

all inclusive!

the poetic and capitalism

Inaugural lecture

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1. WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

Ladies and gentlemen,

Imagine, a literary description presents us with a world that is more agreeable, more interesting, more beautiful, more honest, and musically richer than our own. This description pleases us. It even moves us and appears precious. We come to think that the world represented therein really is more agreeable, more interesting, more beautiful, more honest and richer in affect. But if I now ask “Shall we elect to make that world a reality?” I am pretty sure we would all immediately have our doubts as to the feasibility of the description. “Our world is not ideal,” we say, “but then, an ideal world, come on...”. We find the literary description inspiring, attractive too, and it’s certainly a text we keep in mind, but not as an actual building plan.

In a nutshell, this is about one of the tensions between the aesthetic and the political. The literary sketch that affected you, that asked for your judgement, and with which you entered into a relationship, is a question of aesthetics. That which you choose and the way in which you act in society is a question of politics. Aesthetics and politics are thus distinguishable concepts. They are nevertheless closely correlated. For example, you may be fond of a political *style* – which is an aesthetic category. Or that which attracts you to an artwork may have far-reaching political implications. That does not necessarily mean that aesthetics and politics are concurrent. We can be concerned with politics in a way that does not accord with what we support aesthetically, something that leads to forms of schizophrenia. We sense, for example, what a more beautiful world is, but we do not choose it. Or we make a fair political choice, for example that everyone must be able to eat well, and meanwhile we accept something as repugnant as the bio-industry.²⁷

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It is within the framework of the intrinsic relationship between aesthetics and politics that I deem literature to be important. By that I do not mean to say that literature and art must take political questions as their theme. It is much more complicated than that, as will become apparent today from my exploration of the relationship between the poetic and capitalism. This seemingly economic system is also a power structure: a matter of politics. Further, it is a system that in one way or another is highly attractive or repulsive: a matter of aesthetics.

2. THE QUESTION OF WHETHER CAPITALISM IS POETIC

As a child, I had a remarkable experience in the house of one of my grandmothers, Hanneke van Rosmalen. The former farm on which she lived lay in a hamlet where two roads crossed: the Kruisstraat (“Crossroad”). There, on Sunday afternoons, I would run my hands over the

²⁷ The relationship between aesthetics and politics has been an item of research since classical antiquity. Lately, the relationship has been researched most inspiringly by, among others, Isobel Armstrong (2000), Jacques Rancière (2004), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999). About this last see also Mieke Bal (2002: 286-323).

velvety surface of the table cloth: against the nap, with the nap. But one day this game was stopped in its tracks. Gran had announced that she had watched a boxing match the previous night. In my head things went quiet. Did my silent and peaceable gran watch boxing matches in the dead of night? In the sixties and early seventies of the last century, Dutch TV always broadcast a test picture after midnight. What match had broken that trend? Caught up in an intense moment I saw the face of my smiling gran, enjoying her memories, reflected in a television screen with the shadow of boxers.

Later, the situation became even more intensely charged. The fight involved Cassius Clay, the man who won gold at the Olympic games in Rome in 1960. Inspired by Malcolm X, Clay, who because of his virtuoso language skills was also called “the Louisville Lip”, decided that henceforth he would live his life as Cassius X, where the X referred to the name of one of his ancestors – crossed out due to slavery. The X quickly made way for the name Muhammad Ali. Due to his refusal to serve in the US army fighting against the Vietcong, boxing authorities deprived him of his title of world champion in 1965, and the political authorities refused him his passport. He was summoned before the court. In 1967, Ali fought in what for the time being would be his last match. But he made a legendary *comeback*. In 1974 he once again fought for the world championship: against George Foreman in Kinshasha, Congo. It was a tough fight, nicknamed “the Rumble in the Jungle”, which gran recalled with bright eyes. Unbelievably, Ali had won.²⁸

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Looking back on this situation – of the hamlet, the little farm with my quiet, white gran alone in the night in front of the TV on which two black Americans are boxing in a stadium full of excitement in Congo – I wondered how to define the situation. It’s not a story. There are certain histories, or historical developments, that play a role, but those are locked in the “now” of the situation. Neither is the room in the house the setting for a dramatic act playing out between actors. Between all subjects and objects (gran, boxers, chair, television, table), between all textures (glass of the TV, wallpaper, table cloth), between all postures, positions and sounds there is a relationship that in a strange, intense way is charged and opens up new fields of meaning. This is why I want to call the situation poetic.

