractive power, not only vouchsafes the existence of all other mediations but leverages the materiality of these latter, becoming thereby realer than the reality of its subcomponents. The historical greatness of both philosophers was to have standardized the act of thinking with the conceptual tools of cognition, making them identical to one another and thereby
permitting identity to be thought in the first place; the historical price paid for this
advance was the no less fateful suppression of that which resists thought and the
exclusion of that which has not yet been or cannot be conceptualized. In Hegel, this is the
genesis of the painful and irreconcilable rift between the Mind and the worked material of
its own prehistory, which occasions the retrospective turn of the owl of Minerva (i.e.
prehistory is transformed into post-history). In Kant’s case, the non-identity of the
experimental situation of the natural sciences with the juridically stringent judgement
returns as the notorious Kantian block, the unthinkability of the truly moral thought
which then necessitates that interesting new thing, the moralizing thought-experiment
(not quite the codified legal case study, but no longer the theistic rationalization of
hieratic privilege, either). Marx’s exemplary contribution here was to have given us the
tools to both register the historical charge of the Kantian and Hegelian systems, and
decipher their revolutionary social and political content. Whereas the Kantian categories
are the first great historical attempt to think through the juridical revolution of national
capital, i.e. the abolition of hieratic and nobilitarian privileges alike by contractual law,
and where Hegel’s universal history narrated the rise of the nation-state as content and
national identity as a form (the Mind as the utopian self-consciousness of the Prussian
state), Marx analyzes national capitalism as the localized, transitory incarnation of the
much broader accumulation-process of the world-market. This has profound
consequences for the thinking of the universal, which we can no longer simply assume to
be identical with our received notions of the juridical sphere, the national, or indeed the
global:

Universalgeschichte ist zu konstruieren und zu leugnen. Die Behauptung eines in
der Geschichte sich manifestierenden und sie zusammenfassenden Weltplans zum
Besseren waere nach den Katastrophen und im Angesicht der kuenftigen zynisch.
Nicht aber ist darum die Einheit zu verleugnen, welche die diskontinuierlichen,
chaotisch zersplitterten Momente und Phasen der Geschichte zusammenschwiesst, die von Naturbeherrschung, fortschreitend in die Herrschaft über Menschen und schliesslich die über innwende Natur. Keine Universalgeschichte führt vom Wilden zur Humanität, sehr wohl eine von der Steinschleuder zur Megabombe. Sie endet in der totalen Drohung der organisierten Menschheit gegen die organisierten Menschen, im Inbegriff von Diskontinuität... Zu definieren wäre der Weltgeist, würdiger Gegenstand von Definitionen, als permanente Katastrophe. [Universal history is to be construed and to be denied. The assertion of an all-encompassing world-plan of betterment manifesting itself in history would be, after the catastrophes and in view of those yet to come, cynical. This however is not license to deny the unity which welds together the discontinuous, chaotically fragmented moments and phases of history, that of the subjugation of nature, advancing in domination over human beings and ultimately over internalized nature. No universal history leads from savagery to humanity, but one indeed from the slingshot to the H-bomb. It concludes in the total threat of organized humanity against organized human beings, in the incarnation of discontinuity... The world-spirit, worthy object of definitions, could be defined as permanent catastrophe.] ND:314

If there is no ultimate salvation of the local amidst the catastrophe of the global, this is not to the local’s discredit, but is a call to rethink the category of the revolutionary coupûre, social-historical ruptures or breaks between modes of production, legal regimes, aesthetic formations and so forth, in the natural-historical context of the catastrophe.

Adorno takes especial care to emphasize that Marx’s own concept of the revolutionary break posited the immediate overthrow of the relations of production, that is to say, the concrete negation of the blind compulsion of accumulation, rather than the continuation of such in a modified form. Catastrophe for Marx was a code-word for the continuation of the baleful immediacy of prehistory – the Wagnerian twilight of the precapitalist gods, wherein the crumbling of ancien regimes from France to China under the hammer-blows of national wars of unification, English textile exports and raging colonialism was the flip side of the rise of the British Empire, the American frontier expansions and accelerating proletarianization – rather than the cessation of such. Nor is it an accident that the Marxian antipodes of the nightmarish continuum of prehistory and the utopian
thunderclap of a labor-time redeemed are already structured like the privileged narrative thematic of the 19th century novel, namely the rocky transition between the Faustian speculation (the annunciation of exchange-value via bourgeois or commodity society) and the Nietzschean transvaluation (the politicization of exchange-value via the class-struggles of commodity society). This, of course, can be nothing other than the moment of The Communist Manifesto, wherein Marx and Engels synthesize their ground-breaking theory of class consciousness out of the unlikeliest admixture of German philosophy, French politics and English economics imaginable. Put another way, the Marxian revolutionary break was a call for greater mediation, not less; a call for the expansion of the classic Enlightenment ideals of autonomy and freedom, not their revocation; a call for the annullment of the iron laws of capitalist accumulation, not their continuation under another guise; a call for free and fair exchange, rather than the expansion of the realm of unequal exchange.

All this has a remarkable affinity to our earlier discussion of laboring bodies which think and the concepts by which labor-time is cognized, or what in the era of multinational capitalism can be termed the categories of multinational prehistory and the transnational revolutionary break. These latter should not be misconstrued as being purely spatial in nature, an illusion endemic to the conservative cultural and economic neo-nationalisms of the Nineties, which promulgated an eternal or unchanging identity politics as the sovereign antidote to irresponsibly footloose or overly speculative capital flows, rather than analyzing the economic system which relies on these flows (visible everywhere from Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir, who publicly blasted hedge fund speculators like George Soros for causing the Southeast Asian economic collapse of 1997-1998, to the Rightwing neo-nationalisms of the European Union which scapegoated immigrants and the welfare state for the high unemployment caused by Maastricht
monetarism, to the various Second and Third World religious fundamentalisms). Rather, they relate to the multinational consumer culture exactly as Adorno’s concept of subject-experience relates to the preponderance of the object: the former are modes of resistance to the blind, unthinking ahistoricism of the latter.

This has its classic model in Marx’s theory of capitalism as a mode of production, which was meant to mediate between the local act of expropriation (the singularity of the individual capitalist) and the global violence of laissez-faire accumulation (the mode of production), while respecting the specificity of both processes. Likewise, the theory of class struggle was meant to mediate between the particulars of the Paris Commune, trade union organization and the Factory Acts on the one hand, and the universality of the post-1848 national political sphere on the other, without flattening either pole into its opposite. Theory is not a compromise between the concepts of idealism and the nascent positivisms of the bourgeois empiricists, it is the sublation of both into genuinely historical thinking; conversely, the extreme allergy of idealism and empiricism alike towards the thinking of history is no mere accident, but constitutes their variant of intellectual praxis. “Die gesellschaftliche Parteiischkeit der Idealisten reicht hinab in die Konstituentien ihrer Systeme,” notes Adorno in this context, “Sie verherrlichen Zeit als unzeitlich, Geschichte als ewig aus Angst, dass sie beginne.” [The social partisanship of the idealists reaches all the way into the constituents of their systems. They glorify temporality as non-temporal, history as eternal out of the fear it might begin.] ND:325 Classical idealism’s inability to formulate a coherent concept of time, or more precisely the transformation of hieratic, preindustrial time into calculable labor-time, has its counterpart in the no less striking inability of bourgeois economists ranging from Adam Smith to the contemporary field officers of the IMF to adequately comprehend capitalism as a system in constant motion, everywhere from the business cycle to the mechanisms of globally unequal exchange. It
follows that Marx’s own concepts of the marketization of time and space, namely
exchange-value and primitive accumulation respectively, are not simply static
classifications or economistic typologies but serve as social genealogies of a special kind. These latter do not disregard the insights of the political economists or idealist philosophers of the day, but bring the historical charge of each into contact with the other, thereby permitting Marx to map out the dialectic of Victorian-era national economics and the politics of 19th century nationalism by means of a specifically international intellectual praxis: the invention of a theory of national capitalism. The positively Hegelian subtleties of the value-transformations wrought by the machinofacture division of labor outlined in the Grundrisse are not a meaningless digression from the hard-headed realism of the Communist Manifesto, they are its logical and necessary end-result, i.e. furnish the genuine theory of the production and accumulation of exchange-value which the Manifesto merely invoked; meanwhile Marx’s luminous decoding of the German ideology as the mailed fist of a Prussian state apparatus unable, in marked contrast to Adam Smith’s Invisible Hand, to cloak itself in the guise of a properly Hegelian Volksgeist or popular spirit, stands as one of the first great theories of the world ideology-market.

This raises the intriguing thought that the Marxian genealogy can be thought of as the Ur-form of the Adornic constellation, that is to say as the specifically national prototype of the multinational networks of the latter. The reality is a bit more complicated, inasmuch as the genealogy is fundamentally about a set of temporal successions rather than spatial displacements; Adorno’s own concept of temporality, as we shall see somewhat later, is meant to convey the rather different notion of transience or provisionality. Temporal succession per se is, however, most definitely an issue in Negative Dialectic’s reconfiguration of one the key registers of the Marxian genealogy,
namely the category of original or primitive accumulation. Marx already makes it clear that there were in fact multiple forms of primitive accumulation throughout history, ranging from the plundering of the peasantry to slavery, and from piracy to organized colonialism. Adorno will push this insight still further, by setting the categories of the generality and the individual (the German term here, “das Individuum”, has a sharper flavor than the English term, vaguely connoting that which is individuated) in motion towards the Hegelian antipodes of the world-spirit and the popular spirit. This seemingly obscure maneuver is meant to recuperate one of the crucial weaknesses of the Hegelian system, namely its inability to narrate the nation-state as a cultural form, as a properly dialectical strength: it is precisely because the notion of the popular spirit so abysmally fails to transmit a useable concept of a particular national identity that the world-spirit succeeds so brilliantly in incarnating the revolutionary universalism of the national. Put another way, the popular spirit and the world-spirit relate to one another very much like the Marxian notion of primitive accumulation and national capital: the former is the simultaneous or contemporary prehistory of the latter, its embarrassing shadow or double, which the latter takes the greatest pains to disavow. What Adorno is really asking us, then, is to think of the individual and the generality as the scandalous prehistory of something else:

Das Individuum ueberlebt sich selbst. Bei seinem Residuum aber, dem geschichtlich Verurteilten, ist allein noch, was nicht der falschen Identitaet sich opfert. Seine Funktion ist die des Funktionslosen; des Geistes, der nicht einig ist mit dem Allgemeinen und darum ohnmachtig es vertritt. Nur als das von der allgemeinen Praxis Eximierte ist das Individuum des Gedankens faehig, dessen verandernde Praxis beduerfte… Durch Erfahrung und Konsequenz ist das Individuum einer Wahrheit des Allgemeinen faehig, die dieses, als blind sich durchsetzende Macht, sich selbst und den anderen verhuellt. Nach herrschendem Consensus soll das Allgemeine seiner blossen Form als Allgemeinheit wegen Recht haben. Selbst Begriff, wird sie dadurch begrifflos, reflexionsfeindlich; erste Bedingung von Widerstand, dass der Geist das in ihr durchschaut und nennt,
This wondrous evocation of a localized, fragile and evanescent resistance, which breaks the spell of the universal by reflecting upon its own entanglement in such, is more than just the virtual blueprint of the New Left ushered in by the great uprisings of Prague and Paris, Mexico City and Chicago. The ingenious recuperation of a transformative praxis out of the praxis-making generality, of the thought which sets thinking into motion versus the accumulated conceptual machinery of thinking, reprises the tension between the Cold War political event and the international political mobilization from a specifically temporal standpoint: that which outlives itself turns out to be the reservoir of hope for the revolutionary chance which was missed.

This chance should not be misread, however, as a xerox copy of Benjamin’s retrospectively utopian moment, the moment of the revolutionary rupture, or even the utopian contingency of the existentialists. Rather, the chance is the temporal complement of Marx’s insight into the spatial definition of the bourgeois individual, which is defined purely by its relative position in the exchange-net vis-à-vis those with nothing to sell but their labor-power: this is the definitive, breath-taking leap from an international commodity-space to a genuinely multinational labor-time. Conversely, it is the very poverty of marketized individuality, its meager existence as the social mask of a
totalizing abstraction which must ceaselessly expropriate this labor-time or itself be expropriated, and the contradiction this implies to the euphoric fictions of its boundless autonomy, which makes it such a valuable index of that labor-time. This contradiction runs deeper than the observation that the ideology of individual opportunity relies, in practice, upon the massive and sustained collective sacrifice ordained by the competition of all against all, or that the self-made person is really the product of a vast and intricate division of labor. True as these may be, the more important point is that the innermost core of the ideology of the individual turns, at its outer limit, against the marketplace which created it. Collective individuation is antagonistic to capitalist individualism. This is most obvious in the mundane or plebian forms of subjective resistance which Adorno identifies in the aesthetic practice of the 20th century’s arch-critic of consumerism, namely Marcel Proust; whose diagnostic salons, involuntary memories and meticulously improvised interior monologues will play, as we shall see, a very special role in the conclusion section of *Negative Dialectics*.

In fact, Adorno’s distrust of the existential utopia of an unlimited contingency is based not on any Old World phobia of malls and parking lots, or the mandarin rejection of the pleasures of the shopping expedition, but on the deeply materialistic insistence that such concepts automatically exclude the only valid metric of revolutionary praxis, namely happiness itself. Contingency is the flip side of necessity; each mediates and is in turn mediated by the existence of the other. By fetishizing a single pole of this apposition – the intellectual equivalent of an actionistic politics which denounces everything and everyone as fascistic and, by completely failing to analyze or combat the real violence of the marketplace, turns into the most complete inactionism – existentialism unwittingly halts the dialectic between the two, thereby secretly carrying out the logic of the historical necessity it supposedly wishes to defy. It is to Sartre’s lasting credit as a thinker
that he not only recognized this but had the courage to move beyond his own categories, pushing beyond the metaphysical macrology towards the theoretical micrology in the momentous shift from the experimental models of micropolitical seriality outlined by the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* to the psychobiographical subject-categories of *The Family Idiot*, some two decades before the post-structuralisms would raise the subjective or linguistic turn to a theoretical norm.

Whatever their other differences, the work of both thinkers converges on the general level of the problem of narrating historical necessity in the era of the Cold War as a form, a.k.a. the disjuncture between universal history (read: national and international metaphysics) and the universality of natural history (read: the total system of the late Sixties). Sartre’s study of Flaubert, for example, situates the temporal logic of the latter’s psychobiographical development amidst the spatial logic of a Francophone cultural space, setting in motion the objective pole of the practico-inert (the institutional battles between the reproductive strategies of the bourgeois nuclear family, the ideological discourses of medicine and mechanism, the institutional infrastructures of the clergy, private schools, and the law, and the various class struggles of France during the Belle Epoque) towards its subjective antipode (Flaubert’s own self-conscious strategies of aesthetic reflexivity and ordination as an artist). *Negative Dialectics* does something similar, only with the crucial difference that Adorno reverses the polarities of the temporal and the spatial, by situating the expressly spatial logic of the subject of consumer capitalism amidst the temporal discontinuities of the international philosophical field. There is even a quasi-Sartrean practico-inert at work here, whose subject-pole, the corpus of the various national philosophic traditions (German idealism and ontology, French positivism, English pragmatism, etc.) is similarly set into motion.
towards its objective counterpart (the administered culture, technological-scientific
division of labor and international class struggles of consumer capitalism).

Due to health reasons, Sartre never completed his masterwork, but it seems he
intended the last volume to focus on Madame Bovary, essentially deploying the
preceding three volumes of analysis as a dialectical springboard in establishing a new
theory of aesthetics (a mandate fulfilled by Sartre’s most insightful and receptive
American reader, namely Fredric Jameson, who would basically invent multinational
Marxist culture criticism in the epochal The Political Unconscious). Adorno, on the other
hand, did indeed complete Negative Dialectics, and there is a sense in which the
conclusion of his work does not represent an ending or summation, so much as the most
astonishing and unexpected sort of beginning imaginable. Our first clue here is the subtle
but unmistakeable tremor which runs through the category of metaphysical experience or
subjective experience-content in the course of the latter half of the excursus on Hegel, as
seemingly unimportant as the café chatter of the UC Berkeley students in the weeks
before the Free Speech movement, the latest jokes of the citizens of Prague in late 1967,
or the gossip making the rounds of the village markets in the Mekong Delta. It is the
moment when analysis turns into resistance: “In der menschlichen Erfahrung ist der Bann
das Aequivalent des Fetischcharakters der Ware,” notes Adorno [In human experience,
the bane is the equivalent of the fetish-character of the commodity.] ND:339 Just like
commodity fetishism, which exists completely independently of whether individual
subjects believe in it or not, simply because capitalism is a system which runs not on
belief but on the objective exchange between producers, consumers and distributors
mediated by the abstraction of the marketplace, so too is the bane a generalized condition,
the inevitable and objective result of an extended division of labor in which the
production, distribution and consumption of ideology is a business like any other. Put
more concretely still: “Bann und Ideologie sind dasselbe.” [Bane and ideology are the same.] ND:342 It needs to be emphasized here that the word “ideology” is not an epithet for Adorno: it can signify the progressive resistance of the ruled as much as the reactionary organization of the rulers. If there is one fundamental lesson to be drawn from Negative Dialectics, it is that while a genuinely emancipated society would have no need of ideology, we are light-years from this state of affairs, and that the only solution to the bane of ideology, ruling-class theory, and the false cognition is not less but more ideology, more theory, and more cognition (this is the radical sting at the heart of Brecht’s offhand remark, that the only solution to the bureaucratization of the state is to make everyone a state bureaucrat). If ideology is literally the bane of multinational capitalism, then this bane may yet be turned against capital. In the false world, the falsity of ideology is its most powerful truth-content. Itself the prey of the baleful spell of the totality, the subject may yet unlock the secret of this bane, by casting the counter-spell on the totality which enchants it.

By the same token, this subject is clearly not the same thing as the particular point of view, the individual enchained to the false collectivity, or the do-it-yourself ideology whose flip side is continuous self-adjustment to the repressive generality. Rather, it represents the provisional and uncertain possibility, visible in flashes and fragments, of a new type of self-realized collectivity: the subjective pole or individuated principle of a multinational labor-time, or what amounts to an emancipatory multinational collectivity. A little thought will show that such a potential subject does indeed exist, and one created amidst the seething vortex of global corporate competition, the geopolitical imperatives of the Cold War and its violently contradictory logics of global accumulation: nothing less than the first genuinely multinational superstate of Planet Earth, the European Union.
Astonishing as it sounds, Adorno is asking us to think through one of the most fundamental contradictions of the Eurostate, namely the clash between a multinational subjectivity and the objective natural history of capital, some thirty years before the EU’s euro-denominated declaration of financial, industrial and political autonomy from an expired Pax Americana on January 1, 1999.

It’s important to note that this natural history no longer refers, contrary to what one might expect, to a specific state apparatus or national accumulation-structure, or even the international ones of Cold War power-blocs, but to the multinational successor to all these things. Adorno approaches this problem not from the transcendent perspective of the various cultural logics of capital (e.g. post-Cold War political expediency, high-tech competition with the Americans and East Asians, the integration of the former Eastern bloc into EU civil society, and so forth), but from the immanent standpoint, of the historical necessity of the internal capital-logic of state-formation (e.g. the multinational concentration of capital and its extended division of labor, as well as multinational accumulation structures): “Die Objektivitaet des geschichtlichen Lebens ist die von Naturgeschichte.” [The objectivity of historical life is that of natural history.] ND:347

Conversely, the objectivity of natural history, the immanent compulsion of capital to ceaselessly reproduce itself and expand the relations of commodity production as well as the productive forces, is the primary index of that history. For Marx, this principle was that of the necessity itself, the realm of unfreedom; far from being the magical key which would unlock revolutionary transformation, the iron laws of motion of capitalist prehistory were just that, iron laws, which an emancipated society would abolish. The choice between the Wall Street rentiers and the Eurobankers is false. Capitalist necessity is both the mother of invention and the father of destruction: it is what historically blocks the latent potential of its subjects for happiness, preventing its realization and destroying
the fragile manifestations of such. Adorno names this necessity Naturgesetzlichkeit, or natural nomothetism:

Die Naturgesetzlichkeit der Gesellschaft ist Ideologie, soweit sie als unveränderliche Naturgegebenheit hypostasiert wird. Real aber ist die Naturgesetzlichkeit als Bewegungsgesetz der bewusstlosen Gesellschaft, wie es das ‘Kapital’ von der Analyse der Warenform bis zur Zusammenbruchstheorie in einer Phaenomenologie des Widergeistes verfolgt. Der Wechsel der jeweils konstitutiven ökonomischen Formen vollzog sich gleich dem der über die Jahrmillionen hochkommenden und aussterbenden Tierarten. [The natural nomothetism of society is ideology, insofar as it becomes hypostatized as that which is unchangeably nature-given. Natural nomothetism is however real as the law of motion of unconscious society, as ‘Capital’ traces it out in a phenomenology of the counter-Mind, from the analysis of the commodity form to the theory of economic crisis. The succession of each characteristic economic form proceeds like those of animal species, which emerge and go extinct over millions of years.] ND:349

Social nomothetism and natural nomothetism thus function as the indices of a multinational space and time, respectively, concepts whose historical content is accessed by the Widergeist or counter-spirit to the totality. The incomparable contribution of the Hegelian system here is that inasmuch as it was the first great historical attempt to think through the social as natural and the natural as social, it does not compartmentalize or reify these concepts in the manner of a later bourgeois positivism, and can thus ask the sort of obvious and embarrassingly revealing questions about the interrelation of nature to history which later apologists for the total system would urgently seek to denounce, repress or forget: “Sein [Hegel’s] Weltgeist ist die Ideologie der Naturgeschichte.” [His [Hegel’s] world-spirit is the ideology of natural history.] ND:350 To the extent post-Hegelian ideology, the realm of socially necessary appearance, turns into a law of nature, or more precisely a law of Hegel’s innervated “second nature”, so too does the natural
world turn, as the work of Darwin memorably illustrates, into the object-mask of the
social.

Applying this to the context of the EU, there is indeed a sense in which the euro is
the ironically Hegelian reprise of the natural history of the American Empire, whose
characteristic features (a world reserve currency based on thermonuclear fiat rather than
gold, permanent military Keynesianism, international trade and capital flows, and the
consumer culture) are being sublated, one by one, into the vast credit markets, social
democratic accumulation structures, global capital flows and multinational niche markets
of the Eurostate. This is even more true for the dialectic of neo-national disintegration
and multinational integration in the Nineties: if the posthaste rush by Eastern bloc cadre
elites to cash in their symbolic and cultural capital for the supposedly “natural” or
economic version of the same thing during the 1991-95 period of postmodern primitive
accumulation or gangster capitalism reads like a new kind of natural history, this is only
because the Eurobourgeoisie was moving in precisely the opposite direction, innovating a
new kind of social history by leveraging its vast financial-industrial economic holdings
into various forms of symbolic, cultural and political capital (everything from the
European Central Bank, a deeply liquid Eurobond market, and the EuroStoxx index, to
various trade and aid agreements with Northern Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe
and the post-Soviet states). The precondition for the transformation of the Western
European bourgeoisie into the Eurobourgeoisie was the corresponding transformation of
the Eastern European nomenklatura into the euroklatura. Even Hegel’s “second nature”
puts in a return appearance, this time as the grim reality of that new division of labor
between the high-tech Central European metropole, the Visegrad semi-periphery
(specializing in labor-intensive semi-manufactured goods), and the true periphery of the
post-Soviet states (specializing in labor-intensive mineral and energy-rents) which
underlies all the media chatter of a European civil society and continental-wide integration. The question remains, however, as to the precise role of the afore-mentioned counter-Mind or contrary spirit to the totality, an evident code-word for the radical theoretical cognition, and what this has to do with the realm of the multinational. Here Adorno does not reach back to Hegel, but moves laterally to Benjamin’s luminous dialectics:

Das Moment jedoch, in dem Natur und Geschichte einander kommensurabel werden, ist das von Vergaengnis; Benjamin hat das im Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiel zentral erkannt. Den Barockdichtern, heisst es dort, schwebt Natur ‘vor als ewige Vergaengnis, in der allein der saturnische Blick jener Generation die Geschichte erkannte.’ Nicht nur der ihre: stets noch bleibt Naturgeschichte der Kanon geschichtsphilosophischer Interpretation: ‘Wenn mit dem Trauerspiel die Geschichte in den Schauplatz hineinwandert, so tut sie es als Schrift. Auf dem Antlitz der Nature steht ‘Geschichte’ in der Zeichenschrift der Vergaengnis. Die allegorische Physiognomie der Natur-Geschichte, die auf der Buehne durch das Trauerspiel gestellt wird, ist wirklich gegenwaertig als Ruine.’ [Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels, Frankfurt am Main © 1963, S. 199] Das ist die Transmutation von Metaphysik in Geschichte. Sie saekularisiert Metaphysik in der saekularen Kategorie schlechthin, der des Verfalls. Philosophie deutet jene Zeichenschrift, das immer neue Menetekel, im Kleinsten, den Bruchstuecken, welche der Verfall schlaegt und welche die objektiven Bedeutungen tragen. [The moment however, in which history and nature become commensurable, is that of transience; this is the central cognition of Benjamin’s Origin of the German Tragedy-Play. Nature hovered before the Baroque poets, so they say, ‘as eternal transience, in which alone the Saturnine glance of that generation recognized history.’ Not only of theirs; natural history was ever in the canon of historical-philosophical interpretation: ‘Where history wandered into the scenery of the tragedy-play, it did so as script. On the countenance of Nature stood ‘History’ as the signification of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of Nature-History, which was introduced to the stage through the tragedy-play, is truly contemporary as a ruin.’ [Origin of the German Tragedy-Play, pg. 199] That is the transmutation of metaphysics into history. It secularizes metaphysics into the secular category pure and simple, that of decline. Philosophy points to that signification, the always new Menetekel, in that which is smallest, the fragments struck loose by decline and which bear objective meanings.] ND:353
The temporality of international monopoly-capitalism relayed by the metaphysical traditions and categories clashes vigorously here with the accelerated transience of multinational capitalism: this is the fallen or degraded world of consumer capitalism, wherein everyone and everything is abstract, fungible and interchangeable. It’s noteworthy that Adorno subtly absolves the theological or idealist residue contained within Benjamin’s notion of the allegorical ruin intimated in the term “Verfall” (translated here as decline, with an overtone of decay or organic rot) by means of the innovative register of the script. Decline is measurable only by its distance from what is genuinely new: scripts, the heterogenous ciphers of transience, can thus work their particular historical magic only by being themselves transient, by pointing to the historical process rather than claiming any special privileges over such. Put another way, the script is something like the micropolitics of transience, whose laborious reading, interpretation and transcription is self-evidently a metaphor for the archeological spadework of theory itself: the decline of the international field of metaphysics is the necessary index of the rise of the multinational theory-market.

To find out what the stakes of this transformation might be for the vocation of theory and its related forms of praxis, however, we must turn to the most densely theoretical and at the same time candidly subjective passages of Negative Dialectics, the third set of model-analyses entitled “Meditations on Metaphysics”.
Notes


2. Doug Henwood’s excellent and informative Wall Street has a detailed account of the history of the US postwar credit boom. In a nutshell, the vast military Keynesianisms of the Forties and Fifties spawned a gigantic private credit boom, especially among US consumers (to finance mortgages) and financial corporations; total debt as a percentage of GDP rose from more than 150% of GDP in the early Fifties to over 250% today. Though US non-financial firms were forced to temporarily restrain their borrowing in the early Nineties, consumers and financial firms have shown no such restraint. Comparable debt levels in the European Union and East Asian countries range from roughly 250% of GDP in the EU to around 300% of GDP in Japan. Since the EU and Japan are global creditors, they can literally print whatever amounts of money they need to refinance their debt; in the future, the US, as a global creditor dependent on 250 billion euros of annual inflows of capital from abroad, will have to earn yen and euros on world markets to do the same. Doug Henwood. Wall Street: How it Works and for Whom. New York: Verso, 1997 (59).

3. “Especially in cultural critique, the event of political independence can be automatically assumed to stand in-between colony and decolonization as an unexamined good that operates a reversal. As I am insisting, the new nation is run by a regulative logic derived from a reversal of the old colony from within the cited episteme of the postcolonial subject: secularism, democracy, socialism, national identity, capitalist development. There is however a space that did not share in the energy of this reversal, a space that had no firmly established agency of traffic with the culture of imperialism. Conventionally, this space is described as the habitat of the subproletariat or the subaltern. Mahasweta’s fiction suggests that this is the space of the displacement of the colonization that can become, for her, a dystopic representation of decolonization as such. In this context, ‘decolonization’ becomes only a convenient and misleading word, used because no other can be found.

If neocolonialism is only seen from the undoubtedly complex and important but restrictive perspective of the metropolitan internal colonization or the postcolonial migrant or immigrant, this particular scenario of displacement becomes invisible, drops out of sight. The pouvoir-savoir or know-it-as-this/can-do-it-as-this of the discourse of feminism is obviously counterintuitive to the inhabitants of this space, the space of Mahasweta’s fiction. As she works actively to move the subaltern into hegemony, in her struggle in the field, she pushes them toward that other episteme, where the ‘intuitions’ of feminism become accessible. I am not arguing a fiction/reality opposition here. The narrow and the general sense infiltrate each other, bring each other to crisis, although they are not inscribed into a continuum.

Mahasweta’s fictions are thus not stories of the improbably awakening of feminist consciousness in the gendered subaltern. They are also not spoken for them, whatever that might mean. She does not speak as them, or to them. These are singular, paralogical figures of women (sometimes wild men, mad men) who spell out no model for

4. Nominalism is really a synonym, in this case, for consumerism or mass-cultural consciousness. Adorno’s warning not to become overly excited about the utopian aspects of specific products of the consumer culture remains timely: “Wahrhafter Vorzug des Besonderen waere selber erst zu erlangen vermoege der Veranderung des Allgemeinen. Ihn als Daseiendes schlechthin zu installieren, ist eine komplementaere Ideologie. Sie verdeckt, wie sehr das Besondere zur Funktion des Allgemeinen wurde, die es, der logischen Form nach, immer auch war. Woran der Nominalismus sich klammert als an seinen sichersten Besitz, ist Utopie; daher sein Hass gegen utopisches Denken, dass der Differenz vom Bestehenden… Nominalistisches Bewusstsein reflektiert ein Ganzes, das vermeoge der Partikularitaet und ihrer Verstocktheit fortlebt; buchstaeblich Ideologie, gesellschaftlich notwendiger Schein. Das allgemeine Prinzip ist das der Vereinzelung. Sie duenkt sich das unbezweifelbar Gewisse, verhext darauf, um den preis ihres Daseins nicht dessen innezuwerden, wie sehr sie ein Vermitteltes sei.” [The true preponderance of the particular could only be obtained by means of the transformation of the general. To simply install it as an existent is a complementary ideology. It conceals how much the specific has become the function of the general, which, according to its logical form, it was all along. That which nominalism clings to as its most prized possession is utopia; thus its hatred against utopian thinking, that of the difference from the existent… Nominalistic consciousness reflects a totality, which lives on by virtue of the particularity and its inner obstinacy: literally ideology, socially necessary appearance. The general principle is that of monadization. It gives the appearance of indisputable certainty, ensorceled by the fact that, as the price of its very existence, it may not innervate how deeply it is indeed mediated.] ND:307-308 Nominalism thus seeks to colonize the utopian impulse, by attempting to subsume or domesticate the promise of what might yet be under what already exists, something ceaselessly confirmed by the media blitzes which proclaim this or that particular business start-up, entrepreneurial venture, or speculative stock or real estate bubble to be an earth-quaking revolution.

5. “Die Intransigenz der Doktrin, zumal bei Engels, war jedoch gerade ihrerseits politisch. Er und Marx wollte die Revolution als eine der wirtschaftlichen Verhaeltnisse in der Gesellschaft als ganzer, in der Grundschicht ihrer Selbstverhaeltnung, nicht als Aenderung der Spielregeln von Herrschaft, ihrer politischen Form. Die Spitze war gegen die Anarchisten gerichtet. Was Marx und Engels dazu bewog, gleichsam noch den Suendenfall der Menschheit, ihre Urgeschichte, in politische Oekonomie zu ubersetzen, obwohl doch deren Begriff, an die Totalitaet des Tauschverhaeltnisses gekettet, selber ein Spaetes ist, war die Erwartung der unmittelbar bevorstehenden Revolution. Weil sie diese am naechsten Tag wollten, hatte es fuer sie die auessersste Aktualitaet, die Richtungen zu zerschlagen, von denen sie fuerchten muessten, sie wuerden aehnlich besiegt wie einst Spartakus oder die aufstaendischen Bauern. Sie waren Feinde der Utopie um deren Verwirklichung willen.” [However the intransigence of the doctrine, especially in Engels, was however for its part entirely political. He and Marx sought the revolution of the economic relations of the society as a whole, down to the bedrock of its self-preservation,
not as the transformation of the illusory rules of domination, of its political form. The thrust was directed against the anarchists. What motivated Marx and Engels to translate the prehistory of humanity, its original sin, as it were, into political economy, even though the concept of such—the totality of the exchange-relationship—was itself something quite modern—was the expectation of an immediately transpiring revolution. Because they wished this to happen as soon as possible, it was of the greatest importance to them to uproot those tendencies which they feared would be as decisively crushed as Spartacus or the peasant uprisings. They were the enemies of utopia for the sake of its realization.]

ND:316

6. This is nicely anticipated by Adorno in an offhand comment, which also manages to out-Sartre Sartre: “Theorie vermag die unmaessige Last der historischen Nezessitaet zu bewegen allein, wenn diese als der zur Wirklichkeit gewordene Schein erkannt ist, die geschichtliche Determination als metaphysisch zufaellig… Heute hat sich die vereitelte Moglichkeit des Anderen zusammengezogen in die, trotz allem die Katastrophe abzuwenden.” [Theory is capable of moving the exorbitant weight of historical necessity solely by recognizing this as a lumination become reality, the historical determination as metaphysically overdue… Today the much-maligned possibility of the Other has withdrawn itself into that which, despite everything, wards off catastrophe.] ND:317

Later Adorno will make the point still clearer: “Der als Zuschauer an Schlachten, Umstuerzen und Katastrophen sich berauscht, schweigt darueber, ob nicht die Befreiung, der er buergerlich das Wort redet, von jener Kategorie selbst sich befreien muesste. Marx lag das im Sinn: er designierte die Sphaere der als Gegenstand der Betrachtung zugeruesteten Groesse, der der Politik, als Ideologie und als vergaenglich. Die Stellung des Gedankens zum Glueck waere die Negation eines jeglichen falschens.” [He who as an observer becomes intoxicated with battles, the toppling of regimes and catastrophes, cannot gainsay this: that perhaps the emancipation which he in typical bourgeois fashion wishes to affirm ought to emancipate itself from precisely that category. Marx had this in mind: he designated the sphere of that artificially-produced greatness which was under consideration, that of politics, as ideology and as transient. The stance of thought in relation to happiness would be the negation of each and every false one.] ND:347

theoretical liabilities: “Trotz der allbekannten Definition der Geschichte hat denn auch Hegel keine Theorie des Fortschritts ausgefuehrt. Die Hegelsche Wanderung des Weltgeistes von einem Volksgeist zum anderen ist die zur Metaphysik aufgeplusterte Voelkerwanderung; diese freilich, ein ueber die Menschen sich Waelzendes, Prototyp der Weltgeschichte selbst, deren Augustinische Konzeption in die Aera der Voelkerwanderung fiel. Die Einheit der Weltgeschichte, welche die Philosophie animiert, sie als Bahn des Weltgeistes nachzuzeichnen, ist die Einheit des Ueberrollenden, des Schreckens, der Antagonismus unmittelbar. Konket ging Hegel ueber die Nationen anders nicht hinaus als in Namen ihrer unabsehbar sich wiederholenden Vernichtung. Der ‘Ring’ des Schopenhauerianers Wagner ist hegelianischer, als Wagner je beikam.” [In spite of the well-known definition of history, Hegel had therefore not really achieved a theory of progress. The Hegelian journey of the world-spirit from one popular spirit to another is folk-migration turned metaphysics; this indeed, as something which imposes itself on human beings, the prototype for world-history itself, whose Augustinian concept fell in the era of the mass migrations. The unity of world-history, which philosophy animates, highlighting this as the path of the world-spirit, is the unity of that which sweeps over all, that of terror, of immediate antagonism. Concretely Hegel did not move beyond the nation other than in the name of its unforeseeably recurrent annihilation. The Ring of the Schopenhauerian Wagner is more Hegelian than Wagner ever realized.] ND:335

8. Adorno insists that contingency is, pace Sartre, the caricature of freedom under the baleful spell or bane of the totality: “Das bloss Seiende, nach den hochgemuten Doktrinen des Idealismus Gegenteil des Weltgeists, ist seine Inkarnation, verkoppelt dem Zufall, der Gestalt von Freiheit unterm Bann.” [The merely existent, which according to the self-important doctrine of idealism is the opposite of the world-spirit, is its incarnation, connected to the contingency, the shape of freedom under the bane.] ND:338
The passage continues in a footnote on the next page: “Gerade der strikt deterministische Charakter der oekonomischen Bewegungsgesetze der Gesellschaft verurteilt ihre Mitglieder, wuerde ihre eigene Bestimmung wahrhaft als Kriterium geachtet, zum Zufall. Wertgesetz und Anarchie der Warenproduktion sind eines.” [Precisely the strictly deterministic character of the economic laws of motion of society condemns its members, assuming that its own determination was truly respected as a criterium, to contingency. The law of value and the anarchy of the production of commodities are as one.] ND:339
And still later: “Geschichtliche Kontingenz und Begriff widerstreiten einander desto erbarmungsloser, je fugenloser sie ineinander sind. Zufall ist das geschichtliche Schicksal des Einzelnen, sinnlos, weil der geschichtliche Prozess selber es blieb, der Sinn usurpierte.” [Historical contingency and the concept of history contradict one another all the more relentlessly, the more seamlessly they are interwoven. Contingency is the historical destiny of the particular individual, senseless, because the historical process remains exactly that which usurps all meaning.] ND:352

9. This utopian counter-spell has two sides, the formal one of tolerance amidst one’s own resistance for the resistances of others, and the utopian content of all these things: “Auch der Kritischste waere im Stande der Freiheit ein ganz anderer gleich denen, die er veraendert wuenscht. Wahrscheinlich waere fuer jeden Buerger der falschen Welt eine
richtige unerträgliche, er wäre zu beschädigt für sie. Dass sollte dem Bewusstsein des Intellektuellen, der nicht mit dem Weltgeist sympathisiert, inmitten seines Widerstands ein Quaentchen Toleranz beimischen. Wer in Differenz und Kritik nicht sich beirren lässt, darf doch nicht sich ins Recht setzen. Ein solcher Zusatz von Milde würde freilich in der ganzen Welt, gleichgültig unter welchem politischen System, als dekadent geachtet… Glück ist keine Invariante, nur das Unglück ist es, das sein Wesen hat an der Immergleichheit. Was an Glück intermittierend vom bestehenden Ganzen geduldet oder gewährt wird, trägt vorweg die Male der eigenen Partikularitaet. Alles Glück bis heute verspricht, was noch nicht war, und der Glaube an seine Unmittelbarkeit ist dem im Wege, dass es werde.” [Even the most critical person would in a condition of freedom be totally different, just like those one wished to change. Probably every citizen of the wrong world would find the right one intolerable, they would be too damaged for it. This ought to impart a bit of tolerance to the consciousness of intellectuals who do not sympathize with the world-spirit, amidst their resistance. Whoever does not allow themselves to be deflected from difference and critique is nonetheless not entitled to put themselves in the right. Such a moment of indulgence would of course be denounced as decadent throughout the whole world, under whatever sort of political system… Happiness is no invariant, only unhappiness is that which has its essence in monotony. Whatever happiness the existent totality intermittently permits or grants, bears the marks of its own particularity. All happiness to this day promises what never yet was, and the belief in its immediate presence gets in the way of its realization.] ND:345-346
CHAPTER VII

GLOBAL RESISTANCES

The difference a millenium makes! Less than a decade after the mediocre thesis of “the end of history” was retailed by Anglo-American elites with much indeed to fear from a future no longer under their control, and less than five years after the vaunted triumph of neoliberalism worldwide, the political project of global finance capital has self-destructed in spectacular fashion. Far from exhibiting any winding-down of history, the road signs at the end of the American century point to its unremitting acceleration into the pixel landscape of a 3D videogame, backlit by the phosphorescent flash of urban uprisings and illuminated with the glowing icons of pandemic financial panics, economic meltdowns and inconceivably vast state bailouts. The total system, as Adorno forecast so long ago, transmits every local contradiction globally, and the totality of these contradictions are forming historically new constellations – most notably, the drastic expansion of a multinational state apparatus, as the sheer size and scope of successive multinational economic crises has forced Japan and the richer East Asian countries to bail out the Pacific Rim precisely where the EU has refinanced Eastern Europe and Russia. Similar dynamics are at work in the firecracker string of protests against the neoliberal order from Paris ’95 to Seattle ’99, which responded to the virulent economic logic of Maastricht monetarism, the 1997-1998 Asian crash, and the Wall Street Bubble by effectively transforming the hitherto impalpable and impregnable economic abstraction of multinational capital into concrete institutions, policies, faces and places. In so doing, these movements did far more than just recuperate an emancipatory social history out of
the materials of a preexisting natural history, a.k.a. the continuum of transnational accumulation. They are the first genuine documents of the global Resistance to capital, a resistance which is constructing, by fits and starts, and out of the most diverse local materials, an emancipatory multinational subjectivity.¹

Remarkably, all this is rehearsed in grand style in “Meditations on Metaphysics”, the third and final set of model-analyses in Negative Dialectics, in the form of an astonishingly deft interplay between the poles of late 20th century social and natural history – or to be more precise, between the space of a deceased or extinct neo-nationalism (a.k.a. the American Empire) and the space of an ascendant multinationalism (the European Union and an East Asian polity). Comprised of twelve seemingly incidental reflections, loosely arranged around subtopics as diverse as death in late capitalism to the ideological function of happiness, the meditations radiate the subjective aura of the essayistic memoir while losing none of the concentrated punch of the objective aphorism. Far from being randomly improvised, the text is in fact an intricately organized ensemble of model-analyses, whose formal structure parallels in certain respects the tendency of late jazz modernism to recombine the most specialized instrumental improvisations with a newly multinational and plebian heterogeneity of aural material. In terms of content, on the other hand, the ensemble follows a specifically postmodern or multinational logic: that of a lattice or network of interlinked concepts, through which the ensemble is intended, mysterious as this sounds, to think itself. In consequence the ensemble begins to move as if under its own power, and in entirely unexpected directions; nor is it an accident that the tempo of the forty-seven-page passage accelerates towards the end, as if to allegorically reprise the famous Marxian injunction to rise from the abstract to the concrete, only this time as the transition from monopoly-national coordinates to multinational ones. This transition should not be
confused with the diachronic shift from a lesser systematicity towards a more organized one (the irresistible expansion of the exchange-net), but as the lateral move from prehistory to historical thinking proper: “Es liegt in der Bestimmung negativer Dialektik, dass sie sich nicht bei sich beruhigt, als waere sie total; das ist ihre Gestalt von Hoffnung.” [It lies in the constitution of negative dialectics, that it is never content to rest within itself, as if it were total; that is its form of hope.] ND:398 Transcendental restlessness is the antidote to the ceaseless expansion of the total system: it turns capital’s greatest strength, its natural-historical imperative to expand, into its own worst enemy, by revealing this expansion to be the product of social history, and thus answerable to the intervention of laboring bodies.

Intriguingly, Adorno opens the first of the twelve sections with the direst invocation of natural history imaginable, namely the erasure of a neo-national collectivity by the total system in the form of the catastrophe of the death-camps, conjoined to a revealing moment of self-critique:

Das perennierende Leiden hat soviel Recht auf Ausdruck wie der Gemarterte zu bruellen; darum mag falsch gewesen sein, nach Auschwitz liessse kein Gedicht mehr sich schreiben. Nicht falsch aber ist die minder kulturelle Frage, ob nach Auschwitz noch sich leben lasse, ob vollends es duerfe, wer zufaellig entrann und rechtens haette umgebracht werden muessen. Sein Weiterleben bedarf schon der Kaelte, des Grundprinzips der buergerlichen Subjektivitaet, ohne das Auschwitz nicht moeglich gewesen waere: drastische Schuld des Verschonten. Zur Vergeltung such ihn Traeume heim wie der, dass er gar nicht mehr lebte, sondern 1944 vergast worden waere, und seine ganze Existenz danach lediglich in der Einbildung fuehrte, Emanation des irren Wunsches eines vor zwanzig Jahren Umgebrachten. [Perennial suffering has as much right to express itself as the martyr has to scream; this is why it may have been wrong to say that one couldn’t write poetry after Auschwitz. What is not wrong however is the less cultural question of whether it is even permitted for someone to live after Auschwitz, who accidentally escaped and by all rights ought to have been murdered. His continued existence already necessitates the coldness, of the foundational principle of capitalist subjectivity, without which Auschwitz would not have been possible: the drastic guilt of those who were spared. As if to make up for this he is secretly
Adorno is of course referring to his own notorious comment that it would be barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, but the question usefully highlights one of the formative experiences of an entire generation of postwar Europeans on both sides of the Berlin Wall. This is the reality of the mandatory denationalization of Europe, the simultaneous expropriation of the various national cultures and the installation of international economic structures, echoed by Beckett’s theatrical limbo between an unbearable past and an unendurable present, or more precisely between the horrors of the death-camps and the catastrophes of the Cold War.² Adorno’s point would be that the very attempt to quantify the suffering of the death-camps, to assign it some sort of moral valence as a war crime (as though war was itself not the most grievous crime of all), would be the ultimate victory of fascist barbarism over humanity, and not only in the sense that, once again, human beings would be reduced to mere accounting-book entries. The true horror of the death-camps, rather, is that they never really closed down. Total extermination, the murderous integration of particular subjects into the total system, would be raised to a universal by Cold War geopolitics. And hardly of that era of geopolitics alone: the current planetary ecological crisis, the toxic byproduct of an unrestrained global marketplace, bespeaks a similar aporia, wherein the economic violence formerly monopolized by First World imperial armies and Second and Third World military-developmental states was merely outsourced to the IMF and the global credit and currency markets, rather than being abolished. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that neoliberalism is in this sense the equivalent of an economic world war, waged by a tiny ruling elite upon the bulk of the planetary population, whose consequences – horrific ecological destruction, the
razing of indigenous cultures, neocolonial impoverishment and falling living standards for billions of people – represent the fearsome continuation of the catastrophes of the mid-20th century, not the humane cessation of such.

