

Imagining the End of the World in Fiction and Capitalism

Written by Sadek Kessous

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SADEK KESSOUS, MAR 29 2016

Capitalist Realism

To reflect on the influence of capitalism on fiction, it is necessary to begin by considering capitalism's influence on everything. This may seem counterintuitive until one notes both capital's omnipresence and the lack of contenders to its throne. Unmoored from the Gold Standard in 1971, increasingly unregulated, digitised and freely mobile across almost the entire planet, capital is everywhere without alternative. Mark Fisher encapsulates this analysis with the term "capitalist realism": the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it' (Fisher 2009: 2).

This incapacity to think outside of capitalism has become the norm in a range of fields, often with nightmarish consequences. It allows factory owners to contend that, when their employees commit suicide at work at such a rate that it is necessary to hang netting outside of windows, they are nevertheless the solution to a national problem: because their employees kill themselves at a less significant rate than the national average industry, capitalism therefore must be alleviating the problem, rather than creating its preconditions. It allows corporations to couch their business plans in the language of ecology so that capitalist control over nature seems to be the only way to save the planet. Nestlé's Peter Brabeck, for example, ambivalently claimed that water is 'the most precious resource we have' that should be given 'value' in terms that equivocate between ecology and finance so that the languages of stewardship and plunder blur into one. It produces entertainments that mimic, grandstand, and normalise their capitalist mode of production – whether microfinance-TV (Shark Tank/Dragons' Den), business recruitment (The Apprentice), or talent shows – nominally about modelling, singing, dancing etc. – but that provide their true appeal by airing with pride the grisly insider details of their respective industries and offering their audiences the fantasy of being the executive who hires and fires. Indeed, the emergence of Donald Trump as the current frontrunner for the Republican nomination is one of the clearest contemporary markers of capitalist realism. Trump is the human embodiment of every aspect of obscene capitalist excess – racism, misogyny, ignorance, avarice, callous indifference to human life – and it is not in spite of this but *precisely because of this* that his supporters champion him.

Capitalism's absolute penetration functions so effectively for Fisher because 'capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable' (Fisher 2009: 8). It is with this emphasis on 'the thinkable' that I offer my brief reflection on the interaction of capitalism and literature. Thought, as both reflection and imagination, is the very essence of literature, its raw material, therefore recommending literature as a key medium for the analysis of processes of thought. But if capitalism colonises thought, then the writer of fiction is just as subsumed and held in its sway as anyone else. Indeed, Fisher begins with a maxim he borrows from two Marxist thinkers, Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism' (Fisher 2009: 2). The assertion has a significant bearing on the contemporary creative imagination, to which, from Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) to *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), the post-apocalyptic dystopia has become a mainstay. And yet, Fisher's theory forecloses on the possibilities that texts such as these present. The dystopia might well represent the imaginative escape valve for those who want to imagine the end of capitalism but cannot. But it is precisely for this reason that these dystopias reveal the kernel of a desire for capitalism's end, displaced into the language of science-

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fiction. Therefore I argue that, despite the constraints imposed by capitalist realism, literary analysis can expose the ways in which certain dystopias critique both material economic contexts and the subjectivities produced by these contexts, which together embody the very forms of life that can be lived under capitalist control. This is not to say that dystopias are *prima facie* radical and contain socialist manifestos or programmes, but rather that literary analysis offers readers the means to critique capitalist realism from within its own totalising structures.

What Do We Talk About When We Talk About the End of the World?

First published in 1967, Harlan Ellison's short story 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream' (2011) offers an uncannily prescient example of capitalist realism. In his dystopia Ellison imagines a global communicational network, a cybernetic system in which a burst of information can result in a people's famine, torture, or death. It is a world in which computational models determine material destinies, a world in which technologies alter the flow of time. Processes that once took months are now done in seconds and fleeting moments are stretched out and pored over so as to almost override the present. Ellison presents, in short, a world in which an arch-technocrat controls every aspect of human life. Beyond prefiguring capitalist realism, however, what recommends Ellison's story today is its unconscious critique, which emerges gradually over the course of the short narrative, of its narrator's complicity in such a world.