Paradoxically enough, I thought to myself, once I had conceived of the situation in this way, this was only possible through a system that in itself seems distinctly un-poetic: modern capitalism. Chamsi el Ojeili and Patrick Hayden, basing themselves on Buick and Crump (1986), define it as follows: “Capitalism is an economic system based on the generalized production and circulation of commodities – goods and services on sale on a market – and the production and circulation of these commodities is centred around the drive for profit” (2006:50). Defined like this, capitalism sounds definitely un-poetic. Yet, it is also a system that in one way or another is highly attractive or repulsive, and that has considerable aesthetic powers. This led me to the question whether capitalism is, indeed, un-poetic.

Since the nineteenth century wave after wave of the artistic and literary elite has critiqued capitalism in the name of the poetic. As the American poet and theorist Ron Silliman says: “Every major western poetic movement has been an attempt to get beyond the repressing

²⁸ Recorded in the magnificent documentary *When We Were Kings* by Leon Gast (1997).

elements of capitalist reality” (1984:130). And indeed, only a few artistic movements judge capitalism positively: the early twentieth-century futurism, for example. It will not surprise anyone that with social realism communist regimes propagated a form of writing for decades that was integrally anti-capitalist in its outlook. But it goes much further. The European writers of the nineteenth century; authors from all colonial territories; the twentieth-century historical avant-garde or the International Situationists; nearly all feminist texts; many variants of postmodernism; pretty much all postcolonial texts; much contemporary worldwide or so-called global – indicating the mixture of global and local – literature; in short, the many artistic and intellectual elites of the last one-and-a-half centuries have nearly all gone on the rampage against capitalism.

Now much of this criticism has not achieved anything. That could be proof of the impotence of artistic elites or of the supremacy of the capitalist system. Marx and Engels in their *Communist Manifesto* stated that capitalism had “converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-laborers”.²⁹ More recently, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman claims that capitalism has emptied out the *agora* or public space – the area between the political and private spheres.³⁰ Politics became, also because of that, increasingly impotent, and the real power of capitalism could withdraw from public decision making. Bauman bases his analysis on Claus Offe, who in turn maintains that the role of the artistic and intellectual elite has thereby become futile, or worse, that its critical endeavour is quite simply inadequate (Offe, 1996:12). This could indeed explain the futility of criticism.

My question whether capitalism is really un-poetic leads me to another consideration. Suppose that *capitalism is poetic*, in one way or another? Then literature and capitalism have traits in common. If literature and capitalism resemble one another in certain respects, that too can explain why literature’s criticism of capitalism has missed its mark or had little force. There may still be moral criticism then, but it is put forward in, structurally, the same kind of language. It is as if someone shouts to someone else: “You should not shout!”

Please do not misunderstand, capitalism is not the Great Evil. It is fascinating. It has yielded great profits. But it has also demanded unimaginable sacrifices and caused enormous poverty. Sometimes it glitters brilliantly. It has also, in its course, produced an awful amount of ugliness. Reading the work of James Bellamy Foster, I can do no more than subscribe to the idea that a world ecologically amenable to life is not *possible* under capitalism. This system desires infinite expansion whereas we live in a finite world.³¹ The economist Joseph Schumpeter, who admired capitalism, defined it in 1942 as a system of “creative destruction”. Schumpeter based himself on the work of the German sociologist Werner Sombart, who, in his turn, was deeply influenced by Nietzsche. In all three cases we are talking about thinkers who consider the rule of human beings over the world a positive thing, also when this may lead to massive destruction. Sombart, for instance, called the disappearance of all forests in Europe a problem that stimulated creativity. Granted, capitalism is creative in an unprecedented manner. But it may

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²⁹ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. Transl. Paul. M. Sweezy (1998:6).