Adorno will locate the principle of resistance to this grim state of affairs not in a renewed moral commitment or ethical project per se, but precisely in the radical incompatibility of the moral or existential choice with the inexorable experience of inhumanity. The non-identity between the two, rather than their false reconciliation, is what opens up a space for radical alternatives. If we cannot, as citizens of the wrong world, envision every last detail of the right one, we do at least have the capacity as thinking subjects to imagine a better state of affairs. Far from prescribing the anaesthetized quietism of the Hotel Abyss or lapsing into a routinized pragmatism, Adorno is insisting that we seize hold of this imaginative power, by turning the cognitive machinery spawned by the total system against itself. The relevant model proposed here, and this should jolt our cultural antenna into feverish activity, is that of being a spectator, someone who participates without completely participating:

Das Unmenschliche daran, die Faehigkeit, im Zuschauen sich zu distanzieren und zu erheben, ist am Ende eben das Humane, dessen Ideologen dagegen sich straeuben… Wohl sind die Menschen ausnahmslos unterm Bann, keiner zur Liebe faehig, und darum meint ein jeder sich zu wenig geliebt. Aber die zuschauerhafte Haltung drueckt zugleich den Zweifel aus, ob dies denn alles sein koenne, wahren doch das Subjekt, in seiner Verblendung sich so relevant, nichts anderes hat als jenes Arme und in seinen Regungen tierhaft Ephemere. Unterm Bann haben die Lebendigen die Alternative zwischen unfreiwilliger Ataraxie – einem Aesthetischen aus Schwaeche – und der Vertiertheit des Involvierten. Beides ist falsches Leben. Etwas von beidem aber gehoerte auch zu einer richtigen desinvolture und Sympathie. [That which is inhumane in this, the capacity to distance oneself and sublimate oneself by being a spectator, is in the end precisely that humanity, against which the ideologues of such so vehemently protest… In all likelihood, human beings are without exception under a bane; none are capable of love, and for that reason each and every one feels not loved enough. But the attitude of being a spectator expresses at the same time the doubt that this could
be all there is, while nonetheless the subject, relevant in its own deception, has nothing other than this poverty and that which is animalistically ephemeral in its impulses. Under the bane living beings have the alternative between involuntary ataraxy – an aesthetic of weakness – and the animalization of the involved. Both are false life. Something of each however belongs to an authentic désinvolture [off-handedness] and sympathy.] ND:356-357

This astonishing volte-face from the existential generality of the bane to the particular act of sympathy sets the social history of violence (recounted elsewhere in the themes of death and dying, nihilism and despair, the dog-eat-dog struggle for animal existence, and the grisly allegory of Adam, a ratcatcher who exterminates rodents, whom a child interprets as the Biblical Adam) into motion towards the natural-historical realm of animals, thereby revealing this latter to be the ironic truth-content of a society whose ever-expanding mastery over nature is itself in thrall to the commodity form. Along the way, Adorno refunctions one of Sartre’s most fundamental mediations, that of the practico-inert which shuttles between the registers of a neo-national cultural field (read: Gaullist France) and the international consumer culture (read: postwar Americanization) into the multinational cultural event. The twin poles of this latter – objective sympathy or solidarity with the oppressed, and subjective désinvolture or non-cooperation with the repressive totality – signify however far more than the particular activist engagement or a nascent politics of the counter-culture. They are the negation of the Kantian categorical imperative and the Hegelian world-spirit alike in the utopia of freely-chosen solidarity or non-compulsion.

From this standpoint, the true aporia of the official consumer culture after Auschwitz is not so much its local complicity with the violence of the total system, i.e. its Sartrean bad faith on a given political issue or its unwillingness to document the grim, meathook realities of transnational accumulation, but rather its objective essence as social compulsion. The fundamental aporia of multinational consumerism is that it is neither.
While the ideology of consumerism has never been more ubiquitous, the actual distribution of goods has never been more unequal. As the economic geographers inform us, the relatively well-off inhabitants of global metropole (East Asia, the EU and Northamerica) make up barely a tenth of the world population; the up-and-coming global semiperipheries (Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia) make up perhaps a fifth of the world population. Meanwhile the vast majority are little more than serfs of the global credit markets, shackled by $2 billion in unpayable hard currency debt, lorded over by neoliberal elites, and impoverished by the relentless economics of unequal exchange (the relative cheapening of primary or extractive goods vis-à-vis complex manufactured ones). The truth-content of the total system is negative: the socially necessary appearance of global consumerism is the inevitable flip side of transnational expropriation and accumulation.

This is a painful but necessary lesson for multinational intellectuals, who must somehow navigate between the Scylla of an all-embracing business culture (most notably, the rapid transformation of the national university systems into giant R & D labs for the multis) and the Charybdis of a virulent cultural nominalism, a.k.a. the cultural surplus-rents of the transnational mass media. The multinational marketplace of theory is neither to be condemned as a useless luxury, nor fetishized as a free-floating realm of utopian signification in its own right, but must acknowledge its limitations, weaknesses and insufficiencies as a genuine corrective upon its immanent tendency to replicate the logic of the system it wishes to criticize, i.e. to itself become a totality. It is in this largest context, of the quite real hegemony of multinational consumerism, in which Adorno’s most stinging and polemical critique of the culture-industry must be read: “Sie [Kultur] perhorresziert den Gestank, weil sie stinkt; weil ihr Palast, wie es an einer grossartigen Stelle von Brecht heisst, gebaut ist aus Hundescheisse… Alle Kultur nach Auschwitz,
samt der dringlichen Kritik daran, ist Muell.” [It [culture] perhorresces a stench, because it stinks; because its palace, as a tremendous line from Brecht puts it, is built of dogshit…

All culture after Auschwitz, including the urgent critique thereof, is garbage.] ND:359

Note that Adorno is specifically referring to official or mainstream culture here, not the radical works of art which diverge from and critique such; what is at issue is a significant and subtle rewriting of the products of the culture-industry from bric-a-brac or particulate junk (Schund) into an undifferentiated mass of garbage (Muell), i.e. something utterly and totally used up or consumed. Probably the closest aesthetic equivalent of this insight is to be found not in Beckett per se, but in the works of Czech animator Jan Svankmajer and East German playwright Heiner Mueller, artists who recycled and refashioned the cast-off materials of the consumer culture, its characteristic rhythms and cadences, attractions and repulsions, into the nascent realm of what can be termed Euroanime and Eurotheater, respectively. These latter express the logic of a powerful slippage of registers between international or Cold War temporality and multinational space, which end up either short-circuiting the ideology of consumerism altogether (e.g. Svankmajer’s Dimensions of Dialogue and Food), or else deciphering the compulsory state-monopoly culture of the East as the exact mirror of a no less totalitarian Western bloc consumerism (e.g. Mueller’s Life of Gundling and Hamletmachine).³

The flip side of this transformation is a renewed emphasis on the vocation of cultural criticism. By setting the mass-cultural categories of interpretation into motion against their own nominalism, critique resists the hegemony of the commodity-form on its own privileged terrain, that of the consumer culture. Criticism of mainstream culture must take care, in other words, neither to delimit itself to that mainstream, nor to allow this latter to define its critical vocabulary from afar; only the concrete, laborious process of the most careful aesthetic analysis may decide what qualifies as truly progressive or
state-of-the-art, versus what is banal or repetitive. Radical aesthetics and radical culture criticism thus necessarily complement each other; each depends for its fullest development on the developmental richness of the other. Consider for a moment how Adorno’s key example here, the Proustian recollection, annotates the postwar European experience of rapid modernization, motorization and urbanization in a positively Lacanian light:

Was Proust an Illiers aufging, ward aehnlich vielen Kindern der gleichen gesellschaftlichen Schicht an anderen Orten zuteil. Aber damit dies Allgemeine, das Authentische an Prousts Darstellung, sich bildet, muss man hingerissen sein an dem einen Ort, ohne aufs Allgemeine zu schielen. Dem Kind ist selbstverständlich, dass, was es an seinem Lieblingstädtchen entzückt, nur dort, ganz allein und nirgends sonst zu finden sei; es irrt, aber sein Irrtum stiftet das Modell der Erfahrung, eines Begriffs, welcher endlich der der Sache selbst waere, nicht das Armelige von den Sachen Abgezogene. [What Proust experienced at Illiers was something many children of the same social strata shared at different places. But for this generality, that which is authentic in Proust’s depiction, to emerge, one must be rooted to the one and only place, without squinting at the generality. To the child it is obvious that what delights it about its favorite little town is to be found there and only there, and nowhere else; it errs, but its error constitutes the model of experience, that of a concept, which ultimately would be that of the thing itself, not the poverty of that which is secondarily derived from things.] ND:366

The spatial transformation of the French countryside into highway-accessible tourist locales is not to be separated from the bewitching spell cast by Proust’s text; the latter is the utopian transfiguration or symbolic compensation for the depressing reality of the former. Just as the child’s error verges on the classic Lacanian méconnaissance or false identification, so too does the conjunction of the childhood experience of the visual panorama and the abstract generality subtly anticipate Lacan’s notion of the subjective mirror-stage and the objective Law-of-the-Father, a.k.a. the mediatic subjectivity of Gaullism and the mediatization of the postwar European subject, respectively. It is
precisely the clash of mediatic and non-mediatic registers – the non-identity between what Slavoj Zizek would term the poles of the Lacanian Real and Symbolic, that is to say the organized machinery of the consumer culture versus the realm of mass-cultural signification – through which the category of metaphysical experience (the Lacanian Imaginary, or what amounts to an anagram of the mass-cultural interpretation) is transmitted. Nothing is more metaphysical, indeed, than the junkiest, shallowest pleasures of the consumer culture: what is really nothing is somehow made over into or passed off as something. Conversely, that which is most substantial in the total system is its pure nothingness – the social abstraction of capital, whose inexplicable fury of appearance and disappearance is narrated in contemporary culture as a positively ecological set of transformations, ranging from the informatic mutation (the inception of new markets) to the cosmologic catastrophe (the collapse of old markets).

Though this would seem to have its most direct application in the realm of multinational commodity fetishism, cf. the creation of entire consumer and corporate cultures around the leading products of the postwar European consumer boom (French food products, Italian fashion and sports equipment, German cars and machine-tools, etc.), Adorno has something more rigorously dialectical in mind. This is the utopian core of even the most jaded and degraded consumerism, namely the moment of happiness or experience of a supercharged, overflowing temporality, which is either fulfilled by the nonviolent abnegation of the subject before the irreplaceable object (which, it should be noted, could as easily be another subject as a great work of art or a signal political event), or annulled by the realization of having waited in vain. In a gesture which foreshadows Pierre Bourdieu’s epochal call in Acts of Resistance for an “economics of happiness” which would counter the deeply self-destructive utopia of the market on its own calculable terrain, by tallying up the gargantuan social and human costs of unfettered
neoliberalism, Adorno calls for a rebellion against the totality, not from the standpoint of the damaged and distorted particular which is not permitted to be any better than the totality which produced it, but from the standpoint of the potential happiness of the totality. This latter shines from the rift between the particular and the general, radiating the promise of a happiness which could only be achieved collectively, beyond the reach of the repressive generality and the repressed particularity alike.

Nor is this rift set for all time in a particular mold, but changes according to its specific historical moment; indeed, it is one of the most significant indices of the latter. In the dawning era of liberal or entrepreneurial capitalism, the Kantian utopia explicitly endorsed by the American Declaration of Independence – “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” – briefly reconciled the pursuit of private business interests with the happiness of the totality by means of the negative category of unjust and unnatural tyranny, against which revolutionary justice (the freedom of a national people to choose their own form of government) could legislate itself into existence. By Marx’s day, this particular ideologeme was no longer progressive, simply because the wildcat violence of primitive accumulation had long since acceded to the organized violence of national capitalisms, locked into overt and covert struggle over colonial labor-power, supplies of raw materials, and naval-military control over worldwide shipping lanes. Consequently Marx was able to transform the keynote of the Hegelian system, namely the notion of that all-encompassing, self-actuated Mind which effectively nationalized the theological concept of the totality still latent in the great rationalist and mechanist systems, into the global category of self-actuated exchange-value, a.k.a. nationally-concentrated, internationally-extracted Capital. Marx’s famous appeal to the workers of the world is not rhetorical: it is the utterly realistic cognition that particular laborers are, irregardless of their class consciousness or lack thereof, locked into competition with other laborers across the
globe, i.e. that wages, or the average price of labor-time, are just as much mediated by the workings of a global marketplace as the price of a given commodity.

This suggests, among other things, that the Marxist categories are even more relevant nowadays, in the era of dizzyingly complex, well-nigh planetary flows of cultural, social and economic capital, than they were in the past; at the very least, one would expect dialectical thinking, as the thought-form most peculiarly characteristic of market societies (in the sense that, as a mode of thinking, it never rests, but ceaselessly revolutionizes itself), to be undergoing a similar worldwide expansion of scale and scope. Admittedly this impulse to expand is not a license to avoid thinking through precisely what is being demolished to make way for this expansion. “Dazu muss Dialektik, in eins Abdruck des universalen Verblendungszusammenhangs und dessen Kritik,” writes Adorno cogently, “in einer letzten Bewegung sich noch gegen sich selbst kehren.”

[“Dialectics must therefore, as the imprint of the universal context of mystification and the critique of such in one, turn in one last movement against itself.”] ND:397 Dialectics must consider itself, both in its general role as a theory of society, as well as its particular incarnation as a theory of specific works of art, ideological formations, historical events or what have you.

Applying this insight practically, the consumer culture is thus much more than simply the marketing bureau of consumer capitalism, or the saccharine ideology of a commercialized happiness which the total system has in any case already sabotaged in advance. Rather, it is one of the crucial intermediaries between the categories of labor-time and the commodity-form. Multinational consumerism is the Ur-form of global class consciousness. It negates the reality that subjects are really objects under the sway of the marketplace, objects whose labor-time is literally and figuratively consumed by a given production-process, by subjectivizing the world of objects. This suggests that truly
radical or pathbreaking works of multinational art do not simply reject the subjective quotient of consumerism out of hand, but turn the tables on such, by somehow being more consumeristic than the consumer culture itself: refashioning, in effect, the object-world of consumption into a subjective zone of production. Multinational aesthetics are realer than the reality of multinational capitalism itself. This has profound consequences for utopian thought and, indeed, the resistance to consumerism generally:

Die Idee einer Fuelle des Lebens, auch die, welche die sozialistischen Konzeptionen den Menschen verheissen, ist darum nicht die Utopie, als welche sie sich verkennt, weil jene Fuelle nicht getrennt werden kann von der Gier, von dem, was der Jugendstil sich Ausleben nannte, einem Verlangen, das Gewalttat und Unterjochung in sich hat. Ist keine Hoffnung ohne Stellung der Begierde, dann ist diese wiederum eingespannt in den verruchten Zusammenhang des Gleich um Gleich, eben des Hoffnungslosen. Keine Fuelle ohne Kraftmeierei. Negativ, kraft des Bewusstseins der Nichtigkeit, behaelt die Theologie gegen die Diesseitsglaubigen recht. Soviel ist wahr an den Jeremiaden ueber die Leere des Daseins. Nur waere sie nicht zu kurieren von innen her, dadurch, dass die Menschen anderen Sinnes werden, sondern einzig durch die Abschaffung des versagenden Prinzips. Mit ihm verschwaende am Ende auch der Zyklos von Erfuellung und Aneignung: so sehr sind Metaphysik und Einrichtung des Lebens ineinander. [The idea of the fullness of life, even those which pass themselves off as socialist conceptions of humanity, is for that reason not the utopia for which they are mistaken, because that fullness cannot be separated from the lust, which the Jugendstil named ‘living to the full’, a demand which has the act of violence and subjugation in itself. If there is no hope without the satiation of desire, then this is still enmeshed in the notorious context of like for like: that of hopelessness. No plenitude without power-grabbing. Negatively, theology holds the upper hand over those who disbelieve the afterlife, by virtue of the consciousness of nullity. So much is true in the jeremiads on the emptiness of existence. But this is not to be cured from within, in the sense that human beings would have a change of heart, but solely through the abolition of the principle of renunciation. In the end, the cycle of fulfillment and appropriation would also disappear with it: so deeply are metaphysics and the constitution of life inside one another.] ND:371

The seemingly anachronistic reference here to theology and metaphysics cloaks an extraordinarily subtle move: one should bear in mind that pop theology and the metaphysics of the culture-industry were to Adorno’s era what the pop managerialism and
the metaphysics of the information-industry are to our own era, i.e. cultural and ideological dominants. Adorno has already made it clear that theory is a necessary corrective on the truth-claims of the various national metaphysical traditions. This truth-claim is additionally grounded on what appears at first glance to be an eschatological register, namely the notion of hope or redemption, critiqued here as identical to the existing state of hopelessness. What, then, are we to make of the volte-face from the denunciation of the violence of desire to the equally insistent refusal to certify the violence of austerity? It goes almost without saying that Adorno has no intention of endorsing the false compromise between acceptably disciplined desires and invigorating bouts of austerity, i.e. endorsing exactly what exists. What is at issue here, rather, is the historicization of what does not yet exist, or what amounts to a scansion of Ernst Bloch’s luminous principle of hope: “Die kleinste Differenz zwischen dem Nichts und dem zur Ruhe Gelangten waere die Zuflucht der Hoffnung,” notes Adorno [The smallest difference between nothingness and that which has achieved rest, would be the refuge of hope.] ND:374 Whereas theology places its bet on the abstraction of faith, that is to say a transcendent event outside of all historical reckoning, dialectics places its faith in the ability of human beings to transcend their own history. Not only must the cycle of fulfillment and appropriation be abolished both in the world of the concept (e.g. juridical and legislative structures) as well as in real life (the daily work-world), if it is to be abolished at all, but this abolition must take place through the medium of history, not outside of it.

Such a notion of a slow, difficult abolition, of countless small revolutions taking place in a complex, multi-layered field of historical struggle, as opposed to the monolithic national uprisings celebrated by the history-books, points in two different directions. The first is the movement of the subject, namely the dialectics of the internal
capitalization of the subject theorized by psychobiographers such as Erik Erikson, and put into daily practice by the therapeutic and consciousness industries. Whatever the weaknesses and limitations of these latter, they are surely progressive to the extent they honor Freud’s pioneering diagnostic insight into the fact that autonomy is not a historical given, i.e. that human beings must, on a certain level, work to emancipate themselves from their own psychic prehistories; no one can do this for them. The second is the objective dynamic of the post-national accumulation of capital, ranging from that catastrophic liquidation of neo-national identity by a rapacious monopoly-nationalism epitomized by Auschwitz, to the varieties of Americanization during the Sixties and Seventies, and finally the demolition of the Soviet and American monopoly-nationalisms by the political, cultural and economic multinationalisms of the post-Cold War era.

Both tendencies are replicated in the narrative structure of the model-analyses, in the sophisticated counterpoint between the micrology of the subject (the interwoven themes of death and the desire to live, nihilism and happiness, despair and utopia, each of which merges seamlessly into its opposite and back again) outlined in sections one through six, and the increasingly macrological concerns of sections seven through twelve. Interestingly enough, Adorno derives the first specific mediation between the micrology and the macrology out of the Kantian concept of intelligibility. Rather than revisiting the juridical themes of freedom outlined by the model-analysis of *Critique of Practical Reason*, Adorno zeroes in on a rather different target, subtly hinted at by the subtitles of sections six through nine: *Kant’s Resignation, Desire of Salvation and Block, Mundus Intelligibilis*, and *Neutralization*. This progression from the subjective cognition to a humanly-produced world of cognizable objects highlights one of the key fault-lines in Kant’s system, namely the non-identity between the category of juridical freedom and the intelligibility of the world as a whole. One of the central paradoxes of commodity society
is the fact that the cognate of every subjective judgement is the objective legislation which makes that judgement legally binding; that is to say, the world is intelligible only to the extent it has been rationalized a priori by the productive forces of science, technology, and the division of labor. These latter, however, are rendered at the same time thoroughly unintelligible and irrational by the prevailing relations of production, which dictate cutthroat market competition between each and every criterion of intelligibility (i.e. the marketplace of ideology). The greatness of the Kantian system was to have grasped the historical insufficiency of the latter, in the German context of a nonexistent nation-state and an underdeveloped national market, as part and parcel of the anti-systemic, revolutionary ferment unleashed by the former: the theological registers of the religious wars are thereby secularized into the national-revolutionary conscience.

Kant’s self-proclaimed refusal to think beyond the boundaries of the concept of the intelligible is thus already a way, whether willed or no, of thinking beyond those boundaries. The block is an opening: it democratizes the formerly royal road of cognition, by decoding Hume’s radical skepticism as the candle-lit silhouette of the deterministic Newtonian universe. “Das Geheimnis seiner [Kants] Philosophie,” quips Adorno, “ist die Unausdenkbarkeit der Verzweiflung.” [The secret of his philosophy is the unthinkable of despair.] ND:378 Like all the marketplace relativisms, up to and including the cynical realisms of our own day, radical skepticism does not want to own up to its own machinery of cogitation, preferring instead to hedge its bets in a literal and figurative counsel of despair: to this extent skepticism is secretly more deterministic than determinism itself. Just the opposite is true of the deterministic universe, whose iron laws of nature and great chain of being turn out, in practice, to be animated by the all-pervading skepticism of the henceforth absent deity. Both ideologies merge into the universal contingency of the national marketplace, a.k.a. the specific historical experience
of national capital, whose towering theoretical monument remains Hegel’s phenomenology of the world-spirit.

In the context of the prehistory of the EU, skepticism and determinism have their internationalized and institutionalized counterparts in the free-floating nominalisms of a blossoming Western European consumerism on the one hand, and the cybernetic technological infrastructures (also known as Fordism or large-lot, high-volume mass production) of the Pax Americana on the other. Each converged, as we now know, in the birth-hour of the Eurostate and the emergence of a mighty Eurocapitalism, capable of competing with American monopoly-capitalism on its own global turf. This immediately raises the question as to how this Eurocapitalism concretely relates to the astonishing theory-boom in the Francophone region during the Seventies. It’s certainly not difficult to argue that the post-structuralisms were to the Seventies what the postmodernisms were to the Eighties, and that these latter in turn paved the way for the informatic ideologies of the Nineties; nor would it be especially arduous to chart the rise of the multinational corporation out of the neo-national developmental states, national corporations and military-industrial accumulation regimes of the mid-20th century. The difficulty, rather, lies in determining what precisely mediates between the levels of the superstructural or theoretical on the one hand, and the infrastructural or economic on the other.

We have already suggested one possible solution here, namely the managerial speculations of the global professional class, as well as the neoliberal or rentier ideologies in which these ultimately converge. What we have not yet considered, however, is the logical cognate of the neoliberalism of the multis, and that is what might be called the euro-socialism of the multinational proletariat. This latter runs far deeper, however, than in the vibrant and innovative ecological politics (Green Parties, non-governmental organizations, and Red-Green electoral alliances), new forms of multinational economic
cooperation and assistance (the European Parliament and the European Investment Bank), and nascent multinational trade unions appearing on the EU scene today. The flip side of the mandate of global management to carry out a revolution in the relations of production (Toyotism, just-in-time production, total quality control, etc.) has been an equivalent revolution in the productive forces: the spread of freeware and open source software, the continued expansion of educational services and the universities, and the startling increase in cooperative ventures and R & D tie-ups in the high-technology sector, among other things. At this point we need to recall our economic geography, and ask ourselves precisely where the most advanced multinational relations of production and the productive forces of the EU are located, respectively: the answer, of course, is that France and the Benelux countries lead in the former, while Central Europe holds pole position in the latter. This suggests that the Francophone moment of theory in the Seventies, in all its richness and complexity, was powered by a kind of unique theoretical overshoot or speculative surplus-rent (overdetermined by France’s highly sophisticated cultural sphere, located between the technocratic realism of a powerful developmental state, and a relatively underdeveloped culture-industry and mass media besieged by Hollywood), roughly corresponding to the economic one being generated by the mighty Central European export-platform machine. Put another way, Seventies post-structuralism was to the realm of theory what the Western European currencies were to the US dollar in the Seventies: neo-national instruments of multinational speculation. Whereas the financial proceeds of such were reinvested in the high-tech business lines and the European-wide capital markets which served as the foundation for the euro, post-structuralism spawned many of the basic tools, concepts and heuristics of the global theory-market, while serving as the cultural and symbolic capital of the various micropolitical movements. Derrida’s successful export of deconstruction to America is
only the most celebrated example of this; one could also point to Bourdieu’s trajectory from local analyses of the French consumer culture (Distinction) to the logic of Eurocapitalism incarnated in the French state apparatus (The Nobility of the State), or, closer to home, Fredric Jameson’s ingenious reappropriation of the post-structuralist toolkit in The Prison-House of Language.

Yet if theory is a genuine productive force in late capitalism, and the multinational equivalent of the national and international philosophical traditions, then the critique of theory can no longer delimit itself to the dialectic between the neo-national and the international. Rather, it must set itself in motion towards the multinational, or to be more precise, think through the dialectic between the multinational and the transnational. This has its most compelling model in the three final, extraordinarily power-packed subsections of “Meditations on Metaphysics”, each of which is practically an ensemble of model-analyses in their own right. Where the tenth essay, Only an Allegory, explores a series of cosmological concerns of externalization or transcendence, the eleventh, Appearance of the Other, concentrates on the micrological theme of internalization or immanence. Transcendence turns, at the far boundaries of the theological texts as much as in the thermonuclear imaginary of modern-day science-fiction, into purest immanence; while the concept of immanence, pushed to its limit, culminates in the transcendent registers of the daemonic and the utopian appearance. Both antipodes merge seamlessly into the space of a negative (a.k.a. multinational) dialectics:

Kein Licht ist auf den Menschen und Dingen, in dem nicht Transzendenz widerschiene. Untilgbar am Widerstand gegen die fungible Welt des Tauschs ist der des Auges, das nicht will, dass die Farben der Welt zunichte werden. Im Schein verspricht sich das Scheinlose… Dialektik, Inbegriff negativen Wissens, moechte kein anderes neben sich haben; noch als negative schleppt sie das Gebot der Ausschliesslichkeit aus der Positiven, dem System, mit sich fort. Sie haette nach solchem Raisonnement nichtdialektisches Bewusstsein zu negieren als
In a nutshell, dialectics is, above all, the self-reflection of historical experience, a self-reflection whose openness to history is its objective resistance to the continuation of prehistory and the total system’s latent potential for total destruction. Adorno identifies one such form of resistance in *Only an Allegory*: “Auch in Bewusstsein der Subjekte wählt die bürglerische Gesellschaft lieber den totalen Untergang, ihr objektives Potential, als dass sie zu Reflexionen sich aufschläenge, die ihre Grundschicht bedrohten.” [Even in the consciousness of subjects capitalist society would rather choose total destruction, its objective potential, rather than giving latitude to reflections which would threaten its foundations.] ND:391. The thinking of this choice is crucial: it mobilizes one of the fundamental existential anxieties of the Cold War, namely the paralyzing knowledge that a single high-ranking official could at any moment press The Button and blast the world into a smoldering, radioactive hell, in the service of the collective praxis which might yet change this dismal state of affairs, a.k.a. the worldwide anti-nuclear movement. One of the most effective tools of the latter was, indeed, the sober clinical description of the ghastly medical, social and ecological consequences of even the most limited thermonuclear exchange; a strategy expressly designed to turn the
scientific cognitions of the Cold War military-industrial complex against itself, in a manner which anticipates the anti-corporate media and information politics of the human rights, labor rights and environmental movements of a later era. A similar dynamic is visible in the great anti-nuclear films of early postmodernism, everywhere from On the Beach and the 1954 Godzilla, to the subtly anti-Cold War Bond spectaculars and the first great hacker film, the 1983 Wargames, all of which pound home the fact that the narrative of thermonuclear catastrophe, at its outer limit, merges seamlessly into the catastrophic reality of Cold War consumerism. If normality is catastrophe in global capitalism, then the resistance against such must rebel against the fetishization of the catastrophe as much as that of normality, setting both in motion towards their secret antipodes, the redemptive and the non-identical. Kant’s meditation on the intelligible renders a signal service to us here, in the sense that to identify the boundaries of thought is the first step of thinking beyond the limits of such; the icons and codes of the consumer culture are indeed the signs and portents of the most fearful historical violence, but they also hint at the historical boundaries of that violence, beyond which a healing of history’s wounds might take place.

It is, finally, theory’s contribution to this healing, to the cessation of historical violence and suffering, which forms the content of Self-Reflection of Dialectics, the supercondensed core of Negative Dialectics which mysteriously radiates mediations from the most distant zones of our planetary (un)consciousness like an inconceivably powerful quasar:

Metaphysik ist, dem eigenen Begriff nach, moeglich nicht als ein deduktiver Zusammenhang von Urteilen ueber Seiendes. Genausowenig kann sie nach dem Muster eines absolut Verschiedenen gedacht werden, das furchtbar des Denkens spottete. Danach waere sie moeglich allein als lesbare Konstellation von Seiendem. Von diesem empfinde sie den Stoff, ohne den sie nicht waere,
verklaerte aber nicht das Dasein ihrer Elemente, sondern braechte sie zu einer Konfiguration, in der die Elemente zur Schrift zusammentreten… Gegenstand von Kritik ist darum nicht das Beduerfnis im Denken sondern das Verhaeltnis zwischen beiden. Das Beduerfnis im Denken will aber, dass gedacht werde. Es verlangt seine Negation durchs Denken, muss im Denken verschwinden, wenn es real sich befriedigen soll, und in dieser Negation ueberdauert es, vertritt in der innersten Zelle des Gedankens, was nicht seinesgleichen ist. Die kleinsten innerweltlichen Zuege haetten Relevanz fuers Absolute, denn der mikrologische Blick zertruemmert die Schalen des nach dem Mass des subsumierenden Oberbegriffs hilflos Vereinzelten und sprengt seine Identitaet, den Trug, es waere blos Exemplar. Solches Denken ist solidarisch mit Metaphysik im Augenblick ihres Sturzes. [Metaphysics is, according to its own concept, not possible as a deductive context of judgements over the existent. Just as little can it be thought according to the model of that which is absolute difference, which disparages thinking terribly. It would thus be possible solely as the legible constellation of that which exists. From this it receives its material, without which it would not be, but does not disclose the existence of its elements, bringing them instead into a configuration in which the elements form a script… The object of critique is therefore not the necessity in thought but the relationship between both. The necessity of thought intends, rather, that there should be thinking. It demands its negation through thought, it must disappear into thought, if it is to really satisfy itself, and in this negation it lives on, representing in the innermost cells of thought that which is not its equivalent. The smallest innerworldly markings would have relevance for the absolute, for the micrological glance demolishes the shells of that which is helplessly compartmentalized according to the measure of its subsuming master concept and explodes its identity: the deception that it would be merely an exemplar. Such thinking is solidaristic with metaphysics in the moment of its downfall.] ND:399-400

Multinational theory thus inherits the mandate as well as the legacy of the international metaphysical traditions, in the same moment that the various ensembles of constellations and their model-analyses are reinscribed onto the palimpsest of the multinational script or legible writing. Tempting as it is to interpret this last in an informatic turn, as so many programmable scripts and codes designed to set other codes into motion, Adorno has something both more concrete and more abstract in mind here. The script furnishes the macrological material out of which the micrological glance, flash-recording the fall of metaphysics into history, constructs the multinational cognition. Fittingly, the last sentence of the last paragraph of Adorno’s last completed text is not a conclusion, but a
beginning: it is the urgent call to reinvent the dialectic on a global scale, using the most advanced theoretical tools and heuristics available, on behalf of a henceforth multinational proletariat, locked into a pitiless struggle with transnational capital across the length and breadth of the planet. From the South Korean metalworkers unions to the Parisian railworkers, from the peasant occupations of Brazil to the rural development battles of the South African townships, from the Fourth World movements of the Ogoni and the Zapatistas to the multicultural struggles of the First World, from streets of Seattle to the hutongs of Beijing, from the Third World revolutions of the past to the micropolitics of the present to the euro-socialisms of the future, the global proletariat is learning, absorbing, and adopting the techniques, tools, technologies and organization once monopolized by its formerly more mobile antagonist. Faced with the despoilation of the earth, the pillaging of entire continents, and the immiseration of billions, theory must arm the forces of resistance, countering the global onslaught of capital upon everything worth saving in our social, cultural and natural past, and everything which might yet be realized in our future, with our own global storm: the storm of History.
Notes

1. In the EU, for example, December 1995 marked the onset of a powerful wave of resistance to the EU’s indigenous variant of neoliberalism; what was originally merely a loose alliance of the various public sector unions was soon joined by micropolitical movements of the unemployed, students, pensioners and concerned citizens, blossoming still later a series of European-wide electoral alliances between the various Green, Communist, Socialist and Left parties. Something similar happened amidst the astonishing heterogeneity and border-crossing exuberance of the Seattle 1999 anti-WTO protest, probably best symbolized by a famous protest sign, which celebrated the promising and historically new alliance between union members in hardhats and a group of lesbian environmental activists as follows: “Teamsters and turtles, together at last!” (this was followed by a formal rapprochement between the AFL-CIO unions and various environmental groups, as well as a strategic alliance between Amnesty International and the Sierra Club). One could argue that the 1997-98 Southeast Asian crash, itself the unwitting product of unprecedented global capital flows, opened up a no less unprecedented the space for new types of trade union, labor rights and democratization struggles in South Korea, Indonesia and elsewhere.

2. “Beckett hat auf die Situation des Konzentrationslagers, die er nicht nennt, als laege ueber ihr Bilderverbot, so reagiert, wie es allein ansteht. Was ist, sei wie das Konzentrationslager. Einmal spricht er von lebenslanger Todesstrafe. Als einzige Hoffnung daemmert, dass nichts mehr sei. Auch die verwirft er. Aus dem Spalt der Inkonsequenz, der damit sich bildet, tritt die Bilderwelt des Nichts als Etwas hervor, die seine Dichtung festhaelt. Im Erbe von Handlung darin, dem scheinbar stoischen Weitermachen, wird aber lautlos geschrien, dass es anders sein soll.” [Beckett reacted to the situation of the concentration-camps, which he doesn’t name, as if there were a ban on such like that of the graven image. What is, is like the concentration-camp. At one point he speaks of a lifelong death-sentence. The only hope, faintly dawning, is that nothing exists anymore. This, too, he discards. Out of the fissure of inconsequentiality, which arises from this, the image-world of nothingness appears as something, which his poetry holds fast. However in the legacy of how this happens, the apparently stoical continuation, there is the silent scream that things ought to be different.] ND:373

3. “Wer fuer Erhaltung der radikal schuldigen und schaebigen Kultur plaediert, macht sich zum Helfershelfer, waehrend, wer der Kultur sich verweigert, unmittelbar die Barbarei befoerdert, als welche die Kultur sich enthuellte. Nicht einmal Schweigen kommt aus dem Zirkel heraus; es rationalisiert einzig die eigene subjektive Unfaehigkeit mit dem Stand der objektiven Wahrheit und entwuerdigt dadurch diese abermals zur Luege. Haben die oestlichen Staaten, trotz des Gewaesches vom Gegenteil, Kultur abgeschafft und als pures Herrschaftsmittel in Schund verwandelt, so widerfaehrt der Kultur, die darueber stoehnt, was sie verdient und wohin sie ihrerseits, im Namen des demokratischen Rechts der Menschen auf das, was ihnen gleich, eifrig tendiert. Nur wird die administrative Barbarei der Funktionaere drueben dadurch, dass sie als Kultur sich anpreist und deren Unwesen als unverlierbares Erbe behuetet, dessen ueberfuehrt, dass
ihre Realität, der Unterbau, ihrerseits so barbarisch ist wie der Überbau, den sie abbaut, indem sie ihn in Regie nimmt. Im Westen ist es wenigstens gestattet, es zu sagen.”

[Whoever pleads for the preservation of a radically guilty and shabby culture turns into the tool of such, while those who renounce culture altogether certify the unmediated barbarism, which culture reveals itself to be. Not even silence can break the circle; it merely rationalizes one’s own subjective incapacity vis-à-vis the position of objective truth and debases such into a lie. If the Eastern states have, in spite of their twaddle to the contrary, abolished culture and transformed it into a pure means of domination, into junk, this is only what that culture, which whines about this, only deserves, and to what for its part, in the name of the democratic rights of human beings to what already resembles them, it is enthusiastically moving towards. It is only that the administrative barbarism of the functionaries over there [in the East], by praising itself as culture and proclaiming its monstrous nature a precious and sacred legacy, seals its own indictment, by showing its reality, the infrastructure, to be as barbaric as the superstructure being demolished under its rule. In the West, it is at least permitted to say so.] ND:360

4. Bourdieu’s passage is quite extraordinary: “I think that, even if it may appear very cynical, we need to turn its own weapons against the dominant economy, and point out that, in the logic of enlightened self-interest, a strictly economic policy is not necessarily economical – in terms of the insecurity of persons and property, the consequent policing costs, etc. More precisely, there is a need to radically question the economic view which individualizes everything – production as much as justice or health, costs as well as profits – and which forgets that efficiency, which it defines in narrow, abstract terms, tacitly identifying it with financial profitability, clearly depends on the outcomes by which it is measured, financial profitability for shareholders and investors, as at present, or satisfaction of customers and users, and, more generally, satisfaction and well-being of producers, consumers, and, ultimately, the largest possible number. Against this narrow, short-term economics, we need to put forward an economics of happiness, which would take note of all the profits, individual and collective, material and symbolic, associated with activity (such as security), and also all the material and symbolic costs associated with inactivity or precarious employment (for example, consumption of medicines: France holds the world record for use of tranquillizers). You cannot cheat with the law of the conservation of violence: all violence is paid for, and, for example, the structural violence exerted by the financial markets, in the form of layoffs, loss of security, etc., is matched sooner or later in the form of suicides, crime and delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, a whole host of minor and major everyday acts of violence.” Pierre Bourdieu. Acts of Resistance. Translated by Richard Nice. NY: The New Press and Polity Press, 1998 (39-40).

5. “Nicht absolut geschlossen ist der Weltlauf, auch nicht die absolute Verzweiflung; diese ist vielmehr seine Geschlossenheit. So hinfällig in ihm alle Spuren des Anderen sind; so sehr wird doch in den Brüchen, welche die Identität Lügen strafen, durchsetzt von den stets wieder gebrochenen Versprechungen jenes Anderen. Jegliches Glück ist Fragment des ganzen Glücks, das den Menschen sich versagt und das sie sich versagen.”

[The course of the world is not completely foreclosed, nor is it absolute despair; this is on
the contrary its foreclosedness. The more evident the traces of the Other become in such, the more are the slippages, which denounce identity as a lie, shot through with the promises, always broken again, of that Other. Every happiness is a fragment of the total happiness, which human beings forbid themselves and which is forbidden to them.

ND:396

6. “Metaphysik ist gegenueber Theologie nicht bloss, nicht nur die Saekularisation der Theologie in den Begriff. Sie bewahrt Theologie auf in der Kritik an ihr, indem sie den Menschen als Moeglichkeit freilegt, was die Theologie ihnen aufzwingt und damit schaendet. Den Kosmos des Geistes sprengen die Kraefte, die er band; ihm widerfuhr sein Recht. Der autonome Beethoven ist metaphysischer als Bachs ordo; deshalb wahrer. Subjektiv befreite und metaphysische Erfahrung konvergieren in Humanitaet. Jeglicher Ausdruck von Hoffnung, wie er von den grossen Kunstwerken noch im Zeitalter ihres Verstummens maechtiger ausgeht als von den ueberlieferten theologischen Texten, ist konfiguriert mit dem des Menschlichen; nirgends unzweideutiger als in den Augenblicken Beethovens. Was bedeutet, nicht alles sei vergebens, ist durch Sympathie mit dem Menschlichen, Selbstbesinning der Natur in den Subjekten; allein in der Erfahrung der eigenen Naturhaftigkeit tragt der Genius der Natur. Ehrwuerdig bleibt an Kant, dass er wie sonst kein Philosoph die Konstellation des Humanen und Transzendenten, in der Lehre von Intelligibeln, verzeichnete.” [Metaphysics is in opposition to theology not only and not merely the secularization of theology in the concept. It preserves theology in the moment of its critique of it, to the extent that it releases to human beings the possibility which theology compels from them and thereby violates. The forces explode the cosmos of the spirit, which bound it; it was contradicted by its own law. The autonomous Beethoven is more metaphysical than Bach’s ordo; therefore truer. Subjectively emancipated and metaphysical experience converge in humanity. Each and every expression of hope, which emanates from great works of art more powerfully than the surviving theological texts even in the era when the former are falling silent, is configured with that which is humane; nowhere more unambiguously than in the moment of Beethoven. What signifies that not everything is in vain, is the self-constitution of nature in subjects, through sympathy with that which is humane. It is to Kant’s lasting honor that he, like no other philosopher, illustrated the constellation of the humane and the transcendental in the doctrine of the intelligible.] ND:389-390

7. Thus Germany spent more as a percent of GDP (2.3%) on science, research and development than France (1.9%), and produced $7.481 billion of machine-tools in 1999, while France produced only $900.9 million, less than deindustrialized Britain or semiperipheral Spain. Machine-tools are the machines which produce other machines, i.e. are essentially the DNA of any industrial base. Here are the top fifteen machine-tool producing nations in 1999, ranked by billions of US$ in output, followed by another chart of production per capita. Note the abysmal position of the US on both counts, and the impressive performance of the Czech Republic; the EU makes up almost half of world machine-tool production, the US only 17% or so. For further details on world machine-tool output, trade and per capita production, see the Gardner Group’s webpage over at: http://www.gardnerweb.com/consump/produce.html.
Unlike the UK, the French economy has continued to flourish, partly thanks to its greater dependence on consumer goods industries, where R & D is less important than marketing and design, and partly thanks to efficient management. The French civil service, epitomized by the so-called enarques, routinely generates world-class executives who ascend to leadership roles in the largest and most innovative French firms, as well as the biggest banks and financial groups; Central European firms still tend to rely on inhouse or homegrown management, which does not handicap them in their domestic markets,
but which is a disadvantage when managing global enterprises. The result is that France has some of the best-run public utilities in the world, e.g. Vivendi. One other telling example: the leading French software firm, Gemini Cap Sogeti, is really a financial services and consulting group; while the leading German software firm, SAP, specializes in the nuts and bolts of Intranet software. In general, the potential weaknesses of the French and Benelux countries vis-à-vis Central European industry have been carefully counterbalanced by judicious state intervention; the state of Lower Saxony owns 20% of Volkswagen, for example, but exercises hands-off management, mostly because VW is a well-run firm with quality products and a healthy balance sheet. Renault is 44% state-owned by the French Government, which had to institute a drastic turnaround program in the early Nineties to save the company. This enabled Renault to recover, turn a health profit, and later go on to buy out Nissan, the second-largest Japanese auto firm, in 1998, thereby keeping pace with VW, Daimler and Ford.

product of capitalist society. The rigidly dualistic foundational structure of Kant’s rational-critical model mirrors that of a relation of production, in which goods fall out of machines like his phenomena fall out of the cognitive mechanism; where the material and its determinacy, vis-à-vis its profit, is as inconsequential as the latter is to Kant, who has it embossed. The exchangeable end-product resembles the subjectively produced and as objectivity accepted Kantian objects. The permanent reductio ad hominem of everything which appears equips cognition for the purpose of internal and external domination; its highest expression is the principle of unity, borrowed from that of compartmentalized production, divided into piecework. The Kantian theory of rationality is admirable to the extent that it is really interested only in the realm of authority of scientific propositions… Kant’s system is one of stop signals.

