

# The Mirror of Capital

## An Introduction to Critical *Poiesis*

DAN KRIER AND MARK P. WORRELL

Critical theorists periodically anticipate the demise of capitalism like presumptive heirs in detective fiction; they hover around the sickbed of a despised aunt straining to hear the rattle of death in each phlegm-filled hack. The last such scene began a decade ago, when localized financial crises spread globally, leading to severe recession, septicemia, and a terminal diagnosis by critical theorists. In fiction, the dying testatrix often rallies to an inconvenient recovery that disappoints her heirs, embarrassed in their desire for premature burial. Similarly, capitalism perpetually rebounds from crises, evading the grave prepared for it by dismayed critical theorists. Of course, Marx dispelled all doubt about the dynamics of capital and its ultimate fate over 150 years ago: one fine day, in the fullness of time, it *will* die. Eventually, in the midst of some future crisis, one sickbed prognostication will turn out to be correct, and capital will go the way of all flesh. Critical theorists have always been right about capitalism's impending doom, but the manner and timing of its inevitable passing remains in question.

To comprehend capitalism's resilience, critical theorists have been led beyond the field of political economy onto the wider plain of aesthetics. Critical theory first ventured into the aesthetic dimension when Eduard Fuchs completed his pioneering historical-materialist analyses of Western popular culture (Amidon & Krier, 2017). This foray continued

in Lukács's wide-ranging cultural criticism (1966), in the writings of Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Kracauer, and others associated with the Frankfurt School (Worrell, 2008), and in Bakhtin's sociological poetics developed through readings of Rabelais and Dostoevsky (Bakhtin & Medvedev, 1985). In the late 20th century, Marxist literature studies proliferated outside of social science (Eagleton, 1976; Swingewood, 1977), perhaps most prominently by Frederic Jameson (e.g., 1981). Cultural sociologists also wrote about film, music, and other aesthetic products (Inglis & Almiri, 2016; Williams, 1995), including those that indexed and helped promote movements for progressive change (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). Though approaching culture from a dizzying array of theoretical positions within sociology, few maintained contact with Marx or critical theory. We face then a double problem: Cultural sociology has failed to be critical, and critical theories have failed to be sociological, occupying a niche position in the humanist fields of literary and film studies.

The approach taken by literary studies to human praxis is twofold. On the one hand it involves the subjection of texts to hermeneutical interrogation with an eye toward the creation of an array of emergent, relative, and playful readings. On the other hand, it is concerned with the dynamics of an intertextual web unfolding across time and space. In such approaches, texts are not so much the work of particular authors (who "died" sometime after modernism, but no one knew it before Derrida), but autonomous creations of history carrying contingent authorial attributions. Žižek's (1999) assorted self-referential works are typical of critical theory as practiced in literary and film studies in that Marx is refracted through psychoanalytic theory to focus upon ideology to the exclusion of political economic dynamics.

What cultural studies, hermeneutics, and *Zizekianism* have in common is what we might call an ontology problem that fails to rise above subjectivism or goes off the rails into transcendentalism. Žižek, for example, combines both "sins" whereby his work relies on the paradoxical fusion of psychological reductionism (there is no big Other, merely individual psyches trying to "get off" as best as they can) and a structural transcendentalism of the unconscious. Žižek's designation for his ontological position is one of "transcendental materialism," but this would presuppose a countervailing *empirical idealism* as its mirror opposite, both of which are alien to the social realism we find in Hegel as well as Marx and Durkheim, the founders of modern sociology.

The chapters in this volume were originally written for the Symposium for New Directions in Critical Social Theory at Iowa State University in June 2016. This biennial gathering of sociologists, philosophers, political scientists, and cultural theorists has grown from modest beginnings into an ongoing, formally structured workshop aimed at the reinvention of critical social theory and critical sociology. In this book, critical social theorists reexamine cultural reflections of capitalism in iconic prose, poetry, and photography to locate decisive contradictions and emancipatory possibilities concealed within our historical past and contemporary moment.