³⁰ See Zygmunt Bauman (1999:97-99).

³¹ See James Bellamy Foster (2000 and 2002).

lead to forms of alienation that threaten human existence, or the quality of life – all life.³² The characterization of capitalism as a system of creative destruction has, due to its paradoxical character, something poetic to it as well. And that brings me back to my hypothesis. In relation to this there remains the question of how, in methodical terms, I can test this.

The poetic, just like narrative, is not strictly bound to the medium of language. That was already apparent from the situation with my gran. But the way in which people have thought about the poetic does begin in the study of language, in linguistics, that is, and in literary studies. In language, the poetic comes most markedly to the fore in literature, and therein most markedly in poetry; at least, so it appears from the definition of the poetic provided by the early-twentieth-century linguist and literary scholar Roman Jakobson. Considering language as an instrument of communication, he traced six different functions of language. In most texts these functions occur together, but never with equal dominance. Texts in which the poetic function is dominant can be called literary. These are, according to Jakobson, texts that focus attention on themselves, on their own construction and content.³³ A text in which the poetic function is dominant does not concern itself with conveying a message, but lingers, because it is not immediately clear what the text is or does.

Let it be clear that Jakobson's definition is not the ultimate one. The poetic, defined here as a distinct function, is not definable on the basis of just that one function, or aspect. Jakobson's definition does, however, indicate an important aspect and above all makes a systematic comparison with capitalism possible. In what follows, I shall therefore not be talking of the way in which capitalism is a theme in literature, because that doesn't make systematic deliberation possible. Literature knows so many themes: love, violence, despair, ecstasy, you name it. Those themes are, in a certain sense, arbitrary. What I wish to explore is whether there exists a systematic relationship between some structural properties of the poetic capacity of language and structural properties of capitalism. Here, Jakobson offers a primary point of entry.

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3. THE POETIC FUNCTION AND THE MECHANICS OF PROJECTION

The poetic aspect that interested Jakobson in particular was “estrangement”. A literary text works powerfully, according to Jakobson and his kind, because it thwarts expectations. In order to clarify how a literary text does this, Jakobson puts forth a definition well-known in scholarly circles. The poetic function works by projecting “the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination”. Take the following passage from a novel by the writer Kader Abdolah, who fled his country of birth, Iran, and now lives and writes in the Netherlands:

³² On Schumpeter, Sombart en Nietzsche, see Hugo Reinert & Erik S. Reinert (2006).

³³ However pleasant this clarity may be: it is problematic. The literary scholar Derek Attridge (1999:181-182) made that clear in relation to Jacques Derrida's work. The difficulty with literature is that it requires a law that says what literature is, but that literature withdraws perpetually from this law at the same time.

It was a Friday morning, the beginning of spring. The sun was shining agreeably and one could smell earth in the garden, the trees had fresh leaves. Plants were having their first little buds. Birds were flying from one branch to another and were singing for the garden.

Het was een vrijdagochtend, het begin van de lente. De zon scheen aangenaam en de tuin rook naar grond, de bomen hadden jong blad. Planten kregen hun eerste knopjes. Vogels vlogen van de ene naar de andere tak en zongen voor de tuin.

(Kader Abdolah, *Het huis van de moskee*, 2005:9)

In this somewhat clichéd description there is an interesting little hook: “Birds were flying from one branch to another and sang for the garden.” *For?* Within the clichéd description they should have been singing *in* the garden. The “for” makes strange, stops the reader in her tracks, as a result of which she lingers upon the text. Immediately, we are faced with more than just making strange. There is a change in intensity. In terms of affects, the passage starts to work differently; it may lead, for instance, to a feeling of joy or irritation. And all that happens, according to Jakobson, because of the simple projection of one element from the one language-axis to the other.