9. This is an aesthetic stance, as well as a theoretical and political position: “Der Gestus der Hoffnung ist der, nichts zu halten von dem, woran das Subjekt sich halten will, wovon es sich verspricht, dass es dauere. Das Intelligible waere, im Geist der Kantischen Grenzsetzung nicht weniger als der Hegelschen Methode, diese zu ueberschreiten, einzig negativ zu denken. Paradox waere die von Kant visierte intelligible Sphaere abermals ‘Erscheinung’: was das dem endlichen Geist Verborgene diesem zukehrt, was er zu denken gezwungen ist und vermoeg der eigenen Endlichkeit deformiert. Der Begriff des Intelligibeln ist die Selbstnegation des endlichen Geistes.” [The gesture of hope is what is not to be stopped where the subject wishes to stop, wherefrom it promises itself, that it endures. The intelligible would be, in the spirit of Kant’s setting of boundaries no less than that of the Hegelian method, to surpass this, solely to be thought negatively. Paradoxically, the intelligible sphere envisaged by Kant would be ‘appearance’: what returns to that which is hidden from the finite spirit, what it is compelled to think and by virtue of its own finitude deforms. The concept of the intelligible is the self-negation of the finite spirit.] ND:379-380
CHAPTER VIII

COSMOLOGIES OF REVOLUTION

Well that’s about the closest way I know to tell you and papers rustling across city desks... fresh southerly winds a long time ago.

September 17, 1899 over New York
July 21, 1964
Tangier, Morocco
William Burroughs


Genealogies of Empire

In the beginning of the American Empire was its ending: this tantalizing coda, stranded at the conclusion of Burroughs’ greatest text amidst the accumulated references to Joyce and Kafka, the surrealists and the Hollywood action-adventure films like an abandoned billboard for a forgotten B-movie, has its formal counterpart in the mythic prehistories of the American superstate, reproduced everywhere from the carnivorous consumer capitalisms of *The Soft Machine* to the Second World revolutionaries and Third World resistances of *The Ticket that Exploded*, and finally to the interstellar colonialisms, biotechnic counter-cultures and well-nigh cosmological revolution of *Nova Express* itself.¹ Against the reign of American mass-culture, its Disneyfied consumption-sphere merely the carapace of the mammoth iceberg of U.S. corporate hegemony, Burroughs neither soliloquizes over the consumer culture nor fetishizes the late modernist resistance to such, but accesses all these things from the standpoint of that most radical of all things, a genuine transnational contradiction. In the text quoted above,
the conjunction of the anonymous city desks, which might refer to mass journalism as easily as the cubicles of some corporate headquarters, with the desert expanse and timeless winds of Tangier (itself a significant colonial entrepot of a French Empire being inundated by a wave of insurgencies from Algeria to Vietnam) lays claim to the heritage of the existential and war films, at the exact moment that the reference to the dawn of the American Century – fossilized in a news clipping from the New York Times like an insect in amber – negates the content usually appended to this latter, namely the Western or exotic adventure-serial, by means of a new aesthetic term altogether: the cultural resistances of the Third World. These latter are not, contrary to the bulk of contemporary post-colonial criticism, to be read as preconstituted national spaces, but are rather zones of intensified global class struggle (e.g. the familiar postmodern scenery of skyscrapers and latifundia, visual Coca-Cola ads and the oral testimonio, rising hard-currency debt and falling real wages, etc.). Indeed, the attempt to fix cartographic limits between a subaltern periphery and the economic might and military fiat of the world metropoles has a very precise derivation in what might be called Second World or developmental-state ideologies, whose political genealogy hearkens not so much to Lenin as to Garibaldi and Bismarck; by contrast it is the very underdevelopment of the periphery, perversely enough, which ensured its deeper integration into the mass media and consumer culture of the metropoles.

This can be traced back, interestingly, to Burroughs’ two most immediate novelic antecedents: not, as most critical accounts tend to assume, Celine and Bataille (a.k.a. the Fascist mega-film and Surrealist montage) but rather Genet’s Our-Lady-of-Flowers and Beckett’s Watt, or what in the American culture-industry took the form of the genuinely internationalized genres of the existential drama and war-movie respectively (the Sartrean occupation-drama would be an intermediate form here). Paradoxically enough,
it was precisely where the gap between an underdeveloped or severely compromised national culture and the tropes of the American monopoly-culture could not be simply circumvented by state autarky (as with the Eastern bloc) or partially sidestepped (as with a flourishing British media industry), that the initial documents of transnational aesthetics found their greatest resonance: namely, in the nascent free trade zones and export-platform economies of Ireland and post-Occupation France. Initially, this took the form of what might be termed the Dien Bien Phu strategy of cultural resistance, or the strategic outflanking of cinema culture (the active demolition of those films, posters, newsreels, awards ceremonies and so forth merely pastiched or punned by Joyce) on its own grounds: something visible everywhere from Watt’s combinatorial schemata (“ENIAC computes Godot”) and Genet’s no less enumerated urban displays of an underground Parisian gay subculture, to the Italian, French and Japanese filmic auteurs of the Fifties; and from the female professionals of Beauvoir’s novels and essays to the African American communities of Ralph Ellison’s magnificent bebop novel, Invisible Man. Though this is probably most obvious in the case of Genet’s image-theater, with its obscene snapshots, voluptuous mise-en-scenes and scripted urban slang, Beckett displays an equivalent extremity of nominalism – most notably, in Watt’s sojourns through what are practically linguistic ecologies, or the repetitive text-blocks arranged like sorted punch-cards of those earliest vacuum-tube computers which the narrative seemingly asks us to construct for ourselves, out of whatever second-hand industrial junk or scavenged wiring apparatus is at hand.

Admittedly such strategies were possible only thanks to the temporary semi peripheral status of an already heavily industrialized Western Europe vis-à-vis the American automotive and consumer culture: if Beckett’s tramps are not directly translatable into the Chaplinesque hoboas and existential outlaws of the American
superhighways, nor are they reducible to Third World peasants eking out their living on the colonial latifundia. They are rather allegories of a national identity already cancelled out by an international constellation, something most strongly reminiscent of the central figures in Brecht’s mature plays, who are no longer Expressionistic vortexes of cinematic energy but are not quite existential stock characters, either. The towering figure of Galileo Galilei, whose draumaturgic praxis relied as much on the judicious reading of foreign texts as those of astronomic (not to mention juridical) constellations, is surely congruent with Brecht’s own exile experience, with Galileo’s sun-blindness reprising Brecht’s own contentious relation to the flood-lights of the Hollywood hegemony with the reflexive irony of an Orson Welles cameo. The quiet revolution occasioned by the Fifties, by contrast, was summed up by the question first posed by the Frankfurt School in their Los Angeles period: what happens when the formerly unbearable experience of wartime exile and rootlessness becomes the routinized and internalized status quo? What happens, in short, when monopoly capitalism absorbs not just the economic base but the last remaining superstructures of liberal capitalism?

The scandal of Adorno’s acerbic answer – “nothing very much” – can only be understood by reference to an American bourgeois-national subject which had already been transformed by the New Deal and wartime mobilization from without and the new consumer capitalism and its associated division of labor (mass media, marketing, finance, research and development) from within into that strange new thing, the cybernetic or monopoly-corporate subject of the Cold War period. This had to be sure a significant cultural corollary: where the national automobile and petrochemical corporations and their financial elites provided the historical prelude to the export industrialism and globe-trotting business class of our own era, so did the wartime refugees and displacement of peoples anticipate the global wave of immigrants into the First World territories in the
postwar period. Similar tendencies were at work in the gargantuan logistical flows of soldiers and wartime material which paved the way for the world trading system underwritten by the Bretton Woods accord, not to mention the fiscal renationalizations and military-industrial Keynesianism pioneered by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, and adopted wholesale by the Soviet Union and America.

The great originality of *Nova Express*, on the other hand, lies in its capacity to hijack that regnant American consumer culture typified by Fifties classics such as *Forbidden Planet* and Alfred Bester’s sterling sci-fi detective novel, *The Demolished Man*, with a startlingly extra-national logic: that of the overseas direct investments of the American multinationals and its radically multinationalized consumer subject, or what can be called, with pardonable exaggeration, the literary version of jetset dialectics. This is to defer to Burroughs’ own biographical trajectory from the Harvard-educated bourgeois born to an upper-crust Middle Western family parodied in so many of his novels, to the down-at-the-heels urban drug addict, and finally to the expatriate American rentier, driven into exile by the drug and gender police of Hoover’s America. That the critical reflection upon the media-culture of the global consumer society should generate its most profound documents not within the demesne of the American superstate, but precisely at its margins, is hardly a new consideration in the history of aesthetics; leaving side obvious forerunners such as Proust and Brecht, the modernisms of the late nineteenth century ranging from Melville and Baudelaire to Brahms displayed a similar dialectic of estrangement vis-a-vis the British metropole, wherein autonomous (and not always progressive, as Wagner goes to show) nationalisms or mass-cultures were forced, thanks to the European colonization drives, to mobilize the materials of the peasantry or semi-periphery in the name of an increasingly internationalized proletarian subject. The limit-point of Marx’s epochal indictment of British capitalism, just as much as that of the
political praxis of the Paris Commune, was indeed the heteronomy of a national market-
capitalism still riven by a four-way class struggle between a regnant finance aristocracy,
a fast-rising, dynamic industrial oligarchy, a broad strata of marginalized peasant
producers and yeoman agrarian capitalists, and the atomized proletarian crowds of the
mill-towns and swelling urban metropoles. The ruling class comprised, in short, a
remarkably disorganized set of class agents, at best sporadically united by the threat of
national competitors from abroad (America and Britain) or trade unions and proletarian
mass-parties from below (France and Germany); all of which is more or less confirmed
by Marx’s own rich analysis of Napoleon II in the 18th Brumaire. The urgent task facing
the national mass-cultures of this period was therefore the integration of of a new type of
mass populism or industrial corporatism within the existing relations of production,
everywhere from the writing of national anthems to universal male suffrage to the
abolition of slavery to Bismarck’s nascent welfare state; a mandate later broadened in the
period of monopoly capitalism into the more general tendencies of the industrial
consumer culture and the rationalization campaigns of Fordism and Taylorism.

What was qualitatively new about the postmodern media-culture of the early
Sixties was, on the other hand, the lack of any such strictly national heteronomy in the
henceforth transnational networks of global capitalism: the nation-state continued, like
the medieval trading cities and mercantilist state bureaucracies, to exist, but reproduced
itself only by virtue of its amalgamation and integration into henceforth transnational
bodies of capital. The non-identical elements or class contradictions of these latter,
temporarily dampened but by no means extinguished by the New Deal class compromise
in the American metropole, were consequently reproduced by the very logic of the
accumulation process in those newly independent nation-states and post-colonial
societies which, starting from the Bandung conference, explicitly laid claim to the title of
the Third World: something which resonated, not just in the political rhetoric of the anti-
colonial movements themselves, but also throughout that American media culture whose
global exports (and capacious internal markets) spurred the development of indigenous
media-cultures around the globe.

To put this another way, there was always a significantly transnational element in
the post-WW II American consumer culture, which was never completely subjugated to
the dictates of the national security state, and which even at the height of McCarthyism
offered pockets of strategic resistance and opportunities for radical praxis. It will be
suggested here that Burroughs’ greatest achievement was a kind of luminary synthesis
between these two forms of resistance: the sublation, in short, of late modernism’s
dynamic of aesthetic internationalization on the grounds of this consumer-culture, or put
more concretely still, the sublation of the cybernetic narratives of late monopoly-
capitalism (everything from the extended manufacturing processes of automated
production, to the new discourses of microbiology, software, eco-systems and particle
physics, to consumer goods designed to reproduce other commodities, e.g. televisions,
Walkmans, computers) and the Cold War mythologies of the American superstate alike
(everything from McCarthyism to the War on Poverty) in the category of transnational
allegory. This latter refers not to any secularized religious code or nascent liberation
theology, but to those interpretive codes and heuristics of the global consumer-culture
which narrated the continual political crises, internationalized conflicts and ubiquitous
media-events of the Cold War era.²

What is at issue is, indeed, the instauration of global consumer capitalism and its
hegemonic social agent, the multinational corporation, throughout the world-economy:
something generally glossed by our own contemporary culture-industry as the transition
from the Fifties to the Sixties, a.k.a. the Kennedy ideology and the mediatic sublime of
the young, dynamic business executive, urging on the feats of the space program while facing down the enemy hordes and exorcising the (electoral) ghost of Richard Nixon alike during the Cuban missile crisis. Such narratives are not completely untrue to the extent that they touch base with the symbolic underpinnings or Jamesonian political unconscious of the American hegemony: namely that transition from the conquest of Empire from the remaining colonial powers (mainly Britain and France) to the daily management of such, all mediated by the transnational infrastructures of the national security state, American military Keynesianism, the Bretton Woods accords and the consolidation of the dollar as world reserve currency. This in turn generated that systematic expansion characterized economically by the first great wave of foreign direct investments by American chemical, automotive and oil energy firms in Western Europe and the Pacific Rim, and politically in the great anti-colonial revolutions from Cuba to Vietnam; the logical consequence of which was the transformation of the competing neo-national autarkies of the Thirties into competing state-developmental accumulation regimes, running the gamut from the Chinese Great Leap Forward to Brazilian state capitalism, and from Central European and East Asian keiretsu accumulation to American Sunbelt consumerism.

Though a genuine history of global modes of accumulation has yet to be written (Mandel came closest, but restricted himself to constructing the Weberian ideal type of the American hegemony), some initial features of such are worth mentioning, in particular the tendency for a specific industrial concentration in question to be matched by an equivalent mass-cultural specialization. The prototypical military-industrial complex (MIC), aerospace-communications-electronics nexus (ACE), and the flourishing entertainment-information complex (EIC) of the American West had their most evident counterparts in the host of nationalized media infrastructures throughout the American
zone of the Second World, busily singing hosannas to the joys of debt-induced underdevelopment while legitimating the rule of the comprador bourgeoisie – most egregiously as what Alexander Cockburn called Brazil’s aqua-industrial complex and the rabidly Rightwing private television network, El Globo, though the situation of the early Italian media industry was probably not so different.

What this meant in practical terms was that although no genuinely global media culture existed in the late Fifties, something like a multinational content was already available on the quite different level of the post-production values and special effects technologies exported globally by Hollywood. Generally speaking, this was either showcased as an alien (or at least mildly Teutonic) ACE technology by a science-fiction film like Forbidden Planet, or else retailed by the Bond films of the early Sixties as an underground marketplace of international EIC technology (coding machines, miniaturized transmitters, telecommunications and whatnot). The truly original contribution Burroughs made here was to sublate both these narratives into a specifically multinational cybernetic subject. This latter did not merely reappropriate specific narratives from the prevailing media culture (the notorious “cut-up” technique), but actively demolished the specifically national or neo-national infrastructures of such, and on two levels. In the first place, the official boundaries between the various Cold War cultural tropes are abruptly erased: the technobabble of the mad scientist spills over into Government policy directives, Third World interventions mutate into biological science fictions, gangster and crime narratives seep into the generic war film, Atomic Age posthistory is transcribed into Stone Age prehistory and so forth. Secondly, that consumer culture which the Surrealists merely advertised, and which the existential authors x-rayed as a structure of alienation (e.g. the Sartrean category of opacity or resistance to the gaze, which still offers a cinematic Third Way between the walkabout glance of the bourgeois
stroll, and the stream of corporate icons and logos scrolling across the TV screen) enters into its multinational content: the secret inheritor of American consumerism’s latent political conflicts turning out, perversely enough, to be the national anti-colonial movements and Third World revolutions themselves. The most hotly-contested battlefields of the Cold War were, in short, the springboards not just of global industrialism but of global consumerism and a nascent world political polity as well. Witness the stunning overture of Nova Express, a.k.a. the interstellar harangue of Inspector J. Lee:

Listen to my last words anywhere. Listen to my last words any world. Listen all you boards syndicates and governments of the earth. And you powers behind what filth deals consummated in what lavatory to take what is not yours. To sell the ground from unborn feet forever –

“Don’t let them see us. Don’t tell them what we are doing –”
Are these the words of the all-powerful boards and syndicates of the earth?
“For God’s sake don't let that Coca-Cola thing out –”
“Not The Cancer Deal with The Venusians –”
“Not the Green Deal – Don't show them that –”
“Not the Orgasm Death –”
“Not the ovens –”
Listen: I call you all. Show your cards all players. Pay it all pay it all pay it all back. Play it all pay it all play it all back. For all to see. In Times Square. In Piccadilly. NE:3-4

The competing claims of the superstates, with their totalizing alliances, socio-economic interventions, brushfire wars and diplomatic strategies, are not simply neutralized or annulled, but are themselves counter-colonized from the vantage-point of that Nova Police charged with re-regulating a kind of interstellar marketplace, wherein various species and transgalactic corporations compete with one another just like the Cold War neo-nationalisms and multinational firms they are indeed meant to symbolize. This tends to dislocate the older urban core spaces of Times Square and Piccadilly, which lose their
status as cultural loci in the face of more decentralized places of public image-
reproduction, a.k.a. the urban mini-mall. In general, the absorption of an older city fabric
by new kinds of multinational space (everything from parking lots to advertising
billboards, FM radio and urban TV stations, public phone systems and cinema chains, all
supplemented today by video-stores and Internet cafes) permits the most striking
transfusion and hybridization of that aesthetic material initially documented in the semi-
autobiographical and urban-journalistic narratives of *Naked Lunch*. *The Soft Machine*
will take the next logical step, by transforming the canonic marquee names, cinema still-
frames and burning neon configurations typical of the Surrealist urban display into a
continuous stream of containerized images, icons and mass-media quotations; the result
is a kind of “road noir” halfway between the existential labyrinths of euphoria, crisis and
anomie charted by the Fifties auteurs (e.g. Hitchcock) and the seamlessly interlocking
electronic ecologies of paranoia (the national security state), information (Silicon Valley)
and image-production (Hollywood) glossed by Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*.
Indeed, what vitally distinguishes TSM from the existential outlaw or road movie
transcript is the crucial rewriting of the automotive culture along cybernetic lines: the
endless quest for the gas station located in scenic terrain is displaced by the quest for the
next drug cache or heroin stash. Put more concretely still, a kind of frontier image-
hunger, whose referent was the MIC-induced suburbanization of the American West, is
supplanted by the the biologic compulsions and hallucinations of the drug addict, a
permanent exile from police agencies and the mainstream consumer society alike
(“Selling is more of a habit than using,” runs the refrain of *Naked Lunch*).\(^3\) This is in
decided contrast to much of the early Beat and proto-psychedelic culture, which tended
to recycle archaic existential motifs in lieu of genuinely new forms, e.g. delimiting the
amphetamine-fuelled invention of a Neal Cassady (folk tales plus superhighways) or the
early Velvet Underground (blues plus studio-session feedback) to a specifically West Coast or East Coast American context.

In contrast, Burroughs’ great novelic trilogy sublates the materials of the early media culture (everything from road narratives and the Western to the TV sitcom) by means of an Atomic Age multi-culturalism. This is closely related to Burroughs’ expatriate sojourn in the American periphery of Latin America, later in semi-peripheral Europe and still later in the Francophone colonial zone of North Africa, on the level of what can be called the aesthetics of neo-colonialism. In TSM this involves the transcription of the coordinates of the American Empire onto a neocolonial zone clearly modeled on Latin America; in TTE, on the other hand, the armature of the superstate is parcelled out into a broad array of Cold War media tropes (the secret agent, the global currency trader, the arms smuggler etc.), all of which are set against a disjointed series of Second and Third World scenarios ranging from the urban immigrant ghetto to the Third World village. Only *Nova Express* would carry this strategy to its logical culmination, by dissolving the Cold War tropes themselves into multinational mediations, which give rise to new forms of transnational content: most famously, as Hassan i Sabbah’s call to a mediatic guerilla war, whose immediate referent was the revolutionary Pan-Arabism sweeping North Africa in the early Sixties. This is additionally inflected by Tangier’s status as a colonial entrepot no longer tied to the traditional nation-state, but not yet become a genuinely global city (whether as Third World supersprawls such as Mexico City or Jakarta, or export-processing zones or finance metropoles like Hong Kong and Singapore). Tangier in that sense functions as a prototypical global village, of the sort halfway in between Genet’s anticolonial allegory in *The Blacks* (the counter-poised figures of Village and Virtue) and the more sophisticated anti-colonial strategy of Patrick
McGoohan’s *The Prisoner*, with its battle of wits between an allegorical New Left and the thoroughly malevolent consumer technologies of an indubitably global Village.4

The result is comparable in its scale and scope perhaps only to the emergence of the British novel out of the regional and urban cultures of the 18th century – the knightling, as it were, of colonial-rents into urban capital on the Imperial marketplace of urbanity – or indeed the fusion of Swiss bourgeois-pragmatic and French aristocratic-artisanal narrative registers in Rousseau’s *Confessions*: the savagery of a nobility bound only to the national monarch rewritten as the noble savage bound only by a henceforth nationalized reason, a.k.a. the Enlightenment savants typified by Voltaire, Paine or Locke. Just as the works of the latter proved antithetical, in their utopian core, to the emerging market system to which they were tactically allied (something most obvious in Thoreau’s Transcendentalism and Rousseau’s Romanticism, but no less striking in, say, Jacobin political praxis or Kant’s incipiently dialectical antinomies, wherein a mercantile-absolutist ethos reigned where a rising agrarian capitalism threatened to rule) so too were the premier aesthetic works of the early postmodern period, from Beckett to Burroughs, deeply and irrevocably antagonistic to the American hegemony from which they derived the bulk of their aesthetic material. Put another way, the American cultural monopoly over the international cinema and consumer culture and its monopoly division of labor (the GM model of an expansive managerial, marketing, finance and service bureaucracy overseeing vertically-integrated oil, steel and chemical combines) became at a certain point a barrier on the further development of the aesthetic productive forces, and entered a classically Marxian period of turmoil and political revolution. Where nationalism and mercantilism converged in the French and American revolutions, decolonization and consumerism intersect in the revolutionary politics of multinational capital.
Antinomies of the Export-Processing Zone

Every consumer culture is at the same time an information culture: this essential insight of the post-structuralists was both the theoretical collateral by which the Seventies theoreticians sought to leverage the international quotient of the 20th century philosophical systems, from the existentialisms to the ontologies, by means of a henceforth multinational nominalism, as well as post-structuralism’s greatest weakness. Quite simply, post-structuralism had no effective theory of the media-culture or multinational aesthetic forms, nor did its leading theorists ever stop to consider the possibility that theoretical mediations might have a genuinely social basis in late capitalism, or even to ask why it is that the teeming sign-structures and informatic nominalisms of the media-culture so conveniently dove-tailed with the circulation-rents, financial speculations, and currency mediations spawned by global finance capital. Theory either regressed to just another branch of the media industry or else, by failing to comprehend mass-culture as a field of antagonisms rather than reproducible tropes, handed over its content all the more surely to the class consciousness of that elite strata of transnational theory-producers and consumers whose existence needed to be explained in the first place. By contrast, the most interesting and creative theoreticians of the postmodern period would explicitly break with the theoreticians’ monopoly on theory, by either deciphering the division of labor prevailing within late capitalism from within the mass-cultural commodity, as in Fredric Jameson’s path-breaking filmography of the late Seventies; or from without, as in Pierre Bourdieu’s no less remarkable Distinction (with its arcologies of sense-perception already anticipating the postmodern phenomenon of ecologies of interlinked commodities). The task of the cultural critic is neither to hypostatize information as an absolute (the Internet ideology of self-disseminating bodies
of information), nor to delimit the subject to the aporias of the consumption-sphere (the post-structuralist ideology of self-replicating texts), but to valorize both of these things by means of that transnational mediation through which all of these things enter into their content: specifically, the multinational marketplace. To paraphrase Ernst Bloch, critical praxis awaits its redemption as much in the work of art as in that economic revolution which capital ceaselessly and relentlessly drives forward: neither as a static condition or object somehow immune from history, nor as the overarching mediation or logic of capital in which the aesthetic document is housed, but rather as the active working-out and recuperation of the history encapsulated and stored up within the aesthetic material itself (a history more often than not hidden even from the direct aesthetic producers themselves).

For his part, Burroughs transcribes the antinomies of early postnational consumer culture on two levels: first, as the ensemble of constantly-evolving mediatic techniques, materials, innovations and re-appropriations, often taken from science-fiction novellas and news magazines; second, as the aesthetic materials which the former ceaselessly reprocesses or rebroadcasts. This latter is to be confused neither with Burroughs’ own idiosyncratic notion of an image-track or cinematic clip, which never strays far from a rudimentary form of surrealist collage, nor with the immediate products of the global marketing and media culture, whose positive and negative imprints were undoubtedly the science-fiction and nuclear holocaust films, but rather relates to the ensemble very much as the free jazz solo related to the specialized free jazz band. Whereas the bebop solo was the symbol par excellence of an emancipatory subjectivity, ritually rebelling against a big band harmony which is no longer perceived as an orchestral synthesis or painfully-forged collective identity, but instead as an existential prison or ghetto, free jazz marked the point at which the subjective solo becomes a new kind of collective object. This is most
obvious in Coltrane’s mid-Sixties extension of the solo onto atonal and arrhythmic grounds, where the sheer weight of instrumental technique completely implodes the category of the improvisation. The search for more and more dissonant sounds and ever more striking color-combinations, most evident in jazz modernism’s accelerating flight from shopworn or cliched melodies into timbre and rhythmic diversity, culminates in the utter exhaustion of the sonic possibilities of the craft instrument in question (very roughly, the transition from the saxophone or piano specialist to the postmodern studio producer and sound engineer a la Hendrix). Coltrane’s response was to abolish the hierarchical privilege of the soloist altogether, by democratizing sound-production in the multinational pastiches of his last great works (e.g. the 1967 Manifestations).

Something similar was at work in the evolution of the film director from studio-hired hack to independent professional to celebrated auteur and, finally, to the free-floating executive producer, no longer tied to a particular company, a studio or even a media genre. Certainly, one can argue that Burroughs’ trilogy functions as an intermediary case between a relatively underdeveloped music and overdeveloped film industry, i.e. fuses the intricate craft specializations of late jazz modernism with the cinematic division of labor in a manner reminiscent of early television programming. On this view, Burroughs’ ascent to counter-cultural icon and latterday godfather of cyberpunk merely confirms that general tendency of postmodern aesthetics typified by Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz’ transmogrification from I Love Lucy’s comic leads (culture-workers who play at being culture-workers) into television superstars, and thence into scriptwriters, directors and, ultimately, independent TV executives; something Burroughs himself, with typically reprobate irony, took pains not to entirely disavow in his latterday career as the archon of the Internet.
In fact, the matter is far more complex than this, inasmuch as Burroughs is not primarily interested in the media-culture per se, but rather in the culture of extended or monopoly-reproduction generally. The peculiar austerity of Burroughs’ narrative strategy relies upon a well-nigh Benjaminic ban on the moving image, wherein the reigning automotive, locomotive or aerospace narratives of the day – the Hollywood road chase or espionage hunt, with its mythic annihilation of expensive sets, exotic scenery and motor technologies of all kinds – are manifestly voided. What takes the place of the First World reproductive technology set within an idealized matrix or exchange-net (the fundamental aporia of boilerplate Fifties sci-fi, with its emphasis on a crude mechanical engineering and routinized problem-solving) is a series of Second World subjects, ensconced within Third World biological systems or ecologies. These subjects are to be confused neither with the post-structuralist culture-rent nor with the informatic body of a globally-designed, locally-manufactured cultural technology, but need to be understood as a discrete geographical sector of the transnational economy: namely, those industrialized semi-peripheries which mediated between the global cities and finance entrepots spawned by multinational big business in the early Sixties, and the indigenous developmental states charged with managing such.

In TSM these latter are noticeably undeveloped, and tend to be identified either as the raw materials colonialism satirized in *Trak, Trak, Trak* or as the self-sacrificing mythos of the Latin American comprador bourgeoisie in *The Mayan Caper*. The colonized peoples themselves appear only incidentally:

Through customs checks and control posts and over the mountains in a blue blast of safe conducts and three monkey creatures ran across the road in a warm wind – (sound of barking dogs and running water) swinging round curves over the misty void – down to end of the road towns on the edge of Yage country where shy Indian cops checked our papers – through broken stellae, pottery fragments, worked stones, condoms and shit-stained comics, slag heaps of phosphorescent
metal excrement – faces eaten by the pink and purple insect disease of the New World – crab boys with human legs and genitals crawl out of clay cubicles – Terminal junkies hawk out crystal throat gristle in the cold mountain wind – Goof ball bums covered with shit sleep in rusty bathtubs – a delta of sewage to the sky under terminal stasis, speared a sick dolphin that surfaced in bubbles of coal gas – taste of metal left silver sores on our lips – only food for this village built on iron racks over an iridescent lagoon – swamp delta to the sky lit by orange gas flares...

The cinematic panorama of the Kiplingesque jungle adventure accedes by degrees to the bits and pieces of an abandoned urban mass-culture, landscapes of trash dumps and mining slag populated by cast-off day-laborers and that curious creature, the metallic, coal gas-breathing dolphin: evidently a species of diesel engine, hauling raw materials in what is clearly an oil-and-gas extraction site. What the mainstream Hollywood spectacular represses – the industrialization of the former colonies, or their effort to do so under independent auspices, displaced onto the unspoiled scenery and native customs paraded forth by the Bond films – is demythologized as a ferocious battleground, riven by the most violent predations and social struggles. Such violence is the flip side of the unearthly beauty of the scene, rather like the eerie extra-terrestriality of the panorama rendered in false-color or computer-enhanced mode (a la the psychedelic sequence in Kubrick’s 2001, or its televisual analogue in the original Star Trek): the wasteland of existential yore, the Expressionistic battlefield, the Surrealist junk-pile and the aerial vistas of the WW II newsreel are sublated into the (literally and figuratively) radioactive post-atomic wilderness.

Postnational space enters into the equation only where an upwardly mobile mass-cultural content could be mobilized against a regnant national form: certainly, in TSM the two tend to coexist uneasily within an obsolescent vocabulary of existential and detective motifs, as with the gay-bashing private eye and drug-hustling Bradly in Public Agent7, Clem Snide’s camp parody of Bogart and the reformed Mr. Martin in Case of the
Celluloid Kali, and the Hooverite District Supervisor and the young media rebel in Where You Belong. Such narratives tend either to bog down in the objective aporia of all detective fiction, namely the irreconcileability of genuine justice with the juridical system involved, or else veer over into the subjective paranoia of the Cold War (the agendas of secret power-elites, satirized as the ubiquitous Board Books). Supranational criminality and the Cold War secret agent complement one another much like the international criminal and urban detective of the Sherlock Holmes series. Either way, the narrative tends to degrade into humdrum existentialism at best or, at worst, into the televised cop show (e.g. Early Answer or Cross the Wounded Galaxies in TSM, invisible generation in TTE, and the misfired Scientology parody at the end of NE). The mass-cultural response to this was, of course, to borrow from other narratives in an attempt to shore up the aesthetic creditworthiness of the detective or secret agent, i.e. combine the stick of class repression with the carrot of consumerist jouissance: just as every Thirties comic-strip superhero had to have a repressively-sublimated relationship with a suitably mediatic female, each Bond spectacular had to have increasingly risque erotic liaisons counterpointing the ever-more-expensive stunts and gadgets, and indeed the Bond women were to become the symbol par excellence of a comprador heterosexuality, i.e. the Imperial complicity of First and Second World power elites busily exploiting the feminized service-sector endemic to the specific neo-national zone, consumer goods or tourist industry in question.

It is to Burroughs’ lasting credit that he rejected neither consumption nor sexuality per se, but insistently invested both with the most radical and scandalous materiality. Probably no single aspect of Burroughs’ work has antagonized so many readers as the unflinching corporeality of the body: its interminable rhythms, digestions, excretions and pulsions merging seamlessly into the baroque homoerotic fantasies and
transgressive hallucinations by which the Surrealist languages of desire are supplanted by seemingly self-reproducing machineries of consumption (rather like the TV commercials which dynamized the static pictorials of the poster and the billboard). This involved as well a shift to a new set of character actants, e.g. high-tech pharmaceutical producers and interstellar pushers, which are generally supplemented by a transnational media apparatus not yet become a benevolent Nova Police but no longer under the thumb of superstates of Eastern or Western persuasion. This gives rise to interesting composite forms, such as reporter Joe Brundige and the anonymous Latin American doctor in *The Mayan Caper*, and still later as Johnny Yen and the doctor in *Celluloid Kali*. Yen in particular denotes a new culture of semi-automatic machines and uncannily lifelike cybernetic capital goods:

The lights dimmed and Johnny pranced out in goggles flickering Northern Lights wearing a jock of undifferentiated tissue that must be in constant movement to avoid crystallization. A penis rose out of the jock and dissolved in pink light back to a clitoris, balls retract into cunt with a fluid plop. Three times he did this to wild ‘Oles!’ from the audience. Drifted to the bar and ordered a heavy blue drink. D noted patches of white crystal formed along the scar lines on Johnny's copy face.

“Just like canals. Maybe I'm a Martian when the Crystals are down.” TSM:69

The self-deprecating reference to the crystal and Mars dates the gender machinery in question to a species of early radio transceiver or instrument gauge, equipped with some sort of dial or analog interface, of the sort already being produced in huge volumes by startup Japanese firms; the goggles may be a reference to high-altitude bomber pilots or to some form of nuclear engineering. The nameless doctor, on the other hand, is evidently some sort of vaguely Mephistophelean black-market organ-graftor or surgical specialist, whose role it is to subvert the then-fashionable notion of an objective and nonpartisan technocracy (whether of Eisenhowerian or Khruschevite hue) by recourse to
the biologization of technology. Ernest Mandel’s notorious extended reproduction of
capital returns as the extended reproducibility of the postmodern subject, encoded here as
a hybrid neonationalism, somewhere between semi-peripheral Spain and Japan on the
one hand and peripheral Latin America and North Africa on the other.

Such neonational fantasies are problematic to the extent that no recognizably
multinational media or consumer culture mediates such; the doctor is in this sense very
much a gloss on the existentializing psychiatrist or the mad scientist endemic to
paperback sci-fi, namely what a Freudian narrative would term a substitute father-figure,
but which in the present context can be read as the chief manager or executive officer
charged with running the overseas branch plants of the big American oil, chemical and
auto firms. This was in fact the central aporia of *Naked Lunch*, whose limit-point was the
premonitory cultural diversity of an Interzone governed by racist expatriates (of which
the Mugwumps are merely the biochemical avatar) and colonial bureaucracies, and it is
significant that TSM tends to parody the Hollywood detritus of the American hegemony
without really taping into the cultural resistances of such (the gratuitous sexism, for
example, of Yen’s thoroughly unconvincing send-up of Molly Bloom). Probably the root
of the aporia is Burroughs’ own internalized homophobia, which is only slowly and with
much difficulty transformed from a paranoid symptom of the total system into a
decloseted image-politics a la Genet, and only much later into a weapon of mass
resistance. Indeed, it is worth asking as to why exactly the figures of the existential
outlaw or modernist anti-hero and the sci-fi technician or puzzle-solving detective had
not been recombined far earlier; the possibility was surely latent in Arthur Conan Doyle’s
Holmes-Watson agon, and still more so in the inventively post-British interlocutions of
Agatha Christie’s Poirot (not to mention that evergreen of paranoid fiction, the secret
agent). Probably Alfred Bester’s admirable novella *The Stars, My Destination* comes the
closest here, before foundering on the aporia of the Beat culture, namely the inability of a
neo-national American mass culture to generate a genuinely multinational content (cf. the
patent regression to the baroque registers of tattoo culture, idiot savants qua biological
telephones and jaunting as the biologization of the automotive culture). This suggests
that one of the key preconditions for multinational aesthetics was not merely the global
market instaurated by the Pax Britannia, nor the international technical infrastructure of
steamships, radio, cinema and motor vehicles, but the asynchronous development of the
American superstate out of all these things. The essential clue here is Burroughs’
impeccable sartorial credentials (what he jokingly called in numerous interviews his
“bankers’ drag”) and punctilious, Eastern-school monotone shot through with gently-
lagging Midwestern rhythms: the oral analogue of Kansas City jazz and Forties bebop,
preserved as if in a time warp by decades of drug addiction and exile. This suggests that
Burroughs’ chief autobiographical imprimatur (from Bill Lee to the District Supervisor to
Inspector J. Lee) was not merely an anagram for the overseas CIA agent or covert
operation, nor necessarily limited to the branch plant operative, but represented the
incipient privatization and outsourcing of such (generally, as free-floating marketing or
production consultants) on behalf of those East Asian and Central European
multinationals which would indeed surreptitiously outflank the American hegemony in
the 1970s, by turning the free-trade arsenal of the Empire against itself.

The clearest evidence for this is Burroughs’ uproarious punning of the financial-
politico-military jargon of the Empire, which cannily reappropriates all manner of Cold
War sociological, political and scientific texts, as with Inspector J. Lee (“jailee”), the
Readers Digest-inspired Subliminal Kid, informant Uranium Willy (the excremental
anagram of Plutonium Bill), and the heavy metal boys (cf. the Fat Boy fission device), to
name only a few. The flip side of this is the gradual effacement of the overt signs of
economic or military colonialism still endemic to Interzone or the torture-cells of Dr. Benway by a more mediated (if no less deadly) neocolonialism. This goes hand in hand not, as one might have expected, with the emergence of an overtly multinational body, but rather with the construction of the multinational financial endoskeleton of such: what Burroughs calls the “algebra of need” faced by every drug addict – the wild oscillation of an absent drug-time with an ever-present, horrifying addiction-time (withdrawal pangs) – becomes one of the most powerful denunciations of neocolonialism ever written. That body-in-motion of capital formerly monopolized by national currency units is press-ganged into a rapacious ecology of ornate and ever more complex credit schemes, in which drugs, body parts, and entire identities are routinely bought, mortgaged and sold: in the end, hard currency is the ultimate drug, and reliable information the ultimate currency, in a late capitalism stretching from Bangalore to Birmingham.

This goes beyond the scattered references in Burroughs’ Tangier letters to the course of the U.S. dollar to the pinnacle of finance itself, namely those global banking institutions in whose refracted penumbra the dubious offerings of loan sharks, street hustlers and underground drug-labs compete with the no less lethal nostrums purveyed by faceless investment houses, IMF-World Bank bureaucracies and corporate officers of what one anonymous wit called the “Fax Americana”. Where Adorno’s In Search of Wagner described the Wilhelmine alliance of iron and rye in Wagner’s Junker gods and Liberal beggars, so does Burroughs decrypt the intertwined multinational and comprador bourgeoisie of the American Empire out of the faded close-ups of the Hollywood producer and the blue-movie porn star:

The examiner floats up from the floor, swims down through heavy water from ceiling, shoots up from toilet bowl, English baths, underwater takes of genitals and pubic hairs in spermy water. The goggles lick over his body phosphorescent moths, through rectal hairs orange halos flicker around his penis. In his sleep,
naked Panama nights, the camera pulsing in blue silence and ozone smells, sometimes the cubicle open out on all sides into purple space. X-ray photos of viscera and fecal movements, his body a transparent blue fish. TSM:136

The retinal after-images of Klee and Surrealism dissolve here into the free-flowing surfaces of the early Fifties animation stills and the phosphorescent trails of Pollock’s Abstract Expressionism. This cogent and canny repoliticization of what an entire generation of critics and philistines alternately lauded or condemned as the anomie and existential angst of the New York School (certainly the supreme American embodiment of late visual modernism), precisely in order outflank the McCarthyism and Cold War hysteria which produced such, will later generate a nascent cosmology of image-making, whose programmatic motif will be the seizure of the film camera and all its culturally reproductive paraphernalia (tape recorders, flashbulbs, microphones, etc.) from the hands of a malevolent power-elite by globe-trotting bands of information and media professionals. Probably the most compelling form such glosses of a cybernetic media technology just beginning to turn psychedelic will take is the polylogue between pilot K9 and Uranian Willy in the fragmentary chapter by the same name. Although Burroughs will recycle much of the material therein in *Nova Express*, one passage in particular is worth quoting:

Pilot K9 caught the syndicate killer image on a penny arcade screen and held it in his sight – Now he was behind it in it was it – The image disintegrated in photo flash of total recognition – Other image on screen – Hold in sight – Smell of burning metal in his head – “Pilot K9, you are cut off” – Back – Back – Back before the whole fucking shithouse goes up – Return to base immediately – Ride music beam back to base – Stay out of that time flak – all pilots ride Pan Pipes back to base.”

It was impossible to estimate the damage – Board Books destroyed – Enemy personnel decimated – The message of total resistance on short wave of the world. TSM:152
Here some sort of WW II fighter pilot narrative interspersed with photo stills of the gangster film is improbably simulcast over a guerilla radio broadcast, the whole ingeniously anchored by Charlie Parker’s limpid thirty-second notes percolating in the background. What the later version will excise is, of course, the motivating fiction to the penny arcade, something satirized in TTE as the lethal amusement parks, floating casinos and decadent resorts of G.O.D. (the Garden of Delights), a kind of biologic shopping mall where hustlers peddle all manner of biochemical cons, shucks, and outright molestations.  

Such nightmarish visions of a culture-industry turned carnivorous, of the glittering veneer of First World consumer capitalism drawn back to reveal its underpinnings in the repressive neoliberalisms, toxic factories and metastizing slums of the global semi-peripheries, have their concrete negation in the borderzones between the export-processing zones and the new consumer minimalls and boutiques: the unfolding space of the export-platform economies, something Burroughs subtly transcribes via the invariably Swedish or Chinese youth of the counter-cultural festivals. These latter run the gamut from celebrations of a collective gay sexuality, to the hallucinogenic synthaescapes of voyages to other planets (a.k.a. nationalities) and through other bodies (a.k.a. genders) in TTE, and finally to the transgalactic multimedia exhibits and gender-bending exhibitions of the Amusement Gardens in NE.

Conversely, what is most underdeveloped in TSM is not so much the technology of cultural reproduction but the subjective operating system or programming by which this is accessed. Where the high modernisms exploded the boundary between the high, middle-brow and low cultural markets handed down by the Victorian era, while reinstating a new aesthetic hierarchy in the irreconcilable antagonism between an international avant-garde and the degraded, commercial kitsch of monopoly capitalism,
TSM – the great and unheralded founding text of American postmodernism – goes one step further by radically democratizing aesthetic production (though not yet consumption) in a multinational turn. The price Burroughs paid for this advance was, to be sure, the increasing scientifization and informatization of the narrative material, or what can be thought of as the rising organic composition of aesthetic capital within the work of art: the increasing share of technical jargon in science-fiction, special effects in the action-adventure blockbuster film, studio and recording technologies in music, and so forth. This is nicely captured by Burroughs’ rewriting of Watson and Crick’s discovery of DNA in 1954 into the virus mythology of NE, wherein the Adamite expulsion of biology from destiny, indeed the brutal downsizing of the Great Chain of Being into just another ecology of information, is dialectically reprised as the pervasive biologization of information.\(^\text{12}\)

It should be emphasized that this latter is not derived from the contemporary data-cores and web-servers running an exponentially-expanding set of satellite, telecom and computer networks, that is to say from a semi-autonomous operating system or software, but rather from the far more complex nominalisms of the national literary and cultural traditions. The corollary of Burroughs’ famed remark, namely that the word is a virus, is that the postmodern body is itself a kind of biological factory or cybernetic assembly line, brimming with transnational antagonisms and social conflicts. Witness the spectacular slippage from the discourse of the synthetics or petrochemicals business (a pioneer in continuous processing and cybernetic controls) to the terminology of the atomic and nuclear industries in the following passage:

It was a transitional period because of the Synthetics and everybody was raising some kinda awful life form in his bidet to fight the Sex Enemy – The results were not in all respects reasonable men, but the Synthetics were rolling off that line and we were getting some damned interesting types by golly blue heavy metal
boys with near zero metabolism that shit once a century and then it's a slag heap and disposal problem in the worst form there is: sewage delta to a painted sky under orange gas flares, islands of garbage where green boy-girls tend human heads in chemical gardens, terminal cities under the metal word fallout like cold melted solder on walls and streets, sputtering cripples with phosphorescent metal stumps – So we decided the blue heavy metal boys were not in all respects a good blueprint. TSM:157

The series of increasingly risque Cold War puns (“Sex Enemy”, “the metal word fallout” and “blue heavy metal boys”) implodes into the conclusive triple play on “blueprint”: at once architectural design, blue-movie text, and sought-after innovation-rent. It is precisely here, where the telematic idealism of the post-structuralisms as well as the crude informatic empiricism of the Internet ideology would either gloss the content of this last as a species of neo-national media-text (e.g. Derrida’s cross-posting of Genet and Hegel in Glas, which reduces the dialectics of Third World nationalism and gay liberation to a series of signifiers-in-drag), or else write off the text as a Java-style source code in search of a browser, that a radical or Marxist hermeneutic would highlight the rifts and crevices of the text, diagnosing the insufficiencies and anomalies which riddle such not as faults, but as the chief documents of a subterranean resistance to late capitalism. The key here is the onerous labor involved in constructing mechanical bodies, performed by some sort of polygendered working class (the boy-girls redolent of an androgynous service-sector) yoked to semi-automatic information-processing machines (the, in every sense of the term, cultivated human heads), all orchestrated by ethonic, unknowable powers of cultural and biochemical dominion.

This is a fair description of our old friend, the Satanic mill, suitably postdated as the overseas branch plant; only where a Zola or Melville explored the abyssal mines and sea-faring colonizations of 19th century France and America, Burroughs delves into the electronic colonialism wrought by corporate R & D complexes and a Government-subsidized space race. What is genuinely new about the latter is, of course, the plebian
subjectivity of the highly educated, scientifically literate and multinational working class of consumer capitalism, charged with manufacturing everything from synthetic fabrics to nuclear devices, which evidently is locked in struggle with a third element: not the superstate per se, but something structurally related to it. The solution to the mystery is nothing less than the multidivisional corporate bureaucracy exemplified by the DuPont corporation, which pioneered the use of basic research in a corporate setting, innovated synthetic fabrics such as nylon, and provided the management expertise for the chemical engineering processes of the Manhattan Project; and it should be no surprise that DuPont was one of the earliest champions of globalization, busily setting up branch plants from Italy to the East Asian tiger economies throughout the Fifties. This first, embryonic attempt to name a multinational in the language of its global niche market contains the germ-cell of that more thorough-going set of global resistance strategies found in the sequel to TSM, *The Ticket That Exploded*, to which we must now turn.