A catalyst for this book was Thomas Piketty's (2014) *Capital in the 21st Century*, an academic blockbuster that energized debates on capitalism and inequality. Piketty's book charted unequal income distributions with detailed time-series data and was most compelling when Piketty looked up from the gray plain of statistics to find capitalism's dynamics already theorized in full color by 19th-century novelists Honore de Balzac and Jane Austen. These writers depicted fictional characters whose intimate decisions about love were conditioned by calculations of expected returns: leisurely marriage to wealthy partners versus earnings from professional work. Piketty found that his statistically labored argument had been prefigured a century earlier in the ethical calculus of fictional strivers for patrimony through matrimony. By looking in the mirror of literature, Piketty's view of capital sharpened to reveal social distortions that arise when returns to wealth exceed rewards from work. The connection between inequality and aesthetics is decisive because when a population becomes radically unequal a gulf opens between individuals and groups and, where there are separations and divisions of this nature (alienation), they undergo moral inversions and transformations: Where there were once individuals and citizens, the good in other words, there now appears to be an opposition between the good and a morally impure remainder. Radical inequality, in other words, always already entails an aesthetics of evil—a distortion in the collective moral optics nestled in the heart of neoliberal social reorganization and institutional dissolution. These distortions appear to us as aestheticized objects, things, and weird reflections in politics, economic transactions, religious devotion, and culture. Along with cinema, literature and poetics contain the potential for social critique.

Aesthetic objects, crafted as poetic reflections of the contradictory world that they inhabit, are simultaneously theorized and theorizing. Like

Piketty, this book follows Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud (among others) into the fields of aesthetic culture to locate condensed imagery and fresh insight into the workings of capitalist modernity. This book begins at the point where Piketty's brief cultural turn ended by systematically exploring the aesthetic dimension for reflective visions of capital that would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain through even the most rigorous statistical analyses and the juggle of lifeless variables. While Piketty focused on wealth inequality, this book is addressed to a much wider range of problems at the frontiers of critical social theory, including alienation, anomie, accumulation crisis, ecological collapse, empire, financialization, ideology, state power, and warfare, as well as emancipation, human flourishing, and social regeneration.

The chapters in *Capital in the Mirror: Critical Social Theory and the Aesthetic Dimension* work closely together to analyze contemporary capitalism through the prism of classic works of fiction and film renowned for their aesthetic artistry. Each chapter generates clarifying syntheses of acclaimed imagery and cutting-edge critical social theory. Famous narrative elements—Ahab's pursuit of the white whale in Melville's *Moby-Dick*; demonic summonings, perverse desires and productive frenzy in Mann's *Doctor Faustus*; the socially electrified bodies of Whitman's *Leaves*; dystopian projections of current sci-fi cinema—appear here as stylized but distorted reflections of social life within capital.

### Theoria beyond Praxis: Critical Poiesis

This book is grounded in a reconsideration of Aristotle's (see also Arendt 1958) ancient distinction between *praxis* (theoretically informed political activity as an ethical end-in-itself) and *poiesis* (creative production as means to sustain an ethical *oikos*). *Poiesis* as creative production points to emancipatory activity beyond and distinct from the political horizon. In Plato's *Symposium*, discussed at length in Lacan's seminar on transference (2015), Diotama provides a profound definition of the poetic realm: "all creation or passage of non-being into being is poetry or making, and the processes of all art are creative; and the masters of arts are all poets. . . . they are not called poets, but have other names" (Plato, 1902, pp. 497–498). Agamben (2016), like most critical theorists, privileged *praxis* as a superior and honorific arena of human *energia* pre-

cisely because it is addressed to politico-ethical ends, while *poiesis* (labor, work, or *ergon*) is disprivileged since aimed at *oiko-nomic* production. The cultural privileging of *praxis* over *poiesis* is central to Veblen's (1899) critical analysis of leisure class activity (political, military, destructive, honorific, status-seeking) as superior to but dependent on working-class production (economic, productive, technical, craftsmanship). In contrast, Fromm (1973) distinguishes between *productive-biophilic* cultural action that emphasizes potency, the capacity for loving production in the furtherance of life, and *destructive-necrophilic* cultural activities, impotent, unproductive, focus on power over others that thwarts life.