The *axis of communication* concerns the ordering of the sentence. Here, the combination of words immediately gives rise to non-equivalence. The sentence demands logic and installs a hierarchy. In this way, the subject governs the finite form of the verb. “Birds fly from one branch to another...” is grammatically correct, but “birds flies” is wrong. “Branch” may perfectly well be the subject, or direct object, but cannot become the finite form of the verb. “Branch I in the garden?” is therefore also wrong. “But,” you will say, “that’s perfectly possible in literature!” Precisely. Because in literature, according to Jakobson, the combination-axis is related to the *axis of selection* in a special way. On this language-axis words can be grouped according to, for example, word class, field of meaning, or sound. Apart from that grouping, here too a principle of equivalence applies: all words exist equally and can be chosen equally. What is typically literary or poetic now, says Jakobson, is that the equivalence of selection projects itself into the logical or hierarchical *non*-equivalence in the sentence. The logical “singing *in* the garden” thereby becomes “singing *for*” but more oddly could also have been, “singing under the garden” or “between the garden”. The whole sentence could have been changed by projections into, for example: “Singers birded from one garden to another and branched for the flying.”

Now, let’s discuss this projection first. The possibility of projecting *every* word exists thanks to the fact that projection works mechanically. For example, the Persian poetess Forough Farrokhzad writes:

life is perhaps the lighting of a cigarette
in the narcotic pause between two bouts of love-making in...

*het leven is wellicht het opsteken van een sigaret
in de narcotische pauze tussen twee vrijpartijen in...*

(Forough Farrokhzad, “een andere geboorte”, *Mijn minnaar*, 2007:29; translation in Dutch by Amir Afrassibi)

We can ask ourselves what that “lit cigarette” means in relation to life, to that pause, or to love-making. That’s not what this is about now. Neither is it about the poetic force or quality of this image. It’s about the possibility to be able to project everything mechanically, hence to brush aside something else, in this case behind “life is...”. Elsewhere in this poem we find: “perhaps a long street”. The lyrical subject also says: “a lane through my heart has been nabbed”. That could equally well have been “stabbed”.

Even though poetic projection works simply mechanically, it opens up a force-field with many possibilities. On the one hand, projection makes possible, in a systematic way, splendid findings: unsuspected, impossible, previously unthinkable ideas that suddenly open up a new world. On the other hand, poetic projection knows no mercy, no respect, no limit, and can bring people to ghastly things. This double potential makes the poetic function analogous to capitalism. And my idea is that it is more than an analogy. Maybe language, which was there so much earlier, virtually drew capitalism into itself over time – until it became actual.³⁴

Within capitalism, everything is in principle tradable: from ping-pong balls to diamonds, feather brushes, land, needles, fabrics, erasers, blood, rights or ideas. In a sense even human beings can be bought, like soccer players or brides. The modern capitalistic market considers every material or immaterial thing as equivalent in the sense that it must have equal access to the market. This concerns the axis of selection. In their status with regard to the market all things, material and immaterial, can consequently be projected into the market to become there a tradable product, or *commodity*, on the access of combination. That access concerns the market’s functional connections. In principle, everyone can start out equally on the market and all things can be connected to one another by means of transactions. One coffee trader seeks another, and they seek an intermediary. Products change owner. But here too, just as in the sentence, the rule applies that as soon as combination commences, logical and functional non-equivalences arise immediately. Buyer and seller are never equally powerful. Not all products are equally tradable and not all combinations possible.

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Let me specify the analogy that is at stake. Linguistically, there are no rules whereby some words may be projected and others not. Everything is allowed. Everything may be projected from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. On the plane of the so-called pure market of capitalism (the state in which the market is not regulated by politico-judicial powers) the same applies. Just as poetic projection works neutrally, mechanically, and stands open for everything, this is also the case for the pure capitalistic market.