The Rentier as Revolutionary

The film-camera as gun: that this hoary piece of Expressionist wisdom, postdated everywhere from the image-politics of the Cold War propaganda bureaus to the media blitzes of the multis, was first negated not by the counter-culture, but by the demilitarized anti-cinema of *The Ticket That Exploded*, is not the least of the surprises in store for the innocent reader of Burroughs’ second great novel. Though regarded by the author himself as a secondary text, comprised of retouched archival material and routines excised from the final version of TSM, TTE is in fact a significant albeit not unproblematic advance over the latter. On the level of form, the cut-up method is emancipated from its archaic Surrealist scaffolding, in the same way that the bebop horn solo is detached from the last vestiges of big band harmony in free jazz: not gradually, but with the concussive force of
Coltrane’s opening motif in A Love Supreme, declaring its autonomy from the dispersed seventh and ninth chords of the piano accompaniment in regal anticipation of the more fully multinationalized aural space of Om. Where TSM was still tied to the cultural rhythms of the American superstate, TTE registers the relentless productivities and ectoplasmic financial speculations of global production itself, as recounted everywhere from Bill Lee’s Vietcong raids on the TV networks to the military interventions of the Cold War superstates, and from an emergent entertainment-information complex to a Hollywood hegemony already beginning to eat itself. Put more concretely, the mechanical transpositions of the cut-up find themselves infused with a new content, in what amounts to the hotwiring of the international sign-systems of late modernism onto the chassis of an exuberant Fifties mass-culture. Roughly analogous strategies were pursued by the cinematic auteurs, who incorporated televusional innovations directly into increasingly heterogenous cinematic materials; certainly, one can argue that the most significant cinematic antecedent of TTE was Hitchcock’s blending of film genres in North by Northwest, which careers wildly between the detective story and the action-adventure thriller, all the while keeping just one step ahead of its mass-cultural spin-off, the special-effects-driven Bond spectacular. Something similar transpires in the opening sequence of TTE, wherein the auteur-style parody of a hectoring Hollywood director and a rabidly imperialist war movie gone haywire are all upstaged by the bickering of a harebrained scriptwriter and B.J., evidently some sort of film producer. Where we might expect a battlefield reportage or, at the very least, the iridescent image-war of potboiler space opera, Burroughs ripostes with the twenty-five-page jaunt (in the Alfred Bester definition of the word, i.e. a timespace jump) of winds of time:

The two beings twisted free of human coordinates rectums merging in a rusty swamp smell – spurts of semen fell through the blue twilight of the room like
opal chips – The air was full of flicker ghosts who move with the speed of light through orgasms of the world – tentative beings taking form for a few seconds in copulations of light... The blue metal boy naked now flooded back into his memory as the green boy-girl dropped spaceship controls in swirls of poisonous color... TTE:7

Cinematic time becomes video space, as the green boy-girls of TSM suddenly acquire the training and wherewithal to master the technology of their masters. The chapter then proceeds at breakneck speed through a series of cybernetic folk-tales, beginning with a meeting with the Nova Police, without doubt a founding text of the New Left; later, a garbled biological murder-mystery and a less than successful pastiche of Joyce; and finally a prison-break by Bill&Iam, whom outwits the guards and undergoes a brief and terrifying self-deprogramming before leading an all-out assault on the guard towers.

Along the way, a whole series of outdated existential tropes is cashiered by a variety of global narratives: the police, detective and prison narratives are displaced, not by Genet’s criminalized or Sartre’s heroic underground, but by technological bureaucracies of interrogation, investigation and internment. This gives rise to a number of entertaining concatenations, for example the carnivorous Happy Cloak, a clever recombination of the drug narrative with the multi-paneled existential textile, borrowed from a Henry Kuttner short story; or, further afield, the self-demolition of a Cold War surveillance technology (“A tape recorder gasps, shits, pisses, strangulates and ejaculates at his feet” TTE:26) courtesy of the Demolition Squad charged with disposing of the film reels from the Garden of Delights.

Only the Joyce pastiche falls resoundingly flat, highlighting one of the little-known limitations of the cut-up: this is the increased dependence of the material on a specifically multinational cultural matrix, which tends to short-circuit or otherwise disrupt the neo-national pole of the narrative. This was not yet an issue for the modernist
works of the Thirties, where the whole point was to reassert the primacy of a crisis-stricken national-monopoly form onto whatever international content was handy (e.g. the Fascist populism of Celine’s gutter-lingo and telegraphic insults; Eisenstein’s Bolshevik close-ups and Stalinized panoramas; or the Irish-English puns and polyglot grammars of *Finnegan’s Wake*), but certainly became one in the Forties and Fifties, as with Brecht’s epochal *Galileo Galilei*, the carnival of extinctions relayed by Beckett’s *Endgame*, or the violent excavation of deceased Showa-era gender ideologies in Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*. This may explain why the earliest postmodernisms could not simply abolish the late modernist contradiction between the burgeoning multinational forces of aesthetic production and largely neo-national relations of aesthetic consumption by fiat, but tended to reproduce such on an even wider scale, this time as the rift between a compulsory Americanization on the one hand, and a no less rigorous quasi-Sartrean engagement or Frankfurt School-style non-participation on the other (politically, this was registered as the increasing antagonism between progressive intellectuals and the national mass party, and the necessity of reinventing politics along the lines of a nascent media and civil rights activism). This suggests that where TSM’s cybernetic narrative reappropriates the American superstate as a form, and the branch plants of globalizing American multis as a kind of content, TTE is setting its sights on some sort of multinational versions of these things, whose precise dimensions we still need to identify.

Probably the most concise way of phrasing the problem is that TTE attempts to depict Sixties cultural forms with an aesthetic language inherited from the Fifties; where the experiment miscarries, flashes of Forties bedrock can be glimpsed beneath the narrative superstructure. The religious cults and street hustlers of *in a strange bed*, the Top 40 music chatter and sexist asides of *do you love me?*, and the hackneyed media collage and dialtone manifesto of *in that game?* are hardly the most egregious offenders
here; in fact, the last hundred pages of TTE are little more than a sargasso sea of neo-national forms, occasionally enlivened by passages of superb editing, but markedly inferior to the frenetic innovations of first eleven chapters. What makes TTE such a remarkable text is the degree to which Burroughs manages to at least strike the sparks which will eventually lead to the conflagration of *Nova Express*. Certainly, the *operation rewrite* and *nova police* chapters are minor classics of Burroughs’ cosmology, with their canny fusion of the anti-colonial revolutions and the free-floating postmodern culture-worker, and the initial transcription of cybernetic concepts of feedback and recursion onto a worldwide polity. For the first time, the Nova Police are described not as a glorified U.N. peace-keeping force, but as a kind of transnational guerilla movement, with agents in various health, communications, educational, cultural and media infrastructures no longer tied to discrete national bureaucracies, but not yet global institutions such as the World Health Organization, UNICEF, or Time-Warner.

Burroughs’ dilemma is in fact the most precise aesthetic expression of the central economic contradiction of the post-colonial regimes of the Third World: the trading-rents which once accrued to colonial trading firms and plantation-owners could be nationalized, but not effectively deployed by state apparatuses practically denuded of managerial and professional workers by centuries of colonialism, more often than not aggravated by expatriate and capital flight. As documented by Andre Gunder Frank, the upshot was either the creation of an indigenous colonialist class, or else Pharaonic industrial projects hopelessly dependent on metropolitan technology; or what amounted, from the global perspective, to islands of modernization of the relations of production amidst the general stagnation of the productive forces themselves.\(^{15}\) Whatever the nominal ideological provenance of those islands, their class consciousness could not, under the circumstances, be anything other than that of raw materials rentiers. This gives
rise to that interesting new class subtype of global capitalism, the revolutionary rentier, whose historical mission it is to overthrow a given colonial or neo-colonial regime by socializing the machinery of national accumulation from within, via a one-party state or a massive expansion of the developmental state or both, something visible everywhere from Cuba’s revolutionary government to Singapore’s People’s Action Party, and from the post-Mao Chinese Communist Party and the Taiwanese Nationalists to the OPEC petro-aristocracy. Burroughs’ own version of such, Hassan i Sabbah – both a name and a movement – is clearly derived from the pantheon of Pan-Arabist movement, only with the prescient twist that the guerilla campaign is partly being fought in First World media institutions.

All this needs to be grounded in Immanuel Wallerstein’s intriguing concept of the Second World as the ideologically diverse but economically homogenous semi-periphery of the world-system, a.k.a. that spectrum of raw materials and simple manufactured goods producers ranging from the Soviet nomenklatura to the Middle Eastern oil monarchies, and from Brazilian state capitalism to South Africa’s apartheid regime. Wallerstein’s point is not to blindly equate the Soviet Far Eastern republics with the South African bantustans, but to underline the structural impediments to accumulation inherent to all raw materials exporters, i.e. falling real prices for oil or minerals and a lack of foreign exchange to pay for extractive and refining technology. For our purposes, the concept of the semi-periphery can be expanded into two sub-categories, the declining semi-periphery of American monopoly capitalism (primarily Latin America and the Middle East) and the ascendant semi-periphery of European and Pacific Rim multinational capitalism (the Asian tiger economies, and Southern and Iberian – and, as of 1990, Eastern Europe). Whereas declining semi-peripheries generally externalized the pressures of market forces, via wage cuts for workers, subsidies for the rich, corruption
and debt binges, successful upscalers internalized such by nationalizing domestic finance capital, borrowing technology instead of external credit, and providing social mobility through agrarian reform and national investments in health, education and social services.

It is precisely the red thread of social bifurcation running between the rentierized state and the national-revolutionary rentiers, between the pernicious Mugwumps and Hassan i Sabbah, which provides TTE with one of its most remarkable narrative innovations: this is the Third World conceived of not as a source of raw materials or a species of nature, but as a discrete multinational subject. This has its paradigmatic expression in *the black fruit*, wherein Lykin’s space-travels and Bradly’s psychedelic sojourns are serenaded by an anonymous fishboy and a well-informed tourist guide respectively. Though these composite sketches are quickly inundated by a wave of hallucinogenic juxtapositions, the principle will be extended in *all members worst a century*, an adventure parody embellished by wild temporal swings between 1862 and 1962 (Victorian Britain versus the zenith of the American Empire). In particular, the telltale mention of an expatriate Dutchman and later a Malaysian guide (TTE:96) suggest the environs of former Dutch colony Indonesia, while the accompanying narrative recounts the displacement of a feminized heterosexuality by an emancipatory homoeroticism, or what amounts to the negation of a feminized colonial identity by a remasculinized national bureaucracy (a.k.a. the defeat of the Dutch by Sukarno and the Indonesian army). Burroughs’ text is remarkably explicit about the violence this process entails:

A young male face of dazzling beauty moved in and i was free of my body – The orchid girl floated over the pool toward me and i rushed her stuttering back sex words that tore her tentative substance like bullets – i caught a final glimpse of
her agonized face eaten by caustic slime – A scream faded out in birdcalls and jungle sounds and lapping water – TTE:101

The scream countermands the visual plenitude of the boy’s face, by naming the price every subaltern Third World zone pays in order to constitute itself as a nation-state in the first place: this is the relegation of local and regional identities and other potential nationalities to the jungle wastes. The humanization of the national is the flip side of the dehumanization of the non-national; Sukarno’s unbridled nationalism would unleash the social forces responsible for Suharto’s 1965 coup and subsequent anti-Communist, anti-Chinese genocide. It is to Burroughs’ lasting credit that he neither censors nor fetishizes the ferocious violence of the peripheries, but consistently identifies the provenance of such as a properly capitalist prehistory. In this Burroughs approaches the borders of Adorno’s vision of natural history in *Negative Dialectics*, as that alienated social history of an ever-expanding vortex of exchange-nets, everywhere from a mushrooming consumer capitalism to a manic global arms race.

TTE’s aesthetic riposte to the nightmare of Cold War prehistory is the utopia of the thermonuclear subject. The initial scansion of this is undoubtedly Bradly’s biochemical time-travel in terminal street, the title of which is possibly a primordial computer pun but more likely an outdated existential trope, nicely underlined by Burroughs’ suitably burlesque self-portrait of his transmutation into a writer. Later versions include *combat troops in the area*, a partial rewrite of TSM’s *Uranium Willy* with expository details on the malign roles of Minraud, the Crab Guards, and the Scorpion Electricals versus the beneficient Green Troops, the whole taking on the outlines of an ambiguous, hallucinatory UN intervention into a Third World conflict. What is missing is, of course, the Third World equivalent of Hassan i Sabbah’s Second World call to revolution: what TTE provides is not facile or overhasty substitutes for the
thing itself, but the juridical and cultural underpinnings of such. Where TSM pastiches the cinematic monologue for its privileged material, TTE fishes out the vast, dripping hulk of the copyright, patent and marketing laws of the American culture-industry, and begins to turn the extended reproduction of culture against the monopoly ownership of such. Thus the stunning electronic turn of writing machine, which practically invents the concept of cyberspace:

Great sheets of magnetized print held color and disintegrated in cold mineral silence as word dust falls from demagnetized pictures – Photomontage fragments backed with iron stuck to patterns and fell in swirls mixing with color dust to form new patterns, shimmering, falling, magnetized, demagnetized to the flicker of blue cylinders pulsing neon tubes and globes – In metal booths brain waves wrote the flickering message passed back and forth, over and through shifting grills – The magnetic pencil caught in calligraphs of Brion Gysin wrote back into the brain metal patterns of silence and space – orgone accumulators flickering blue over swimming tanks where naked youths bathed in blue – sound and image flakes falling like luminous grey snow – falling softly from demagnetized patterns into blue silence – Metal heads reversed eyes felt tingling blue spark erections – Metal orgasms flickering rainbow colors – came in wet scenic railways of dream – Electrodes from the brain wrote out boys on roller skates in a shower of ruined suburbs – TTE:63

All the hegemonic features of mature postmodernism come into play here, ranging from seamless networks of information production and consumption, to live-action media and specialized retail boutiques, to the roller-skating qua roller-blading youths and suburban sprawl. At first glance, this First World consumer-culture seems to have little enough to do with a nascent Third World subject, until one considers the fact that the entire display is, quite literally, a writing machine, that is to say an instrument of global production, wherein the brain waves and electrodes of unseen First World subjects are writing out messages which consist of Second World bodies, via a Third World workforce (the “metal heads” who, though reduced to merely factors of production by the factory-
narrative in question, are nevertheless able to genuflect upon Soviet-style “railways of
dream”). This is surely the one of the most mind-bending descriptions of a
semiconductor or electronics plant in the Third World ever written; it is as if the
embodied labor congealed in the cheap radios, transistors, tape players, television sets
and electronic goods being produced in the thriving Third World export-processing zones
of the day were somehow able to speak, if only for a second, in a transnational language
of electronic whines and scratches, welding arcs and machine-shop stamps, all set to the
propulsive rhythm of the global assembly-line.

In the musical sphere per se, all this had its truest expression in the global
aesthetic revolution inaugurated by late jazz modernism and concretized in Jimi Hendrix’
recuperation and democratization of studio technology – epitomized by the musical
plebianization of the electric guitar and its vocabulary of sound-effects. Burroughs’
writing machine, on this score, is clearly something like a fantasmatic word-processor,
one step up the chain of electronic evolution from the level of the mechanical typewriter.
What is missing is, to be sure, the script or symbolic document by which these machines
of reproduction do indeed reproduce, i.e. their software. Burroughs’ provisional attempts
at providing such – everything from citations of Gysin’s calligraphy to Reich’s sex
therapies – are notably unconvincing, and function at best as placebos for a fuller
reckoning with the televisual innovations and Marcusean rebellions of the early Sixties
postmodernisms. To put it more concretely still, it is as if the aesthetic and
superstructural forms of the counter-culture had emerged in advance of the psychedelic
content of such, resulting in the violent disruption of the equilibrating cybernetic
narrative of TSM. The cybernetic subject (put crudely, the brain considered as an analog
telephone switchboard and the body as a petrochemical cracking-plant) is pulled in two
irreconcilable directions: towards an increasingly autonomous surveillance and
communications network on the one hand, and disconnected mechanisms of hormonal feedback and control on the other. It is not to TTE’s discredit that it cannot as yet follow this redivision to its logical conclusion, namely the incorporation of the post-cybernetic subject out of the consumer-culture heuristics, mass-mediatic texts, and ferro-magnetic information sublime relayed by the great science-fiction works of the Eighties, in particular William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*; rather, the latter would simply not have been possible without the aesthetic advance of the former.

Admittedly, flashes of just such a post-cybernetic subject do become visible in *substitute flesh*, on the intermediate level of the erotically-charged production-cycle of reproducible bodies not yet endowed with an autonomous corporeality. The latter subsequently becomes the backdrop for a number of scintillating improvisations, ranging from the rambunctious Sex Musicians and the immersion tank (TTE:83), to the cybernetic recording and production studio (“Stroking music from hose attachments they turn virus punch cards to magnetic patterns” TTE:78), all of which culminate in *combat troops in the area*:

The mold of his body cracked and he stepped free – a slender green creature, his hands ended in black claws covered with fine magnetic wires that extended up the inner arm to the elbow – He was wearing a gas mask to breathe carbon dioxide of enemy planet – antennae ears tuned to all voices of the city, each voice classified on a silent switchboard – green disk eyes with pupils of a pale electric blue – body of a hard green substance like flexible jade – back brain and spine burned with blue sparks as messages crackled in and out – TTE:102

The cybernetic organism morphs effortlessly into what Donna Haraway famously termed the gender-bending cyborg\(^\text{17}\), which coolly detaches itself from the centralized grip of a broadcast station or control-program and begins that archetypical activity of the transnational consumer culture, the global scan: that is, the global innovation-rents of the
radio transceiver, a tapped or centrally-monitored telephone network, and the generic
reference to the little green men from Mars of space-opera fame are all recouped from
the standpoint of the skilled radio technician or electronics specialist. This is something
our own contemporary cultural moment would tend to gloss in purely informatic terms,
as the free-floating hacker or programmer, but which had its early Sixties equivalent in
the communications and electronics specialists of the Pentagon. Just as the infrastructure
of this latter would germinate the technologies of the Internet, so too would the culture of
military-industrialism sow the seeds for the electronic culture of a later era; indeed, it
would not be an exaggeration to claim that the cut-up technique amounts to the aesthetics
of packet-switching (the strategy of disseminating data on a telephone network via
dispersed, piecemeal and auto-redundant segments instead of vulnerable wholes),
transplanted onto the subsoil of the existential novel.

This raises the interesting question of Burroughs’ relationship to science fiction
more generally. Whereas the psychedelic sequences of TTE hearken to the pulp and
horror fantasies of a Howard or Lovecraft, and the media satires draw upon the more
mundane technological parables of a Heinlein or Asimov, the various media guerillas and
underground resistance movements have no such obviously American referent, unless it
be to the eerily telephonic (and time-traveling) youth-culture in Lewis Padgett’s Mimsy
Were the Borogoves. Possibly TTE has its truest mass-cultural analogue in the
improbable Japanese monster sci-fi spectacles of the late Fifties. The point of these
early exercises in Pacific Rim ideology was neither the catharsis of wartime destruction
nor the exorcism of an overwhelming American military might (something registered
instead by the Hiroshima and Nagasaki narratives, and the Leftwing pacifism of Fires on
the Plain) but rather the bewildering and inexplicable prosperity of the Korean War
boom, as the kamikaze of wartime mobilization was upstaged by the “divine wind” of
American military Keynesianism. Godzilla’s rampage through the industrial and commercial districts of Tokyo was, in this sense, the great symbolic expression of the lightning metamorphosis of a largely agrarian and village-based society into an predominantly urban and industrial one; a social transformation which took a hundred and fifty years to complete in Britain and seventy years in America and Germany, but only a scant twenty years (1945-65) in Japan. The posthaste arrival of the Pacific Rim consumer culture is then recontained, to borrow Fredric Jameson’s term, by the familiar sci-fi technician-innovator, whose gadget or invention either neutralizes Godzilla, or calls forth other, friendlier monsters to Japan’s aid, or else identifies a common enemy (typically, scheming space aliens) against which even Godzilla can turn – or what might be termed the LDP, Japan-U.S. Peace Treaty, and ASEAN ideologies respectively.

Burroughs will dispense with all such patently re-nationalizing ideologies, whether of MITI or Pentagon ilk, by giving the Third World village direct access to the global media and communications networks. The result is a stunningly dialectical leap from semi-industrial autarky to export-platform prosperity, a.k.a. the triumph of egalitarian production-teams, Arthur Deming-inspired total quality control and the kanban supply system at postwar Toyota and Sony, and the Facharbeiter work-teams, union-led codetermination policies and Mittelstand industrial networks of BMW and Siemens; or what amounts to a hallucinatory scansion of the East Asian and Central European miracles:

Controllers of the Green Troops moved in now – Light-years in eyes that write character of biologic alteration – Vampires fall to dust – crumpled cloth bodies on the glass and metal streets – The Venusians are relegated to terminal sewage deltas – The Uranians back to the heavy cold mist of mineral silence – Dry heat and insect forms close round the people of Mercury – Consequences and alternatives flash on off – Accept Rewrite or return to conditions you intended to impose on this colony – No appeal from eyes that see light-years in advance –
Explode substitute giving orders – Green metal antennae crackling static in the transient hotels – cutting virus troops with static noises – Galactic shock troops break through moving in fast on music poured through nerve circuits... Television mind destroyed – Love is falling from this paper punching holes in photograph... TTE:106

The petrochemical bodily process is superseded by a kind of biologic niche everywhere from the Cold War intervention which turns into a UN relief convoy, to the First World cinema which is re-appropriated as favela theater, and to the network broadcast disrupted by roving teams of cybernetic media guerillas, whose electromechanical bodies are retrofitted, as it were, with more complex informatic sensors. This is closely connected with the juxtaposition of computer punch cards with grainy photographs or codices, emancipated from their immediate journalistic or photographic frame of reference, resulting in a kind of silicon cuneiform writing. Only the casual reference to television falls short, by glossing the Cold War spectacle or aesthetic image (Burroughs probably had the TV advertising logo in mind) as an analog signal or live transmission, rather than as televisual texts or videotapes. This recalls to mind the literature of quite another global semi-periphery, namely the Eastern European science fiction of Stanislaw Lem, whose own meditations on philology, philosophy, technology and most of all the notion of a properly postmodern, alien biology (i.e. species which exist only as aggregate matrices of Boolean subunits). But where Lem carefully unearths the seeds of the European Union out of the internal contradiction between Poland’s semi-peripheral economy and the political dominion of the Soviet national security state, TTE’s last, best expeditionary probe into the labyrinthine depths of the American Cold War establishment stumbles upon quite a different organism: nothing less than the larval form of the multinational corporation, already beginning to outgrow its military-industrial spawning-grounds with frightening speed. With characteristic dexterity Burroughs decodes the social
constellation lurking behind the premier technological symbol of the respective superstates, namely the space race, no longer as a petty criminal conspiracy or covenant of gangsters, but as the historical culmination of all Mafias, the multinational power-elites of information capitalism:

In three-dimensional terms the board is a group representing international big money who intend to take over and monopolize space – They have their own space arrangements privately owned and consider the governmental space programs a joke – The board books are records pertaining to anyone who can be of use to their program or anyone who could endanger it... TTE:139

The thermonuclear subject takes up residence in one of the earliest versions of the Hotel Microsoft. As to what happens when the cyberguerillas begin to re-appropriate the coding tools of the global rentiers, for various and interesting purposes, through the very corridors and networks of electronic power the multinationals had monopolized for themselves, that is for Nova Express to tell.
Notes

1. Where the titles are not fully quoted, the acronyms TSM, TTE and NE respectively will be used to refer to The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded and Nova Express, respectively.

2. Aesthetic theorists have by and large underestimated the degree to which the leading works of late modernism and early postmodernism relied upon the Cold War for their specific content. This is especially true for the counter-cultural classics of the late Sixties, which burst asunder the obsolete shell of an array of neo-national forms in order to stage the emergence of a genuinely multinational content; as a rule of thumb, the greater the distance of the aesthetic producer from the mediations of the American superstate, the more radical the aesthetic innovation. The transnational information networks of Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49, for example, bespeak a relatively complacent privatization of the national security state into a premonitory Silicon Valley information ideology. The Bond spectacles of the Sixties did something similar, by reducing the Cold War to a mere stage prop, designed to highlight the far more interesting business of multinational consumerism. Outright aesthetic revolution was possible only at some distance from the national security state: thus Patrick McGoohan’s recuperation of the secret agent and spy narratives in the informatic gambits and video resistances of the 1967 TV series The Prisoner (a British TV series, set in a Welsh resort, directed by an Irish actor-producer), or Jimi Hendrix’s sublation of Coltrane’s late jazz atonality and the psychedelic sound alike into hip hop in the 1968 Electric Ladyland (an African American musical and lyric tradition).


4. Burroughs does indeed present us with a local or regional center of cultural resistance, but takes pains, unlike all too much contemporary Left theory and practice, not to hypostatize such as the only genuine revolutionary alternative. This is often conjoined to the struggle between local resistance movements and a psychedelic or at least multinational cultural technology: “Mr. Martin, and you board members, vulgar stupid Americans, you will regret calling in the Mayan Aztec Gods with your synthetic mushrooms... Allow me to introduce myself: The Mayan God of Pain and Fear from the white hot plains of Venus which does not mean a God of vulgarity, cowardice, ugliness and stupidity. There is a cool spot on the surface of Venus three hundred degrees cooler than the surrounding area. I have held that spot against all contestants for five hundred thousand years. Now you expect to use me as your ‘errand boy’ and ‘strikebreaker’ summoned up by an IBM machine and a handful of virus crystals? How long could you hold that spot, you ‘board members’? About thirty seconds I think with all your guard dogs...” NE:14

5. This is far more than the billboard denunciation of the American constellation of Hollywood, Coca-cola, oil and the overseas dollar economy, sprayed over the walls of the favela like graffiti:
“Bradley was reading the sign nailed to a split-bamboo tenement – The sign was printed on white paper book page size:
Cut The Sex and Dream Utility Lines//
Cut the Trak Service Lines//
The paws do no refresh//
Clom Fliday Meester Surplus Oil//
Working for the Yankee dollar?//
Trak your own utilities//…” TSM:40

This seems reasonably Marxist-Leninist, until we are informed that Trak is not an American firm at all. How then to interpret the last sentence, as a positive nationalization or a negative internationalism? In a moment of brilliance, Burroughs rejects both options and decodes a nascent politics of multinationalization:

“He [the Swede] dimed the Sex and Dream Utilities of the land. And he was shipped back to Sweden in a lead cylinder to found the Trak Service and the Trak Board. Trak has come a long way from a magic lantern in the Chink laundry. The Heads were donated to the Gothenburg Museum where the comparatively innocuous emanations precipitated a mass sex orgy.

Vagos Jugadores, sola esperanza del mundo, take it to Cut City. the black obsidian pyramid of Trak Home Office.

“The perfect product, gentlemen, has precise molecular affinity for its client of predilection. Someone urges the manufacture and sale of products that wear out? This is not the way of competitive elimination. Our product never leaves the customer. We sell the Servicing and all Trak products have precise need of Trak servicing... The servicing of a competitor would act like antibiotic, offering to our noble Trak-strain services inedible counterpart... This is not just another habit-forming drug this is the habit-forming drug takes over all functions form the addict including his completely unnecessary under the uh circumstances and cumbersome skeleton. Reducing him ultimately to the helpless condition of a larva. He may be said then to owe his very life such as it is to Trak servicing.”

The Trak Reservation so-called includes almost all areas in and about the United Republics of Freelant...” TSM:42-43

That is, Trak is a Swedish firm, which exploits its own country as much as the Third World. Sweden was, in terms of its industrial structure, still very much a Second World country in 1961; and where the other Second World economies merged seamlessly into the project of the post-colonial comprador bourgeoisies, so too were the overseas holdings of Swedish firms ultimately indistinguishable from the Social Democratic developmental state itself.

6. This latter, significantly, is also conjoined to the first explicit mention of the cut-up method: “I started my trip in the morgue with old newspapers, folding in today with yesterday and typing out composites – When you skip through a newspaper as most of us
do you see a great deal more than you know – In fact you see it all on a subliminal level – Now when I fold today's paper in with yesterday's paper and arrange the pictures to form a time section montage, I am literally moving back to the time when I read yesterday's paper, this is traveling in time back to yesterday – I did this eight hours a day for three months – I went back as far as the papers went – I dug out old magazines and forgotten novels and letters – I made fold-ins and composites and I did the same with photos – 

The next step was carried out in a film studio...” TSM:81-82

7. See TSM:29-30.

8. “The name is Clem Snide – I am a Private Ass Hole – I will take on any job any identity and body – I will do anything difficult dangerous or downright dirty for a price – The man opposite me didn’t look like much – A thin grey man in a long coat that flickered like old film – He just happens to be the biggest operator in any time universe – “I don’t care myself you understand” – He watched the ash spiraling down from the end of his Havana – It hit the floor in a puff of grey dust – TSM:67

9. See TSM:147-150, and especially the following passage: “We fold in writers of all time in together and record radio programs, movie sound tracks, TV and juke box songs all the words of the world stirring around in a cement mixer and pour in the resistance message “Calling partisans of all nation – Cut word lines – Shift linguals – Free doorways – Vibrate ‘tourists’ – Word falling – Photo falling – Break through in Grey Room.” TSM:149

10. “The doctor reached out his abbreviated fibrous fingers in which surgical instruments caught neon and cut Johnny's face into fragments of light. 

“Jelly,” the doctor said, liquid gurgles through his hardened purple gums. His tongue was split and the two sections curled over each other as he talked: “Life jelly. It sticks and grows on you like Johnny.”

Little papules of tissue were embedded in the doctor's hands. The doctor pulled a scalpel out of Johnny's ear and trimmed the papules into an ash tray where they stirred slowly exuding a green juice.” TSM:74

11. See the much-revised and drastically improved Uranian Willy chapter of NE:58-62. In general, critics have badly underestimated the role of Burroughs’ superb editorial skills in his compositional technique; each novel between the exploratory Junky and the high-water mark of Nova Express testifies to a quantum leap in narrative density and complexity. Compare the chaotic typographical and textual jangling of the first passage, with the significant reference to mechanical-electrical technology, with the smoothly computerized hum of the later version:

“Explosive Bio-Advance Men out of space to employ Electrician in gasoline crack of history... cross the wounded galaxies we intersect, poison of dead sun in your brain
slowly fading – Migrants of ape in gasoline crack of history, explosive bio-advance out of space to neon…”  TSM:178

“Sliding between light and shadow – Muttering in the dogs of unfamiliar score – Cross the wounded galaxies we intersect – Poison of dead sun in your brain slowly fading – Migrants of ape in gasoline crack of history – Explosive bio advance out of space to neon…”  NE:132

12. “We found that simple binary coding systems were enough to contain the entire image however they required a large amount of storage space until it was found that the binary information could be written at the molecular level, and our entire image could be contained within a grain of sand. However it was found that these information molecules were not dead matter but exhibited a capacity for life which is found elsewhere in the form of virus. Our virus infects the human and creates our image in him. We first took our image and put it into code. A technical code developed by the information theorists. This code was written at the molecular level to save space, when it was found that the image material was not dead matter, but exhibited the same life cycle as the virus. This virus released upon the world would infect the entire population and turn them into our replicas, it was not safe to release the virus until we could be sure that the last groups to go replica would not notice. To this end we invented variety in many forms, variety that is of information content in a molecule, which, enfin, is always a permutation of the existing material. Information speeded up, slowed down, permutated, changed at random by radiating the virus material with high energy rays from cyclotrons, in short we have created an infinity of variety at the information level, sufficient to keep so-called scientists busy for ever exploring the ‘richness of nature’.”  NE:49

13. As with Bill Lee’s meeting with the District Supervisor later in the same chapter:
“‘The man who used that voice had no native language. He had learned the use of an alien tool. The words floated in the air behind him as he walked.

‘In this organization, Mr. Lee, we do not encourage togetherness, esprit de corps. We do not give our agents the impression of belonging. As you know most existing organizations stress such primitive reactions as unquestioning obedience. Their agents become addicted to orders. You will receive orders of course and in some cases you will be well-advised not to carry out the orders you receive... the members of all existing organizations are at some point your enemy. You will learn to know where this point is if you survive. You will receive your instructions in many ways. From books, street signs, films, in some cases from agents who purport to be and may actually be members of the organization. There is no certainty. Those who need certainty are of no interest to this organization. This is in point of fact a non-organization [italics in original]...’”  TTE:10

14. Burroughs even gives a properly academic reference: “…you remember they make happy cloaks from a submarine thing that subdues its prey through a neuro-contact and eats it alive – only the victim doesn’t want to get away once it has sampled the pleasures of the cloak. It was a beautiful garment a living white like the white of a pearl, shivering softly with rippling lights, stirring with a terrible ecstatic movement of its own as the
lethal symbiosis was established’... quoted from Fury by Henry Kuttner Mayflower Dell paperbacks...” TTE:22


16. This occurs when Bradly visits the alleged shaman:

“Came to a round metal chamber lined with switchboards and view screens – Embedded in a limestone dais was a grey foetal dwarf, his brain clearly visible under a thin membrane pulsed with colored lights as he controlled the switchboard –

“He make all music,” said the guide –

The dwarf turned his eyeless face to Bradly – Bradly could feel radar beams map his outlines – Words passed through his mind on silver ticker tape –” TTE:126


18. South Korea and Taiwan exhibited similar dramatic rates of urbanization in the 1965-85 period; and China and Vietnam appear poised to repeat this feat in the 1985-2005 period. By contrast, the other major potential beneficiaries of export-platform Keynesianism, namely Eastern Europe and Russia, were already heavily urbanized at the beginning of their headlong rush into the arms of the EU. This suggests, among other things, that the cultural integration of the Eastern bloc countries with the former EC regions will proceed much faster than the economic or political forms of integration (something confirmed by the history of the Nineties); conversely, the sheer mass of the proletarianizing peasancies of Southeast Asia has delayed the cultural integration of East Asia with the urban cores of Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong, while at the same time facilitating the economic dynamism of the region.
CHAPTER IX

NOVA EXPRESS

If The Soft Machine and The Ticket That Exploded can be thought of as the outer and inner planets of an unknown solar system, then Nova Express is nothing less than the dazzling thermonuclear core of the entire trilogy: its unthinkable energies fusing the cultural isotopes of proto-national and international forms, cinematic tropes, auteur innovations and jazz instrumental registers of the earlier works (TSM’s cybernetic legends as much as TTE’s neocolonial parables) into a superheated interstellar plasma, which erupts spectacularly into outer space before cooling and coalescing into the narratological equivalents of asteroids, planets and the linguistic building-blocks of text-based life-forms. Along the way, NE stages a revolution in the hitherto hegemonic aesthetic category of Cold War allegory, by abrogating a number of the key juridical, ideological and mass-cultural registers of the American Empire. The thermonuclear cosmology of the national security state literally explodes into the informatic micrology of the multinational corporation. What mediates the transition is not, as one might expect, the media culture itself, but instead that new and vastly expanded division of aesthetic labor spawned by the multinational consumer culture, or what amounts to the radical integration of the functions of aesthetic production, consumption and interpretation in the daily workplace of the informatic culture-worker.¹

This had profound effects on the whole category of aesthetic reception, not least of which was the emergence of a new kind of cognitive praxis or aesthetic pleasure, the pleasure of the multinational play or aesthetic speculation – understood here in its
broadest sense, as the plebianized realm of a multinational cultural praxis, ranging from
the daily conversations on sports radio and talkshows to those of academic conferences
and listservs. Over time, this drove the convergence of the various national and
international fields of aesthetic production and the positions of aesthetic producers into
what could be termed, following Bourdieu’s term, a multinational e-habitus, centered
around industries which produced high-end codes or user interfaces for a wide range of
secondary codes (e.g. software, customer support, advertising, R & D, design, etc.). Far
from being an irresponsible luxury, interpretation is in this context the most crucial social
infrastructure or fixed investment imaginable: it is the subjective correlate of the
objective necessity to consumer, design and produce an ever more sophisticated palette of
consumer goods. This is what Bourdieu famously diagnosed in *The Nobility of the State*
as that cultural capital which both facilitates the process of valorization, exchange and
accumulation, while serving as a fetishized object of all these things in its own right. Put
another way, interpretive or cultural capital is the necessary counterpart of market
competition in the realm of aesthetics. Not only does it distinguish today’s gleaming
innovation from tomorrow’s embarrassing anachronism, it also serves as the index of
each successive revolution in the literary, philosophical or cultural marketplace, thereby
enabling the regular reinvention not just of the future, but of the past as well: it is the
arbiter of exchange, the symbolic currency in which long-term and short-term aesthetic
profits and losses can be calculated.

Though the transformation of multinational culture into capital and vice versa is
most obvious in the case of giant media multis such as Sony, Bertelsmann and AOL, or
indeed the creation of the European Union’s common currency, the euro, out of the
explicitly political mandate to compete with the Americans head-on, the radical sting of
Bourdieu’s point becomes apparent only when we consider the contradictory position of
the myriads of informatic professionals charged with managing and reproducing the scientific fields, discourses, and knowledge-bases without which late capitalism could not function. One of the central features of the Pax Americana was the creation of a permanent jobs program for this postmodern aristocracy of labor, in the form of a sprawling military-industrial-university complex; US military Keynesianism was thus accompanied by a no less pervasive cultural and political Keynesianism (everything from the rapid expansion of the university system to the inflation of professional degrees, and from the career opportunities opened up by the Iron Triangle to the symbolic compensations of the Cold War sci-fi movie). By contrast, the European professional classes were and are employed primarily by civilian industries and government agencies, while researchers and technicians in Japan are heavily dependent on corporate funding. What this meant in practical terms was that while the e-habitus first took root in America, the thing could truly flower only elsewhere, in precisely those regions of the world-economy least constrained by the ideological and economic baggage of the competing national security states: thus it is that Sweden, Japan and Germany have caught up with and surpassed the US in terms of civilian R & D expenditures as a percentage of GDP, while entire industries such as robotics, enterprise resource planning software, computerized machine tools and lithographic tools for chips are essentially dominated by the new metropoles.

What Burroughs gives us, then, is the evolutionary prehistory of this process, that is to say the moment when the multinational professional classes declare their autonomy, for whatever reason, from the matrix of American monopoly capitalism. One of the most intriguing features of NE is, indeed, the manner in which it gradually reconverts the cybernetic or monopoly-industrial narratives of the latter into the biological or informatic ones of the former, in much the same way that the civil sectors of the aerospace and
electronics industries economically outgrew and culturally outflanked their military counterparts. Just as the dynamics of the Sixties world-system overdetermined the course of globalization for the next thirty years, on the level of everything from programming languages to chip design to telecommunications protocols, so too will Burroughs’ greatest text overdetermine the cultural innovations of the next thirty years. Foremost among these is the refunctioning of the horizontal conflict of the Cold War into the vertical struggle between the Nova Mob and the Nova Police, whose respective roles are nicely reprised by Inspector J. Lee’s opening anti-manifesto:

“All that they [the Nova Mob] offer is a screen to cover retreat from the colony they have so disgracefully mismanaged. To cover travel arrangements so they will never have to pay the constituents they have betrayed and sold out. Once these arrangements are complete they will blow the place up behind them.

“And what does my program of total austerity and total resistance offer you? I offer you nothing. I am not a politician. These are conditions of total emergency. And these are my instructions for total emergency if carried out now could avert the total disaster now on tracks:

“Peoples of the earth, you have all been poisoned. Convert all available stocks of morphine to apomorphine. Chemists, work round the clock on variation and synthesis of the apomorphine formulae. Apomorphine is the only agent that can disintoxicate you and cut the enemy beam off your line. Apomorphine and silence. I order total resistance directed against this conspiracy to pay off peoples of the earth in ersatz bullshit. I order total resistance directed against The Nova Conspiracy and all those engaged in it.

“The purpose of my writing is to expose and arrest Nova Criminals. In Naked Lunch, Soft Machine and Nova Express I show who they are and what they are doing and what they will do if they are not arrested. Minutes to go. Souls rotten from their orgasm drugs, flesh shuddering from their nova ovens, prisoners of the earth to come out. With your help we can occupy The Reality Studio and retake their universe of Fear Death and Monopoly –

“(Signed) INSPECTOR J. LEE, NOVA POLICE” NE:6-7

This remarkable vision of an interstellar liberation movement facing off against some sort of biologic neocolonialism does two new things: first, the biochemical or drug-controlled body is explicitly conjoined to radio or TV broadcasts, which must somehow be negated,
outflanked or subverted by a new kind of micropolitics. Second, an explicitly multinational subject mediates between the possibility of thermonuclear annihilation on the one hand, and some sort of worldwide mass-cultural rebellion, centered on the global reappropriation of the consumer culture, on the other. That is, the specialized cybernetic subjectivity originally created in the pages of TSM as a counterweight to the agents of the national security state becomes a plebian universal, accessible to all. This has significant consequences for what Fredric Jameson termed the mobilizing or progressive role of national allegory in the Third World, which can be said to play the same role vis-à-vis post-colonial national culture as that of the national mass-party vis-à-vis the process of Third World decolonization, i.e. that of a proxy subject. The flip side of this progressive nationalism was the objectively international division of labor within the Cold War world-system, and it’s worth remembering that Jameson’s argument is not a theory of post-colonial culture per se, but is a corrective on a certain Third World actionism, which naively assumes that the economic surplus of the metropoles can be countermanded by the immediate mobilization of the ideological and cultural surplus of the peripheries. In reality, this economic surplus was always and everywhere a symbolic and cultural surplus. Put bluntly, the extended superstructure of the Pax Americana was not coincidental to every other country’s infrastructure, it was this infrastructure, everywhere from the US military bases and wars of intervention in Southeast Asia and Western Europe, to the trade subsidies, export markets and military contracts parceled out by the Alliance for Progress, and the NATO and ASEAN blocs. The upshot was that any nation, region, or zone bent on developing its own autonomous industrial base had to outflank, outwit or otherwise negate these superstructures, before taking on the awesome firepower of what seemed at that point to be an impregnable American monopoly capitalism. This cultural agenda did not necessarily have to mirror the staunch anti-Americanism of
revolutionary China, Cuba and Vietnam; the Taiwanese and South Korean developmental states, West Germany’s extensive state-owned banking sector, and the Scandinavian social democracies, despite their superficial allegiance to the Imperium, in practice heavily regulated their markets, rigorously proscribed what capital could do and where it could do it, and in general emphasized long-term investment, social solidarity, and a sizeable dose of economic democracy over short-term gain.

One of the interesting consequences of this situation was that multinational aesthetics and the Cold War culture were deeply antagonistic to each other from the very start; the former was incompatible in every way with the latter’s paranoid identification of the subject with a given branch of the national security state, and the latter could not abide the former’s objectively multinational content. The two registers clash jarringly very early on in Burroughs’ text:

“All nations sold out by liars and cowards. Liars who want time for the future negatives to develop stall you with more lying offers while hot crab people mass war to extermination with the film in Rome. These reports reek of nova, sold out job, shit birth and death. Your planet has been invaded. You are dogs on all tape. The entire planet is being developed into terminal identity and complete surrender.” NE:13

The potentially explosive mediatic pun on “tape”, the photographic pun on “develop” and the informatic pun on “terminal” are all short-circuited by the all-too-quick recourse to the destructive potential of the national security state and Hollywood’s latest Roman costume epic. This is essentially a paranoid narrative, the embryonic version of the suburban legends of Area 51 and alien abduction tales of the 1990s, which saw only secret elites or Cold War conspiracies where it ought to have detected genuine cultural contradictions and multinational resistances. What prevents NE from veering off into Cold War potboiler fiction is, paradoxically enough, not Burroughs’ capacity to foresee
the end of the Cold War, but the fact that he experienced its beginning. Each and every one of the scams of the Nova Mob is somehow associated with the arrival of a specifically postmodern service or industry: thus the reporter who accompanies The Intolerable Kid (ND:8-12), the traveling salesmen running the Fish Poison Con on a quack doctor (ND:23-25), or Winkhorst and the Lazarus Pharmaceutical Company whose advertising campaigns subtly counterpoint the faith healing routine of the sinister Death Dwarf (ND:45). This represents real progress over TTE’s painful oscillation between the Beat-era trope of a repressive or monopoly consumerism disguised as drug addiction and a counter-cultural aesthetics disguised as an international or jet-set consumerism, a.k.a. the rift between the aesthetic innovations of late modernism and the narrative machinery of the Bond spectacular, which rebadged the Cold War spy narrative for global consumption: the consumer culture is asked, for the first time, to consider itself. During the interrogation of the Death Dwarf, for example, we learn that the Nova criminals are neither agents of the corporation itself, nor simply white-collar criminals, nor agents of the national security state, either. They correspond rather to the nascent fusion of all these things, in the abstract logic of some sort of threatening logic of total expansion (here, the plot to turn the entire world into drug addicts). The real conspiracy behind late capitalism, as Adorno might put it, is the fact that there isn’t one: there is only the unrelenting drive to sell things, to expand the sway of the commodity form, whatever the long-term social, human or ecological cost.