Most Marxists and critical social theorists think of themselves as engaged in politically charged *praxis*, working toward capital's collapse in unrecoverable crisis or searching for openings that lead to fantasized revolutionary situations. Society after-capital is often imagined as either automated production by robots or as a society composed only of labor. Work either vanishes entirely into the unethical shadow of robot producers (repressed into the social real) or is projected into the sublime (the surreal) under a regime of Lukacs-esque labor-fetishism populated by the heroic Workers. Marx himself imagined a future where humans acquire freedom from *poiesis* (permanently turned over to the robotic general intellect) so that they can dedicate themselves full time, without cessation, and without limit to politico-ethical *praxis*. Worrell and Krier (2015) note that Marx's utopian postrevolutionary imaginary continues the Aristotelian privileging of politico-ethical *praxis* over economic-productive *poiesis*. Following Weber, we view *poiesis* as more than mere labor (Arendt's *animal laborans*) or pure "use of bodies" (Agamben 2016) but as an ethically significant realm of activity in its own right: intellectually engaged, cooperative, and life-furthering.

To avoid falling into the trap set by revolutionary, *praxis*-oriented, "Beautiful Souls," the chapters in this book suggest that after-capitalism must result from the negation (*aufhebung*) of capital, not just tearing down, but "cancelling upward" while preserving what is productive and biophilic. While others theorize revolutionary *praxis*, we theorize the *poiesis* of after-capital, comprehending what must already be there, inside of capitalism, such that the negation of domination results in a worthwhile, democratic, life-furthering society. While many Marxists fantasize automated/robotic production technologies as important foundations of after-capital, we suggest that subversive subjectivity

(widespread democratic social character rather than reactionary/necrophilic/authoritarian social character), and a deeply ingrained, enduring cultural commitment to productive “callings” are much more important.<sup>1</sup>

What does the distinction between praxis and *poiesis* mean for critical social theory? While waiting to deliver the *coup de grace* to capital, what can be done to build subjects capable of enduring the freedoms and possibilities of after-capitalism? What can be done to build a firewall to limit reaction and re-barbarization? Critical *poiesis* as important adjunct to praxis and theory, with goal of building culture of self-chosen, cooperative *creative work in callings*—moving toward others (Horney) to work together in creative production. Rather than draining *poiesis* away while filling the world with *praxis*, perhaps better to reconstruct subjects/culture so that *poiesis* is a way of life and *praxis* (political struggle/factional discord/ power-over others) kept to a minimum, an intervention of the Big Other that “comes and goes.”

### Outline of the Book

The book is divided into two sections: the first devoted to shadowy images of domination and alienation (Twilight), the second to prophetic visions of transformation (Dawn). Twilight opens with Tony Smith’s chapter, “An Insane Book, an Insane Country, an Insane System: *Moby-Dick*, U.S. Hegemony, and the Catastrophe of Capital.” U.S. capital seized a dominant position in the capitalist world market first in whale oil and other by-products of the whale’s carcass. Melville’s detailed depiction of the various phases of the particular capital circuit of a particular unit of capital in this sector illuminates the general direction world history would take in the century to come: U.S. capitals would come to dominate most of the important sectors in the global markets. Ample investment capital would be available, along with a racially and ethnically diverse labor force of diverse skills and a high level of collective energy, intelligence, and creativity. The most technologically advanced means of production would be put in place. A competent supervisory apparatus capable of overseeing complex and sophisticated labor processes would be found. Persons with the highest level of technical skills, immense energy, and unremitting dedication would be found to manage the production process as a whole. And in crucial sectors U.S. capitals would face few demand constraints, producing commodities

for expanding markets. While the demise of the whaling industry would soon follow *Moby-Dick's* publication, the book is a poetical prophecy of coming U.S. hegemony in the world market. The novel, however, is also a poetic sibling of the theoretical critique of "the American century" in specific and the reign of capital in general. A series of unresolvable (and irresolvable, within the confines of a capitalist order) antinomies haunt Melville's text. The workforce must be skilled and engaged, but its voice cannot be heard. Technologies serving capital's end can support some forms of human flourishing, but it will be partial and precarious at best, with a risk of catastrophe never far away. And these technologies can be diverted to other ends; the technical rationality meant to be subordinate to capitalist rationality can be distorted by the substantive irrationality of those supposed to be capital's agents. Last but certainly not least, the insane drive to accumulate as much capital as possible, as fast as possible, will invariably deplete resources at a faster rate than they can be replenished and generate wastes at a faster rate than they can be processed. Natural organisms must pay a high price if they fail to establish and maintain an appropriately symbiotic relationship with their environment. The destruction one particular whale inflicts on the particular ship called the Pequod prefigures the fate of our species if it fails to overthrow the yoke of capital.