All the same, Jakobson’s poetic projection cannot explain an important issue. As Hans Bertens puts it: “...it is obvious that the principle of equivalence has even less to say about the relative *merit*, the *value* of individual works of literature” (2001:49, emphasis his own). In other words, Jakobson’s definition cannot show how poetry is valued highly or not so highly, or why one image is qualitatively more successful than the other. Here the appreciation of literature – and by implication of products – is in the proceedings. This appreciation depends partly on quality. A rotting crop of lettuce is worth less than one straight from the field. But even then

³⁴ By this I am driving at a difference between virtuality and actuality that Gilles Deleuze made. Virtual and actual are both real. The virtual is there already, only it is not yet actualised.

the question is how much that rotting or fresh crop is worth after all. Each value (here I have to omit a more detailed elaboration on that term) is determined in an interplay of forces, or capacities, and powers. Allow me to consider the poetic more closely in relation to this.

4. POETIC ABUNDANCE: POTENCY VERSUS POWER

Capitalism is not equivalent to the prevailing political power. It has toppled whole societies. It has deprived millions of people of opportunities *and* given opportunities for a better life to those who would not otherwise have had them. That does not mean that capitalism works without consideration for the individual. Adam Smith's famous formula that the capitalistic market distributes everything rightly and fairly as with an invisible hand has never become a reality in the history of capitalism. There were and are always political and legal powers which regulate the market. In the course of its existence, capitalism has also become a power itself. According to Bauman and others, it is even the only true power at the moment. How does the poetic play a role in relation to this?

Fundamental here is the work of one of Jakobson's contemporaries: the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin, parody is characteristic of Western literature, in which the following applies:

For any and every straightforward genre, any and every direct discourse – epic, tragic, lyric, philosophical – may and indeed must itself become the object of representation, the object of a parodic travesty 'mimicry'. It is as if such mimicry rips the word away from its object, disunifies the two...
(Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981:55)

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Here Bakhtin is not discussing opposites, such as good is opposed to bad. For Bakhtin, the issue is parodying, which he states "must" happen. Why *must* this be? Simple: whenever everything can be projected from one language axis into the other, the implication is that a radical alternative to what is said is enclosed in language systematically, and therefore always. That is not because we can or should venture to *choose* this alternative. The radical alternative is just a component of the wider arsenal of possibilities. This capacity is therefore not strictly poetic by nature. This is evident from the most simple slip of the tongue. Someone recently phoned to cancel my son's cello lesson because the teacher "had contrived, uhm, had to drive to the hospital."

Always the nature of saying itself – a text or speaker – can be changed too, and possibly made ridiculous. Take this opening stanza: "O shining glow / Of socialism, / Consuming capitalism / As the sky does the clouds." The words in this poem refer to an actual socialism that must consume a capitalism that exists in reality. If someone now wants to parody this text, the nature of that reference changes. Should it become clear from my intonation that I am parodying the poem, then I am no longer referring to the reality external to language but to the

style of the poem – in this case one by the Dutch poet Herman Gorter.³⁵ Put in another way: in a parody linguistic expression itself becomes the object of representation.

Concerning this possibility, Bakhtin concealed the radical implications of his analysis. He had to work under Stalin and knew the dangers and cruelty of totalitarianism. For that reason he emphasized how language refers to a reality. Reality is always too contradictory and too diverse to fit in one serious genre. Laughter must, Bakhtin says, offer a correction to an approach to reality that is too one-sided. Indeed, laughter can have such a function. But in relation to the prevailing power laughter can function more radically. Then it is not what the authority talks about but the authority itself that is ridiculed.