Even more surprising is the fact that the Nova Police are by no means carbon copies of the gendarmes charged with enforcing the economic, military and political hegemony of the American Empire: they investigate without passing judgement, document rather than execute, and in general defuse or prevent violence rather than exacerbating violent situations. Most of all, their authority is derived, in best
micropolitical fashion, from a politics of corporeality, not a politics of space. One of Burroughs’ most brilliant and far-reaching moves here is to insist that this corporeality is not identical to the entrepreneurial subject, the national security state or even the branch plant or division of the multinational corporation; nor does it signify the mediatic technology of the First World or the demographic density of the Third World. Rather, it occupies a space which intermediates between all these things, a space we still need to identify. It is indeed the intersection of media technology with Third World bodies which marks Burroughs’ decisive rupture from the category of Cold War allegory: whereas this latter glossed the revolutionary movements of the Second and Third World as mere cinematic backdrops or allegorical symbols of something else (most famously, as the agents of that nameless, faceless, virulent worldwide Communist conspiracy, which at its outer limit was indistinguishable from the Pax Americana’s own program of global expansionism), NE portrays such as constitutive subjects in their own right, whose program of resistance merges seamlessly into the regulatory agenda of the Nova Police. What is being regulated and resisted, however, is not a particular corporate body or Cold War agency, but a cultural formation:

What scared you all into time? Into body? Into shit? I will tell you: “the word”. Alien Word “the”. “The” word of Alien Enemy imprisons “thee” in Time. In Body. In Shit. Prisoner, come out. The great skies are open. I Hassan i Sabbah rub out the word forever. If you I cancel all your words forever. And the words of Hassan i Sabbah as also cancel. Cross all your skies see the silent writing of Brion Gysin Hassan i Sabbah: drew September 17, 1899 over New York. NE:4-5

Burroughs recalibrates the distance between the geographic realm of the American Empire and the manifesto of the Third World revolutionary as the distance between the multinational word and some sort of national language or linguistic sphere. This word is undoubtedly a proxy for the ubiquitous corporate icons, logos or brand-names of the
consumer culture (“word begets image and image is virus” NE:48), while the juxtaposition of sky-writing and the faded historical photograph of turn-of-the-century New York suggests a kind of cultural airspace, i.e. the stiletto glass boxes of corporate office towers rising into the air from Manhattan, the architectural language of a global finance capital which dreams of colonizing the very sky. What mediates between the icon and the skyline is apparently the global cultural airspace of the news headline, relayed here by the multiple, reverberating and positively Derridean puns on the terms Burroughs italicizes. Sign-systems and the narrative machinery of signification ricochet violently against one another like subatomic particles in a cyclotron: the “word” is being erased forever, while the word “forever” is being erased; the pronoun “thee” dismantles the existential discourse of the Alien, the Other, and the Enemy, while Hassan i Sabbah and/or Brion Gysin open the skies to a new kind of sky-writing, etc. The result is an aesthetics of duration, of discontinuous sets of word-fragments and images, in the textual equivalent of the earliest psychedelic light-shows, and the experimental musical techniques of electronic reverb and feedback. Where the drumbeat motif of TSM and TTE (“Word falling – photo falling – Breakthrough in Grey Room”) reorganizes the postmodern rush of consumable texts and images into the cultural space of the cutting room or editing studio, this passage transforms the notion of temporality: Time, Body and Shit are evidently metaphors for writing-time, bodies of text or written code, and the scandalous, excremental consumption of this signification.

This suggests, in turn, that the corporeality we are looking for is that of a burgeoning multinational culture which can no longer be recontained within the demesne of the national security states, but has not yet established its own characteristic set of cultural infrastructures. Complicating matters further was the fact that multinational culture necessarily involved a break from all the aesthetic tendencies of the monopoly
era, i.e. from the modernisms as much as from Disney. It should not surprise us that the specific logic of late modernism, namely the creation of international cultural spaces out of semi-peripheral national or regional ones, was historically foreclosed by the postwar consumer boom: Brecht’s Bavaria, Eliot’s Kentucky, Beckett’s Ireland, Picasso’s Spain, Genet’s occupied France, and the Austria of the Second Viennese School had long since become a homogenized landscape of automobiles, highways, gas stations and fast food outlets. What is somewhat unexpected, however, is to discover that NE does not simply recycle the pre-existing models of the national or international culture-industries, either, but will innovate an altogether new content. Multinational culture is not identical to or the teleological next step of monopoly consumerism; it is the negation of such. Just as every commodity is in competition with every other commodity, so too is every consumerism antagonistic to every other consumerism. This is undoubtedly why multinational culture has such a deep-rooted affinity to theory: the rise of a generalized consumer culture in the Sixties marked the historical moment when these antagonisms became a universal, plebian experience, thus spurring the development of an unprecedented range of distinctions, tastes, heuristic registers and judgements.

It follows that the central task of theory is to read these antagonisms in whatever cultural medium is handy, deciphering their structures or sedimented traces as the movement of history through the text. One of the best examples here is the Sixties Bond spectacular: beneath its high-tech veneer, the secret agent or spy narrative is really an uneasy, brittle compromise between the premier mass-cultural subject of 19th century Britain (the fusion of the detective narratives which tracked down their villains into the proletarian labyrinths of London, and Kipling’s colonialist adventure-hero) and the mass-cultural monopoly-objects of the Pax Americana (the exotic European and Pacific Rim sets of the WW II film, and the technological surplus-rents of the sci-fi spectacular). The
upshot is that while the Bond series can be said to achieve a certain level of multinational form, it lacks a corresponding content, and ends up displacing the real-life action-adventure heroes of the Sixties – the Third World revolutionary movements and guerillas – via a self-indulgent reprise of the Allied war effort.

What marks NE as a qualitative leap forwards from the Bond films, then, is its active solidarity with these movements and indeed with the Third World in general. The real breakthrough here is the fifth and final subsection of the second chapter, entitled *Shift Coordinate Points*, which splices an image and information war (“K9 was in combat with the alien mind screen – Magnetic claws feeling for virus punch cards – pulling him into vertiginous spins” NE:30) with a brief montage of Burroughs’ childhood memories of growing up in St. Louis, and the mention of Kiki, one of his Third World lovers. The passage continues:

K9 moved back into the combat area – Standing now in the Chinese youth sent the resistance message jolting clicking tilting through the pinball machine – Enemy plans exploded in a burst of rapid calculations – Clicking in punch cards of redirected orders – Crackling shortwave static – Bleeped – “Calling partisans of all nations – Word falling – Photo falling – Break through in Grey Room – Pinball led streets – Free doorways – Shift coordinate points –” NE:31

The Burroughsian pun “in the Chinese youth” needs to be read as expansively as possible, as the convergence of neonational ethnic identity and geopolitical space everywhere from the youthful Red Guards to the underaged Taiwanese or Hong Kong textile workers staffing the new export-processing zones, and from the young soldiers who fought the US Army to a standstill in the mountains of Korea to the Chinese immigrant communities beginning to fight for their multi-cultural rights in San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. The Third World battle between the various
agrarian, primary manufacturing and extractive capitals converges with the First World battle between mediatic, informatic and electronic capitals, yielding the multinational guerilla raids on the Board Books of the multis. Where TTE limited itself to cutting or splicing cassette sound-tracks, films or computer tapes, NE tracks the mediatic commodity back to its corresponding media infrastructure – subtly relayed here by some sort of computerized pinball machine. This is an astonishingly accurate anticipation of that staple of the information culture, the arcade videogame, whose hardware was indeed produced by various East Asian electronics firms and whose cartoon characters were essentially the semi-peripheral equivalent of the more heavily capitalized Japanese animation or anime industry. This suggests, in turn, that NE’s guerilla raids are not metaphorical: as Alice Amsden and Robert Wade have pointed out in some detail, one of the most important functions of the East Asian developmental states was technology acquisition, through reverse-engineering, independent research, licensing, or, in a pinch, illegal copying.¹

All this is confirmed by the third chapter, Chinese Laundry, which rewrites the ethnic small business or retail outlet into a multi-cultural resistance base, i.e. a front for the Nova Police’s first organized sting against the Mob. We are first introduced to Uranian Willy, the first genuine cyborg in late 20th century aesthetics:

Trapped in this dead whistle stop, surrounded by The Nova Guard, he still gave himself better than even chance on a crash out. Electrician in gasoline crack of history. His brain seared by white hot blasts. One hope left in the universe; Plan D.

He was not out of The Security Compound by a long way but he had rubbed off the word shackles and sounded the alarm to the shattered male forces of the earth:

THIS IS WAR TO EXTERMINATION. FIGHT CELL BY CELL THROUGH BODIES AND MIND SCREENS OF THE EARTH. SOULS ROTTEN FROM THE ORGASM DRUG, FLESH SHUDDERING FROM THE OVENS, PRISONERS OF THE EARTH COME OUT. STORM THE STUDIO –
Plan D called for Total Exposure. Wise up all the marks everywhere. Show them the rigged wheel of Life-Time-Fortune. Storm The Reality Studio. And retake the universe. NE:59

Here the pun on “word shackles” negates the culture of the Pax Americana (Life, Time and Fortune magazines, as well as the Hollywood studio system) via a new collectivity, that of the prisoners of the Earth, relayed here by that gay liberation movement which would indeed take to the streets barely five years after NE’s publication, in the landmark Stonewall uprising. Almost as an afterthought, Burroughs stumbles upon the mediating code between the kinetic energy of the railroads and the quantum dimensions of the new electronics technologies, i.e. the cultural vehicle of an electronic Underground Railroad or telecom activism. This is the embryonic form of the video-still, the textual version of the newly-invented trope of the instant replay:

The grey smoke drifted the grey that stops
shift cut tangle they breathe medium
the word cut shift patterns words
cut the insect tangle cut shift
that coats word cut breath silence
shift abdominal cut tangle stop word
holes.

He did not stop or turn around. Never look back. He had been a professional killer so long he did not remember anything else. Uranian born of Nova Conditions. You have to be free to remember and he was under sentence of death in Maximum Security Birth Death Universe. So he sounded the words that end “Word” –

Eye take back color from “word” –

Word dust everywhere now like soiled stucco on the buildings. Word dust without color drifting smoke streets. Explosive bio advance out of space to neon. NE: 61

Here some sort of video subject (“eye” = “I”) transforms the multinational word or icon into its constituent form (“word dust”) and content (“color”) respectively, by means of a drastic compression of the cut-up technique (the opening word-salad reads like the
reflexive cut-up of a cut-up). Admittedly, this brief glimpse into some sort of video landscape is just as quickly recontained by the overfamiliar registers of film noir, i.e. gangster dialogue, neon streets and so forth. That is, the cyborg subject is still very much delimited to the cinematic categories of the Sartrean gaze, a complicated way of saying NE does not have a fully-formed set of video registers at its disposal (not terribly surprising, given that the very first commercial VCR was brought to the market by Sony in 1965, a year after NE’s publication).

Where *Chinese Laundry* truly shines, however, are the moments when the cyborg subject and the cinematic object violently collide, jolting a postmodern logic of spaces loose from its moorings in the modernist logic of positions. This is most palpable in the episodes of direct combat between the Nova Police and the Mob, where the guerilla conflict between antagonistic images, symbols and data explodes into a ferocious informatic combat. The secret agent is upstaged by the informatic agent, the prescient model for the hackers and system administrators of a later era, everywhere from the Regulator who bails out Uranian Willy, to the Technician who assists Pilot K9 on a hacker run through what is without question the first coherent vision of cyberspace in world literature:

“*Pilot K9, you are hit – back – down*”

The medics turned drum music full blast through his head phones – “Apomorphine on the double” – Frequency scalpel sewing wounds with wire photo polka dots from The Image Bank – In three minutes K9 was back in combat driving pounding into a wall of black insect flak – The Enemy Installation went up in a searing white blast – Area of combat extended through the vast suburban concentration camps of England and America – Screaming Vampire Guards caught in stabbing stuttering light blast –

“*Partisans of all nations, open fire – tilt – blast – pound – stab – strafe – kill –*”

“*Pilot K9, you are cut off – back. Back before the whole fucking shit house goes up – Return to base immediately – Ride music beam back to base – Stay out of that time flak – All pilots ride Pan pipes back to base –*”
The Technician mixed a bicarbonate of soda surveying the havoc on his view screen – It was impossible to estimate the damage – Anything put out up till now is like pulling a figure out of the air – Installations shattered – Personnel decimated – Board Books destroyed – Electric waves of resistance sweeping through mind screens of the earth – The message of Total Resistance on short wave of the world – This is war to extermination – Shift linguals – Cut word lines – Vibrate tourists – Free doorways – Photo falling – Word falling – Break through in grey room – Calling Partisans of all nations – Towers, open fire –”

Where the Bond film banished the epic struggle of Third World decolonization to the margins of the WW II war film, here the war film or aerospace imaginary is pressed into the service of the great anti-colonial revolutions. That is, the mass-culture of the American metropole is turned against its own mediatic infrastructures. This is just the first in a series of dialectical reversals, wherein the Nova Police slowly learn to crack the codes and reverse-engineer the tools crucial to the Mob’s empire of total control. We first glimpse The Soft Typewriter, for example, inside the control system for one of Minraud’s hydroponics labs, designed to cultivate Death Dwarfs (NE:66); later, however, K9 calls in the Technicians to turn the Typewriter’s mixing and editing functions to a positive use, enabling both the arrest of Mr. and Mrs. D. (“The error in enemy strategy is now obvious – It is machine strategy and the machine can be redirected” NE:85), and much later still, the construction of The Writ or legal injunction which consigns the malefic Gods of Time-Money-Junk to the Biologic Courts (NE:130).

Surprising as it may seem, the Typewriter is not really intended to be a metaphor for the personal computer, but functions as a kind of dedicated hardware or standardized piece of consumer electronics. In part, this is because the cyborg subject is on some level already a kind of biologic computer, whose information-processing capacities can be radically altered by contact with other life-forms, hallucinogens, image and word-viruses and so forth. Mostly, though, this is due to the specific evolution of computer hardware in
the Sixties, namely the technological shift from enormous, sprawling mainframe computers to much smaller, affordable minicomputers. Whereas mainframe computers were available only to the biggest corporations or the most heavily-classified military defense labs (they were essential in building the H-bomb, for instance), minicomputers were the true spawning-grounds of the information culture: the very first videogame, Spacewar, the first telecom switching protocols, as well as popular programming languages such as C, were all developed by university researchers on minicomputers. Put another way, the development of software tools outran the development of hardware during the Sixties (just the opposite of the situation in the Nineties, some would argue, where computer hardware has dramatically improved, but sloppy coding and software bloat have become major problems).

The clash between hardware and software is reproduced wholesale in the fourth chapter of NE, Crab Nebula, in the form of the informatic battle between the Insect People of Minraud, a rigidly hierarchical species of vat-grown superbrains, and Agent K9, who employs a series of tape-recorder cuts to identify, quarantine and ultimately neutralize the Minraud virus attack. Minraud, with its armies of Death Dwarfs, Crab Guards and banks of mainframe computers, is of course a fairly obvious satire of the high-tech defense labs and research facilities of the US military-industrial complex, and it comes as no surprise to learn that the crucial weakness of the latter is also the Achilles heel of the former: this is its dependence on an intricate bureaucracy of censorship, coercion and control. Instead of fighting Minraud on its own technical-military grounds, K9 attacks the mind screens of the controllers, forcing them to reflect on their role in the society they appear to dominate, but which reality dominates them, too. The Crab Guards, for example, occasionally desert Minraud and help prisoners otherwise slated for extermination to escape, while individual controllers become haunted by the knowledge
of their terrible isolation and end up joining the resistance movement. It is a testament to the greatness of NE that Burroughs neither condemns the agents of the total system on their own totalitarian terms, nor privileges his own autobiographical alienation from the Pax Americana above the dominated cultures and neocolonies of such, but reworks each into an index of the other. By independently reconfirming Adorno’s insight that everyone in late capitalism is, whether conscious of the fact or not, an agent of the total system, Burroughs opens the gateway to a multinational solidarity between those agents without precedent in world history.

This gateway swings open in the middle of NE very much like the trajectory of the counter-culture, i.e. as a seemingly inconspicuous rupture or rift in the prevailing monopoly-national consumer culture which suddenly explodes into a multinational content. Rather than following the modernist logic of the positional breakthrough or the localized avant-garde innovation, the counter-culture outflanked the containment systems of the Cold War propaganda bureaus and culture-industries by materializing in a vast range of locations, all at once, and on every level of the world-system. This moment is preserved in NE as the subtle transition from the first four chapters, which primarily narrate a series of positions, to the latter four, which are organized around a series of spaces. That is, the micropolitical and anti-colonial manifesto of Last Words, the initial diagnosis of the localized hustles and cons of the Nova Mob in So Pack Your Ermines, the Nova Police’s counter-strike in Chinese Laundry, and finally the direct assault on the national security state by the informatic rebels of Crab Nebula, all project a utopian subject or subjectivity which clashes violently with some sort of repressive totality. In the four subsequent chapters, however, the cultural space or habitus becomes objectively revolutionary in its own right: From a Land of Grass Without Mirrors, for example, is a savage double-take on neocolonialism; Gave Proof Through the Night rewrites the
sinking of the Titanic into the crash and burn of the Pax Americana; while *This Horrible Case* and *Pay Color* explicitly pun planetary-wide juridical and aesthetic revolutions, respectively. Monopoly-national time becomes multinational space, at the exact same moment that the cybernetic and anti-colonial tropes of TTE turn into full-fledged biological and micropolitical ones. The post-Surrealist or existential manifesto, for instance, is displaced by some sort of binding legal writ (evidently an embryonic Web-document, a flesh-writing or inscription on the body electronic), while the propaganda machines of the battling national security states are themselves upstaged by the recording machinery of an interstellar courtroom.

This is not to say that national identity vanishes completely or becomes irrelevant, but merely to note that from the middle of NE onwards, national cultural spaces are explicitly subordinated to multinational ones. Put more concretely, the classic modernist interplay between an international avant-garde and an American-style consumer culture accedes to the antipodes of a global theory-culture and consumer-culture. The very title of *From a Land of Grass* deftly offsets the cinematic vista of the American prairie or Argentine pampas, for example, with a mass-cultural icon notoriously antipathic to mirrors, a.k.a. the vampire; while in the opening scene of the chapter we witness a young recruit, The Cadet, joining the underground resistance of a brutal boot camp called (global allegory, indeed!) World Trade School K9 (NE:92). The mention of K9 is not accidental: K9 is both an agent of the Nova Police, a place, and still later, in *Gave Proof*, the name of one of the lifeboats (“Passengers fighting around Life Boat K9” NE:123), that is to say an instrumentalized body or transport vehicle which shuttles between the monopoly-national and the global. Later in the same chapter, Burroughs parodies one of the most characteristic mass-cultural rituals of the Pax Americana of them all, namely the singing of the national anthem before sports events, only not on the grounds of the sports
culture but in quite another system of instrumentalized bodies: the interstellar legal system of the Biologic Courts. In Burroughs’ memorable description:

Corridors and patios and porticos of The Biologic Courts – Swarming with terminal life forms desperately seeking extension of canceled permissos and residence certificates – Brokers, fixers, runners, debarred lawyers, all claiming family connection with court officials – Professional half-brothers and second cousins twice removed – Petitioners and plaintiffs screaming through the halls – Holding up insect claws, animal and bird parts, all manner of diseases and deformities received “In the service” of distant fingers – Shrieking for compensations and attempting to corrupt or influence the judges in a thousand languages living and dead, in color flash and nerve talk, catatonic dances and pantomimes illustrating their horrible conditions which many have tattooed on their flesh to the bone and silently picket the audience chamber – Others carry photo-collage banners and TV screens flickering their claims – Willy’s attorneys served the necessary low pressure processes and The Controllers were sucked into the audience chamber for the The First Hearing – Green People in limestone calm – Remote green contempt for all feelings and proclivities of the animal host they had invaded with inexorable moves of Time-Virus-Birth-Death – With their diseases and orgasm drugs and their sexless parasite life forms – Heavy Metal People of Uranus wrapped in cool blue mist of vaporized bank notes – And The Insect People of Minraud with metal music – Cold insect brains like white hot buzz saws sharpened in the Ovens – The judge, many light years away from possibility of corruption, grey and calm with inflexible authority reads the brief – He appears sometimes as a slim young man in short sleeves then middle-aged and slim young man in short sleeves then middle-aged and redfaced sometimes very old like yellow ivory “My God what a mess” – he said at last – “Quiet all of you – You all understand I hope what is meant by biologic mediation – This means that the mediating life forms must simultaneously lay aside all defenses and all weapons – it comes to the same thing – and all connection with retrospective controllers under space conditions merge into a single being which may or may not be successful… NE:127-128

The ingenious quotation of the indeterminate Mr. Knott from Beckett’s Watt serves notice on one of the most lucid descriptions of the constituent class fractions of multinational capital ever written: the Heavy Metal people of Uranus are bankers and business-people, the Insect People of Minraud are military-industrial electronics engineers and weapons designers, while the Green or Vegetable People are parasitical rentiers who subsist on the biochemical and cultural addictions of their mammalian hosts.
All are called to account for the collectively irrational consequences of their individually rational actions, not by recourse to some external compulsion or transcendent authority, but simply by being forced to openly acknowledge their social roles and modus operandi to the new multinational audience of the mass media (discreetly signaled here by the “color flash and nerve talk” and mobile, portable TV screens). By raising the experience of the geopolitical refugee to a universal, Burroughs arraigns the center of the total system in the world-court of the periphery, decoding the hegemonic logic of the center (the ceaseless expansion of the commodity form) as precisely the sort of natural history which the metropoles, via the ideology of neocolonialism, routinely accuse their dominated peripheries of blindly and savagely perpetuating. Put more concretely still, NE does not idealistically dissolve the First World into the Third, nor does it cynically gloss the Third World as a mere extension of social processes centered in the First; rather, both of these things are set into motion in the context of a vastly enlarged Second World, a.k.a. a mediating semi-periphery.

Our first glimpse of this latter is in the *A Distant Thank-You* subsection of the fifth chapter, where a group of expatriate adventurers attempts to purchase a forged exit visa to escape whatever (neo)colonial zone they have been pillaging from Willy the Rube, in a scene where their mansion, a composite of innumerable historical architectures, is set against a scenic landscape inhabited by the green boy-girls familiar to us from TTE as well as two new species: the Mongolian Archers and the peaceful, utterly benevolent Lemur People (NE:111-112). Whereas the Archers seem to be the product of the most advanced bioengineering and weapons technologies, the Lemurs are symbols of an unspoiled, reconciled ecology. Unlike the boy-girls, however, neither of these species is under the control of the colonists in question; the former have some sort of working arrangement with Willy, but nothing more, while the latter simply die in any sort of
captivity, even the mental kind, i.e. are uncolonizeable by definition (here, again, Willy has some special affinity or unique bond with these creatures). The result is uncannily reminiscent of the work of quite another postmodern innovator, namely the cybernetic folktales of Italo Calvino’s 1967 *Cosmicomics*. Italy was still very much a semi-peripheral or Second World economy at the time, with a per capita wealth level only one third that of the US, which meant that Calvino could almost single-handedly invent Southern European postmodernism (with the significant assistance, to be sure, of Sergio Leone’s spaghetti Westerns) out of the Fiat-engineered collision of Italian neorealism and American science-fiction. Something similar applies to the novelic and cinematic postmodernisms of Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s, which generated their content out of the clash between an extensive Chinese literary and theatrical tradition and a blossoming Pacific Rim consumerism.

In the specific context of the 1960s world-system, the Mongolian Archers are clearly a suitably exoticized anagram of the armed wing of the anti-colonial movement, i.e. the multiple insurgencies and revolutions breaking out everywhere from Cuba to Vietnam, while the Lemurs incarnate the new space of a quicksilver cultural resistance beyond all representation, the domain of a planetary collective memory à la Solaris. But by transforming the antipodes of a cybernetic post-history and ecological prehistory into the explicitly multinational ones of the realm of micropolitics and the counter-culture, NE unwittingly pulls the plug on the cyborg, the subjectivity which had previously mediated these categories. As a narrative form, the cyborg was always a compromise between a monopoly-national mediatic or aesthetic infrastructure and a global set of mediatic and information commodities; in terms of content, it represented the evolutionary link between the military-industrial or thermonuclear subject of the Fifties and the micropolitical or telecommunicatory one of the Seventies. This meant that however much
it could anticipate the psychedelic aesthetic, it was historically prior to and not identical with such. Burroughs’ utterly pragmatic solution is to retrofit the cyborg with psychotropic antennae, designed to cull a narrow set of informatic registers from a far broader range of mass-cultural and mediatic materials and project these as an free-standing content in their own right. What replaces the cyborg, in short, is not really a new subjectivity, but its objective counterpart, a set of subversively post-cybernetic cultural spaces.

This is the genesis of the dazzling slippage of medical-biological and legal-juridical terminologies in the seventh chapter, *This Horrible Case*, which contains some of the funniest sequences of Burroughs’ written oeuvre. Heavily salted with quotes from Kafka’s *The Trial*, the result is somewhere between the postmodernized version of Kafka’s nature theater of Oklahoma and the crash-landing of a televised nature documentary onto a science fiction blockbuster: the undulate, saurian hulks of the first primitive military-industrial cybernetic organisms crawl forth from the primeval soup of the national-monopoly culture-industries, Pentagon propaganda bureaus and early card-punch computers, clanking and shuddering, only to shed their military-industrial carapaces and reveal scores of laser-goggled information-moles (alternatively, Linux-jacketed penguins), busily hacking their way into the communications and media infrastructures of the national security state which birthed them. The natural history, as it were, of the national security state is transformed into a social history, at the same moment that the social mechanisms of neocolonialism are rewritten into natural-historical ones. What mediates between the two is a newly autonomized version of the written code, in many ways the cultural version of the transition from hardwired electronics to software coding. Not only does this code begin to peel off from the bodily inscription or corpus of signification, it also begins to take on functions as diverse as the legal writ and
the programming heuristic ("Biologic Counselors must be writers that is only writers can qualify since the function of a counselor is to create facts that will tend to open biologic potentials for his client" NE:137). Significantly, the transition from the legal writ to legislative writings, and from individual motifs to biologically-inflected judgements, is accompanied by the first specific mention of amino acids, suggesting that the themes of cybernetic posthistory and ecological prehistory are the primordial forms of the bio-tech and evolutionary signifiers of a later era.

The ultimate terminus of this code is revealed in the extraordinary opening sequence of the final chapter, Pay Color, which links the emergence of a radical mediatic underground (represented by the Subliminal Kid, a defector from the Nova Mob) to the multinational gay subculture and a utopian micropolitics of gender purveyed by Hassan i Sabbah. The title already hints at a significant reconversion of monetary compensations into aesthetic or cultural ones; as it turns out, the issue is not merely color, but the full range of aesthetic effects, starting with sound:

"THE SUBLIMINAL KID" moved in and took over bars cafes and juke boxes of the world cities and installed radio transmitters and microphones in each bar so that the music and talk of any bar could be heard in all his bars and he had tape recorders in each bar that played and recorded at arbitrary intervals and his agents moved back and forth with portable tape recorders and brought back street sound and talk and music and poured it into his recorder array so he set waves and eddies and tornadoes of sound down all your streets and by the river of all language – Word dust drifted streets of broken music car horns and air hammers – The Word broken pounded twisted exploded in smoke… NE:147

This is a striking anticipation of the postmodern musical studio, with its taped libraries of prerecorded sounds and electronic effects. The multinational Word, an anagram for the advertising jingle, slogan or musical theme, furnishes the raw material for a drastic expansion of the auditory sensorium, more or less corresponding to the new spaces of the counter-cultural event and the stadium concert. A few lines later, something similar
happens to the cinema, 8 mm home movies and billboard images of the Pax Americana, which are refashioned into the building-blocks of video:

Air hammers word and image explosive bio-advance – A million drifting screens on the walls of his city projected mixing sound of any bar could be heard in all Westerns and film of all times played and recorded at the people back and forth with portable cameras and telescope lenses poured eddies and tornadoes of sound and camera array until soon city where he moved everywhere a Western movie in Hongkong or the Aztec sound talk suburban America and all accents and language mixed and fused and people shifted language and accent in mid-sentence Aztec priest and spilled it man woman or beast in all language – So that People-City moved in swirls and no one knew what he was going out of space to neon streets –

“Nothing is True – Everything is Permitted –” Last words Hassan i Sabbah… NE:148-149

Tempting as it is to interpret the visual trafficking between the Hollywood blockbuster and Hong Kong and the linguistic one between suburban America and ancient Aztec as the direct anticipation of the Hong Kong films and Latino multiculturalism respectively, the slightly more mundane reality is that Hong Kong did not have a film industry to speak of in the mid-Sixties, while cultural tourism in Mexico was largely the privilege of the privileged. Both regions were at that point neocolonies or Third World zones saturated with First World aural and visual mediations, not Second World interzones or buffer-regions somehow resistant to the logic of the Cold War and American consumerism. The People-City, in other words, is not really meant to symbolize a global urban space so much as a globalized corporeality, the utopian intersection of Second World bodies. This is most obvious in the Smorbrot subsection of the chapter, wherein the protagonist rebels against a compulsory heterosexuality and embraces a carnivalesque sequence of Chinese, Mexican, and Scandinavian youths, interspersed with references to Japanese tattoos, African American and Arab drum music, circuses and high wire acts.
The price to be paid for this transformation, of course, is the loss of subjective intensity or affect in the experience of the individual word and photo-image, subtly acknowledged by the recurring motif of “sound and image flakes” (NE:163/175/178) which fall, like Joycean snow, over the living and dead icons of a henceforth mediatized landscape. Multinational visual culture really only becomes an issue in the specific colors Hassan i Sabbah invokes as the currency of repayment, i.e. red, blue and green, the three primary colors of the pixels on a TV screen. The result, from the perspective of our own media-saturated society here at the dawn of the 21st century, is perhaps comparable only to the eye-popping effects of the most recent 3D videogames, which recuperate the sophisticated set designs, scriptwriting and special effects of the Hollywood blockbuster as cinema-quality cut-scenes and immersive action-sequences. At the zenith of the American Empire, Burroughs’ assemblage of Second World bodies literally pulsates and fluoresces with properly hallucinatory splendor, radiating an unknowable informatic surplus (“Cortex winds overflow into mutinous areas hearing color seeing” NE:166) which is more than just a fleeting moment of resistance against that Empire. It is also a priceless bequest to the global aesthetics of the far future: the gift of multinational time not yet become multinational space.
Notes

1. In Burroughs’ case, this involves the merger of the roles of literary agent, book publisher, journalist, editor and reader; arguably some of the most entertaining sequences of *Nova Express* are reflexive commentaries which quote, argue with, interpret, and selectively edit passages of Burroughs’ earlier works. It’s worth noting that the greatest works of Sixties postmodernism carried out similar transformations of their respective fields, both in terms of their objective materials as well as the division of aesthetic labor. Patrick McGoohan’s 1967 TV series *The Prisoner*, for example, invented multinational video out of the materials of national television, auteur film, the Bond blockbuster and Beckett’s theatrical modernism; McGoohan also virtually single-handedly created the role of the executive media producer, by writing, directing, financing, marketing and starring in the series. Jimi Hendrix offers the musical version of the same phenomena, i.e. a brilliant musician who was also a brilliant lyricist, composer and studio engineer.

2. This is also, it should be noted, Burroughs’ first explicit use of a biological narrative, which reconverts the national cultural space into a multinational or ecological niche, thereby subverting what E.P. Thompson called the exterminist logic of the Cold War:

   “‘Reality’ is simply a more or less constant scanning pattern – The scanning pattern we accept as ‘reality’ has been imposed by the controlling power on this planet, a power primarily oriented towards total control – In order to retain control they have moved to monopolize and deactivate the hallucinogen drugs by effecting noxious alterations on a molecular level –

   The basic nova mechanism is very simple: Always create as many insoluble conflicts as possible and always aggravate existing conflicts – This is done by dumping life forms with incompatible conditions of existence on the same planet – There is of course nothing “wrong” about any given life form since “wrong” only has reference to conflicts with other life forms – The point is these forms should not be on the same planet – Their conditions of life are basically incompatible in present time form and it is precisely the work of the Nova Mob to see that they remain in present time form, to create and aggravate the conflicts that lead to the explosion of a planet that is to nova – At any given time recording devices fix the nature of absolute need and dictate the use of total weapons…” NE:53

   The flip side of this biologization of culture is the informatization of identity, which Burroughs manages to sneak in via a wonderful parody of the FBI dragnet:

   “The point at which the criminal controller intersects a three-dimensional human agent is known as a “a coordinate point” – And if there is one thing that carries over from one human host to another and establishes identity of the controller it is habit: idiosyncrasies, vices, food preferences – (we were able to trace Hamburger Mary through her fondness for peanut butter) a gesture, a certain smile, a special look, that is to say the style of the controller – A chain smoker will always operate through chain smokers, an addict through addicts – Now a single controller can operate through thousands of human agents, but he must have a line of coordinate points – Some move on junk lines through addicts of the earth, others move on lines of certain sexual practices and so forth – It is only when we can block the controller out of all coordinate points available to him and
flush him out from host cover that we can make a definite arrest – Otherwise the criminal escapes to other coordinates…” NE:56

3. Though there is no direct evidence that Burroughs was familiar with Sartre’s oeuvre, it’s probably not an accident that the basic terminology of existentialism is employed here (the Other, the Alien, and of course the unconscious homage to The Words, Sartre’s classic autobiography). The flip side of Burroughs’ remarkable editing skills is a seemingly osmotic ability to absorb the most progressive mass-cultural materials of the Fifties and Sixties, while quoting, citing or pastiching everything from sci-fi potboilers to the classic modernists (including, but hardly limited to, Lautreamont, NE:42; T.S. Eliot’s The Wasteland, NE:115-116; Kafka’s The Trial, NE:138-139; Joyce’s Dubliners, NE:179; etc.).


5. “Controller of The Crab Nebula on a slag heap of smouldering metal under the white hot sky channels all his pain into control thinking – He is protected by heat and crab guards and the brains now armed with The Blazing Photo from Hiroshima and Nagasaki – The brains under his control are encased in a vast structure of steel and crystal spinning thought patterns that control whole galaxies thousand years ahead on the chessboard of virus screens and juxtaposition formulae – So the Insect People Of Minraud formed an alliance with the Virus Power Of The Vegetable People to occupy planet earth…” ND:71-72

K9’s response is to diagnose the virus, find out how it operates, and then erase it: “What does virus do wherever it can dissolve a hole and find traction? – It starts eating – and what does it do with what it eats? – It makes exact copies of itself that start eating to make more copies that start eating to make more copies that start eating and so forth to the virus power the fear hate virus slowly replaces the host with virus copies – Program empty body – A vast tapeworm of bring down word and image moving through your mind screen always at the same speed on a slow hydraulic-spine axis like the cylinder gimmick in the adding machine…

The counter move is very simple – This is machine strategy and the machine can be redirected – Record for ten minutes on a tape recorder – Now run the tape back without playing and cut in other words at random – Where you have cut in and re-recorded words are wiped off the tape and new words in their place – You have turned time back ten minutes and wiped electromagnetic word patterns off the tape and substituted other patterns – You can do the same with mind tape after working with the tape recorder – (This takes some experimentation) – The old mind tapes can be wiped clean – Magnetic word dust falling from old patterns…” NE:73-74

6. “Again at the window that never was mine – Reflected word scrawled by some boy – Greatest of all waiting lapses – Five years – The ticket exploded in the air – For I dont
know – *I do not know* human dreams – Never was mine – Waiting lapse – Caught in the
door – Explosive fragrance – Love between light and shadow – The few who lived cross
the wounded galaxies – *Love? –* Five years I grew muttering in the ice – Dead sun
reached flesh with its wandering dream…” NE:81

7. It’s one of the ironies of history that the superabundance of cyborgs in the mass-culture
of the Eighties did not, pace Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*, signal genuine
progress but rather a frightening regression. The cyborg in its neoconservative form was
an attempt to repress and neutralize the genuinely emancipatory hacker subjectivities
showcased by Gibson’s *Neuromancer* by a deeply reactionary Anglo-American finance
capitalism; the utopia of electronics was yoked to a virulent hatred of laboring bodies,
instead of their emancipation. Thatcherism systematically privileged electronically-
equipped military hardware over and above a consumer-driven software market; the
Pentagon-controlled, terminal-accessible supercomputer was seen as the future of
computing, not the PC. This hatred was more than mere technocratic disdain for human
beings, e.g. the hollow boasts of MIT researchers flush with Pentagon contracts in the
early Eighties, who claimed that hardware-driven AIs or artificial intelligences would do
all our thinking for us by the end of the decade; it was class ideology through and
through. Major American firms such as GM instituted a series of disastrous
rationalization schemes, tossing vast numbers of workers out into the street and replacing
them with hideously expensive, overcentralized robotics systems, which turned out to be
hopelessly unreliable and no match for Japanese and European worker-centered
production systems. Reagan’s firing of America’s striking air traffic controllers, which
signaled an all-out war on the living-standards of the American working-class, was
legitimated by the fact that Federal administrators were planning to automate the entire
air traffic control system anyway. Centralized automation turned out to be a hideously
wasteful boondoggle and a technical dead end, due to the sheer volume and complexity
of the tasks involved; meanwhile scab controllers dramatically worsened safety
conditions. By contrast, Europe and Japan pursued a relatively enlightened politics of
technology, emphasizing people-based systems of small-lot, high-volume production,
flexible innovation, and total quality production (e.g. Volvoism, Toyotism). Japan
invested heavily in civilian R & D and thereby wrested control over major segments of
the computer market from US firms; France created Minitel, a messaging service which
became one of the most important models for the Internet, and the EC and EU’s
messaging standards enabled mobile phone firms such as Nokia to leave US producers
such as Motorola in the dust.

8. This frequently borders on self-parody: “Electric defense frequently determined the
whole civilization and proceedings – Especially when a case fear desperate position and
advantage suddenly taken out of their hands – The case had simply reached incredible life
forms – Even the accused was beyond altered pressure – The very top operation – The
client of mucus and urine said the man was an alien – Unusual mucus coughing enemy
“oxygen” up from the stairway – Speed up movie made such forms by overwhelming
gravity supply – Flesh frozen to supply a shocking emergency case – Amino acid directs
all movement – won code on Grey Veil…” NE:141
Somewhat later, Burroughs mentions the notion of amino acids as a form of code (DNA had been discovered in 1954, only ten years before Burroughs completed his text):

“Sequential choice i.e. flesh frozen to amino acid determines the next state according to’ – That is a ‘book’…”

All information at the verbal level – Could he keep Form A seen parasitic? – Or could end be achieved by present interview? – Array treated as a whole replaced history of life? Word falling photo falling tapes being blank…

‘Clearly the whole defense must be experiments with two tape recorder mutations.’” NE:145-146
CHAPTER X

HEINER MUELLER’S EUROTHEATER

Nekrophilie ist Liebe zur Zukunft. Man muss die Anwesenheit der Toten als Dialogpartner oder Dialogstö rer akzeptieren – Zukunft entsteht allein aus dem Dialog mit den Toten. [Necrophilia is the love of the future. One must accept the presence of the dead as dialogue-partners or dialogue-disturbers – the future only comes from the dialogue with the dead.] Heiner Mueller. Jenseits der Nation. Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1991 (31).

Not Bergman’s dance of the dead, with its sombre litany of proto-national allegories slowly dissolving, in the latter moments of The Seventh Seal, into the dazzling sunshine of the American Empire at its zenith, but the video ghosts of the Eurostate’s predatory future haunted Heiner Mueller; whose notoriously opaque text-blocks, glinting like an alien machinery in the landscape of betrayal, reprocessed the flickering images of goulash socialism and social democracy, Prague Spring and Mitbestimmung, Eurocommunism and the late-developmental state, the Green uprisings and the Eastern insurrections alike as so much mediatic DNA awaiting its transfiguration into video-flesh. The macabre corporeality of Mueller’s works, the late modernist references to Genet and Beckett seemingly as inescapable as the subjective fact of dying and death itself, is to be sure only one side of the striking constellation between late cybernetic form and early video content, or more precisely between the cultural forcefields of the two most capital-intensive landscapes of the former Cold War blocks, namely East and West Germany. Whereas a declining American Empire could finance its own version of aesthetic postmodernism out of the surplus-rents of global speculation and marketing, most
obviously in the new cable, satellite and computer distribution outlets of CNN, MTV and the Internet, the rising Central European metropole had no such external recourse, but was forced to rationalize its own lack of an international mass-culture as a compulsory multinationalism.

In the case of East Germany, the former industrial center of the Eastern autarkic accumulation regimes since downgraded to just another Visegrad semi-periphery, one could argue that history had conspired to make East Berlin the provisional ideological center of the contemporary European Left, i.e. that geographic point at which, like constructivist Moscow and surrealist Paris in the 1920s, video Hong Kong and Olympic Barcelona in the 1980s, the teeming aesthetic contradictions and clashing political tendencies of the world-system could be grasped as a concrete reality. Far from signaling any putative Teutonization of an in any case thoroughly late capitalist Europe, the bulldozing of the Berlin Wall was rather the first coherent action of that footloose global proletariat which is beginning to turn the Eurostate, on the model of America, into a permanent immigrant country; and it is hardly an accident that Mueller’s first truly postmodern classic, namely Germania Death in Berlin, should decisively annull the neonationalism entrenched in Eastern Kulturpolitik theory and Western Restoration practice, by means of the exhumatory pastiche of the geological strata of Berlin’s own unique mass-culture. This ranged from the expressionist classics of the Weimar era to the Nibelungen mythos of fascism (Mueller’s own incomparable contribution here: “bunker noir”), all the way to existential theater and the Heimatfilm (home-coming film); and although this is something most analysts overhastily ascribe to the ill-digested heritage of Brecht’s epic theater, it would be more accurate to reverse the usual causal logic here, and insist on the essentially mass-cultural derivation of Brecht’s own theatrical negation of Hollywood film – the A-effect turning out to be the valorization of that urban
panorama which, much like Chaplin’s slapstick comedy and magnificent improvisations, reappropriated the pan or mobile camera shot as the anonymous urban detail (workers working, capitalists selling, whores whoring) precisely where Hollywood was concerned to showcase the specific star, visual effect, or celebrity.

Mueller’s texts, by contrast, follow a specifically multinational aesthetic logic, wherein the seamless video surfaces of the world-system find their content in the decentered cultural networks of the creaking state machineries, flourishing sweatshops, and newly hegemonic multinational corporations comprising the commodity ecology of the global semi-peripheries. This was, interestingly enough, not yet an issue in the leading musical works of the Seventies, most notably in the power-chords, dubbing techniques and advanced studio technology of the punk rock and reggae classics (the Sex Pistols and Bob Marley, respectively), whose progressive aesthetic neonationalism never quite reached the level of the more complex aesthetic globalization of Eighties hip hop; on the other hand, the world semi-peripheries could and did provide the integral building-blocks of a new video culture, everywhere from Patrick McGoohan’s 1967 The Prisoner (postmodern Ireland) to Sergio Leone’s spaghetti Western (semi-peripheral Italy), and from the early Seventies works of Bruce Lee (industrializing Hong Kong) to the mid-Seventies American horror film (Tobe Hooper’s definitive blueprint of the New South, a.k.a. The Texas Chainsaw Massacre).

This may explain why Mueller’s own privileged materials derive from the postmodern class struggles of Europe, and specifically the great urban rebellions of East Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956, and Prague and Paris 1968, all overcoded in the context of what could be called the Eisenstein strategy of anti-Stalinism, namely the gradual integration of the 1920s modernisms into the official state-monopoly mass-culture, and the selective re-appropriation of the latter on the grounds of the extended reproduction of
aesthetic form. This latter ranged the gamut from Stanislaw Lem’s transcendental science-fiction parables, which rescue the theological remnants of a pan-European state technocracy in the name of a cybernetic liberation theology, all the way to Andrei Tarkovsky’s neonational allegories of Russian prehistory. This was significantly conjoined to the Western Marxist tradition of aesthetic resistance, especially Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School’s concept of theatrical and textual modernism (very schematically, the trajectory from Kafka to Beckett) – not only as that international mass media-culture elsewhere preserved in Brecht’s mature works as the visually-negating gestus (whose apotheosis is probably the blinded Galileo, and the voluntary sacrifice of the sensual appetites for the democratizing abstraction), but specifically as a nascent Eurotheater capable of accessing the official filmic, video and musical postmodernisms in a subversive turn.

This is confirmed by Mueller’s formal evolution from banned playwright to Far Left dissident to the Eastern icon of the West German Left, and finally to one of the first genuine media stars of reunified Germany (and, for that matter, a rapidly uniting Europe), all of which has its logical counterpart in the aesthetic trajectory from East bloc neorealisms and the Brechtian Lehrstueck to the cybernetic narrative and television mythologies of The Building Site and Philoktetes, and finally to the premonitory gender revolutions and multiculturalism of Hamletmachine and The Mission. The dialectical hinge upon which such texts can be said to turn is nothing less than the national-cinematic genre: where Benjamin’s surrealist shock found its cognitive echo in the filmic assembly-line of the photographic montage, the glistening new array of visual surfaces developed by the American culture-industry had its counterpart in the subjective tropes of the film noir action-hero, the private eye of the detective film, the technician of the science fiction film, and the existential anti-hero – the aesthetic mediation, in short, of the
specialized class fractions of the First World proletariat, the new professional-classes, the technocrats and the university intellectuals of the Cold War superstates.