Christian Lotz authors the second chapter, "Marxist Aesthetics, Realism, and Photography: On Brecht's *War Primer*." In this chapter, Lotz conceptualizes critical aesthetics in connection with a theory of society that problematizes the distinction between the socially visible and invisible. By reconsidering Marx's method in *Capital*, Lotz argues that the modern problem of rendering the invisible visible, especially representing capital from an artistic point of view, originates in Marx's philosophy and in Marxist methodology. Lotz argues that one could read the entire problem of Marx's genetic concept of social categories as an aesthetic problem. Lotz tests this thesis in reflections upon a case study, Brecht's *Kriegsfibel* (*War Primer*), first published in 1955 in the GDR. In this work, which takes the form of "photo-epigrams," Brecht presents a history of World War II as captured in 81 photographic plates (taken from magazines) that display main figures and atrocities from the second world war. These images are accompanied by their original caption along with brief four-line poems by Brecht. The principle of montage, in Brecht a proper *realist* practice, is central to this book, and was developed by Brecht from the 1930s forward, as one can see from his *Journals*. Brecht

highlights the problem of how to represent abstract social structures such as war that is bound up with the problem of *remembering*. Put differently, the problem of (in)visibility can be found on virtually all levels of critical aesthetics: theory-capital-war-memory.

Patrick Murray and Jeanne Schuler author the third chapter, “The Poetics of Nihilism: Representing Capital’s Indifference in Dickens’ *Hard Times*.” This chapter focuses on how Charles Dickens’ novel *Hard Times* (1854) critically represented mid-19th-century industrial capitalism while uncritically adopting much of its mindset. Murray and Schuler argue that *Hard Times* is primarily about capital’s shadow forms—indifference, egoism, utility, the calculative mentality—and only secondarily about its constitutive forms—value, money, wage labor, capital. They also argue that Dickens accepts key bifurcations involved in modern conceptions of reason and society and seeks only to harmonize them or ameliorate their ill effects. The chapter opens with thoughts from Hegel on art and philosophy as a counterpoint to Dickens’ false split between reason and imagination. Dickens is disturbed to see the utilitarian mentality spread across the whole social order and wants to shield the political and the domestic spheres, especially education. At the root of Dickens’ indifference to particularity is the reduction of the qualitative to the quantitative such that all life’s issues become calculations. The novel centers on shadow forms of capitalism, above all, indifference: What does it matter? Shadow forms are easier to grasp; they disclose a world but not the mainspring of its dynamism. At the core of capitalist society is the emptiness of value, which shows itself in money. Not surprisingly, emptiness reverberates throughout the shadow forms and fosters a nihilistic mindset. Some shadow forms negate the reality of self and world more completely than the constitutive forms. By seeming to lack historical grounding, shadow forms appear irreversible. Constitutive forms, by contrast, are grounded in history. Tracing shadow forms to constitutive forms, then, keeps time from standing still.

The darkness continues with Dan Krier’s chapter, “The Repressed Returns: Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* and the Fugue of Capital.” Krier interprets Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* as critical *poiesis* about *poiesis*, a creative production about the work of creative production. Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* is a cultural product of the highest caliber that highlights the centrality of ethically infused callings in capitalist modernity. Those with a calling produce high-quality creative work as the central realm of freedom, meaning, and ethical action. As in other of Mann’s works,