Now, every totalitarian system wishes to exclude such subversion and for that reason it aspires to be taken seriously – whether this is to do with a religious, political, philosophical, erotic or economic system. The desire and the will of totalitarian power to govern all facets of societal life, which Hannah Arendt sees embodied in every secret service, is fuelled by fear. Here a distinct kind of capitalistic schizophrenia is concerned. Capitalism needs and propagates the so-called free market. But that market must not be free on the plane of information, for instance, where capitalism wants to hide that it is a system of *unpaid costs*. This applies, to mention one thing, to the extraction of raw materials as cheaply as possible or to pollution of the environment free of serious (financial) consequences. It can also apply to unpaid work. See, for example, how in booming cities, not in the nineteenth century but *now*, millions of ex-farmers are making things pretty much without any rights that we are quite happy to buy in cheaply. This underpaid workforce does not fall outside of capitalism. The parts of the living world that are not really paid must *appear* to be of another kind. It is this quasi-exclusion that makes profit possible, by concealing the true costs or postponing these until the future.

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The concealment is telling. Whereas capitalism seems to be nothing more than an economic system, it is also a political system that directs everybody's choices. It wishes to be a system that encompasses everything and everyone. Does it therefore fear laughter or deny it its own domain? I can answer that question with the help of a text, called "The", written by the most famous avant-garde artist of the twentieth century: Marcel Duchamp.

The

If you come into * linen, your time is thirsty because * ink saw some wood intelligent enough to get giddiness from a sister. However, even it should be smilable to shut * hair whose * water writes always in * plural, they have avoided * frequency, meaning mother in law; * powder will take a chance; and * road could try. But after somebody brought any multiplication as soon as * stamp was out, a great many cords refused to go through. Around * wire's people, who will be able to sweeten * rug, that is to say, why must every patents look for a wife? Pushing four dangers near * listening-place, * vacation had not dug absolutely nor this likeness has eaten.

³⁵ "O lichtende gloed / Van het socialisme, / Verterend het kapitalisme / In zich, als de hemel de wolken doet."
See Herman Gorter (1977:117).

Replace each * with the word: *the*.

(Marcel Duchamp, "The", *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 1989:175)

This text parodies every text in which one is asked to "cross out that which does not apply", or "replace this with that". The idea is that if we replace the asterisks with "the" we will have a comprehensible text. But that won't wash. Replacing the asterisks with "the" does not make a difference. The text remains equally incomprehensible and "the" could just as well have been another word. That makes this text funny too – and not without reason.

Apparently it does not matter that wrong, illogical or ungrammatical sentences arise in Duchamp's text. Concerning replacement, "the" is equally important as, for instance, "multiplication". Consequently, we could end up in the void of cynicism or of indifference, as a result of which meaning has no worth at all. And must we not always strive for worthwhile meaning? Not just for its own sake. Ron Silliman, whom we met earlier, has stated that, as a result of capitalism, linguistic meaning has become a product.³⁶ Or rather, we are forced by capitalism to *produce* meaning with language in the same way we produce broom handles or cotton. In order to become not simply part of the great production process, art, or literature, must refuse that production of meaning, says Silliman. And that is precisely what Duchamp is doing here.

However, that does not mean that Duchamp's text only makes sense as critique or as negative pole. The positive sense of his operation is that *everything* has an equal potential, even if the sentence is thrown logically or grammatically into confusion as a result. Furthermore, it is apparent from Duchamp's text how the poetic originates from the complete openness of the language system and the limitless potential therein. Therefore, the equivalent does not project itself, poetically seen, *into* the un-equivalent. It forces its way into it and exceeds it. I wish to call that the radical *abundance* of the poetic, or, positively, as the poetic's potential. I agree in part with Jacques Rancière, here, who defines literature's "regime of truth" in a similar way. Where I deviate from Rancière is that he considers this regime of truth as the result of a paradigm shift that takes place in the nineteenth century. I consider the poetic's abundance as a potential that has existed for a long time already. Consequently, I do not consider it in terms of a democratic equivalence, but as a living, excessive potency, in which seriousness and humor are equally forceful, just as original and parody, unique specimen and reproduction. This poetic abundance knows no exclusivity. Through poetic's abundance each part potentially weighs the same or is equal in value. And that's not all. As the term abundance suggests, it concerns a potency that will always exceed any system that will want to impose limits.³⁷

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This capacity does not agree well with the totalitarian power of capitalism. As we have just seen, one form of capitalistic schizophrenia concerns the proclamation of absolute freedom whereas actual costs need to be concealed. Another form of schizophrenia concerns the fact that while everything falls under the system, value is realized through a quasi-exclusivity. You

³⁶ Ron Silliman (1984:121-133).