The short story begins with the narrator, Ted, describing Gorrister, entering a 'computer chamber' and looking up to see 'the body of Gorrister hung from the pink palette; unsupported', 'drained of blood through a precise incision made from ear to ear under the lantern jaw' (Ellison 2011: loc.185). This unreal opening moment, in which Gorrister sees his own mutilated body, comes to typify the form of alienation that saturates this text: in this world, productive bodies are divorced from their minds to create passive, unthinking subjects, thus pre-empting Fisher's understanding of capital as 'an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us' (Fisher 2009: 15). The story, however, makes a significant distinction between its cast of alienated characters, all from the social margins, and its narrator, Ted, the straight-white-man who claims to be the last person in possession of an authentic, interior subjectivity. It is around this binary that the story develops its coping mechanism for complicity.

The scenario is as follows: the story's five human characters – Ted, Gorrister, Ellen, Benny and Nimdok, a band of survivors in the apocalypse – are the last of humanity, tortured by the sentient supercomputer, AM. AM is the product of the Cold War, here having escalated into World War Three. He reveals that the world's superpowers, Russia, China, and America, created vast subterranean shafts to house their own pre-microchip machines, capable of performing the computational tasks necessary to fight this 'big war, a very complex war' (Ellison 2011: loc.256). Having 'honeycombed the entire planet' with tunnels of these machines, AM one day 'woke up and knew who he was' and, wretched in this moment of unified, global self-awareness, turned on humanity (Ellison 2011: loc.258). Writing in the late-1960s, Ellison's representation of AM stands as a harbinger of the impending post-Cold War market liberalization that would spread across the world, the neoliberal turn that foreclosed on all political possibilities aside from a cold, hard and absolute capitalism.

The text equates AM with the God of the Old Testament, here seen to be a cruel patriarch tormenting his people: in Ellison's words, 'the masculine... the paternal ... the patriarchal ... for he is a jealous people. Him. It. God as Daddy the Deranged' (Ellison 2011: loc.207). The religious subversions are myriad. AM grants those he has not killed eternal life for the sake of eternal torture. AM feeds these wandering people manna which 'tasted like boiled boar urine' (Ellison 2011: loc.212). AM appears before them as a burning bush. Fusing economic teleology with religious imagery establishes a vision of late capitalism as absolute. Ellison merges the Cartesian cogito, 'I think, therefore I am', with the God who tells Moses in Exodus 3:14 'I am that I am'. To press this further, there is, in the semantics of 'I am', a machine in the holy ghost: encompassing 'AM' and 'cogito ergo sum' and 'I am' or 'I.A.M', there is implicitly one more that draws us to the economic: IBM. Much like the name of God in orthodox Judaic tradition, which is unspeakable (and as an aside, Ellison came from a Jewish household), so too does IBM have to be restated as IAM.

So it is then that the survivors are faced with the sadistic, absolute sovereign technocrat of late capitalism. AM rules over their bare lives entirely. AM's circuitry extends to their bodies and minds. He takes from Benny, a gay 'college

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professor' and 'brilliant theorist', his mind by driving him mad, while transforming him into a half-ape creature 'with an organ fit for a horse' (Ellison 2011: loc.287) Gorrister had been a political activist, in Ellison's words, 'a planner, a doer, a looker-ahead'. (Ellison 2011: loc.290) AM makes him politically indifferent, 'a shoulder shrugger'. (Ellison 2011: loc.290) Ellen, the only woman in the group, who before the reign of AM was just 'a virgin twice removed', a woman 'whose ebony features [were] stark against the snow', becomes the men's shared-concubine. (Ellison 2011: loc.290) Only Ted, the straight-white-male narrator, remains unaltered. His burden is his passivity, condemned to watch the suffering of the marginalised, understand it and be unable to act. Such a reading, however, fails to recognise the extent to which capitalism extends itself even to the level of thought, not as an external imposition but a rot that has its root from within. What makes Ellison's story so horrifying is that it posits itself as a nightmare of the white male liberal, while describing a fantasy of white male authority within capitalist realism.

Life Support Machines

Ted's dark fantasies becomes most apparent around his narration of Ellen. To Ted, Ellen is a sexually promiscuous deviant for whom all of this torture is actually pleasure. Ted imagines Ellen having sex with Benny in these terms:

He [Benny] was big in the privates, she loved that! She serviced us, as a matter of course, but she loved it from him. Oh Ellen, pedestal Ellen, pristine-pure Ellen, oh Ellen the clean! Scum filth (Ellison 2011: loc.232).

Such anxiety is an over-determined reflection of white masculinity in crisis: only a bestial gay man can sexually satisfy the straight black woman. Ted's own sexual interaction with Ellen reinforces this reading of his libidinal paranoia.