the vicissitudes of callings—the trauma of separation from primary ties and the equally traumatic installation in professional work—determines the life trajectory of characters. Adrian Leverkühn, the symphonic composer at the center of the novel, wagers his soul with the devil, but unlike previous incarnations of the Faust story, he does not seek universal knowledge, unlimited pleasures, or unceasing experience. Instead, he seeks nothing more than creative potency in his calling. Leverkühn lives an almost entirely sinless life while devoting himself ascetically to the most intensive creative work. Leverkühn's fate is a strange sort of tragedy because he gets what he bargained for, a life without “cow warmth” but thoroughly infused with creative productivity and ethical achievement. Mann depicts a particularized calling as a magic circle of masterly productivity inscribed in the symbolic order, marked by desire, fantasy, and *jouissance*. Leverkühn plays in and between three symbolic orders—philology, mathematics, and theology—before finding his calling as a master of a fourth symbolic order, musical composition. Mann's ability to “write music,” to detail the immanent (rather than transcendent) structure of tonality, harmonics, polyphony is unparalleled. The book details symbolic effects of the calling, shaping organic responses and imaginary projections at the coordinates of the vocational order. Finally, and most important, *Doctor Faustus* depicts history's dialectic as a fugue-like “insistence of structure” in which motifs, even when repressed, return in variant form. This should give pause to critical theorists who desire after-capital: We need to be careful lest the thing we destroy returns in even darker form.

Dawn breaks with a second chapter by Tony Smith, “‘Shakespearean Politics’ and World History.” While contemporary literary criticism remains fascinated with Shakespeare's personal political views, Smith views his plays as extended thought experiments on the vicissitudes of political rule. The first part of his chapter explores three main political themes that Smith isolates in the Shakespeare's plays. These themes, repeated across the history plays, present political authority as (1) determined by power struggles between competing elites rather than by a natural order, (2) maintained by normatively questionable means (e.g., deceit, subterfuge, brute force), and (3) “normally” oppressive of subordinates and failed contenders to power. Smith then speculates on conclusions that reasonably follow from these themes regarding the essential nature of the political sphere. Since we cannot claim anything about Shakespeare's own political views, Smith refers to these theses and

conclusion as a form of “Shakespearean politics.” Shakespearean politics are grounded in a worldview that is neither a conservative endorsement of traditional political authority nor an endorsement of a radical political alternative. Instead, it centers on the fundamental ethical irrationality of the political realm, and the idea that the normative satisfaction that cannot be found in politics must be sought instead in the private domestic sphere, where the great dramas of reconciliation of husband and wife, parents and children, birth and death, are played out. From this standpoint the greatest political dramas in world literature endorse an apolitical mode of being in the world, a combination of critique and acceptance. Smith ends his chapter by returning to the plays to construct and defend an alternative, critical version of “Shakespearean politics.” Smith asserts that underneath Shakespeare’s deep pessimism is an affirmation of the reality status of normative advances. He argues that the mirror function of cultural products like Shakespeare’s plays conditionally contributed to normative advances in the past and might again contribute, under the right conditions, to normative advances in our time. This alternative Shakespearean politics underscores the possibilities for normative advances that makes critical social theory and praxis worth pursuing.

The sixth chapter is authored by Michael J. Thompson, “The Radical Implications of Hölderlin’s Aesthetic Rationalism.” Thomas Mann wrote that “all would be well in Germany . . . the day that Karl Marx reads Friedrich Hölderlin.” Thompson’s chapter tests Mann’s proposition, noting that Hölderlin’s is not well known to critical theorists and, what is known, has been overshadowed by Heidegger’s existentialist reading of his work, resulting in the image of an impractical Romantic without political relevance. Thompson returns to Hölderlin’s aesthetic-philosophical project that engaged the dilemmas of modern reason that forced us to make a choice between one-dimensional life of domination and unrealized potential and a new multilayered way of living, thinking, and feeling encompassing the full potentialities contained within nature. Thompson reveals Hölderlin’s aesthetic theory as a more holistic and ambitious conception of rationality than the predominant *Aufklärung* ideas prevalent in his time. Hölderlin’s conception of aesthetic reason provides a deeply anti-reificatory conception of rationality and human reflection that provides the framework for a theory of the “good” and truth that can help expand the concept of critical agency and contribute to a critical theory of human reflection and judgment. Hölderlin’s

problematic was similar to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It is man's separation from nature—and hence his separation from himself—and his domination of nature—and hence his systematic domination of himself—that Enlightenment reason has spawned. For Hölderlin, the Enlightenment is therefore a necessary but deficient development in human culture. It requires that we expand the circle of reason—expand it to the extent that it encompasses beauty as well as truth. That our ability to know truth is only possible once we can experience the absolute, the “unconditioned,” and overcome the radical separation between the subject and the object. Once this is done, a new man will emerge: a new form of subjectivity, of agency, of culture, society and a true kind of freedom. In the end, Hölderlin's critique of modernity is not a regressive, Romantic movement to the past, but an aesthetic-philosophical vision far wider than the narrow Enlightenment conception of the rational subject.