³⁷ When Rancière deals with literature's regime of truth, he states: "C'est, premièrement, la suppression de toute hiérarchie des sujets et des épisodes : toute vie est matière à écriture et toute manifestation insignifiante ou tout objet prosaïque est également propre à en écrire la puissance de sens et d'expression. C'est, deuxièmement, un nouveau rapport de la partie au tout. Le tout n'est plus l'enchaînement des causes et des effets, l'ordonnance d'ensembles des parties bien agencées. Il est la puissance commune qui habite tout détail et tout phrase." (2007: 149).

buy a genuine Van Gogh and do not wish for this to be replaced by a poster or by the word “The”. This capitalistic exclusivity is determinative of value, establishes hierarchy, and demands absolute sincerity. Such sincerity is rendered absurd by the poetic potency that is principally all-inclusive. The capitalistic fear that results from this is evident from the way in which the system excludes laughter from a specific domain: that of money. If we collectively interpret money as parody, the capitalistic system is dead. That is not, then, because we have found a true value, but because value itself has become unstable. We are thus not rendering absurd that which capitalism is about or that to which it contributes, but we are parodying capitalism itself. For example, we go to buy bread with a wheelbarrow full of banknotes. That is a hilarious situation, and one which has great poetic force, unless of course we are still operating in the domain of sincerity and there is soaring inflation. One of the reasons why capitalism is so afraid of inflation is that money would no longer be taken seriously. And we, as capitalist subjects, fear the same thing.

Let me summarize. Jakobson’s poetic projection concerns a systematically inherent, mechanically working capacity in language. It is about the unlimited, merciless, disrespectful, fascinating projection of the principle of equivalence of the selection-axis into the combination-axis – a projection that works not just in language but also in capitalism. Here the poetic is analogous to capitalism, in which everything in principle must be able to be a tradable product. This makes it such that literature can never criticize capitalism completely effectively. In some ways, it is the pot calling the kettle black.

36 But the consequences of the poetic projection are different depending on whether they are seen politically and aesthetically or economically. Due to the fact that the poetic principle works principally inclusively, types of exclusivity and hierarchy are always unstable. The capacity of the poetic principle implies that all components of the language system can participate and are and remain potentially of equal value. Here the poetic offers a radical alternative for capitalism, which works after all through exclusivity and the sincerity of value. And because language can create reality, this poetic capacity goes beyond the domain of language and can infiltrate the existing societal forms of inequality, even if as a result the existing logic and hierarchy is disrupted.

This much should be clear: the poetic has a split relation to capitalism. We shall see this again when I trace, in conclusion, a *historic-systematic* relation between the poetic and capitalism.

5. THE POETIC AND VECTORIZATION: CAPITALISM IN THE PHASE OF UNCERTAINTY

In *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (2006), the sociologist Richard Sennett outlines the development of modern capitalism in phases. He sees the first seven decades of the twentieth century as a separate phase, which he characterises as a *narrative* phase. Narrative is a capacity in language that is not strictly literary, but that does emerge as a dominant feature of literature. What does Sennett mean when he talks about narrative and can we extrapolate from his considerations that there can also be a poetic phase of capitalism?

In the nineteenth century it becomes apparent how modern capitalism is anarchic by nature and potentially self-destructive. Marx and Engels observed already that unemployment

is not an aberration of capitalism but a functional instrument: a firm hand that brings the workers to heel.³⁸ Later, unemployment is even seen by others as the ultimate terror which capitalism threatens. But even that terror applies only to a certain range. If social tension becomes simply too great, the system explodes. The possibility of self-destruction is more than a possibility in the nineteenth century. Western capitalism almost bursts apart due to an internal antagonism. The class of workers stands directly opposed to the propertied class and the social tension quickly becomes so great that capitalism threatens to explode.