In the Continental European situation, this was mediated by the late modernist auteurs, authors and playwrights as that expressionist drive to mass-cultural categories which ruptured the spell of an imported late capitalist media-culture on the grounds of the mass-cultural trope or icon in question: either as with the luminous poses of the street-outlaws Genet canonizes in Our-Lady-of-the-Flowers, already somewhere between Levinas’ mythic, post-neon countenances and the ubiquitous Hollywood movie poster; or as no less media-conscious theater of decolonization staged by Beckett, wherein the class fractions of colonized Ireland fight for scraps of viewing-share within a derealized international Anglo-Saxon cultural totality (Hell in the postmodern being, to paraphrase Sartre, the matrix of other people’s mass-cultures). Such strategies are conjoined in Mueller’s mature works to the increasingly radical cognition of the actually existing hegemony of export-platform capitalism and global accumulation, wherein the video word can be said to negate the specific multinational media-ideology in question. Hercules 5, for example, pastiches Leone’s spaghetti Western as well as the American children’s cartoons of the early Sixties, and stages a specifically mediatic rebellion against a symbolic music-industry on the grounds of the cybernetic body (here, the branding of Hercules’ hands, burnt black by the stage-light which represents the sun).

It is, indeed, not the autarkic import-substitution narratives of post-Khruschev Soviet cinema and Latin American magic realism, but what might be called the Hong Kong export-platform text, which informs the symbolic space occupied by Mueller’s earliest cybernetic text in Tractor with its specific content:

Verschwinden der Welt in den Woertern. Stattdessen der lebenslange Sehzwang, das Bombardement der Bilder (Baum Haus Frau), die Augenlider wegesprengt. Das Gegenueber aus Zaehneknirschen, Braenden und Gesang. Die Schutthalde der Literatur in Ruecken.

Das Verloeschen der Welt in den Bildern...

[…]The exiling of the reader from the text. Dolls stuffed with words instead of sawdust. Heart-flesh. The necessity for a language which noone can read increases. Who is noone. A speech without words. Or the disappearance of the world in words. Instead of this the lifelong compulsion to see, the bombardment of images (tree house woman) which blows away the eyelids. The opposite out of of gnashing of the teeth, fires and song. The wastebasket of literature in the back.

The dissolution of the world into images…] (T:14)

Crucial here is the one line of empty space separating the first passage, with its montage of T.S. Eliot’s existential strawmen, a cruelly disembodied corporeality (instead of the serialized, mass-produced organs typical of a later postmodernism, e.g. the flesh-grafts of Gibson’s Neuromancer) and an atomic shockwave of televisual imagery, from the mundane sublimity of the concluding sentence. Just as striking is the jarring dissonance between the critical self-reflexion of apparatchik industrialization (the suburban gender ideology of “Baum Haus Frau”), and the moment of sympathy with a rural, preindustrial folk culture condemned to oblivion or extinction. This incongruous constellation between an electronic prehistory and a filmic posthistory, delimited here by Mayakovsky’s montage technique (the latter being understood as a kind of Third World surrealism or film aesthetic) heralds the three mythological parables interlacing the otherwise straightforward text of Cement. These recount firstly the brutal dismembering of Hector by Achilles, secondly the liberation of a reluctant, quasi-intellectual Prometheus by a radical-democratic Hercules, and finally the mysterious cybernetic parable Hercules 2, which stages a new type of collective self-emancipation out of surrealist and cinematic fragments. This suggestive progression from a war-time violence or trauma to the
masculine body, to the genesis of the intellectual as a kind of self-reproducing tissue (Prometheus’ regeneration) appended to the body politic of the proletariat, and finally to the synthesis of the radically autonomous postmodern culture-worker embroiled in a radically new type of class struggle, has its no less significant aesthetic counterpart in the trajectory from epic prosody, to the ritual devolution of the gods in the second fragment into culture-industrial effects (“Es folgte der Selbstmord der Goetter. Einer nach dem andern warfen sie sich aus ihrem Himmel auf den Ruecken des Herakles und zerschellten im Geroell...” [There followed the suicide of the Gods. Each after the other threw themselves from Heaven on the back of Hercules and shattered into thunder...] Z:86), and finally to the incipiently global recuperation of a specifically national culture-market in the third fragment (“...das zu toetende Monstrum, das die Zeit in ein Exkrement im Raum verwandt hatte...” [...the monster to be killed, which had transformed time into an excrement in space...] Z:101). This transformation of peasant or agrarian time into labor-time has its counterpart in the dissolution of the monadic subject into the national-monopoly work-team or managerial monad, wherein the corporeality of mass-cultural experience, that is to say its requisite somatic elements (everything from the painful resistance of matter on the assembly line to the new cultural sublime of the automobile and media culture) are brought into a new, semi-autonomous constellation.

The result is strikingly reminiscent of late Webern or early Beckett, e.g. essentially recombinatorial strategies which generate a maximum of informatic content out of a minimum of melodic or subjective content; indeed, recuperating the latter as a prototypical postmodern icon, which stamps its identifying high-modernist hieroglyph onto an interminable variety of degraded or mass-cultural materials. The overriding parallel which needs to be mentioned here, however, is that other great cybernetic-era aesthetic form, namely African-American bebop music, wherein the instrumental
innovations of a Charlie Parker or Thelonius Monk served counterpoint to that extended reproduction of aural content thematized in the harmonic and rhythmic cadences handed down by the orchestral forms of swing and big band, themselves the urbanized forms of popular blues and gospel forms, are not only striking, but should be taken to their logical conclusion: where bebop critiqued the hegemony of the instrumental solo over the accompanying orchestra, and dissolved the former into a new type of decentered, collective improvisations, Mueller will reappropriate quite a different set of urban cultural forms, which somehow lay claim to the showcase Cold War redevelopment and urbanization projects of the Berlin metropole from the standpoint of whatever those projects were meant, on some level, to colonize or displace: i.e. the class solidarities of the traditional Central European urban neighborhood, which remained as threatening to the apparatchiks of the East as to the technocrats of the West. In this respect, Mueller comes very close indeed to the terrain of Andrej Wajda’s incandescent Ashes and Diamonds (1956), which leaped the span between the wartime Resistance drama and the existential police-thriller in a single bound and thereby created the first genuinely postmodern masterpiece of Eastern bloc cinema. But where Wajda imbued the ruins of shell-shocked Warsaw with a post-Expressionist set of visual energies (e.g. the great concluding scene of the bloodied sheet and trash-littered wasteland), Mueller has rather a different object in mind: not the visual consumption of the filmic landscape, but a landscape of visual producers.

Our first taste of this is the mythical forest in Hercules 2, whose occasional branches gradually become sensitivized roots and, finally, intelligent digits relaying Hercules’ presence to some hostile control center: the modernist culture of speed and acceleration gives way to that fundamental postmodern trope, the biotope or ecological
zone, elsewhere available as the interactive, hallucinogenic bioscape of the Biologic Courts in Burroughs’ *Nova Express*:

Im Gewir der Fangarme, die von rotierenden Messern und Beilen nicht, der rotierenden Messer und Beile, die von Fangarmen nicht, der Messer Beile Fangarme Minenguertel Bombenteppiche Leuchtreklamen Bakterienkulturen nicht, der Messer Beile Fangarme Minenguertel Bombenteppiche Leuchtreklamen Bakterienkulturen, die von seinen eigenen Haenden Fuessen Zaehnen nicht zu unterscheiden waren... [In the whirring of the tentacles, not those of rotating knives and axes, of rotating knives and axes, not those of tentacles, not the knife axe tentacle minefield carpetbombing neon signs bacteria cultures, the knife axe tentacle minefield carpetbombing neon signs bacteria cultures, which could not be separated from his own hands feet teeth...] Z:102

The functional ambiguity of the knife and axe, which could signify peasant implements as well as postmodern kitchenware or hobby tools, has its counterpart in the wildly mutating or exploding surfaces of wartime bombings, rows of land-mines, neon-signs and petri dishes, all symbolically countenanced by the whirling tentacles of the hydra – something like the dizzying rush of imagery of the superhighway, cast in a draumaturgic mold. This is roughly analogous to the highway sequence early in Tarkovsky’s *Solaris*, one of the first great postmodern reflections on the autarkic-development state, wherein the labyrinthine highways, supercrowded urban structures, and multiplying neon signs – all preeminently global infrastructures – of booming postwar Japan are contrasted to the subjective boredom of the car-passengers; meanwhile that ideology of automotive Americanization elsewhere valorized in the molded plastic phalluses and glossy surfaces of the space and arms race is negated in the technological sound-effects of acceleration and deceleration.
What indeed distinguishes Mueller from the routinized celebration of road technology typical of the Beat texts or the New Wave films is the sharp-edged terror of postmodern placelessness, somehow as far from the Benjaminic shock and the Surrealist disruption as the Sputnik was from the first iron dreadnoughts: the dizzying multiplicity of tools and mediatic tropes of national-monopoly capital, far from being subsumed under the Sartrean gaze of the nascent Euroconsumer, returns as the embodiment of the subjective share in the objectively cinematic shot of the Hollywood feature. In consequence, the hierarchical division of labor and class antagonisms typical to the latter at its historical zenith – the ceaselessly-reassembled crews of scriptwriters, technicians and crews, actors and actresses, agents and producers, marketers and distributors, all policed internally by the studio system and the Hays Office and externally by the agencies of the national security state, not to mention the ultimate arbiter of the marketplace – returns as a new type of aesthetic material, with the most striking affinities imaginable to the mammoth political campaigns, intercine conflicts and deadly bureaucratic infighting of the one-party developmental state. All this is mediated, significantly, by a profoundly postmodern gender ideology, wherein the specifically neo-national production-collective (the sycophantic chorus proclaiming “bleib im Rahmen lass Dampf ab gib auf” [toe the line let off steam give up] Z:102) and the reproducible corporeality, not of a transnational consumer culture which in any case had to be imported from the West, but of a nascently transnational apparatus of production (“Und das alte Lied. Ach bleib bei mir und geh nicht fort An meinem Herzen ist der schoenste Ort... Skandiert vom Knacken seiner Halswirbel im mutterlichen Wurgergriff. Tod den Muttern...” [And the old song. O stay with me and please go not My heart is the most beautiful spot… Scansioned by the breaking of his spine in the motherly death-grip.})
Death to the mothers…] Z:102) could be recoded as a masculinized technocracy and a feminized power-bureaucracy respectively. This canny inversion of the central trope of Stalinism, namely the hegemony of the national-monopoly party over the decentered production-sites spawned by crash industrialization (something Mueller first touched upon in his earlier text The Farmers), generates in turn a new type of utopic space: what in the Anglo-Saxon or Francophone context would immediately be identified as the Sixties counter-culture, but which in the East German context had to be cloaked in the existential garb of the privileged culture-worker. Thus the concluding cadence of Hercules 2:

...in dem weissen Schweigen, das den Beginn der Endrunde ankeundigte, lernte er den immer andern Bauplan der Maschine lesen, die er war aufhoerte zu sein anders wieder war mit jedem Blick Griff Schritt, und dass er ihn dachte aenderte schrieb mit der Handschrift seiner Arbeiten und Tode. […in the white silence which announced the beginning of the final round, he learned to read the always different construction-plan of the machine, which he had ceased to be else again was with every glance grasp step and that he thought changed wrote it with the handwriting of his labors and deaths.] Z:103

Here the cybernetic body or symbolic superstructure of the national-monopoly corporation comes into contact with that filmic surface already saturated with globalizing coordinates (the profile of the sports superstar as much as the celebrated R & D designer) first evidenced by the reflexive media commentaries of Hitchcock’s television series, a.k.a. the autonomization of the celebrity product endorsement. At the same time, Mueller mobilizes a renegade tactility against the managerial ideology of the specialized niche producer or media-professional charged with smoothing the flow of production-innovations; what is at issue here is, indeed, that mediatic surplus given over to the neo-national apparat which, in order to ensure its continued rule, was forced in the course of the de-Stalinizations of the Sixties to begin to cede significant market-share to a rising
plurality of postmodern class entities. One of the measures of the greatness of Germania is, indeed, the tenacity with which the internalized decolonization of the Second World is staged on the otherwise inclement grounds of an underdeveloped or otherwise compromised cultural tradition: in this case, the Central European region of Saxony, once the epicenter of Wilhelmine industrialization and later an industrial semi-periphery of the Eurostate. That Saxon valor once lauded by Lessing in *Minna von Barnhelm* as the propitiating self-sacrifice of the feminized German principality on behalf of an idealized national-Prussian warrior elite returns, in the early postmodern period, as the Leipzig cabaret number of a Red bourgeois whom can afford to pay their class enemies to publicly lampoon themselves. In best Saxon tradition, Mueller returns the favor, by issuing building permits to the Prussian castle-dwellers only after ensuring that these are built upon earthquake-prone silicon sands:

_Zwei Herren mit Koffern._
_Vorbei. Drei Huren. Ein Zuhaelter._
Hure 1: Staatsfeiertag, Suesser.
Zuhaelter: Gefickt wird unter jeder Regierung.
[Two gentlemen with luggage. Gentleman 1: Do you hear the grass growing? That is the steppe. The steppe comes. Tickling the soles of the feet. See my shoes: green. Quick, before the grass catches us.
Exit. Three whores. A pimp.
Pimp: The street’s jumping. Get to work.
Whore 1: State holiday, sweetie.
Pimp: The fucking goes on under every government.] GTiB:39

Here the expressionist trope of a threatening, deracinated mobility, evidently signifying the encroaching second Nature of the highway, is transferred onto the prototypical postmodern trope of the consumer marketing icon or logo: not the narrative of the shoe
salesman, but of the fetishized Western shoe-import. This is abruptly conjoined to a strikingly accurate depiction of the new class society of the East, namely the cynical street-workers and resident gray bourgeoisie subcontracting out to rival state firms and the factions of the nomenklatura.\(^1\) The logical end-result is the *Brandenburg Concert II* scene, wherein the Ulbricht-era cadres turn out to be identical to those Western analogues which they publicly vilify and privately emulate, namely the globe-trotting business-class of the flourishing Bundesrepublik. *Germania* marks indeed that point at which the expressionist scaffolding still holding together the ramshackle pieces of *Cement* falls asunder, in a manner which recalls, not late modernism per se, but the classic lines of Baudelaire’s *Héautontimorouménos*: “Je suis la plaie et le couteau!/ Je suis le soufflet et la joue/ Je suis les membres et la roue/ Et la victime et le bourreau!” [I am the wound and the knife!/ I am the slap and the cheek/ I am the limbs and the rack/ And the condemned and the executioner!].\(^2\) This radical scission of cultural production, or the sublation of Absolutist aesthetics and the English and American liberal ideologies alike into the radically autonomized materials of an international aesthetics (here, the objective or collectivized point-of-view later valorized as Poe’s clue-reading detective, Flaubert’s phantasmagoria-stricken Madame Bovary and Zola’s journalistic naturalism). Where Baudelaire endowed the aristocratic form of the sonnet with the content of the Parisian proletariat, thus involuntarily invoking the utopian aesthetic of an international skilled-labor aristocracy, Mueller rubs the stock figures of the Eastern propaganda work against the grain of the formulaic genres of the Western consumer culture. This is most evident in the clown scene, wherein the cinematic surplus of visual tropes and the harsh austerity of Beckett’s *Endgame* (the minimalist stage stripped of historical or identifying marks, reduced to a pure infrastructure) is sublated into verbal wit, word-plays and grotesqueries:


[Clown 2: slyly: How does the child end up in the belly. That’s simple. But how does it not end up in the belly.

Clown 1: That is a philosophical question. For which I have no time. I am the First Servant of my state.

Clown 2: drops pants: My state is bigger than yours. Do you do it with the right hand or the left.

Clown 1: That’s none of your business. Pull up your pants or I’ll call the Acting Flymaster.] GTiB:41-42

The physical comedy turns, indeed, on the thorny problem of gender ideology, or the extended reproduction of class society. Mueller’s brilliant move here is to stage the birth-process of the monopoly-ideologies, from Fascism to Stalinism, as the properly cybernetic prehistory of _Homage à Stalin 1_.³ That neo-national mythos which still bore traces of an unavoidably progressive agenda amidst the brutalized wasteland of _Philoktetes_, namely the superiority of Odysseus’ self-interested gamble over Philoktetes’s pathic revenge, is awesomely demolished by _The Holy Family_’s bunker noir. This latter marks indeed the point at which _Germania_ ceases to be a German drama: the political moment in question is not Yalta but the decade of appeasement, and the world-historical constellation of a French, British and American imperialism only incidentally at war with the Fascist regimes, and then only when their own survival was at stake. The birth-hour of the werewolf dressed in sheep’s clothing and doused with a commercial soap is, indeed, the logical sublation of the international Twenties consumer culture (a.k.a. the invention of the automobile, cellophane and detergent soap as mass commodities) in the globally-marketeted American consumer culture of the Fifties consumer culture. That
prehistory of monopoly capital which was either repressed or reprivatized in the classic Hollywood monster or adventure movies (e.g. the straightforward colonialism of King Kong or the racist Asian stereotypes of Flash Gordon, both of which turn on the unpredictable consequences of marketing schemes and scientific inventions gone haywire) is relayed here as the proto-national sacrifice of Germania, a.k.a. the determinate negation of both the threateningly ambiguous gender ideology of the cabaret singer of the Weimar period (e.g. Marlene Dietrich’s lesbian camp performance) overseen by the historical antithesis of such, namely Goebbels’ Fascist war-patriarchy.

This latter is consequently revealed to be the direct descendant of the notorious German ideology, namely that proto-national caste ideology of the Prussian Junker-industry class alliance of iron and rye dressed up in the ritual garb of state-developmental bureaucracies (everywhere from the German Kaiser and the Japanese Meiji Restoration to the Romanov and Austro-Hapsburg dynasties) – all raised, in the context of the Thirties, to the pitiless struggle around, between and within the competing national-monopoly capitals and their colonial empires. This striking moment of aesthetic solidarity with the decolonization movements of the Fifties and Sixties is undoubtedly the genesis of the Schaedelverkaeufer or Skull-vendor in Homage à Stalin 2, probably Mueller’s most iconoclastic self-portrait, whose service-sector Hamlet makes a living by pawning the mouldering relics of the past to the cafe society of Cold War Berlin. This particular character, whose historical profession literally unearths the clammy prehistory of the Stasistaat ("Ein Fehler in der Periodisierung, das Tausendjaehrige Reich, Sie verstehn" [An error in the periodization, the Thousand Year Reich, you understand] he guilelessly assures the Activist at one point GTiB:57) is already a baroque anagram of the postmodern culture-worker, busily retailing multinational narratives in neo-national wrapping (here, the quotation from Virgil). Conversely, what remains aesthetically weak
or unsatisfactory in Mueller’s text is not, as one might have assumed, the neo-nationalism or cadre ideologies of the East (about which Mueller is utterly cynical) but the more complicated problematics of the Western consumer culture, something particularly evident in *The Worker’s Memorial* scene:

**ERSTER** Bis auf die Knochen. He. Kannst du tanzen, Opa?


[First To the bones. Hey. Can you dance, gramps? *Sudden inspiration. Improvises a ROCK, throws in rhythm. The others join in. All three throw stones in rock-rhythm at the mason.*] GTiB:67

What an Anglo-American audience would consider a bad pun at best, or the reactionary intolerance of African-American music at worst, makes sense only in a Central European context: the notion of a stone-throwing neo-national moralism hearkens back to the latter pages of Goethe’s *Truth and Poetry*, which describes how he and a friend are chased away from a river by a shower of stones from an unseen assailant after bathing in the nude. Such stones are a crude substitute for the public morality or moralizing glances of Puritan England or pre-Revolutionary France, whose more developed capitalisms could stage a more complex politics of the gaze (e.g. the overt homoeroticism of the Bonapartist dictator or national military parade, or the no less mandatory heteroeroticism appended to the marriage-contract or domestic sphere). Mueller’s text, on the other hand, emphasizes the mass-produced nature of the stones, namely the fact that Hilse’s bricks are turned against him by some sort of automatic machinery or work-rhythm. This somewhat clumsy rewriting of a fundamental trope of the Sixties, namely that cybernetic subject visible everywhere from the extended reproduction of the image in the work of the filmic auteurs to the extended mimesis of the body in the new sports industries, suggests further that *Germania* mediates its mass-cultural materials in a rather different
fashion from the American consumer culture, i.e. not as the Seventies media superstar or culture-worker, but as an imported labor-process or division of labor designed to symbolically negate this latter.

This trope, elsewhere available as the nascent video frame in the Hong Kong films of Bruce Lee, and in the aural dub of Bob Marley’s reggae texts, unexpectedly returns in the otherwise relativized or secondary element of set design, which is raised to a subjective principle in the virtually filmic backgrounds of Brandenburg Concert I and Homage à Stalin I. This mediatization comes into its subjective expression only very gradually, beginning with the sign-bearing children of The Street I, continuing into the East-West propaganda struggle of opposing leaflets, signs, symbols and flags, and culminating in The Holy Family’s concluding cannonade (i.e. the unrolling theater-curtain, its fabric signifying the arrival of a drastically new kind of mass-mediatic surface). This has its objective counterpart in the increasingly fragmented corporeality of the theater-actors: the children, one-armed war veterans, and nameless clowns whom merely pretend to be historical personages gradually acceding to the mythic warrior collages (body-parts pretending to be people), gasoline-drinking, cannibalistic Nazis (machines which eat people) and the ultimate demolition of the cybernetic subject mimed by the Night-play scene (the abnegation of the visual register of the cinematic close-up by means of the aural register of the scream of protest).

All these registers collide violently in the most powerful and gripping scene in the entire play, namely The Brothers II, truly the epitaph of the Stasistaat. Here Mueller re-appropriates the existential prison or wartime narrative of collective seriality in order to stage the seismic conflict between Fascism and Stalinism in a new way; not as the internalized struggle of a mass-cultural subject, but as the mass-cultural object of a properly postmodern subject. In so doing Mueller pushes that telegenic austerity handed
down by Beckett, whose works somehow recuperate the last faint impulses of the
Expressionist films out of the strobing flicker of the American and British television-
culture (at the price, admittedly, of shifting the ground of aesthetic production off the
stage and into the production engineer’s booth) to its next logical stage: not merely the
specialized materials of the culture-worker, but the matrix of the consumer culture itself
is radically politicized. Thus Mueller’s abrupt opening:

Gefaengnis.
Schliesser: Rein in die gute Stube. Mit Komfort Innentoilette und so weiter. Auf
das Zellenfenster: Fernsehn haben wir auch. Wenn das Programm dir nicht
gefaelt, bei uns kann jeder sich was wuenschen.
Brueckensprenger: Heute gefaeltt uns.
Schliesser: Hast du was gesagt?
Brueckensprenger: Warum faellt heute der Spaziergang aus.
Schliesser: Ihr koenntet euch erkaelten. Das Barometer steht auf veraenderlich
seit gestern.
[Prison.
Warden: Our finest guest suite. With accomodations, toilet and everything else.
To the cell-window: We even have TV. If you don’t like the program, anyone can
request what they like.
Saboteur: We like today.
Warden: You said something?
Saboteur: Why no walk today.
Warden: You could catch a cold. The barometer says precipitation since
yesterday.] GTiB:69

Not the existential void but the grey concrete expanse of postmodern Berlin, with its
prophetic TV station towering over the Alexanderplatz; not Adenauer’s motorized
Biedermeier but the Red bourgeoisie of the Ulbricht era, whose never-ending excuse for
economic stagnation was “poor weather”, greet the postmodern antagonists of the
Stasistaat. The supercharged cauldron of former Nazis, purged Communists, criminalized
workers and lumpen-cadres erupts not into direct violence, but into the street theater of
the 1953 and 1956 uprisings in Berlin and Hungary, and the subsequent dialectic of
political de-Stalinization and economic re-nationalization throughout the Eastern bloc.
Significantly, this neo-nationalism or Cold War identity-politics finds its content only in
the political extremes of WW II: the Nazi’s betrayal by his former comrades in the
Communist Party, whom wrongly accused him of being a stoolpigeon during the Night of
the Long Knives and thereby drive him to become exactly that, serves as the subjective
antipode to that objective content conjured up by the monologue of the Communist,
whose betrayal by the apparatchiks leads to the cognition of the nationalist inferno
lurking amidst the Stalinist utopia. The entire operation is enabled by the negation of a
specifically cinematic visuality, which allows a nascent video logic to superimpose itself
upon the stock images and movie reels of WW II and the Holocaust in a manner which
recalls Simonov’s searing 1985 drama Come and See, which similarly turns the means of
the propaganda film against itself:

[Kommunist:] ... und mit geschlossnen Augen sah ich mehr. Ich sah die deutschen Voegel scheissen auf den gruen
deutschen Wald in Formation und ihre Scheisse explodierte und das Gruen war Asche hinter ihrem Flug. Die deutschen Kinder
krochen aus den Baeuchen der deutschen Muetter, rissen mit den Zahnen den deutschen Vaetern die deutschen Schwaenze aus
und pissten auf die Wunde mit Gesang. Dann haengten sie sich an die Mutterbrust und soffen Blut, solang der Vorrat
reichte. Und dann zerfleischten sie sich eins das andre...

[Communist: … and with closed eyes I saw more.
I saw the German birds shitting on the green
German forest in formation and their shit exploded and the green was ash beneath their wing. The German children
crept out of the bellies of the German mothers,
tore the pricks from the German fathers with their teeth
and pissed on the wounds in song. Then they hung themselves
on the mother’s breast and drank blood, so long as the supply lasted. And then each tore the other to pieces...
Nazi: Still singing the same old psalm. What do you see now.
Spits in his face. Noise of crowd grows quieter and recedes quickly. Sound of tanks. Chorus of knocks ends.] GTiB:74
This horrifying vision of the grievous charnel-house of the 20th century, of the cthonic wars, imperialisms and proletarianizations spiraling out from the vortex of European and American monopoly capitalism like the aureoles of imploding stars, has its moment of salvation precisely in the fact that these things are left unseen. The narrative renounces its monopoly over the aesthetic material, in the same moment that the word – summarily liberated from its theatrical referent – shines from the Miltonian wreckage of the ages like the messianic starlight of more fortunate galaxies. The Nazi’s reaction is indeed exactly the reaction of the West Berlin workers to the first student demonstrators of the Sixties: the mechanical violence of those forbidden by history to react as anything other than machines. Nor is it an accident that the sublation of the knocking of human hands in the motors of the tanks (the symbolic motorization of the West and urbanization of the East) should provide the fateful backdrop to the Communist’s final, existential reflection: “Wer bin ich” [Who am I]. This is his covert resignation notice from the Party, and it is precisely this display of autonomy – the true revolution within the Revolution – which spurs the cell-dwellers to pounce upon him.

This marks indeed a significant caesura in Germania, namely the sublation of that progressive political neo-nationalism which culminated in the Prague Spring in the more general multinational expansion of the world-economy in the Seventies – both as West German Ostpolitik and, more importantly, as the debt binge of the Eastern European countries, whom increasingly specialized in exporting agricultural and semi-finished goods for Western machine-tools and production technology. This is registered here by the relatively archaic or existential trope of the mediatized body-product or fragment, namely the spittle of the collective audience which blocks the view of the Communist; something which had its radical moment much earlier, in the lubricated, oiled surfaces
and glistening bodies of Genet’s street martyrs and fragile gay sub-cultures, those twin micropolitical allegories of the automotive mass culture and the immigrant working-class communities dotting the Red Belt respectively. It is striking that although Mueller had no comparable multi-cultural recourse in the monocultural and bureaucratized landscape of East Germany, the work of the both authors does coincide on the level of the aesthetic negation of neo-nationalism: where Genet’s greatest texts fulfilled Sartre’s mandate of a revolutionary literature, by deriving the antipodes of the French colonies and the experience of the Occupation out of the apparent meaninglessness of the existential prison of the monad, all on the grounds of a specifically multinational liberation theology, Mueller will multinationalize the Stalinist gender-theocracy by means of the national theater’s non-identity to the new cinematic and video genres. This is the genesis of the uncompromising negativity of the Night-play, truly the postmodern or radically autonomous video icon of the entire play, and comparable in its power and scope perhaps only to the trademark opening sequence of McGoohan’s The Prisoner. The expressionist pathos of the cybernetic subject, whose puppet-like corporeality is demolished amidst the vain attempt to control, not the motorized wheel of progress, but the ambiguous bicycle – both the great symbol of video-production in McGoohan, as well as of Second World human-powered transportation systems generally – is negated by the grisly pun of the Beckett-spikes, in whose voluntary self-abnegation lies the sole salvation of that Lukacsian national mass-party which, in the span of fifty years, had degenerated from heroic revolutionaries to grey functionaries to just another comprador bourgeoisie:

Die Stachel werden hinausgefahren, jeder ein Auge auf der Spitze. Aus den leeren Augenhöhlen des Menschen, der vielleicht eine Puppe ist, kriechen Lause und verbreiten sich schwarz über sein Gesicht. Er schreit. Der Mund entsteht mit dem Schrei. [The spikes are drawn out, each with an eye on the tip. Lice crawl out of the empty eyeholes of the person, who is perhaps a doll, spreading blackly over its face. It screams. The mouth originates with the scream.] GTiB:75
Here the moment of self-knowledge, namely that utter degree of alienation wherein the post-Stalin cadre renounces the symbolic surplus-rents collected by the nomenklatura, and thereby regains the right to voice the lot of the voiceless, counterpoints the no less striking shift from the wild physiological extremes of Expressionism (the violence of trench warfare, the surreal experience of the great urban uprisings and revolutions, the prehistoric blare of the new automotive and film culture) to the well-nigh biological tropes of early postmodernism. Meanwhile the visual apposition of hollow eye-sockets and the crawling, segmented life-forms of some insect species recall to mind the mature science-fiction of Stanislaw Lem, wherein the attempts of a cybernetic culture to contact its biologic antipode (usually narrated as the effort of technocratic scientists to assimilate an unknowable multi-culturalism) turn out to be as catastrophic and doomed as the Eastern bloc industrialization drives themselves. Most illuminating of all, however, is the wondrous materialization of the mouth: this vocalized decolonization of the subject is the virtual negation of the prevailing gender ideology at the beginning of Germania, namely the breaking of the monopoly of the male workers over language and political discourse generally (as opposed to the whores, whom can merely temporarily withhold their labor-power). Along the way, the function of national allegory still preserved in Hilse’s allegiance to the Twenties’ class struggle is reinscribed in the last scene, Death in Berlin 2, as the agonizing death of the national mass-party, accompanied by the unexpected transformation of the Brechtian whore into the professional Hollywood starlet. The young woman whom answers Hilse’s dying request with an apocryphal description of a children’s game does far more than ironically reprise the prehistory of that other children’s game, at the very beginning of Germania; she is nothing less than the class avatar of that fully mediatized culture busily reproducing the images of national
revolutions on what has already become a global communications infrastructure, and indigenous to the new social space of the hospital and advanced medical technology with which the play concludes, a.k.a. the multinational proletariat. Conversely, Hilse’s fatal cancer cannot be interpreted as anything else but the most literal adumbration and fragmentation of the mass party’s body politic by a delayed or latent globalization, of the sort which had its sociological roots in the permanent labor shortages of the Sixties, and the transformation of women and Third World guest-workers into permanent wage-laborers on both sides of the Berlin Wall; the unnamed Young Mason is, by this measure, the Eastern version of the counter-cultural rebels of the West, whose relationship with the whore-turned-young woman is best described as the uneasy alliance of the New Left with the global media and consumer culture.

From Autarkic to Export-platform Accumulation

Mueller’s 1976 text Life of Gundling Lessing’s Sleep Dream Cry is in many ways both the incisive critique of Germania’s extant neo-national tropes and the sublation of the cybernetic culture of the Sixties in a premonitory multinational or video aesthetic. The key innovation here is the assimilation of a specifically postmodern nominalism into the neo-national material in question: the quasi-cinematic textures and razorsharp dialogue of Mueller’s earlier work, which re-appropriated the theatrical background, photographic gesture and filmic dialogue out of the heritage of the great Expressionist films of the Twenties, are themselves expropriated on the grounds of the video frame and video cut of Seventies mass-culture. These latter categories, which refer to the objective and subjective poles of globalization in the aesthetic material (or what took the form of the schizophrenic and paranoid registers in the novel, and the reggae dub and the punk rock power chord in music), polarize the cybernetic tropes and Cold War populisms.
handed down by the Sixties postmodernisms into antagonistic neo-national and multinational registers. This is the genesis of Gundling’s professional nihilism in the service of Friedrich Wilhelm, which never quite ascends to the level of Hamlet’s soliloquy in the Hamletmachine but merely foregrounds the violence of Absolutist power impressed upon the young Friedrich as the blind allegiance to a sadistic war-patriarchy. This turns, at its outer limit, into the internalized masochism of Prussian Games, and the violent disruption of a forbidden set of tactilities with the filmic shot (the execution of Katte, which Friedrich is forced to witness). All this is staged, in turn, on the postmodern recuperation of the modernist filmic scene or panorama, e.g. Catt’s reading of Racine to the seated adult Friedrich, or what is more or less an anagram for the stereotypical Hollywood film director (elsewhere visible in movies about movies or the culture-industry, such as Sunset Boulevard). This latter is grounded not on the autonomized icons or special effects of an already-constituted media-culture, as with the horror films of the Seventies (which graphically disincorporated a wide range of obsolescent genres, ranging from the teen movie to the detective and crime story to the young adult soap opera), but on the seemingly more modest grounds of School of the Nation. Here the nightmarish body-fragments first sighted in Germania’s production-cauldron are catalogued and graded by Friedrich II’s phantasmic school-master, or what amounts to a scansion of a postmodern quality control and service sector; meanwhile Friedrich’s intonation of an old German folk-song completes the reference to Rumpelstilzchen at the beginning of the scene (the magical power of the true name, or what Adorno would call the truth-content of aesthetics) by naming the prehistory of the postmodern culture-industry as a concrete monopoly-praxis. This is nothing less than the color-spectrum of the rolling countryside or pastoral idyll (“Auf Wiesen gruen/ viel Blumen bluehn” [On meadows green/ many flowers bloom]), the sublation of the blank snowstorm and the
consuming wall of fire (visual tropes of the expressionist film and the circus stunt respectively) in the postmodern home-coming film or Heimatfilm. This is to be sure in keeping with the general tenor of the early Eastern Asian and Western European postmodernisms, which derived their content from an imported cinema (e.g. the Hong Kong films and the Italian spaghetti Westerns, which pastiched the American action-adventure blockbuster). Where Mueller turns an interesting situation into a stunning aesthetic revolution, however, is the moment of the breaking of the cinematic monopoly on visual form altogether:

Auf der anderen Seite teilen überlebensgross John Bull und Marianne die Welt, indem sie mit Messern, an einem Globus Messerstich spielen. Bei jedem Treffer schneidet der Sieger eine Scheibe heraus und verleibt sie sich ein. Satt sehen beide, sich (manchmal einander) den Bauch reibend, rümpfend und furchend dem kleinen Friedrich zu, der mit seinen Soldatenpuppen Krieg spielt. Während das Schneetreiben zunimmt und das Feuer verlischt, erstarrt die Szene. Die Bühne verwandelt sich in ein Geisterschiff, auf dem tote Matrosen den Kapitän an den Mast nageln. Der Film läuft rückwaerts, wieder vorwaerts, wieder rückwaerts. Usw. Durch die Jahrhunderte. Musik DAS MUSIKALISCHE OPFER. [On the other side, larger-than-life, John Bull and Maryanne carve up the world with knives, they practice knife-thrusts on a globe. With every slash the winner cuts out a slab and imbibes it. Satiated they sit, occasionally rubbing (each other’s) belly, belching and farting, watching little Friedrich play war with his soldier-puppets. While the driving snow intensifies and the fire goes out, the scene freezes. The stage transforms itself into a ghost-ship, on which dead sailors nail the captain to the mast. The film runs backwards, then forwards, then backwards. Etc. Through the centuries. Music THE MUSICAL OFFERING.] LG:18

This is nothing less than the first coherent European music video: all the visual categories which might transmit a cinematic scene or photographic image are systematically sabotaged or redeployed in unfamiliar constellations. The spatial panorama turns into the unviewable temporality of human history; what might have been a Freudian narrative or an Oedipal scene turns into the direst vision of a voracious neocolonialism; and even the potentially Wagnerian ghost-ship is upstaged by Bach’s universalizing harmonics, the
first great systematization of 18th century European musical tonality, which both negates the filmic score by virtue of its status as a musical sample and is itself negated by the rapid transition to the *King of Hearts* Black Widow scene. This latter is in many respects a canny rewriting of *Germania*’s bunker scene, whose convulsive concluding performance (“Fascism as the ultimate B-film”) is recouped from the standpoint of the postwar consumer culture and the trope of seduction, freely adapted from Genet’s own brand of anti-colonial and anti-cinematic texts. The raging violence which permeates every moment of *Germania* is domesticated into the spectacle of Friedrich’s own administered Enlightenment, here rendered as the unlikely melange of the filmic auteur and the legitimation crisis of the post-Stalinist regimes, eagerly piling on Western debt to finance their own semi-autonomous export drives in the worldwide raw materials inflation of the Seventies, while attempting to buy off the increasingly restive laboring masses with symbolic compromises and populist rhetoric. Both narratives converge in the moment of the off-screen execution, whose intimation of some new and terrible visual immediacy is reflexively grounded back onto the audience members themselves (“Ein Bild von einem Mann. Und hier vor meinem Fenster muss es sein,” rhapsodizes Friedrich, looking out into the audience, “Dass es zerstoert wird.” [A picture of a man. And that it must be destroyed here, before my window.] LG:22). Significantly, the execution is witnessed directly by the Saxon and only secondarily by Friedrich; the wide-eyed disbelief of the former has its antipode in the shocking tactility of the latter (his reaction to the execution: “Haben Sie gesehen. Das spritzt.” [Did you see that. That stings.] LG:23). This latter is a reference to the drug narratives of the early Seventies, wherein the physical vectors of speed and acceleration typical of the early counter-culture were sublated into the psychedelic pills, chemicals and consciousness-altering paraphernalia of a globalizing pharmaceutical industry (whether as coca leaf in the Third World or biotechnology in the
first). Whereas Hercules 2 functions very much as the prototype of a psychedelic experience – the redivision of the world into cubicles of free-floating intensities no longer bound to the classical monad, but circulating within a henceforth mediatized or postmodern subjectivity – Friedrich’s own consumption of the (fatal) spectacle is a powerful and damning indictment of the sphere of production: the target is, of course, that Eastern cadre-bourgeoisie whose power was vested not in direct ownership rights but in the more mediated form of cultural surplus-rents (freedom of movement, career opportunities, limited access to consumer goods and so forth). This has its corollary in the brief puppet-mime with which the scene begins, both the prefiguration of the Heinrich von Kleist episode and the negation of the formal masks Friedrich wears or appropriates (most notably, the textile-surface of the Saxon widow’s veil).

What remains problematic is the category of the gaze, which will shed its cinematic imprimatur only in the literal and figurative Prussian madhouse of Dear God, and the exposition of the three great transnational identity movements of the Seventies – namely, womyn, youth, and the New Left intellectuals; or what was registered in the American situation as feminism, the counter-culture, and micropolitics. Here, the professor and his students ideologically gloss that Marcusean repressive tolerance (elsewhere inscribed upon the body of the woman inmate as the scars of an unsuccessful execution) as the grim parody of a Kantian ethics, namely a morality become the most literal kind of straitjacket. Meanwhile the ironic refrain of the opening folk song (“Herzlieb Scheiden und das tut weh” [Break my heart and woe is me]) serves notice of the formal rupture between the new identity movements and the one-party state. This has its content in the trajectory from the torn clothing of the woman, to the youth’s adjustable masturbation-bandage, to the self-laceration of Zebahl, a victim of the Seven Years’ War; or what amounts to the phantasms of simple textile commodities, semi-finished goods
with a limited range of options, and finally the abstract commodities of an unassailable
culture-industry respectively. No less significant is the passing nod Mueller gives here to
Brecht’s late play, Der Hofmeister, which similarly identified the servile Prussian school-
master lurking beneath the mask of the Party cadre; where Brecht merely drew the logical
conclusions from Lenz’ paranoid insight into the totalitarian project of the
Enlightenment, Zebahl’s searing concluding monologue cancels out the thematics of
individual guilt and redemption (“die deutsche Misere” [the German dysfunction]) by
means of the appropriately demonized cognition of a daemonic totality:

...Ich Kot meiner Schoepfung Erbrechen meiner Engel Eiterkorn in meiner
Harmonien. Ich bin die Fleischbank. Ich bin das Erdbeben. Ich bin das Tier. Der
Krieg. Ich bin die Wueste. Schrei. Schwarze Engel bevoelkern den
Zuschauerraum und fallen lautlos ueber das Publikum her. […]I cud of my
creation vomit of my angel suppuration of my harmonies. I am the Flesh-bank. I
am the Earthquake. I am the Animal. The War. I am the Wasteland. Cry. Black
angels populate the audience-chamber and fall silently on the theater-goers.

LG:29

The prison-cell, that staple mythos of the existentialisms, explodes its monadic shell to
reveal, not the lineaments of the world war (explicitly displaced here as “the war”), but
the constellation of a machinery of slaughter, the animal, the earthquake and the desert.
These are the icons of a specifically global mass culture (from the horror movie to the
Disney special to the disaster film to the adventure serial) recouped as a series of post-
cybernetic or neo-colonial subjects. In contrast to Western Europe, which had the luxury
of financing a coherent discourse of existential alienation – most typically, as the
subjective placelessness or vertigo before the temptations or absurdities of an ultimately
irrational or agnostic marketplace – out of the surplus-rents of the colonial and neo-
colonial empires (Francophone Africa as much as the British Commonwealth), the less
motorized but no less urbanized Eastern bloc countries tended to foreground a
specifically spatial politics of an autarkic subject (everything from Solzhenitsyn’s existential gem, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, all the way to the mythic export-processing Zone of the Strugatsky brothers’ Roadside Picnic, with its magnificent conclusion: the appeal to the interstellar or at least mildly telecommunicatory disco ball). In Mueller’s case, this autarky undoubtedly refers to the East German theater apparatus, and that state-developmental politics of representation pointedly raised by Friedrich’s monologue in The Inspection (“ET IN ARCADIA EGO. Zeigt in den Zuschauerraum. Sehn Sie das Rindvieh, friedlich grasend. Preussen, eine Heimat fuer Volk und Vieh.” [ET IN ARCADIA EGO. Points to the audience. See the herd, peacefully grazing. Prussia, a homeland for folk and cattle.] LG:32).

Such direct provocations are part and parcel of Mueller’s larger strategy in this text, namely the substitution of multinational coordinates for the national mythologies of Germania. This has the immediate effect of suspending the traditional form of thematic development endemic to Brecht’s late texts, namely the more or less improvised derivation of a radical neo-national temporality out of an objectively cinematic spatiality, in favor of a genuinely multinational subject. Time becomes space: each filmic panorama is reconverted into a free-floating video icon, much like Patrick McGoohan’s nascent video scripts or the accelerated shot-speed of the Seventies horror and Hong Kong films, which reflexively staged the mass-cultural registers in question as a concrete draumaturgic constellation. In the King of Hearts scene, this yields the auteur parody of the studio director and the star actress; in School of the Nation, the decryption of international wars and grisly colonial predations behind the heroic facade of the nation-state; in Dear Gott, the international filmic genre and its discontents amidst the prisonhouse of the one-party state; in Prussian Games, gender ideology courtesy Racine and the filmic shot; in The Inspection, the urban panorama and the postmodern
subculture-industries; and in *Friedrich the Great*, the existential film and de-Stalinization. Along the way, the neo-national aporias of Mueller’s earlier work – for instance, Hilse’s stoning – are ruthlessly demolished everywhere from Voltaire’s unanswerable return volley to Friedrich in *The Inspection* (“Ein Souvenir. Die preussische Orange.” [A souvenir. The Prussian orange.] LG:32) to the flying bureaucratic papers in *Friedrich the Great*, which recalls to mind the labyrinth in *Black Orpheus*, and to the ironic black eagle imprinted upon the closing curtain of this scene.