Chapter 7, authored by James Block, is entitled “From Mirror to Catalyst: Whitman and the Literature of Re-Creation.” The forces of social transformation are in need of a vision that integrates the great achievements of the modernist age and dialectically locates them within a greater vision of human possibility. Progressive social theory has misunderstood its project as rejecting every category of liberal discourse and lexicon. For liberalism as a modernizing movement first generated the categories of liberation and then turned them in ways that undercut their emancipatory potential. Its goal became to insulate modern popular society from their full unveiling and expression in order to protect the new post-theological common Author in a popular body politic—Society—from the full dynamic and dislocations of an individualizing modernity. Progressive theory, in order to renew and further advance this liberating dynamic begun by liberalism, must once again offer a vision of emancipation, truly evolved conceptions of individual and individualism, autonomy and freedom, development and self-development and self-realization, consent and genuine democratic citizenship, recognition and self-recognition. This chapter contends that the fulcrum through which to lift us into the age of emancipation lies in the poetry of Walt Whitman. Whitman knew the power of literature advocating in Democratic Vistas for poets of the new to lead the way as only literature could (once religion was gone) to create the characters, selves, and identities that would help Americans and others shape themselves for full democratic life. Poetry could as no other form of expression as well

call each to the journey in a popular age where all were to be included by forging new selves. Poetry (as literature), in other words, was a form of activism and an agent of transformation.

The immense significance of Whitman for understanding the relationship between critical social theory and critical *poiesis* is underscored in a chapter by Mark P. Worrell and Dan Krier entitled “The City of Brothers.” Whitman was not “merely” a poet but, as others have noted, also a social philosopher working in the Hegelian vein and even a ‘social scientist’ of sorts, juxtaposed to Marx and Durkheim. At the level of social ontology Walt Whitman solves a number of problems that plagues naive realism as well as the intersubjective hyper-fluidity at the heart of pragmatism that rebels against anything like a social absolute. The “Cosmic Walt” (objectified in *Leaves of Grass*) represents a kind of Hegelian vision of the absolute spirit that resists reification while also rooting individuals in a universal moral matrix that persists beyond fleeting interactions that, as Marx would say in reference to the accidental value form, come and go with each transaction.

Harry F. Dahms takes us out of the world of literature and into contemporary cinema in the ninth chapter, entitled “Critical Theory, Sociology, and Science-Fiction Films: Love, Radical Transformation, and the Socio-Logic of Capital.” As a distinctive tradition, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School emerged for the stated purpose of tackling a confounding challenge: to scrutinize the logic of capital as it manifests itself in politics, culture, and society, in order to discern and delineate the gravity concrete sociohistorical circumstances exert on efforts to illuminate the constitutional logic underlying modern societies. While the original program of critical theory stressed the need to scrutinize how, in modern societies, economic logic and social logic are interlinked in specific and seemingly unfathomable ways, the commitment of critical theorists to confront these challenges has been weakening with each subsequent generation. As a genre located in the field of tensions between politics, culture, society, and the capitalist economics-economy nexus, science-fiction films have been playing a most paradoxical role in perpetuating, amplifying and concealing the logic of capital, while also drawing attention to and criticizing the centrality of those tensions to modern life. Especially since the late 1990s, through their importance to the film industry, science-fiction films have been fulfilling a key role in supporting the logic of capital. On the other hand, by relaying a type of subversive and largely overlooked message relating to the link