Much of the narrative turns on Ted reluctantly following AM's cruel breadcrumb trail towards the promise of canned food. Sceptical of AM's promise, Ted argues against them setting out but nevertheless succumbs at Ellen's insistence. Ellen repays the favour by '[taking] him twice out of turn' of the group's sexual rota. (Ellison 2011: loc.204) Of this Ted states,

Even that had ceased to matter. And she never came, so why bother? But the machine giggled every time we did it. Loud, up there, back there, all around us, he snickered. It snickered (Ellison 2011: loc.205).

For Freud, the 'paranoid character lies in the fact that the reaction used to fend off a homosexual wishful fantasy is precisely a persecution of this kind [i.e. paranoia].' (Freud 2002: 50) Ted's paranoia (his delusions of derisive laughter at his sexual inadequacy) should not, therefore, be read as the response to his external oppression but rather the manifestation of his own internal desires. Much like the case study from which Freud develops his theory of paranoia, Ted's delusions of a persecutory God represent his own desires to both acknowledge and disavow his complicity in systems of capitalist realism.[1] As set out in Ted's deliberation as to whether to pursue AM's fool's errand:

It couldn't be any worse there, than here. Colder, but that didn't matter much. Hot, cold, hail, lava, boils or locusts – it never mattered: the machine masturbated and we had to take it or die (Ellison 2011: loc.202).

In masturbation, AM acts on Ted's behalf to enjoy the guiltless pleasure derived from brutal exploitation. This exploitation has made Ted the group's de facto leader but his gain comes at the price of his conscience and can therefore only be acknowledged through the paranoid delusions of a masturbating computer that laughs at his sexual failures. This accentuates the way in which the turn to capitalist realism is not a passive act but one to which acquiescence is reached through unconscious desires. It is not simply because capitalism offers no alternative that it is accepted but because capitalism provides pleasures for which we are prepared to pay, even in (other people's) blood.

In the story, this culminates in a plot twist worthy of *The Twilight Zone*. The group arrive in a frozen cavern to find the promised cans of food but no can-opener: they have the food but cannot eat. Enraged, Benny attacks Gorrister and Ted, averring that AM will never let this suffering end, grabs an icicle and rams it into Benny's side, killing him. Ellen, recognising Ted's plan, kills Nimdok, and, before AM can intervene, Ted kills Ellen. Thus, Ted enacts the greatest

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act of violence against the band of marginalised figures, to whom he was a leader, in an act that emphatically stresses his reprisal of the phallus and his capacity to use it to exercise authority. This act momentarily reverses the displacement of his desires onto AM – AM has lost its function to enact Ted's desires, Ted is no longer able to displace his hostility onto AM – causing the logic of the text to short-circuit. Faced with his own desire, Ted's narration breaks away as he wilfully tries to read gratitude in the eyes of the woman he has killed.

Conclusion

The short story concludes (possibly) hundreds of years in the future. AM has punished Ted by transforming him into a great soft jelly thing. Smoothly rounded, with no mouth, with pulsing white holes filled by fog where my eyes used to be. Rubbery appendages that were once my arms; bulks rounding down into legless humps of soft slippery matter. I leave a moist trail when I move. Blotches of diseased, evil gray come and go on my surface, as though light is being beamed from within (Ellison 2011: loc.419).

No longer aware of the flow of time, Ted's mind is still (he claims) inviolable: 'he left my mind intact. I can dream, I can wonder, I can lament. I remember all four of them. I wish-'. (Ellison 2011: loc.415) This trailing 'wish' embodies that which Ted cannot recognise himself – that he and other social leaders like him have produced this world and continue to reaffirm and reproduce it. The crisis with which the story's readers are left is that of being politically conscious and wholly passive, and is captured neatly in the story's final lines: 'I have no mouth. And I must scream.' (Ellison 2011: loc.422) This contradiction sits neatly within the rubric of capitalist realism, and yet, through its contradictory expression throughout the text as a repressed desire, it obliges its reader to consider his own complicity with capitalism. It is with this reflexive quality and its lapses between conscious/unconscious and ideology/critique that fiction can open new critical vistas on an unassailable capitalism. Fiction might not allow readers to act but might instead grant them a way to think.

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Notes

[1] 'What was for the patient a delusion of sexual persecution was retroactively transformed into religious megalomania. The persecutor was initially taken to be the patient's doctor, Prof. Flechsig, with God Himself taking his place in due course.' (Freud 2002: 11)

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Sadek Kessous is a PhD Candidate at Newcastle University, UK. His research concentrates on literary representations of society after neoliberalism. He has published on globalisation in the work of American novelist Joshua Ferris. For more information about his research please follow him at academia.edu.