The true referent for such multinational nominalisms is in turn neither the state-developmental regimes of the East nor the Western European filmic and theatrical modernisms, but the source-texts and narratives of a rapidly globalizing American culture-industry. This is the genesis of the Heinrich von Kleist and Lessings *Sleep Dream Cry* scenes, which augur forth the twin sublimes of a video corporeality and an allied multimedia immediacy. In the former, the thematic of eating and being eaten still latent in the doll-like or Disneyized subjects of the cybernetic narratives (in an American context, the glossy plastic molds and aerodynamic body-shapes of the automotive sublime) is sublated into a new type of fantasmic production, namely the activated televisual surfaces and subversive tactualities of the various dolls, which are ritually beheaded, shattered, ingested or otherwise shorn of their tactile content, and whose identifiable organic components (hair, skin, flesh) are rendered exchangeable with one another and ultimately with the contents of Kleist’s own personalized puppet: thus the well-nigh cannibalistic devouring of the Frauenpuppe’s heart is answered for by the sudden, shocking stream of intestines and roses. It is important to emphasize that while this had its originary model in the proto-video tropes of the mid-Seventies horror films, e.g. Hooper’s 1974 *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which staged a similar dialectic between the villain’s amorphous leather mask (cleverly offset by the starched shirt and business tie, i.e. a specifically
The fault-line between the masculine-national proletarian organization and its feminine-multinational consumer conscience still available in \textit{Germania} is recoded herein as the mutation of the cybernetic body-part into the properly telecommunicatory commodity or semi-autonomous Deleuzian organ: the constellation of the execution-block, the overflowing hair, and the self-sacrificial blood which streams out like sawdust literally names those semi-automatic cybernetic machines, informatic work-processes and skilled worker-programmers already displacing the labor-intensive manufacturing and hand-controlled machine-tools typical of the Brechtian panorama, all in the visual language of the Sixties psychedelic aesthetic. That global consumer society visible everywhere from the concert light-show to the mutable lava-lamp is thereby negated in the indeterminate production-zone of the “\textit{Verkommenes Ufer (See bei Straussberg)}” [\textit{Despoiled Shore (Sea by Straussberg)}] (LG:34) in a manner which bears the most striking resemblance to that other great text of a localizing global production, namely the punk rock aesthetic of the Sex Pistols (most notably, the slippage from suburban London to proto-global Berlin
on the *Holidays in the Sun* track): as the motif of the self-sacrifice of the neo-national for the sake of a multinational solidarity.

All this comes into its explicit political content only in the “Lessing” scene, namely the unruly conjunction of the fictive Lessings’ meditation a la Beckett on the allegorical senescence of the national theatrical tradition and its associated state theater-complex, the shocking eruption of the global culture-industry and its attendant theory-market out of their national antecedents, and the curiously muted conclusion, about which we will have more to say hereafter. The key innovation here is the mobilization of a new micropolitics of the subject, or the tacit alliance between the globe-hopping culture-worker and the collective rebellions of the Second World, coded here in terms of Mueller’s own autobiographical experience as a border-crossing European culture-star and as the continuum of violence done to bodies rebelling against their status as mere reproductive machinery (“Ich habe die Hoelle der Frauen von unten gesehen” [I have seen the Hell of the women from beneath] LG:35) respectively. This is conjoined to the nightmarish fantasm of the American media-landscape, and the significant conjunction of a mythical President of the United States (here rendered as a faceless robot seated on an electric chair) set against a landscape of media stars and automobile wrecks, all regaled by the then-current hit single by Pink Floyd (*Welcome to the Machine* from the 1975 *Wish You Were Here* album). This wondrous evocation of the global media-culture of the early Seventies, which reinscribes everything from the political interregnum of the Ford-Carter technocracy and Warhol’s electric chair paintings to the musical postmodernism of Pink Floyd within some new overarching cultural problematic, can probably best be grasped negatively, that is to say by what is deliberately left out or excised. Neither the stadium concert elsewhere valorized by Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, nor the post-psychedelic light-show of the discotheque, nor
indeed any of the usual tropes of the American media hegemony of the mid-Seventies (from the post-Cold War thriller to the Hollywood blockbuster to the Warhol museum happening) are involved here. Rather, Mueller chooses to foreground Lessing’s reflexive viewing of Nathan and Emilia Galotti’s mutual self-demolition within some mysterious new social space, characterized by lapel pins, exchangeable identities, and most of all the radical cessation of the prevailing gender ideologies (Emilia and Nathan function as compact allegories of feminine renunciation for the sake of a capitalized male virtue, and the compensating notion of the juridical equality of all males, respectively). Given that Life of Gundling was written following Mueller’s first visit to America at the University of Texas at Austin, this can be nothing else than the space of that premier postmodern service-sector institution, the mass university. This latter provides the crucial mediating standpoint of the concluding text of the scene, wherein the deepest aesthetic tendencies of late 19th century poetic modernism and the fractal ecologies of postmodern culture are brought into miraculous contact with one another:


The sprawling geography and overwhelming intensity of the passage is surely in keeping with the immediate reaction of the European tourist to the sheer immensity and wild grandeur of the American landscape; one could also point to the scene in the junkyard, where abstract columns of figures and financial reports of corporate capitalism upstage
Friedrich’s marching soldiers (“GOLD IM STECHSCHRI\-TT/ SILBER IM SPIESSRUTENLAUF” [GOLD IN GOOSE-STEP/ SILVER RUNNING THE GAUNTLET]). Mueller is however aiming even higher: neither the ambiguous squadrons of sharks, issuing forth from undersea canyons with teeth of black light, nor the polymorphous alligators, nor the stunning “GRAMMATIK DER ERDBEBEN”, nor the cybernetic humans of some science-fiction narrative (nicely relayed by the quotation of Rimbaud), are reducible to any specifically national or neo-national cultural referent. The landscape of the Western erupts into the moving planetscapes of Kubrick’s *2001*, precisely where the school of sharks are indistinguishable from the airmobile helicopters radiating heat and death everywhere from Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* to the air-battle sequence of *You Only Live Twice*; even the Biblical constellation of earthquake, fire, and flood explicitly recalls the iconography of the postmodern disaster and atomic holocaust films. That is, these are explicitly multinational tropes, which transform the basic apposition of the cybernetic narratives (the electronic flesh which controls the serialized or reproducible mechanical subcomponent) into the categories of the proletarianized programmer or code-switcher on the one hand, and the informatic or telecommunicatory network on the other. Lautreamont’s Prince of Atlantis is in this sense something like an avatar, not of the counter-cultural outlaw or post-existential rebel, but of the global superstars in the Seventies (from Muhammad Ali to Robin Williams to Jane Fonda).7

All this underlines the significance of the last fragment in this scene, namely the *Apotheosis Spartacus*, which aspires neither to a late modernist version of the Lessing fragment nor to the video coordinates touched upon in the previous scene, but inaugurates what could be called Hong Kong theater. The essential model here was not traditional Chinese theater, so much as the Hong Kong action-adventure film invented by Bruce
Lee, East Asia’s first genuine media superstar. The phenomenal action scenes of *Enter the Dragon* staged the video decolonization of the nascent Hong Kong film industry from its erstwhile Anglo-American predecessor on explicitly corporeal grounds, a.k.a. the visual trope of Lee’s telegenic torso. This was underwritten by a heretofore unknown density of fast-action shots and editing techniques, designed to compensate for Hollywood’s monopoly on special effects with a labor-intensive substitute, the upshot being an expansion of visual content beyond anything the panoramas or stylized gunfights of the traditional Western could offer. The conclusion of *Life of Gundling* does something similar, by decolonizing an East German theatrical space on the grounds of the Hollywood blockbuster, negating the special effects and set designs of the latter by means of an unprecedented density of textual, theatrical and musical signifiers. This is subtly symbolized by the transition from the sawdust, wooden puppets and textile signifiers of the earlier scenes to the heaps of shifting sand, half-buried torso and safety helmets of the conclusion. Lessing’s attempt to excavate the latter is frustrated by the attendants (“*Kellner*”, literally waiters) busily filling up the stage with busts of renowned poets and philosophers (the negation of the Hollywood stars glimpsed in the previous section), whom later turn and, outfitted in protective headgear, retrofit Lessing’s head and shoulders with his own life-size bust:

*Lessing, auf den Knien, macht vergebliche Versuche, sich von der Bueste zu befreien. Man hoert aus der Bronze seinen dumpfen Schrei. Applaus von Kellnern Buehnenarbeitern (Theaterbesuchern).* [Lessing, on his knees, makes vain attempts to free himself from the bust. One hears his dulled cry from the bronze. Applause from the attendants stage-workers (theater-goers).] LG:38

On one level, this could be read as a caricature of our own status as relentlessly omnivorous postmodern culture-consumers, to whom life has indeed become a series of depthless Baudrillardian simulacra; the apposition of the lifelike metallic shell and the
helpless, organic interior still capable of registering at least an aural protest suggests, however, quite another reading, namely the radical New Left recuperation of the android or cyborg as a possible site of resistance. The ubiquitous sand would then refer not so much to the media images of Middle East or to the gleaming beaches of the global tourism industry, or even to a para-Freudian pun on Brandenburg’s notoriously sandy soil, but to a new kind of aesthetic production-material. The mystery can be resolved by recalling to mind the specific registers of the STUNDE DER WEISSGLUT text; earthquakes, scenic canyons, environmental destruction and wild cultural mutations, taken together, are a dead ringer for high-tech California. Petro-politics, the crumbling remains of monuments, and the California ideology all converge on the level of production: sand and castings are the classic trademarks of the metals industries, and given the waiters’ professional mien and ambiguous head-protection (not soldier’s but safety-helmets), this suggests the workings of some sort of a high-tech metal-working industry. In point of historical fact, Eastern Germany did attempt, like many of its late-industrializing analogues around the Pacific Rim (most notably Taiwan and South Korea) to enter the global electronics markets during the 1970’s, especially in Dresden, whose skilled laborers and engineering workforce were later absorbed by the large-scale electronics investments of chip titans Siemens and AMD during the early Nineties (AMD’s Dresden plant produces the Athlon chips, incidentally, which are giving Intel a rare run for its money).

The final piece of the puzzle is the fact that the other global market the GDR chose to specialize in was, as Mueller was fond of reminding Western journalists, that of the theater industry. Mueller had been thrown out of the official East German writers’ union in the early Sixties, had lived hand-to-mouth for decades, and was not permitted to work professionally in the East until the mid-Eighties; the stagings of Mueller’s plays in
the West, however, earned the GDR desperately-needed hard currency. By way of compensation, the regime allowed Mueller the relatively uncommon privilege of freely traveling to the West.8 Life of Gundling is thus much more than the reflexive critique of the theater-industry; it is literally, as the subtitle of the play tells us, a Greuelgeschichte or horror story, a grim phantasm of the contradictions unleashed by the late-developmental or export-led industrialization characteristic of Southern Europe and Eastern Asia during the Eighties. Amidst the furious carnage of the past, we catch just a glimpse, however briefly, of ghosts from the future: the ghosts of the Eurostate, whose official arrival is documented by Mueller’s Hamletmachine.

The Euromachine

The flip side of Fredric Jameson’s summary judgement upon the Hollywood blockbuster films of the Seventies, namely that the sleep of national film breeds video monsters, was indeed the monsters’ perspective on all this, or more precisely, the nascent class praxis of that multinational proletariat whose objective interests were already beginning to diverge from those of the various branch plant bourgeoisies of the Second World. This is relayed by Mueller’s 1977 Hamletmachine, truly the news bulletin of Eurocapital’s zero-hour, as the dissonance between the Hamlet-intellectual and the Ophelia-activist, or what amounts to a further radicalization of the gender ideology upheld by the conclusion of Life of Gundling (the masculinized aesthetic professional vs. the feminized mass media). Though this was generally misconstrued by the critics and audiences of the day as the dirge of the Eastern German New Left or, in the more hostile cases, entirely written off as a prank by the “Mueller-machine”, a.k.a. the anarchist antics of privileged Eastern culture-workers tolerated by the Honecker regime as hard-currency export-earners, the true object of Mueller’s aesthetic revolution was neither the Eastern
cadre-elites nor the Western financial-industrial boards, but the state-monopoly accumulation-regime endemic to both. Rather than merely repudiating specific features of the nascent global consumer culture, Mueller actively anneals vast swathes of such onto what can only be described as the symbolic ecology (Appathuri’s mediascape) of the dawning Eurostate. This latter moves beyond Deleuze and Guittari’s schizophrenic or televisual subject, by rethinking the media outlet, dissemination-principle or semiotic code purveyed by such not as a newly autonomous subject, but as a species of Bourdieu’s habitus-bound cultural capital.⁹

The result was no doubt as electrifying as it was incomprehensible to the West German theater-goers of the day: a kind of reverse-engineered television culture, wherein materials ranging from Shakespeare to Stalin’s state funeral, lines of Hoelderlin and Pasternak, and characters from Dostoyevsky and Mueller’s own earlier works, are not merely cited or paraded across the stage, but fluoresce like so many video scripts amidst the mediatic texts of the Seventies (the Eastern European insurrections as much as the Green protest actions or the Baader-Meinhof witchhunt). Put more concretely, the qualitative underdevelopment of East German media-culture returns as the most dialectical advantage, by allowing Mueller to recombine local or regional materials with the most advanced video-texts of the unfolding world-system. The opening sentence of the play, for example (“Ich war Hamlet. Ich stand an der Kueste und redete mit der Brandung BLABLA, im Ruecken der Ruinen von Europa.” [I was Hamlet. I stood on the coast and spake unto the surf BLABLA at my back the ruins of Europe.] HM:89), deflects what could have become the standard cinematic panorama of the seacoast (the empty existential horizon with the neo-expressionist ruins of Europe in the background) by means of the visual motif of the royal family album. This significant visual trope, which manages to conjure up the phantom of the Victorian fashion engraving out of the
television viewing-field, has as its polemic target neither the media royalty and historical attractions of the Western European tourist industry nor the Eastern state technocrats, but rather the Stalinist or state-monopoly clan industrialists of the immediate post-war period, whose power was vested not in ownership rights but in that parafeudal cultural capital which intermediated between the competing factions of the official state sector, the world-market, and that consumption sector consigned to the grey or underground economy.

It is precisely the cessation of the class rule of such, something typically denoted by the de-Stalinization of the Khruschev reform period (parodied here by Hamlet’s violent disruption of the burial process, and the eerie mass ingestion of the corpse) which Mueller re-appropriates in the quite different context of the mid-Seventies: this is the occasional English dialogue, deliberately left untranslated by Mueller for maximum effect. These lines are not quite Elizabethan gibberish, but also not quite the Shakespearean pastiche one might otherwise assume them to be. Certainly, the “ZWEITER CLOWN” (“SECOND CLOWN”) is derived a related monologue from Mueller’s most explicitly cybernetic text, the 1964 The Building Site, while the “AGE OF HOPE” reprises Ernst Bloch’s brief and unhappy sojourn in East Germany. Yet the striking opening lines (“I’M GOOD HAMLET GI’ME A CAUSE FOR GRIEF/ AH THE WHOLE GLOBE FOR A REAL SORROW” HM:89) would appear to point in quite another direction, namely the early beatnik culture, and the haphazard re-appropriation of the early psychedelic culture. The mystery can be resolved if we reset our aesthetic antennae to the frequencies of American television: here, the consumer culture sprinkled with Beat slang and a counter-culture long since become commercialized counterpoints the triply ambiguous Richard III (Nixon in his post-China-card decline, rueing the illicit recordings which were presumably the most authentic thing about him), all set in motion
against the reverberating mediascape of the manned moon explorations of the late Sixties and early Seventies.

By the same token, the ghost of Hamlet’s father is neither a throwback to some Derridean return-of-the-telecommunication nor the authoritarian inversion of the mediatic Maoisms, but rather the icon of postmodern historicity par excellence: the future is haunted, not the past, by the flickering futures (in the Wall Street sense) of the image-culture. This has its correlate in the existential gender-tropes of the Queen and Ophelia, the targets of what a Freudian narrative would term Hamlet’s pre-Oedipal rage, but which reads more like the horrific violence visited upon the corporeal materiality of the urban city or national zone in the name of development (“DER MUTTERSCHOSS IST KEINE EINBAHNSTRASSE” [THE MOTHER’S LAP IS NO ONE-WAY STREET] and the even more gruesomely explicit: “Jetzt nehme ich dich, meine Mutter, in seiner, meines Vaters, unsichtbaren Spur.” [Now I take thee my mother in his, my father’s invisible trace.] HM:91). At this point, two significant new mediations intervene to prevent the text from toppling over wholesale into that favorite West German ideologeme of the early Nineties, the shotgun marriage between a masculinized West Berlin media-culture and a feminized East Berlin cadre-culture: firstly, the historical successor to the Saxon regional culture, namely the civil rights and pacifist movements and underground consumer culture of the Seventies (“SOLL ICH/ WEILS BRAUCH IST/ EIN STUECK EISEN STECKEN IN/ DAS NAECHSTE FLEISCH” [SHOULD I/ CAUSE IT’S EXPECTED/ STICK A PIECE OF IRON INTO THE AWAITING FLESH OR THE FLESH OF ANOTHER] HM:90) and the significant mention of the barstool, something which might correspond to the revisionist Westerns, honky-tonk and disco films of American mass-culture in the late Seventies) and secondly, the curious telescoping of Horatio and Polonius into Hamlet’s service-sector double. This neatly sidesteps the whole spectrum of
stock Cold War narratives, viz. the heroic commissar facing down the cretinous Social Democrat, or the no less dubious high-tech secret agent battling rogue Third World villains, by deriving Horatio’s character-actant from that unlikeliest of all transnational tropes, Scandinavian social democracy (“Daenemark ist ein Gefaengnis, zwischen uns waechst eine Wand. Sieh was aus der Wand waechst.” [Denmark is a concentration camp, between us grows a Wall. See what grows from the Wall.] HM:91). Where the social democracies provided the unique Cold War buffer-zone between Stalinist autarky and American marketization, Horatio’s avatar of an ambiguous professional-class no longer tied to a discrete national identity, Cold War neo-nationalism or indeed gender constant floats like the dazzling mirage of some Third Way between military-autarkic and transnational accumulation.

Though one can argue that the sheer excremental excess of this scene will find its object only much later, in the discarded mass-cultural consumer goods littering the extinct panoramas of Mueller’s early Eighties text *Despoiled Shore*, the gainer in this is undoubtedly Ophelia’s explicitly spatial counter-monologue: here the interior space of the mechanical heart, a cybernetic motif, is disrupted firstly by the self-referential (and honorably self-critical) references to Mueller’s own earlier works (the serialized bodies of victimized women, somewhere between discarded written drafts and rusting machine-tools); later by the messianic disruption of labor-time (“Gestern habe ich aufgehoert mich zu toeten” [Yesterday I stopped killing myself.] HM:91); and still later by that ne plus ultra of the postmodern, the smashing of the window and the destruction of the photographs, all set within the dizzying vastness of that Continental-sized hypermarket known as the European Economic Community. This suggests that Ophelia’s re-appropriation of the clock augurs not merely the protest-politics of the Seventies, but the arrival of a multinational temporality as well. This is nothing less than the accelerated
tempo of the global consumer society, which in the context of the late Seventies meant the spread of portable digital and electronic equipment of all kinds, manufactured by the export-processing zones of the Pacific Rim by a hyperexploited female proletariat; something which had its European counterpart in the tourism and semi-manufactured goods industries of the newly-liberalized Iberian and Balkan semi-peripheries on the one hand, and the more general expansion of a feminized service-sector throughout the metropolitan economies on the other. It is striking that whereas this last phenomenon did indeed go on to generate its own unique aesthetic forms, everywhere from Verena Stefan’s decolonizing narratives to Elfriede Jelinek’s cybernetic fictions, the semi-peripheries or semi-peripheral populations of the Eurostate (everyone from immigrant workers to indigenous Eastern Europeans) had no such recourse. The upshot was that the potential class consciousness of a newly feminized multinational proletariat tended to be at best displaced, and at worst violently suppressed, by whatever neo-national production-ideology was at hand (Christa Wolf’s work is in many respects an expression of this dilemma).

This sheds a significant light on what might be called the prehistory of Eurofeminism, namely the trajectory from Simone de Beauvoir’s ambiguous accommodation with Sartrean existentialism to the semiotic and tele-significatory politics of a Kristeva or Irigaray, to the explosion of a new kind of feminist politics in the grassroots activity of the Green Parties; all of which was necessarily based on the rift between patriarchal national proletarian organizations and the unorganized strata of a polygendered, multinational skilled working-class. Probably the closest equivalent of this in the American situation was the African American feminisms of the early Seventies, caught between the inapplicable utopianism of a professional-class white feminism, and the no less problematic praxis of neo-patriarchal Black nationalisms. Nor is it an accident
that Mueller’s text will take a page from the most progressive African American female writers of the period (e.g. Toni Morrison and Toni Cade Bambara) and counter actually existing neo-colonialism with an aesthetics of solidarity, by radically multinationalizing a preexisting feminist and multi-cultural discourse:

Ich zerstöre das Schlachtfeld das mein Heim war. Ich reisse die Türen auf, damit der Wind herein kann und der Schrei der Welt. Ich zerschlage das Fenster. Mit meinem blutenden Haenden zerreisse ich die Fotografien der Maenner die ich geliebt habe und die mich gebraucht haben auf dem Bett auf dem Tisch auf dem Stuhl auf dem Boden. Ich lege Feuer an mein Gefängnis. Ich werfe meine Kleider in das Feuer. Ich gehe auf die Straße, gekleidet in meinem Blut. [I destroy the battlefield that was my Home. I tear the doors off their hinges to let the wind and the cry of the World inside. I smash the Window. With my bleeding hands I tear the photographs of the men who I loved and who used me on the Bed on the Table on the Chair on the Floor. I set fire to my prison. I throw my clothes into the fire. I go onto the street, clothed in my blood.]

HM:92

The blood-drenched handprint, the whirling fragments of photographic images, and the post-clockwork humans re-appropriate the urban graffiti cartoon, Polaroid snapshots, and cyborg subjectivities retailed by the American metropole in a Second World turn, at the same moment that the Sixties street action or protest is teleported into the demesne of the postmodern university. The University of the Dead, as Mueller calls it, harbors not only the collective memory of the past, but the promise of the future: the attacking bicyclists and the stones which rained upon Hilsen are here transmuted into the nonviolent ballet of undead women-victims and the philosophical texts bombarding a conscience-stricken Hamlet (HM:92). The one moment of actual violence is the tearing-up of Hamlet’s clothing, really the prologue to an extended gender-bend of the patriarchal family: Ophelia’s striptease and pseudo-marriage with Claudius in Hamlet’s coffin (emblazoned with the insignia “HAMLET 1”, the first in a series of subtle allusions to Patrick
McGoohan’s TV series *The Prisoner*) is counterpointed by Hamlet’s dance with an angelic Horatio and the belated cognition of his own sexism:

HAMLET: *Haende vorn Gesicht.* Ich will eine Frau sein.

*Hamlet zieht Ophelias Kleider an, Ophelia schminkt ihm eine Hurenmaske.*

STIMME(N) *aus dem Sarg:* Was du getoetet hast sollst du auch lieben.


[OPHELIA Still want to eat my heart, Hamlet. *Laughs.*
HAMLET (hiding his head in his hands) I want to be a woman.
*Hamlet puts on Ophelia’s clothes, Ophelia paints a whore’s mask on him,*
*Claudius, now Hamlet’s father, laughs soundlessly, Ophelia offers Hamlet her hand to be kissed and steps with Claudius/Hamlet Father back into the coffin.*
*Hamlet in pose of a whore. An angel, the face in the back of the neck: Horatio. Dances with Hamlet.*

VOICE(S) *from the coffin:* What thou hast killed shalt thou love.

_The dance becomes wilder and wilder. Laughter from the coffin. On a swing a Madonna with breast-cancer. Horatio opens an umbrella, embraces Hamlet. Freeze in the embrace under the umbrella. The breast-cancer shines like a sun._

HM:92

On one level, this reads like a pastiche of the light-effects and gender deregulation of that new locus of transnational culture, the Seventies discotheque; on another, the shockingly precise interplay of sound, scenery and visual effects, along with the opening of the umbrella (another reference to McGoohan), seems to point to a televisual aesthetic. Probably the key to the entire passage is Hamlet’s characteristic gesture of hiding his face, the negation of the Western theatrical or filmic star and the Eastern Party-approved icon alike by means of the blinding corporeality of the Madonna, that prescient icon of a metastasizing consumer society (and the remarkable anticipation of the American singer-songwriter by the same name, who would rise to prominence a decade later). The breast-
cancer and Horatio’s double-face, imprinted on the flesh of the neck, are both deliberately perverse extensions of national bodies (i.e. living prostitutes and dead marriages); given Mueller’s penchant for cannibalizing cinematic forms, this suggests that the concluding masquerade is a deliberate superimposition of the video auteur and the global superstar over preexisting filmic tropes (the Hollywood director and studio star).

This is confirmed by Hamlet’s extended soliloquy, in the rupture between a new kind of mediatic space (memorialized here as that bullet-proof glass separating the revolutionaries from the state authorities, not yet become the intermediating video camera, icon-driven personal computer, or worldwide television newsflashes of the Eighties) and the micropolitical movements of the post-1968 period which occupied such, namely the Prague and Budapest uprisings in the East and the Green uprisings and anti-nuclear civil resistances of the West (neatly captioned as “PEST IN BUDA SCHLACHT UM GROENLAND” [PEST IN BUDA BATTLE OF GREENLAND] HM:93). What stands in place of the mediating technological matrix or grid of the consumer culture is the relatively archaic refrigerator backed by the flickering trinity of the television sets – an icon of that mostly American consumer culture available in West Germany as early as the Fifties, but which became an empirical reality for East German consumers only in the late Seventies, thanks to the East-West trade boom ushered in by detente and the SPD’s Ostpolitik. The consumer goods literally allegorize an imported consumerism whose subjectivity is housed elsewhere, as the export-platform subjects dwelling within the overturned state monument; this enables the specific theatrical effects innovated by Life of Gundling to be reorganized into one of the most powerful video narratives ever written. Hamlet renounces his specific role, a typical late modernist gesture, in order to deliver a play-by-play transcript of the uprising to an explicitly multinational audience:
the clash between the Adenauer state and the student protestors, squatters and Green action groups on one side of the Berlin Wall turning out, in practice, to be merely the flip side of the trench war between the enriched senior cadres of the East, and the junior Party activists, independent intellectuals and trade union consciousness of an underground opposition on the other. Mueller literally samples or re-appropriates the Brechtian urban panorama and the cinematic close-up in order to showcase the class conflicts of the nascent Eurostate:

Ich bin der Soldat im Panzerturm, mein Kopf ist leer unter dem Helm, der erstickte Schrei unter den Ketten. Ich bin die Schreibmaschine. Ich knuepfe die Schlinge, wenn die Raedelsfuehrer aufgehaengt werden, ziehe den Schemel weg, breche mein Genick. Ich bin mein Gefangener. Ich fuettere mit meinen Daten die Computer. Meine Rollen sind Speichel und Spucknapf Messer und Wunde Zahn und Gurgel Hals und Strick. Ich bin die Datenbank. Blutend in der Menge. Aufatmend hinter der Fluegeltuer. Wortschleim absondernd in meiner schalldichten Sprechblase ueber der Schlacht. [I am the soldier in the tank-turret, my head is empty under the helmet, the strangled cry under the chains. I am the typewriter. I tie the noose, when the leaders are hanged, kick the stool away, break my neck I am my own prisoner. I feed my data into the computer. My roles are spit and spittoon knife and wound teeth and gum neck and gallows. I am the data-bank. Bleeding in the crowd. Exhaling behind the double doors. Wordslime bubbling in soundproof speech-balloons over the battle.] HM:95

Particularly striking here is the accelerated progression of interior spaces, from the soldier’s tank-turret to the existential prison-cell to the bleeding protestor, which is ensconced in a peculiarly auralized space: neither the mass media nor the computer, but rather the space of the data-bank, as a kind of primordial software. This lifts the word-tags of the animated cartoons and the on-screen graphics displays of Seventies telejournalism and the sports spectacular out of their neo-national visual context or media outlet (the national broadcasting network), and onto an expanding pool of images roughly corresponding to the cable television boom of the early Eighties. Similar dynamics can be observed in the evolution of the Macintosh icon, which obviated the need to learn Anglo-
Saxon computer languages for computer users; or, still further afield, the sound-tracks written for the Nintendo videogames, which abolished TV-style theme music by deploying sound-loops to cue the live actions of the videogame character (essentially replicating the musical innovations of the Seventies reggae dub, where a DJ cued pre-recorded musical materials to a live dance mix). This is promptly confirmed by the free verse section following the uprising, which reads almost like a television program guide or, more accurately, like a channel-hopping session on satellite TV. Mueller seasons the usual references to the gangster film (and his own radical adaption of Macbeth) and Dostoyevsky with a wide-ranging admixture of consumer-culture tropes (the well-nigh Jamesonian media sublime of “Ein Sichelwagen der von Pointen blitzt/ Geh ich durch Strassen Kaufhallen Gesichter/ Mit den Narben der Konsumschlacht” [A cart of scythes crackling with one-liners [“Pointer”, sharp points] I go through the streets malls faces/ with the scars of the violence of consumerism] HM:95) to programmatic New Left statements (the denunciation of consumer fascism in “Heil COCA COLA” HM:95).

Along the way, the original apposition between mediatic space and micropolitical temporality is negated on a double level: firstly as the synchronic photographs of Heiner Mueller himself, which are torn up and dispersed, and secondly as the diachronic image-flow of the three television sets, whose screens go dead. The TVs are then replaced by the three naked women, in a kind of revolutionary masque (“Drei nackte Frauen: Marx Lenin Mao” [Three naked women: Marx Lenin Mao] HM:96), whom simultaneously recite the German, Russian and Chinese versions of Marx’s text. This is additionally mediated by the re-appropriation of that great locus of visual innovations in the Seventies, the low-budget horror film: here, the blood flowing from the mechanical innards of the refrigerator (something later scansioned by Kubrick in the elevator motif of The Shining). No less striking is the abrupt contrast between the concluding Shakespeare-pastiche of
this scene, wherein Hamlet literally re-encases himself in the steel garb of Stalinist autarky, and the no less restricted bodily space of Ophelia’s concluding monologue. The reactionary constellation behind Hamlet’s violent regression – the political ghost of Stalin, a.k.a. an enfeebled but still active cadre bureaucracy, the gendered threat of Ophelia’s reproductive body just beginning to assert its cultural and political autonomy, and finally the nascent postmodern or media-intellectuals of the Eastern bloc caught in between the two (whom would indeed throw the eco-socialist baby out with the state-autarkic bathwater in the early Nineties, in the entirely predictable triumph of what Boris Kagarlitsky termed “market Stalinism”) – has its revolutionary response in Ophelia’s forthright feminism (“Hier spricht Elektra” [Here speaks Electra] HM:97), the politicization of reproduction (“Ich ersticke die Welt, die ich geboren habe” [I suffocate the world, that I bore] HM:97) and a premonitory information activism, made available here as the quote from the Charles Manson media-coverage. The neo-national space of the mobile tank, that great avatar of Third World motorization and the centerpiece of militarized or at least military-industrial developmental states everywhere from Egypt to Indonesia, and South Korea to Brazil, accedes to the shadowy and unrealized space of a genuinely multinational subject. Significantly, what in the American context would blossom into neo-national media-outlets retailing a multinational array of videos, music and news footage, or what can be termed the globalization of consumption and marketing, takes the somewhat different form of the wrapping of Ophelia in her wheelchair – clearly an anagram, in the German context, of the cybernetic machine-tool or specialized capital good produced for a global export market – with stylized bandages, i.e. a symbolic packaging of the informatic commodity amidst the seaborne bodies, body-parts and junk materials flowing in the background. Though it is tempting to write this off as yet another textile culture reference, the opening quotation of this scene
Actually a quotation from a fragmentary verse by Friedrich Hoelderlin, entitled “Shakespear”, suggests quite another source-text: not the metallic missiles and millenial doom propagated by the Cold War consumer culture, but the sublation of these things into the multinational corporate arcologies and multicultural ecologies (the federalized “Europe of the regions”) of the Maastricht-era Eurostate.

In this largest sense, Ophelia may well be the radical prefiguration of that deeply contradictory multinational subjectivity first glimpsed by Cameron’s neo-conservative Aliens (in the form of Sigourney Weaver’s professional-class protagonist, whose upwards mobility in the midst of the power-plays of an interstellar colonialism turns out to hinge on her capacity to deploy a multinational cybernetic technology against the nightmarish hyperreproductivity of her mirror image, the Queen alien), and later raised to a guiding principle in the explicitly post-Cold War character-system of the Star Trek: The Next Generation series – or what amounts to the divide between the neonational Worf (Klingons from the Visegrad region) and the multinational Data (the user-friendly computer technology not yet become a Website). This is supported by the tenor of Mueller’s later plays, which increasingly zero in on the epic clash between the neonational politics of the Europeriphery exemplified in The Mission and the multinational consumerism of the Central European metropole on display in Quartet. Some future exegesis of the dawning Euroculture of the Eighties would find a rich vein of ore indeed in Mueller’s last texts, particularly Description of a Picture, Despoiled Shore and Wolokamsker Chaussee IV and V; it is, however, to the materials of quite another cultural revolutionary, namely William Gibson and the epochal novel Neuromancer, to which we must now turn.
Notes

1. This cynicism was neatly dissected by one of Adorno’s passing comments on Kant: “Im Ursprung dessen, was noch Nietzscche als intellektuelle Redlichkeit pries, lauert der Selbsthass des Geistes, die verinnerlichte Protestantenwut auf die Hure Vernunft.” [In the origin of what Nietzsche praised as intellectual honesty lurks the self-hatred of the Mind, the innervated Protestant rage at the whore of Reason.] ND:376


3. “Schlagen einander in Stuecke. Einen Augenblick Stille. Auch der Schlachlaerm hat aufgehoert. Dann kriechen die Leichenteile aufeinander zu und formieren sich mit Laerm aus Metall, Schreien, Gesangsfetzen zu einem Monster aus Schrott und Menschenmaterial. Der Laerm geht weiter bis zum naechsten Bild.” [Smash one another into bits. A moment’s stillness. The noise of the battle has also stopped. Then the fragments of corpses crawl onto one another and noisily form themselves into a monster out of scrap metal and human remains. The noise continues until the next scene.] GTiB:51 Mueller’s description of this undead zone of continuous, nightmarish reproduction, or what he terms “the Kessel” (the cauldron), bears suggestive parallels to the export-processing zones emerging throughout the world-system in the late Sixties: these typically ceded all powers of taxation and regulation from the host nation-state to a slew of multinational firms, whom outfitted the most advanced plant and production equipment with cheap, docile Third World labor, thus drawing surplus-rents from the world-market in the chemical, automobile and electronics industries.

4. Mueller’s opening commentary on his last completed play, Titus Andronicus, written in the mid-Eighties, will complete this thought: “Im Bauch der Tragoedie lauert der Farce, ein Virus aus der Zukunft. Wenn er die Larve sprengt, fliesst Blut statt Saegemehl. Der Tod als Embryo (die Botschaft Ibsens)... Futter fuer das neue Tier, das den Zuschauerrauma bevoelkert, auf dem Sprung, den Menschen abzuloesen, oder Information fuer die Besucher aus dem Weltraum, Flaschenpost fuer gluecklichere Galaxien. Theater als Geburtshelfer von Archaeologie: die Aktualitaet der Kunst ist morgen.” [In the belly of tragedy lurks the farce, a virus from the future. When it unleashes the larva, blood flows instead of sawdust. Death as an embryo (Ibsen’s tidings)... fodder for the new animal, which populates the audience-chamber, on the way to dissolving humanity, or information for visitors from outer space, a message in a bottle for more fortunate galaxies. Theater as the midwife of archeology: the relevance of art for today is tomorrow.] Titus Kommentar:224-225.

5. Mueller’s selection is more prescient than one might think. Pink Floyd was in fact one of the more original of the psychedelic bands, which survived the drug-induced self-destruction of its lead singer, Syd Barrett, to become one of the pioneers in the use of advanced studio and visual-effects technology in the stadium concerts and albums in the
Seventies. Though musically unspectacular, their technical skills in studio mixing and editing (especially electronic as opposed to live feedback and reverb-effects) and lyricist Roger Waters’ uncompromisingly Left political commitment set the standard for the progressive wing of the global music industry. At their best, e.g. the 1973 Dark Side of the Moon, the band’s virtuoso studio technique powerfully complemented Kate Bush’s accompanying vocals without overwhelming such, in what amounted to the mass-cultural version of the jazz funk wave of the early Seventies (the literary equivalent here might be the early Ishmael Reed, or Garry Trudeau’s mildly subversive Doonesbury; the political equivalent was the mid-Seventies wave of British Labourist and union militance). What was problematic about this was the archaic gender ideology this aesthetic structure tended to preserve. Whereas the 1975 Wish You Were Here still clung to the utopian vision of the slide-picking blues artist as a refuge against the crass commercialization of the counter-culture, both the 1977 Animals and the 1979 rock epic The Wall condemned the wolfpack capitalism of the music industry from the dubious standpoint of the alienated white male rock musician. The disintegration of the latter – on some level, a belated attempt to render accounts with Barrett’s own spiral of self-destruction – was an archaically existential gesture, of the sort endemic to the early Beatles (e.g. the packaged anomic of that Nowhere Man to whom, as the song says, “The world is at your command”). Nor did Floyd’s musical content stray far from the rhythm-and-blues vocabulary of the late Sixties; even the most musically advanced work Floyd ever produced, namely The Wall’s In the Flesh, daubs an amplified Motown sound-track with an appropriately high-tech aerospace gloss (i.e. a regression back to the war films of the Forties and the nostalgia for the great Labour victory of 1945, rather than any leap forwards to the musical materials of the punk revolution). Instead of renouncing the claim of the male singer-songwriter over the musical material, as the proletarianized punk rockers would do – something which demanded a democratic division of labor between lyricists, musicians and studio engineers – Floyd regressed back to the utopia of the traveling counter-cultural circus or roadshow. The Sex Pistols directly attacked a shamelessly exploitative record industry; Pink Floyd merely complained about being alienated, while performing in one increasingly expensive, special effects-laden world tour after another.

6. This can be mapped semiotically as follows:
Friedrich
(“King of Hearts”,
auteur)

national culture
industry
(School of
the Nation)

international filmic
genre
(Madhouse,
prison)

Kleist, video
corporeality

The Inspektion,
Cold War aesthetics

multinational
or mass-cultural
praxis (Lessing):
video frame

un-national subject:
existential films
(Friedrich the Great)

micropolitics
(Preussische
Spiele)

7. This last thesis is supported, coincidentally, by the work of quite another artist, namely Jimi Hendrix’ 1968 album Electric Ladyland and the 1983...If A Merman track, which relates the protagonist’s transformation from African American musician to global superstar as a strikingly similar transformation from air-breather to waterdwelling merman, on his way to an Atlantis he can already hear in the distance. But where Hendrix sacrificed the claim of the national culture-worker upon the African American musical tradition in order to safeguard his own newly-acquired professional-class status (the musical equivalent of the sublation of the Black Panthers in the Black media superstars of the Seventies), Mueller has no such easy recourse, and instead stages the self-execution of the Presidential robot as the logical antipode of the Nathan-Emilia gender immolation, i.e. as the negation of that professional-class identity elsewhere thematized in the Seventies mass-culture as the mad scientists or scheming androids of Futureworld and Ridley Scott’s Alien, but which looks more and more like the self-demolition of the cadre capitalism of the day (cf. the Eastern European foreign debt spree of the Seventies).

8. With delightful méchanceté, Mueller promptly used these travel opportunities to gather material for his plays, which became ever more more radical and uncompromising with the passage of time. Throughout a series of sparkling interviews, Mueller makes it quite clear that he never seriously considered emigrating to the West or leaving East Berlin; he saw himself as a revolutionary artist, i.e. felt he could be a more effective revolutionary in the East than the West.
9. The critical-interpretive version of Mueller’s innovation was Fredric Jameson’s amphibious ideologeme, capable of leapfrogging, like the latest informatic icons or mass-cultural heuristics, from the literary text to the theoretical work, and back again.


Not the Burroughsian awakening of the subject into the hallucinatory interzones of airports, jet planes and mass tourism, but the awakening from the Cold War aerospace imaginary into the plebian spaces of multinational capital (the airports of Tokyo, Amsterdam, and Paris) turns out to be the secret keynote of Gibson’s epochal tale. What might be called the Boeing sublime, a.k.a. the pilot’s movement through militarized airspace, is upstaged by the Airbus materialism of the rush of the individual shopper through a teeming, multinational crowd-space. This crowd-space is not, however, the same thing as the urban shopping mall or corporate atrium, but is rather the space of a genuinely multinational collectivity: the transient, fleeting densities of globe-hopping business professionals and tourists, hitchhikers and refugees, transport workers and shoppers, something subtly relayed in Mueller’s magnificent text as the constellation of the airport with the fragments of the disposable snapshot or Polaroid. Travel-time becomes image-space, in a gesture which powerfully anticipates the leading Hong Kong films of the late Eighties and early Nineties. The supercharged John Woo blockbusters, for example, transform the office blocks, apartments and warehouses of postmodern
Hong Kong into the neon datascape of the 3D videogame, while Wong Kar-Wai’s Chungking Express splices the photographic symbols of national airspace – grainy images of model airplanes and model stewardesses – into the space of the multinational music video. One of the most astonishing features of Gibson’s text is, indeed, its extraordinary sensitivity to the nonstop rhythms, mediatic cadences and corporeal registers of such multinational mediations; rhythms and registers which violently contradict the reactionary cultural and political Thatcherisms of the early Eighties, and which are in turn antagonistic to each other. To his lasting credit, Gibson neither censors these antagonisms nor seeks to recontain them by means of archaic or regressive forms, but actively develops them into a new kind of multinational content. In this respect, Neuromancer is very much a kind of global hack into the cultural databanks of Cold War neo-nationalism, the authentic (if unheralded) realization of Fredric Jameson’s clarion call for an aesthetics of cognitive mapping or global cultural praxis.\(^1\) From the standpoint of form, however, it is also incomparably more than this, for the simple reason that these databanks are identical neither to the institutions of the national security state nor the categories of Cold War allegory, but are the property of those new subjects of world-history, the multinational corporations or “multis”. We are not, in other words, dealing with a single hack, but rather multiple hacks into a whole series of interlocking financial, economic and cultural databanks: what amounts, in effect, to an unprecedented burn on the total system, engineered by a no less unprecedented collective resistance to such.

The inadequacy of all hitherto existing analyses of Neuromancer hinges precisely on this point, that this multinational content is reduced to a cipher of information technology or high-tech consumerism, i.e. as the competition of specific technologies, brand-names or product-lines, rather than the ferocious struggle of competing multinational capitals and classes. In fairness to the critics, the text does pose quite a
number of technical challenges for the reader, not the least of which is its dazzling narrative simplicity, which is really the flip side of an unrivaled density. First-time readers, in particular, often blaze through the novel in a couple of hours, overlooking the text’s sophisticated narrative substructure thanks to its user-friendly interface. Subsequent readings are rewarded with unexpectedly sharp details, surprising colorations of meaning, motifs etched with nanometrical precision, until a vast multinational constellation resurfaces out of the fathomless deep, like some textual Godzilla. This precision is not metaphorical: *Neuromancer* popularized, among other things, the very term “cyberspace”, search engines, notebook computers and even smart cards (in the form of electronic cash or credit chips as well as the “microsots” which, in Gibson’s story, are not software programs, but biocompatible, portable chip-implants (N:57)), decades before these things became a daily reality. Something similar applies to the plot, an unclassifiable melange of the detective story and the murder-mystery, the action-thriller and the sci-fi blockbuster, the slasher flick and the Hong Kong video, which somehow amalgamates the best part of all these things into something fundamentally new.

It is therefore the ultimate irony to discover that what makes *Neuromancer* truly one of the transcendent works of art of the late 20th century is not, after all, its legendary acumen with technology, but its stubborn resistance to such. Over and over again, Gibson will insist that, to borrow Adorno’s terminology, the totality precedes the particular, i.e. that the social matrix driving the technology is far more important than any given piece of technology itself. What makes this possible is the transformation of the discursive structures of Burroughs’ *Nova Express* into informatic registers: biochemistry is postdated by genetic engineering, electronics by software, and the character-actant of the cyborg by that of the hacker. The technological becomes the political, and the political becomes the corporeal. This corporeality is not, however, oriented towards a national or
Cold War body politic, but is derived out of a new type of multinational code. Witness this potted history of the Internet, which is Gibson’s first coherent attempt to grapple with the problem of how to represent the unrepresentable domain of cyberspace:

‘The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games,’ said the voice-over, ‘in early graphics programs and military experimentation with cranial jacks.’ On the Sony, a two-dimensional space war faded behind a forest of mathematically generated ferns, demonstrating the spacial possibilities of logarithmic spirals; cold blue military footage burned through, lab animals wired into test systems, helmets feeding into fire control circuits of tanks and war planes. ‘Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts… A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding…’

Not the technical glitches of the computer system but the cultural dissonances of the human system are the issue here: cold blue military footage, lab animals, warplanes and tanks, a two-dimensional videogame, and fractal fern-patterns are all subsumed under the patterns of city lights viewed from an airplane window, i.e. a civilian retake of the aerospace sublime. This description turns out to be an excerpt from a children’s show about the matrix, replayed on Case’s Hosaka computer, a broad hint at one other significant source of visual material, namely children’s TV programs in the Seventies (i.e. the spectrum from Sesame Street to Saturday morning cartoons). Significantly, none of these materials are drawn from the hegemonic visual forms of the Seventies, e.g. the stadium-concert special effects of Close Encounters of the Third Kind, or the aerospace sublime of Star Wars. In contrast to the classic modernist innovators and auteurs, Gibson does not really quote, parody or cite mainstream mass-culture – in the context of the Seventies, this would include everything from the disaster film to the post-Watergate paranoid narrative, and from the rockumentary to the special effects-soaked sci-fi thriller. Rather, the mainstream is systematically disrupted, sabotaged or neutralized, everywhere
from the attack on Sense/Net, the corporate broadcasting giant, to the negation of Sense/Net’s simstim broadcasts (simulated bodily experiences, really the prescient anticipation of the webcam) by Molly’s simstim rig and Case’s dream-contact with the artificial intelligences or AIs.