between love and radical transformation, science-fiction films also have been broadcasting, as it were, the social, political, cultural, and ecological destructiveness of the logic of capital. By both recognizing explicitly and explicating the peculiar message about “love” that is built into and at work in the narrative structure of most acclaimed science-fiction films, the opportunity opens up to access an aspect of modern societies that has been neglected in social, political, and philosophical thought (including critical theory), and in both Marxist and Marxian discourse: the entwinement of the system of modern social relations and the logic of capital. This neglect has been detrimental to both theoretical probity—to think is supposed to be “unthinkable” to members of modern societies, and to practical relevance—to conceive of practical and political strategies that are “unimaginable” as long the link between the logic of capital and the system of modern social relations implicitly is taken for granted in all efforts at critical reflection. Appreciating explicitly the message about love and radical transformation in science-fiction films reveals a powerful aesthetic vision of the modern age and opens up perspectives on the future that have been—and are supposed to be, from the vantage point of the existing social economic structures—too audacious for social scientists and social theorists to entertain with any measure of seriousness.

Mark P. Worrell’s chapter “Magical Marx: Objective Method and Aesthetics” examines the dialectical method that Marx uses to accomplish three important things from the standpoint of our problem: first, the subversion of the reified and alien nature of the commodity; second, the dialectic moves the thing, discursively, into the arena of contested objects that have to legitimate their existence with reasons; and finally, the dialectic weaves together a third, irreducible and objective perspective (constellation of judgments) from the sublation of its shuttling back and forth between the twin dead ends of materialism (the concrete) and idealism (the abstract). *Capital* is a masterpiece of analysis whereby the bourgeois sacred (money, commodities, and capital) is exposed via analytical inversion to be not holy but an *unholy* nightmare resting on the brutalization and exploitation of the laboring classes. Marx theoretically “kills off” the new god of modernity and appears to restore workers to a place of honor. However, a few things muddle this accomplishment. First, postcapitalist relations are nowhere in Marx’s writings made coherent or even plausible. Analytical dissection cannot be separated from the larger problem of distinctions and setting things aside—anything set aside or

excluded (Marx and Durkheim) are either reduced to profanity (devaluation) or undergo moral inversions of one kind or another and only the magician of cultural anthropology can control these doublings. The “magical” moment of dialectics is necessary but insufficient on its own as a critical sociological method because, on one hand, it leads to total disenchantment and possibly diabolical reenchantment when pursued to the end and, on the other, it fails to realize that magical negation already presupposes a “positive” but conceptually irrational moment. Without a conscious and conceptually plausible counter-dialectics that engages in an absolute reconstruction and, crucially, a synthetic reconstruction that does not function merely as a fatalistic restoration, the best we can hope for is social anarchy. Durkheim’s sociology is presented as a way to sublimate Marxist theory in such a way that society is still possible. For Durkheim, the program of sociology is not one of destroying the absolute (reducing the world to a “happy go lucky” world of pragmatic fluidity and hyper-constructionism) but rendering the collective representation, the substantial phantom known as the big Other, luminous and nonterrifying where it was once an opaque Thing of awesome and uncanny powers. We can have the absolute, a Big Mirage, without it being a big, nasty Thing casting unbearably long shadows.



Since staring directly at gorgons turns the viewer to stone, the sound policy when approaching monsters is to view them in a mirror. Like Piketty, Marx, and many others, the theorists in this book know that approaching capital directly through quantitative data analysis generates lifeless statistical reports rather than living theory. Just as Perseus slayed the gorgon by looking at its reflection in his shield, our critique of monstrosity proceeds with a vision of capital in the mirror of culture. The great cultural products of the 19th and 20th centuries, from Brecht, Dickens, Goethe, Holderlin, Mann, Melville, Shakespeare, and Whitman, speak to us profoundly and advance our projects. Good cultural productions anticipate theory by generating apt representations of great imaginary power, images that are already distilled, with accidentals removed, and essentials placed in proportion. The most theoretical useful cultural products are imperfect mirrors that distort reality, enlarging some elements while shrinking others. The best *poiesis* theorizes with images and the best critical social theorists—from Marx to Piketty—have relied

on literary and artistic creations to complete their work. We aim to reorient critical theory so that *poiesis* supplements *praxis* in the ongoing project to negate capital.

### Note

1. On the subversive subject, see Žižek, 1999: 247–260; on the reconstruction of social character as a crucial project of critical theory, see Fromm, 1973; Reich, 1946, 1949; Adorno et al., 1950; Worrell, 2003; Krier and Feldmann, 2016; Worrell and Krier, 2015.

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