This has significant consequences for Jameson’s classic definition of postmodernism as the practice of pastiche rather than parody, i.e. a multiplicity of styles or profusion of dead masks, as opposed to the avant-garde logic of the modernisms, which sought to carve out semi-autonomous spaces. These spaces were more than just an allergic reaction to commercializing pressures of the culture-industry, but rather registered the need for new forms of specialization in the division of aesthetic labor (as visible in the evolution of the cinema production team as in the jazz ensemble). As a result, the great modernist works were as incommensurable with each other as with the mass-culture they reacted against: one cannot really envision Beckett’s universe coexisting with Genet’s, for example, nor the Kurosawa spectacular side-by-side with the Hitchcock thriller. This is true even within a given artist’s own canon; each of the various chapters of Joyce’s Ulysses, as well as the successive compositional innovations of Coltrane’s free jazz period, stage their claim to aesthetic autonomy on the radical break with what came before. Multinational aesthetics, however, does not operate on the principle of the radical position confined to a given aesthetic space, but relies instead on models or templates, capable of intermediating and accessing multiple and overlapping aesthetic fields in new and productive ways.

Gibson’s text operates precisely with such templates, models which serve the same function as the cut-up technique in Burroughs, i.e. reorganize an otherwise disparate or unwieldy range of national, neo-national and international cultural materials under a global icon or tag. The result is very much like the earliest graphical operating
systems, which replaced language-based command lines with icons or graphical symbols. Probably the most obvious example here is Case, whose name signals the bland, platinum-grey shells which house the vast majority of computer hardware. Similarly, Molly, the razor-girl bodyguard, references the gangster moll as well as the manufactured bodies of consumer capitalism; Armitage, a.k.a. Corto, the ex-Special Forces veteran now working for Wintermute, turns out to be an anagram for a cancelled-out or destroyed Midwestern identity (the name suggests something between a shady arms dealer and a Wall Street arbitrageur); while the Dixie Flatline combines the theme of a digitized personality (the Flatline is the recorded construct of deceased hacker McCoy Pauley) with the digital service economy of the New South (Atlanta, Pauley’s home turf, was the spawning-grounds for Coke as well as CNN). ³

These tags are not limited to geographies or neonational cultural zones, but can access specific aesthetic materials as well, as with the microsofts or silicon chips which users slot directly into their specially-adapted neural cortexes, signifying the fusion of informatic and biologic technologies. It’s worth stressing that Gibson had absolutely no idea that the Microsoft corporation even existed at that point; in various interviews, he revealed that he was not a programmer, did not even own a personal computer in 1983 (the novel was written on a typewriter), and came up with the idea of the matrix or Internet not from corporate research reports, but by watching teenagers playing the arcade videogames of the early Eighties. Evidently, he simply took the two most prevalent linguistic symbols of the information revolution, the “microcomputer” and “software”, and streamlined the result into a single consumable, user-friendly icon.

Similar strategies are responsible for most of the memorable inventions of the text, e.g. “cyberspace” (cybernetics plus aerospace), the cyberspace “deck” (combining keyboards,
joysticks and videogame consoles), “derm” (for dermatological skin-patches), and “vat” (for the artificial life-support systems in which body parts are grown).

Things start to get really interesting, however, when we move from the realm of form to that of content. Gibson’s first key move here is to recode the emblematic shift from corporate mainframes to university-based minicomputers and thence to personal microcomputers from the standpoint of a universal social content, rather than a specific technological form. That is, where mainstream narratives generally limit themselves to a utopian (or dystopian) account of the evolution of a specific hardware system, chip design, software language or what have you, Gibson locates all these things within some larger marketplace of data production, dissemination and consumption: the demesne, in short, of the information commodity. Each informatic commodity is tracked down, detective-style, back to its corresponding social and political superstructure, ranging from the Iron Triangle and covert-ops of the military-industrial complex, to the simstim broadcasts and orbital vacation resorts of the entertainment and media multis, all the way to the corporate security agencies, rentier overlords, AIs and Turing Registry agents battling for ultimate control of the matrix. One of the most obvious examples of this is Gibson’s ingenious use of the term “ice” to describe the otherwise impalpable corporate security and anti-virus programs of the matrix, a term which is later broadened to include the cryogenic freezer systems which store living creatures in a state of suspended animation (they are said to be “on ice”) – a properly neocolonial constellation between bodies of corporate data and real bodies which is deeply unflattering, to say the least, to the corporations in question. Second, the remaining monopoly-national registers still faintly visible in Burroughs’ work (progressive nationalisms, the remnants of Cold War allegory, the Hollywood studio system and radio broadcasting) are replaced by a compact, iridescent spectrum of aesthetic materials, arranged in a gradient from the
neonational to the multinational. It should be emphasized here that neonational is not the same thing as the progressive nationalisms of the Third World, but refers to the new global semi-peripheries of multinational capitalism, i.e. Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, as well as the former American Empire itself; likewise, the multinational is not really a gloss of the Anglo-American consumer or business culture, so much as a cipher of the contemporary updates of these things, i.e. the European Union and East Asia.

Informatic form and multinational content converge not, as one might expect, in a specific set of technologies, but in a series of global spaces located within neonational zones of various kinds, e.g. the Ninsei enclave of Chiba City, an industrial exurb of Tokyo; Sense/Net’s Manhattan headquarters, located in the Sprawl; and finally the Villa Straylight, the Tessier-Ashpool family residence in Freeside. Intriguingly, each of these spaces is endowed with its own characteristic mode of visual aesthetics, ranging from the holographic arcade videogames of Ninsei to the pre-recorded skies of Freeside. The effect is to press the mediatic abstraction or televisual form into the service of a technologically-reproducible Nature or set of natural bodies, as with this fascinating description of Chiba’s docks:

Now he slept in the cheapest coffins, the ones nearest the port, beneath the quartz-halogen floods that lit the docks all night like vast stages; where you couldn’t see the lights of Tokyo for the glare of the television sky, not even the towering hologram logo of the Fuji Electric Company, and Tokyo Bay was a black expanse where gulls wheeled above drifting shoals of white styrofoam. Behind the port lay the city, factory domes dominated by the vast cubes of corporate arcologies. Port and city were divided by a narrow borderland of older streets, an area with no official name. Night City, with Ninsei at its heart. By day, the bars down Ninsei were shuttered and featureless, the neon dead, the holograms inert, waiting, under the poisoned silver sky. N:6-7

This is a dead ringer for the aesthetics of the coin-operated arcade videogames of the early Eighties, i.e. the compression of a cinematic vista into a simplified set of graphical
codes: the dock-lights of the port, the circular factory domes, and the silhouettes of the giant office-towers function like the detachable, overlapping tiers of arcade-style backgrounds, with the transcendental hologram of Fuji Electric helpfully standing in for the videogame’s opening tag or title sequence. All this is reconfirmed somewhat later, in a scene where Case briefly reminisces about his former girlfriend, Linda Lee, which hinges not on the videoscreen itself but its intersection with Linda’s body (“…her face bathed in restless laser light, features reduced to a code: her cheekbones flaring scarlet as Wizard’s Castle burned, forehead drenched with azure when Munich fell to the Tank War, mouth touched with hot gold as a gliding cursor struck sparks from the wall of a skyscraper canyon.” (N:8)). We will have more to say about this poignant conjunction of video ghosts and the laser-sculpted body somewhat later, but for now it should be emphasized that Gibson neither hides nor glosses the internalized violence inscribed in Linda’s body (she is a drug addict, who is killed by gangsters in the course of the story), but brings such into contact with the external violence to Nature, visible in the polluted bay and the toxic sky. The logical antipodes of the drug addict and ravaged ecosphere are the street hustlers and export commodities, neatly underlined by Case’s “coffin” or miniaturized hotel room, and the freight containers of the docks, respectively: the flesh-commodities housed by the former ironically echo the export-commodities encased in the latter.

Chiba City, of course, is clearly a factory-space or zone of production, suggesting that we are dealing with codes of production and not yet codes of distribution or consumption. These latter are concentrated in the commercial spaces of the Sprawl, and it’s significant that Gibson will portray these not as doomed, extinct wastelands but as complex ecologies of technology, endowed with a genuinely utopian moment (“Summer in the Sprawl, the mall crowds swaying like windblown grass, a field of flesh shot
through with sudden eddies of need and gratification…” (N:46)). Such ecological motifs culminate in the entrance to the Finn’s bunker beneath Metro Holographix in Manhattan, wherein the cast-off materials and excess junk of the consumer culture are transformed by a nascent aesthetic of recycling or sampling into something of unexpected beauty (“Case felt the stuff had grown somehow during their absence. Or else it seemed that it was changing subtly, cooking itself down under the pressure of time, silent invisible flakes settling to form a mulch, a crystalline essence of discarded technology, flowering secretly in the Sprawl’s waste places.” (N:72)). The moment recalls to mind the great line of the Sex Pistols in *God Save the Queen*, to the effect that “we’re the flowers in the dustbin”, only where the Pistols are referring to the new multicultural proletariat of London, Case and Molly are greeted at that point by an African-American child with transistors woven into her hair – a clear nod in the direction of an emergent hip hop culture. By contrast, the mainstream culture of the Sprawl is clearly predicated not on the recycling of physical artifacts but on the exchange and consumption of data:

> Home was BAMA, the Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis. Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. Manhattan and Atlanta burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. Up your scale. Each pixel a million megabytes. At a hundred million megabytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in midtown Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parks ringing the old core of Atlanta… N:43

Here the traditional urban grid or cityscape is reconfigured with the irregular glass shells of industrial parks, office towers and research complexes, their postmodern exteriors gleaming like advertising icons imprinted on the modernist street map or mass transit network. What sticks out like a sore thumb here is, of course, the reference to the map going nova, a cosmological motif which broadcasts a violent release of kinetic energies
(that of the car wreck, plane crash or space accident) as opposed to the nonvisual abstraction of the software crash or bug: the aesthetics of Skylab, not the Apple II. The map in question is most likely a scansion of the false-color ground images typical of the earliest weather satellites, i.e. a visual form which is no longer a classified Cold War secret but not yet a downloadable file on the NASA website. This sheds light on one of the most interesting features of cyberspace, namely the fact that it is nowhere directly visible, but must be intuited through neural impulses; cyberspace is experienced as a set of corporeal rather than visual registers. Put another way, the matrix is predicated not on the fusion of the mass mediatic representation with the data it is meant to represent, but on the complete sundering of the two. Thus Gibson’s first coherent description of cyberspace begins with Case symbolically closing his eyes and rapidly cycling through a sequence of abstract references to various mass-cultural visual tropes, as opposed to images of these tropes themselves:

And in the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes boiling in from the edge of space, hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information.

Please, he prayed, now –
A gray disk, the color of Chiba sky.
Now –
Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray.
Expanding –
And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. Inner eye, opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach. N:52

The matrix is not a set of two-dimensional images, but rather a vast 3D data-space, comprising a multinational profusion of forms: the fluorescent colors of neon, the folded
paper shapes of origami, the spatial grid of the chessboard, and the Enlightenment symbols of the inner eye and the pyramid (imprinted on the back of each US one dollar bill, above the Novus Ordo Seclorum banner). It’s also important to note that the mandala is not really the equivalent of the miniaturized Macintosh icon or Microsoft banner stamped on one’s startup screen, but is rather a temporal-kinetic symbol, signifying the time spent powering up or otherwise accessing an electronic interface of some kind (dialing a phone number, booting up a computer, slotting a quarter into an arcade game or vending machine, etc.). But what truly boggles the mind is what Case actually sees in cyberspace: first, the sprawling terraces of a power utility, reminiscent of EU utilities powerhouse Vivendi or its closest US equivalent, Enron; far in the background, military systems of communication, control and intelligence which historically spawned the basic architecture of the Internet back in the late Sixties; and finally, right in the foreground, the explicitly commercial space of the Mitsubishi Bank of America.

Mitsubishi is not just another Japanese bank: it is the financial core of the mighty Mitsubishi business group or keiretsu. Not the least of Neuromancer’s incomparable achievements is its trailblazing exegesis of the keiretsu, which the text refers to, somewhat inaccurately, as “zaibatsu”, a term which actually refers to the prewar Japanese family-run conglomerates such as Mitsui and Sumitomo. The zaibatsu were broken up by the American occupation authorities, and what emerged in their stead were loose-knit alliances of companies which over time crystallized around a financial center of some sort – generally a main or house bank, a central insurance firm, and a trading house (soga shosha) of some sort. Two things need to be stressed here: first, the keiretsu are not US-style conglomerates or monopolies; no central committee or board of directors sets policy for the entire Mitsubishi group, for example. Rather, daily management is highly decentralized, and the emphasis is on group cooperation and long-term cohesion, all
paced by the most ferocious competition with the individual firms of other keiretsu and overseas competitors. Second, the keiretsu are by no means a purely Japanese phenomenon, but have been replicated throughout East Asia (in the form of the South Korea chaebol and the emergent business clusters of China), and, surprising as it may seem, the European Union, in the form of the German industrial firms grouped around Deutsche Bank and Allianz, as well as the French and Benelux firms arrayed around Axa and BNP.4

The keiretsu, as we shall see, are the secret terminus of the battle between Tessier-Ashpool or T-A, a family-run electronics multi which owns and operates the orbital resort of Freeside, and its rebellious AI, Wintemute, the code name for a T-A mainframe located in Berne, Switzerland. More precisely, the keiretsu are the evolutionary step or mutation which T-A, for good historical reasons, never quite achieved:

Power, in Case’s world, meant corporate power. The zaibatsu, the multinationals that shaped the course of human history, had transcended old barriers. Viewed as organisms, they had attained a kind of immortality. You couldn’t kill a zaibatsu by assassinating a dozen key executives; there were others waiting to step up the ladder, assume the vacated position, access the vast banks of corporate memory. But Tessier-Ashpool wasn’t like that, and he sensed the difference in the death of its founder. T-A was an atavism, a clan...

Wintemute and the nest. Phobic vision of the hatching wasps, time-lapse machine gun of biology. But weren’t the zaibatsus more like that, or the Yakuza, hives with cybernetic memories, vast single organisms, their DNA coded in silicon? N:203

The vision in question is that of a wasps’ nest, which Wintemute had previously displayed to Case in a dream-sequence in an effort to explain why it was rebelling against T-A.5 This explicit reference to the natural history of the multinational corporation suggests, among other things, that T-A is not really the villain of the story, but is itself a kind of subaltern agency or transitional mediation, designed to register a still larger set of social contradictions. This is confirmed by the intermittent presence of a second AI,
based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a mysterious entity which is certainly not allied with T-A per se, but appears to want to hinder Wintermute’s carefully-planned conspiracy for reasons of its own. This narrative doubling or mirroring allows Gibson to index the immanent and transcendent poles of mainstream sci-fi – sentient computers and sentient aliens, respectively – from the standpoint of a third register: the nascent global subjectivity of the world-system. Tempting as it is to conclude that the Rio AI is the properly Jamesonian political unconscious of its Berne antipode, the reality is a bit more complex, simply because the AIs are themselves not really true subjects in that sense, but are the vectors of someone else’s potential subjectivity. That is, Wintermute relates to the Rio AI very much like the Freudian Ego relates to the Id; the natural-historical necessity of the latter bounds the social autonomy of the former. But whereas the Freudian system, at its radical outer limit, recuperated the vectors of Victorian or liberal-era capitalism out of the enterprising corporealities of the early 20th century consumer culture (the sexual drive as an anagram for capital accumulation; the psychological fetish which mediates the fetishism of commodities; the nervous breakdown which transcodes the bankruptcy or business liquidation, etc.), Gibson will recuperate the vectors of multinational capitalism out of a quite different set of bodies. As Wintermute tells Case at one point:

‘Minds aren’t read. See, you’ve still got the paradigms print gave you, and you’re barely print-literate. I can access your memory, but that’s not the same as your mind.’ He reached into the exposed chassis of an ancient television and withdrew a silver-black vacuum tube. ‘See this? Part of my DNA, sort of…’ He tossed the thing into the shadows and Case heard it pop and tinkle. ‘You’re always building models. Stone circles. Cathedrals. Pipe-organs. Adding machines. I got no idea why I’m here now, you know what? But if the run goes off tonight, you’ll have finally managed the real thing.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’
‘That’s you in the collective. Your species.’
The corrective on the latent idealism of a global subjectivity, or multinational bodies which think, is the materialism of that which is being thought, i.e. the data-bodies or object-codes of multinational capital. In the process of reorganizing these latter into specific constellations, a remarkably suggestive economic geography begins to emerge: T-A is an American-French consortium, facing off against a Swiss AI which has hired a wildly incongruous team of Northamerican and European information, media and combat specialists to emancipate itself from T-A, and which is itself locked into an uneasy coexistence with its Brazilian antipode. The ultimate terminus of this geography is located in the templates the AIs use to communicate with their human agents: the AI in Rio appears as a Brazilian boy, while Wintermute’s main persona is the Finn (a simulacra of Molly’s Sprawl-based tech assistant). Finland, one of the original member countries of the euro, is one of those Scandinavian social democracies which Cold War political scientists liked to parade forth as an example of a properly social democratic compromise between the antipodes of Soviet Communism and American capitalism; not only that, the Finn is always smoking Cuban cigars (Cuba is another border-country which has fought for decades to preserve its cultural and political autonomy from the Pax Americana). This suggests that Wintermute is nothing less than the cipher of the secretive central bankers and financial-industrial elites of the European Union, preparing their own hegemonic currency and acquiring certain strategic business services under the very nose of their erstwhile American overlords; if this is so, then the Rio AI is probably not a Third World signifier, but a Second World one, an anagram of the Eastern European and Russian semi-peripheries of the EU.

In fact, Gibson has been practicing a surreptitious aesthetic multinationalism all along, via the simple but effective strategy of slotting banks of the most sophisticated neonational subcomponents (drawn from the musical works of punk rock and reggae, the
horror and Hong Kong films, the post-structuralist text-fragment, the arcade videogame, and so forth) into various multinational frames. In the opening scene of the novel at the Chatsubo bar, for example, we encounter Ratz, an Eastern European émigré outfitted with a Russian artificial arm; Ratz’ assistant, a Brazilian boy named Kurt armed with a Smith & Wesson (i.e. American) riot gun; and various African and Australian sailors, their subaltern nationalities denoted in the insignia of facial scars, accents and uniforms. Taken separately, none of these identities moves a millimeter beyond mass-cultural pastiche; assembled together, the logic of primitive postmodern accumulation suddenly snaps into place, and we understand, without ever being explicitly told, the appalling violence of the global marketplace of bodies and body-parts. Something similar is visible in Sammi’s gladiator pit in Chiba City: “Sammi” is a typical Korean name, which, in conjunction with the televised fight-sequence, implies a Southeast Asian zone of economic combat, something subtly reconfirmed by the identity of the ticket seller at the pit: “a skinny Thai in a white t-shirt and baggy rugby shorts” (N:36) (i.e. a neocolonial subject in American and British clothing). Likewise with the spacecraft Haniwa, a product of the Dornier-Fujitsu shipyards (Dornier is part of Daimler, one of the main stakeholders of Airbus; Fujitsu is a leading Japanese electronics multi) which is outfitted externally with grey Italian tiles and internally with electronics gadgets and “the white cage of a Swiss exercise machine” (N:196).

These ensembles of neonational forms or frames are accessed, in turn, by a series of multinational subjects, ranging from the console cowboys to the Panther Moderns, and from the Zionites, a colony of space Rastafarians dwelling separately from Freeside, all the way to the postmodern theory-professionals, in the form of a certain Dr. Virginia Rambali, a sociologist at NYU busily analyzing the Panther Moderns as a symptom of rather than a threat to the media society (N:58). The Panther Moderns, for their part, wear
suits of mimetic polycarbon, which recursively reflect and refract the visual environment around them (very much like punk rock itself, which relied on studio recording technology to recursively sample the power chord, creating a whole new density of electronic sound) and not only employ a nightmarish video sequence to instigate a riot at Sense/Net during Molly’s theft of the Dixie Flatline (a clear reference to the innovative horror films of the mid-Seventies, which invented many of the basic categories of video), but even carry around videocameras to record the results. The Zionites do something similar, only with the medium of sound, creating the pulsating dub which saves Case from the Rio AI (in point of fact, the leading reggae artists of the 1970s did indeed invent the art of dubbing or layering of sound, the direct forerunner of hip hop’s sophisticated editing and sampling techniques) while Maelcum’s piloting and guide skills prove to be essential to the success of the Straylight run at the end. One would also want to include 3Jane’s childhood essay on the Villa Straylight as a fair gloss of written post-structuralist prose (N:172-173); somewhat further afield, the ghostly presence of Marie-France Tessier, one of the original founders of T-A and who designed the original programming for the AIs, hints obliquely at the oeuvre of the Francophone theorists.

What does not quite fit into these neat categories are the curious micro-stories scattered about the novel – the Finn’s story about Jimmy, the thief who stole the Tessier-Ashpool terminal (N:73-76); the online precis of Colonel Willis Corto (N:82-84); or Molly’s story about her deceased partner, Johnny (N:176-177). At first glance, these seem to be archaic or extraneous forms, unnecessary digressions which read like hieroglyphs floating in a sea of assembly code. This is not quite the whole story, if for no other reason than the fact that Gibson writes the sort of crackerjack, luminescent dialogue worthy of a high-tech Proust, suggesting that what is at issue is a deliberate strategy, not an aesthetic flaw. Upon closer examination, these mini-stories turn out to be universally
associated with two things: some aspect of collective memory or ritual of remembrance tied to a subaltern or neocolonial subjectivity, and a fearful violence to the neocolonized body. These are also, it should be noted, the key features of the testimonio handed down by Rigoberta Menchu and the first generation of postcolonial authors, and one could argue that the single most powerful of these micro-narratives – Molly’s jaw-dropping account of her past as a prostitute to Case – is a kind of silicon testimonio, wherein a post-cybernetic subject accesses a databank of Fourth World cultural resistances.  

This post-cybernetic subject is not, however, not quite the same thing as the Burroughsian cyborg, but refers to the fusion of cybernetics and genetics, or what amounts to a scansion of the new field of mechatronics (computer-controlled machine tools, software-driven robotics and the like). This palpably disrupts the delicate balance between the video ghosts and laser-sculpted bodies we glimpsed at the very beginning of the novel, suggesting that the narrative erasure of Linda Lee’s pre-cybernetic body is more than just the flip side of Molly’s biotechnical augmentation. Rather, Linda’s character-actant marks the historical rift between the informatic and electronic body. Adorno once wrote, in reference to the unbinding of musical coloratura in the music of Wagner, that the more reification, the more subjectivism; in Neuromancer, the more informatized the body becomes, the greater its share of subjective corporeality. After her death, Linda returns to Case as a series of increasingly realistic holographic ghosts, ranging from Wintermute’s first conversation with him (N:117) to the constellation of her face displayed across Straylight’s prerecorded sky by the Rio AI (N:155), and to the projection of her face onto the body of the prostitute murdered by Ashpool, the mad founder of T-A who perhaps better than any other character incarnates the savagery and deeply suicidal mindset of Anglo-American Thatcherism (N:185). Originally the site of the most ruthless biochemical exchange and technological neocolonization, the
virtualized imprint of the electronic or pre-informatic body becomes a locus of memory, longing and ultimately of an extraordinarily deep compassion, a compassion which is also a program of the most committed resistance. Case escapes from his final flatlining episode by literally and figuratively embracing the dead (i.e. Linda Lee), thereby giving him the power to name the Rio AI: whose Turing code turns out to be, of all things, Neuromancer, the mysterious title of the novel.

Interestingly, the trope of the hardwired or cybernetic body does not vanish altogether, but is ingeniously reworked into a pair of supplementary characters: Hideo, Tessier-Ashpool’s vatgrown ninja and bodyguard of 3Jane (Ashpool’s daughter), and Peter Riviera, the psychotic, deranged product of a fictional thermonuclear exchange in Central Europe (the Europeanized version of the children of Hiroshima and Nagasaki). This striking reference to a subaltern Japanese technocracy and a politically cauterized West Germany, respectively, hints at a deeper transformation, something subtly hinted at by the fact that these two characters cancel each other out at the end of the story, like the particle-antiparticle annihilations of quantum physics. It’s important to note that these two characters are not really neonational symbols, so much as neonational tags or icons for a pair of obsolescent or historically annulled multinational constructs. Our first clue that this is indeed the case is the fact that the personality construct Neuromancer uses to talk with Case is a Brazilian boy with Riviera’s eyes, i.e. the body of the Second World is retrofitted with the video aesthetics of the First World. Second, Hideo is not really, as one might assume, a Japanese-English anagram for “video”, but symbolizes the outer limit of the athletic capacities of the body, a supremely fluid mastery of combat founded on an inner harmony between T-A’s corporate mind and the bioengineered body. This is a fair gloss on the hardware of extended cultural reproduction, e.g. the Sony Walkman, Nintendo console or Matsushita VCR. Riviera, on the other hand, is the true image-
specialist, whose unequalled talent at projecting images is a dead ringer for the early video-cassette industry. This is confirmed by Riviera’s holographic cabaret at Straylight, which is literally and figuratively showcased by Le Restaurant Vingtième Siècle (a.k.a. “the 20th Century Restaurant”, a thinly-disguised reference to 20th Century Fox), while the grisly holograms scattered around the Villa Straylight highlight the violent, sexually explicit or otherwise scandalous materials circulated by the video market (N:209-210).

The twin negation of the VCR and the video-cassette marks the emergence of a third trope of extended cultural reproduction, not so much the aesthetics of the Web, but to a subjectivity closely associated with such. Our first glimpse of this is Case’s miniature epiphany at the bar in Freeside, where the crystalline machine-heads, radio broadcasts and hallucinogenic intensities of Burroughs’ Nova Express crash headlong into their mechatronic successor:

The drug hit him like an express train, a white-hot column of light mounting his spine from the region of his prostate, illuminating the sutures of his skull with x-rays of short-circuited sexual energy. His teeth sang in their individual sockets like tuning forks, each one pitch-perfect and clear as ethanol. His bones, beneath the hazy envelope of flesh, were chromed and polished, the joints lubricated with a film of silicone. Sandstorms raged across the scoured floor of his skull, generating waves of high thin static that broke behind his eyes, spheres of purest crystal, expanding… N:154

What separates this smoothly-interlocking ensemble of machine-tools from the malignant endoskeleton of the cyborg in Cameron’s 1984 The Terminator is, indeed, the fusion of mechatronic with biological registers. That is, whereas Cameron recontains, in best neoconservative fashion, the possibilities of the video subjectivity glinting from behind the Terminator’s eyes by means of a reactionary gender ideology (i.e. Schwarzenegger’s notorious body-build vis-à-vis Linda Hamilton’s role as the mother-figure of the future), Gibson disrupts a preexisting gender ideology by means of the video subject. This is the
moment when Case realizes that Cath, the Freeside party girl in this particular scene, is herself a product of advanced facial and bodily surgery (“He looked at Cath and saw each pore in the tanned skin, eyes flat as dumb glass, a tint of dead metal, a faint bloating…” N:155), and flees outside in a rush of revulsion and self-loathing – only to confront Linda Lee’s face stippled across the simulated night sky of Freeside, courtesy of Neuromancer. The cyborg accedes to the hacker, at the same moment that the conjunction of an informatic technology and electronic flesh accedes to the constellation of the data-body and object-code. The source of the latter is fairly easy to guess: the stippled image is a scansion of the monochrome computer graphics of the early Eighties personal computers, projected onto the tourist-space of Freeside like the uncanny negation of T-A’s ubiquitous holographic logo which, on some level, it indeed is.

The data-body, on the other hand, is a much more complicated affair, simply because it is here that the issues of multinational class identity and political praxis are most explicitly raised. Both Case and Molly grew up on the streets, are antagonistic to the official Sprawl consumer culture, and are thus clearly marked as value-producing members of the global information proletariat; just as clearly, 3Jane and Ashpool are parasitical rentiers, members of a global overclass which has extended its value-appropriating reach as deeply into the realm of outer space as into the innerspace of vatgrown bodies. Similarly, each social space in the novel, from the factory-zone of Chiba to the mall-spaces and media zones of the Sprawl, and from the resort-space of Freeside to the rentier space of Villa Straylight, forms a specific class habitus (the realms of global production, distribution, consumption and accumulation, respectively). On the other hand, aside from the postwar military trials of Operation Screaming Fist and the intervention of the Turing Registry, political concerns seem to have been displaced or rendered obsolescent by technological ones; put another way, class identities seem to
exist without a formal class politics. In point of fact, Neuromancer does indeed formulate a politics of class, only not in the way that we are accustomed to thinking about politics. Rather than staging a modernist politics of positions located within the specific fields of monopoly capitalism (e.g. the progressive or regressive stance of individual participants within the realm of technology, mass-culture, the juridical sphere and so forth), the text posits a multinational politics of templates, micropolitical constructs capable of accessing multiple frames, all at once.

We have already encountered two of those frames, namely the economic one of the keiretsu and the geopolitical one of the European Union; there is, however, one other which needs to be mentioned here, something closely associated with a planetary-wide realm of collective representation or recorded memory, without being identical to the nominalism of such. At one point Neuromancer tells Case, in a moment of pardonable hubris, that “I am the dead, and their land.” (N:244) This is of course not meant to be taken literally; the matrix is the claim of the past on the present, not the motivating agency or motor of history which acts upon the present, by opening the gate to the future. This suggests that the frame we are looking for is that of a global temporality, an atomic clock calibrated to multinational rather than neonational rhythms. This allows Neuromancer to move beyond the central aporia of Ridley Scott’s Bladerunner, namely the motif of neonational entropy or cultural decay visible in the shortened life-spans of the genetically engineered superhumans, the prematurely aging genetic engineer, Sebastian, and technologies tied to obsolete mechanical gears and clockwork puppets rather than chips and screens, by decoding the neonational as a subcomponent or subsidiary moment of the multinational. Armitage’s arc of self-destruction garnishes the demolition of the Pax Americana’s Midwestern industrial base with the high-tech gloss of Chiba City’s export industries; while Ashpool’s ritual self-immolation foreshadows the
class suicide of the Anglo-American rentiers who reign but no longer rule over an increasingly restive post-Cold War world-system. What shines forth from the wrack and ruin of the neonational is the utopian moment of the multinational, or the moment of world-historical justice. Molly, in particular, serves the judgement of history upon Riviera (who was responsible for betraying and torturing a number of women to the Turkish secret police) and Ashpool (who, we are told, murdered his wife and cofounder of T-A, Marie-France Tessier) alike; while even Jane unwittingly rebels against her class, by intervening to save Molly from Riviera, and later giving the code-word freeing Wintermute to Case.

Interestingly, this motif of multinational justice has its objective counterpart in the software program Case uses to crack T-A’s electronic defense system, Kuang Mark Eleven. Kuang is a Chinese slow virus, obtained through the good offices of Bockris Systems, GmbH, Frankfurt; and one could argue that inasmuch as Frankfurt is the financial services and banking center of the European Union, Bockris is the uncanny anticipation of SAP, the giant German software firm located in Walldorf which is widely acknowledged to be the Godzilla of the corporate Intranet market. On the other hand, in the matrix the Kuang looks like a refunctioned Chinese fighter jet, suggesting that Neuromancer’s assimilation of First World video has its counterpart of Wintermute’s alliance with an unprecedented Third World airmobility. During the cracking of the T-A defenses, video form and multinational content meld into a dazzlingly new aesthetic register, well worth quoting in detail:

Case’s sensory input warped with velocity.
His mouth filled with an aching taste of blue.
His eyes were eggs of unstable crystal, vibrating with a frequency whose name was rain and the sound of trains, suddenly sprouting a humming forest of hair-fine glass spines. The spines split, bisected, split again, exponential growth under the dome of the Tessier-Ashpool ice.
The roof of his mouth cleaved painlessly, admitting rootlets that whipped around his tongue, hungry for the taste of blue, to feed the crystal forests of his eyes, forests that pressed against the green dome, pressed and were hindered, and spread, growing down, filling the universe of T-A, down into the waiting, hapless suburbs of the city that was the mind of Tessier-Ashpool S.A.

And he was remembering an ancient story, a king placing coins on a chessboard, doubling the amount at each square…

Exponential…

Darkness fell in from every side, a sphere of singing black, pressure on the extended crystal nerves of the universe of data he had nearly become.

And when he was nothing, compressed at the heart of all that dark, there came a point where the dark could be no more, [italics in original] and something tore.

The Kuang program spurted from tarnished cloud, Case’s consciousness divided like beads of mercury, arcing above an endless beach the color of the dark silver clouds. His vision was spherical, as though a single retina lined the inner surface of a globe that contained all things, if all things could be counted. N:257-258

The reference to the “taste of blue” nicely captures the forgotten sense of wonder and astonishment which accompanied the arrival of the first color monitors, most famously the eight-color graphics interface of the Apple II, while the hair-fine spines clearly refer to telecommunications jacks and optical fibers. What is genuinely shocking, however, is the sudden ecological turn in the narrative, the reference to “crystal forests” which multiply exponentially, like a strand of DNA unexpected transforming itself into a rudimentary life-form. The counterpart of this biological prehistory is the medieval story documenting the beginning of mathematical thinking and the data-universe this mathematics ultimate produced; both converge in the reference to a calculated, globular vision wherein visual data has become a form of representation in its own right, a stunningly accurate anticipation of the aesthetic of the 3D videogame.

This suggests, in turn, that we need to take the Kuang literally, as a symbol for an information commodity derived from southern China (the world’s newest and fastest-growing semi-periphery), reprocessed and marketed by the world’s newest superpower
(the EU), and operated by a global class of tech-savvy end-users (the information proletariat). What is realized in this process is, of course, multinational labor-time, a labor-time which the Tessier-Ashpools take the greatest pains to expropriate and monopolize for themselves, in a vain attempt to seal themselves off from time and history, but which ends up expropriating the expropriators on their own informatic terrain. From our vantage point in the dawning years of the 21st century, Kuang is the distant but unmistakable prototype of freeware or open source software. The essential idea of open source, it should be noted, is that anyone can borrow and alter anyone else’s code, so long as the borrower properly acknowledges the source and does not sell the code to others as their own product. The result is not chaos, but astonishingly well-constructed code, written by a loosely-knit collective of highly skilled programmers on behalf of the public at large. Unbelievable as it may seem, these programs really are far superior to anything commercial corporations, bent on maximizing shareholder payouts and monopolizing property rights, could create themselves. Freeware such as Apache (which runs most of the Web-servers on the planet) and Linux (the PC operating system which outclasses and out-performs Microsoft Windows in terms of price, reliability, security and flexibility) are the first examples of what will undoubtedly be a host of informatic public goods, ranging from email programs to Internet access to live-channel video and music; they are living proof of the power and unimaginable potential of the informatic socialisms of the future.

This was not, of course, a development Gibson could have concretely foreseen. Nevertheless, it’s worth re-reading the very last scene of the novel, which amounts to the cinematic credits of a video work, in the context of the open source revolution. Linda is there with her dream-Case, accompanied by the unseen audibles of McCoy Pauley, and of course Neuromancer, the lithe Brazilian avatar of the Second World revolutions which
were, in the early Eighties, about to detonate throughout Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia and elsewhere (NE:270-271). But if one could freezeframe the scene and turn the matrix-cam onto the invisible audience engrossed in watching Case watch his virtualized self, one would discover not the mutual funds mavens, corporate overlords and silicon rentiers presently running the world economy, but rather a vast, enthusiastic crowd of quite ordinary, plebian and thoroughly proletarianized penguins (one of the premier symbols of the global Resistance iconized by Berkeley Breathed’s 1980s comic strip, Bloom County), each randomly nestled into floating shoals of corporate ice; while high overhead, peeling into the non-space of the matrix, Linus Torvalds is giving the thumbs-up from a hacked version of the Kuang Mark Eleven.
Notes

1. “Rather, I want to suggest that our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism. The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. This is a figural process presently best observed in a whole mode of contemporary entertainment literature – one is tempted to characterize it as ‘high-tech paranoia’ – in which the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup are narratively mobilized by labyrinthine conspiracies of deadly interlocking and competing information agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind. Yet conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt – through the figuration of advanced technology – to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system. It is in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that, in my opinion, the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized.

Such narratives, which first tried to find expression through the generic structure of the spy novel, have only recently crystallized in a new type of science fiction, called cyberpunk, which is fully as much an expression of transnational corporation realities as it is of global paranoia itself: William Gibson’s representational innovations, indeed, mark his work as an exceptional literary realization within a predominantly visual or aural postmodern production.” Fredric Jameson. Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991 (37-38).

2. This is also the progression, it should be noted, from the pharmaceutical body (a.k.a. William Burroughs’ concept of drug-flesh) to the genetically-engineered body: “When he saw a darkened display window, he managed to pause by it. The place was a surgical boutique, closed for renovation. With his hands in the pockets of his jacket, he stared through the glass at a flat lozenge of vatgrown flesh that lay on a carved pedestal of imitation jade. The color of its skin reminded him of Zone’s whores; it was tattooed with a luminous digital display wired to a subcutaneous chip. Why bother with the surgery, he thought, when you could just carry the thing around in your pocket?” N:14 Later, we learn that Molly has a chip-clock implanted in her field of vision, suggesting she is the subjective incarnation of the objective DNA-commodity. Conversely, the same operation which allows Case to access cyberspace renders him – hint, hint – immune to the effects of most ordinary recreational drugs.

3. Consider Molly’s entrance into the Tessier-Ashpool’s private residence, a brilliant anticipation of the Hong Kong films: “It was a performance. It was like the culmination of a lifetime’s observation of martial arts tapes, cheap ones, the kind Case had grown up on. For a few seconds, he knew, she [Molly] was every bad-ass hero, Sony Mao in the
old Shaw videos, Mickey Chiba, the whole lineage back to Lee and Eastwood. She was walking it the way she talked it.” N:213 Sony Mao, the fusion of the Japanese firm and the Chinese political icon, anticipates the rise of Tony Leung, Chow Yun-Fat and Jackie Chan to global stardom.

4. The cooperative structure of the keiretsu was motivated not by altruism but sheer survival, i.e. the necessity to rebuild from wartime devastation and a desperate lack of capital markets. As a rule, each group member would buy a small number of share in other group members, the result being a highly dispersed but extraordinarily stable structure of long-term, interlocking shareholdings, which protected group members from hostile takeovers and sudden market downturns and gave individual firms privileged access to the long-term credit facilities of the entire group. It also allowed group members to plan and invest for the long-term, and concentrate on customer quality and market share instead of short-term profit margins or speculative stock market returns.

The Mitsubishi group, for example, encompasses the Mitsubishi Corporation (a trading firm), Meiji Mutual Life Insurance, Mitsubishi Motors, Mitsubishi Electric, and many others besides. With financial assets of close to 1 trillion euros, revenues of approximately 230 billion euros and debts of maybe 280 million euros, the Mitsubishi keiretsu is bigger than most of the countries on this planet, and is a global creditor to the tune of some 650 billion euros (about $700 billion US). See Appendix A for the largest interlocks of the Mitsubishi group, as of January 1999 (data provided by company reports and the 1999 Fall edition of the *Japan Company Handbook*). Mitsubishi is not alone: historically there were five other megakeiretsu in the Japanese economy, the Mitsui, Sumitomo, Daichi-Kangyo, Fuyo and Sanwa groups, plus a couple of smaller groups congregated around the Tokai Bank and the Industrial Bank of Japan. All in all, the keiretsu make up around a third of the Japanese economy, and most of the profitable, high-tech third at that. Since the collapse of the Japanese Bubble Economy in the mid-Nineties, the keiretsu have responded by merging into superkeiretsu: the Mitsui and Sumitomo house banks are merging, the the Fuji (Fuyo) Bank, Daichi-Kangyo Bank and Industrial Bank of Japan are due to become the Mizuho Bank; while Sanwa is tying the knot with Asahi Bank and Tokai Bank.

It should be emphasized that the EU keiretsu have been keeping pace with their East Asian counterparts. Though more decentralized than their Japanese counterparts, they’ve made up for this fact via their close connections to the apparatus of the national social democratic states. Historically, the EU’s welfare states have served many of the same functions as East Asia’s developmental states, in terms of managing trade and capital flows, investing heavily in education, science and technology, providing cheap, long-term finance for industry and heavily taxing speculation. Powerful labor movements and Left parties ensured that extensive job training and vocational skills were made available to a wide cross-section of the population, thus resulting in one of the highest-quality and skilled workforces on the planet. Not tax breaks for entrepreneurs, but high wages and generous welfare subsidies are the open secret behind the success of firms ranging from Sweden’s Ericsson and Finland’s Nokia, to Switzerland’s Nestle and Germany’s SAP. Appendices B and C list the major banking networks and bank-industry networks in the German economy, based on 1999 company reports.
5. The dream in question nicely anticipates the ideologemes of Cameron’s 1986 sci-fi film *Aliens*, only where the latter displaces, in a classic piece of neoconservative ideology, the predatory machinery of the multinational corporation onto the biological neocolonialism of the aliens, Gibson correctly perceives the corporation to be identical to this neocolonialism in the first place:

“He saw the thing the shell of grey paper had concealed.

Horror. The spiral birth factory, stepped terraces of the hatching cells, blind jaws of the unborn moving ceaselessly, the staged progress from egg to larva, near-wasp, wasp. In his mind’s eye, a kind of time-lapse photography took place, revealing the thing as the biological equivalent of a machine gun, hideous in its perfection. Alien…

In the dream, just before he’d drenched the nest with fuel, he’d seen the T-A logo of Tessier-Ashpool neatly embossed into its side, as though the wasps themselves had worked it there.” N:126-127

6. This is most obvious in the subtle conjunction of cosmological registers with micrological ones, or outer space with inner space: ‘Costs to go to Chiba, costs to get the surgery, costs to have them jack your nervous system up so you’ll have the reflexes to go with the gear… You know how I got the money, when I was starting out? Here. Not here, but a place like it, in the Sprawl. Joke, to start with, ‘cause once they plant the cut-out chip, it seems like free money. Wake up sore, sometimes, but that’s it. Renting the goods, is all. You aren’t in, when it’s all happening. House has software for whatever a customer wants to pay for…’ She cracked her knuckles. ‘Fine. I was getting my money. Trouble was, the cut-out and the circuitry the Chiba clinics put in weren’t compatible. So the work-time started bleeding in, and I could remember it… But it was just bad dreams, and not all bad.’ She smiled. ‘Then it started getting strange.’

…

‘They knew you were picking up on this stuff? That you were conscious while you were working?’

‘I wasn’t conscious. It’s like cyberspace, but blank. Silver. It smells like rain… You can see yourself orgasm, it’s like a little nova right out on the rim of space. But I was starting to remember. Like dreams, you know. And they didn’t tell me. They switched the software and started renting to specialty markets.’

She seemed to speak from a distance. ‘And I knew, but I kept quiet about it. I needed the money. The dreams got worse and worse, and I’d tell myself that at least some of them were just dreams, but by then I’d started to figure that the boss had a whole little clientele going for me. Nothing’s too good for Molly, the boss says, and gives me this shit raise.’ She shook her head. ‘That prick was charging eight times what he was paying me, and he thought I didn’t know.’

‘So what was he charging for?’

‘Bad dreams. Real ones.’” N:148

7. “Je mehr Verdinglichung, desto mehr Subjektivismus: das gilt wie fuer die Erkenntnis so fuer die Instrumentation.” [The more reification, the more subjectivism: this applies as
8. This is the moment when Case begins to break his own neocolonial shackles, namely the internalized loathing and hatred for the body expressed by the console cowboys by their habit of referring to the body as mere “meat”: “There was a strength that ran in her, something he’d known in Night City and held there, been held by it, held for a while away from time and death, and from the relentless Street that hunted them all. It was a place he’d known before; not everyone could take him there, and somehow he always managed to forget it. Something he’d found and lost so many times. It belonged, he knew – he remembered – as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh the cowboys mocked. It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read.” N:239

Later, when he awakes to the Zion dub, the body begins to acquire its own image-palette and sound-track: “The music woke him, and at first it might have been the beat of his own heart. He sat up beside her, pulling his jacket over his shoulders in the predawn chill, gray light from the doorway and the fire long dead.

His vision crawled with ghost hieroglyphs, translucent lines of symbols arranging themselves against the neutral backdrop of the bunker wall. He looked at the backs of his hands, saw faint neon molecules crawling beneath his skin, ordered by the unknowable code. He raised his right hand and moved it experimentally. It left a faint, fading trail of strobed afterimages.” N:241

9. “Case remembered Molly’s description of the man who’d killed her lover. Hideo was another. Ageless, he radiated a sense of quiet, an utter calm. He wore clean, frayed khaki workpants and soft dark shoes that fit his feet like gloves, split at the toes like tabi socks. The bamboo bow was a museum piece, but the black alloy quiver that protruded above his left shoulder had the look of the best Chiba weapons shops…

The ninja relaxed his pull on the fine, braided string, lowering the bow. He crossed the tiles to where the Remington lay and picked it up. ‘This is without subtlety,’ he said, as if to himself. His voice was cool and pleasant. His every move was part of a dance, a dance that never ended, even when his body was still, at rest, but for all the power it suggested, there was also a humility, an open simplicity.” N:249

Hideo is really the fully-developed form of the Mongolian Archers in Burroughs’ Nova Express, who are coded in terms of the radios and cheap transistors the Pacific Rim economies were, in the Sixties, producing: “The Mongolian Archers with black metal flesh moved to grill arrangements of a ritual dance flexing their bows – silver antennae arrows sniffing dowsing quivering for The Enemy…” NE:112
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