This threat of self-destruction is dealt with, in the first instance, predominantly by policial and juridical means. One of these means is what Saskia Sassen calls the construction of “the legality of a disadvantaged subject” (2006:110-121): anchoring workers’ disadvantage in the law. Thus the nineteenth-century United States trade unions were branded forms of conspiracy by the judge. But the solution cannot continually be realised *ad hoc* by police or courts. According to the famous German sociologist Max Weber it was the idea of German chancellor Bismarck to neutralise the endemic threat of self-destruction by a specific kind of militarization of society. Society had to become an all-inclusive hierarchical organisation, within which preferably the entire working population would receive a function which was ensured for the long term. Bauman calls the result the “40/40” society, in which you work for forty years forty hours a week for the same company. The capitalistic societies of the first seven decades of the twentieth century are organized in this way, even though in Europe they are more social-capitalistic by nature and in the US took shape as *managed capitalism*.³⁹ According to Sennett these societies are settled due to the fact that people live according to a predictable *narrative*. From an age at which they are conscious, they know where they come from, their place in the social scale and what salary grade they can expect. They pay into their pension, decades later it pays out. It is advisable to be loyal to the company providing work.

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The logic of the narrative is characterised by a specific vectorization. Take this opening to Renate Dorresteins’s novel *Zolang er leven is (As long as there is life)*:

Down in the wild garden, on the border with the bee field, the children were entangled in an excited game for which they were already making up the rules. Perspiring, they hunted one another between the man-high shrubs. With the wooden spoons they had found in the kitchen they thrashed the overhanging branches aside.

Achter in de verwilderde tuin, op de grens met het bijenveld, waren de kinderen verwikkeld in een opgewonden spel waarvan ze de regels al doende bedachten. Bezweet joegen ze elkaar tussen de manshoge heesters achterna. Met de pollepels die ze in de keuken hadden gevonden, ranselden ze overhangende takken opzij.

(Renate Dorrestein, *Zolang er leven is*, 2004:9)

The sentences do not act *against* each other, as dramatic sentences would, but follow logically on from one another. In that order an enormous series of possibilities is gradually restricted. Of all prepositional possibilities here “down in” has been chosen, of all possible gardens a wild

³⁸ See also David Schweickart in *After Capitalism*.

³⁹ James Fulcher (2004:41-49).

one, and it is not a gardener in that garden but children playing. Each new element fits itself in logically in connection with the introduced elements. Nevertheless, frequently something strange will arise, like the wooden spoons here. The narrative logic demands that the logic of those strange elements be reinstated. The vectorization of a story thus works like a flexible cone. The cone forms itself, stretching outward, extending and closing in, then turning back, opening up again, to start growing once more in one dominant direction.

This narrative pulse of opening and closing in one fixed direction is not only a phenomenon of the first decades of the twentieth century. In *The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth*, Liah Greenfeld (2001) compares the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century with seventeenth century England. The Dutch Republic is seen by many as the prefiguration of modern capitalism. Greenfeld's question, then, is why this precursor did not develop as a vector and lead to the first real form of production capitalism. The answer is that the Republic lacked such a vector. According to Greenfeld, capitalism requires an organising principle which she terms *concerted action*, an orchestrated action leading in a fixed direction. In England this was realised in the form of a consciously built nationalism which orchestrated capitalism – which provided it with a *narrative* and a vector in the direction of the future.

Something goes wrong during the transition between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century capitalism and the wilder production capitalism. Capitalism ends up in what I can call, in line with Sennett's analogy, a *dramatic* phase. The logic of drama is defined by vectors that point to one another, and that may, in extreme cases, become antagonistic. One speaker says something and another reacts.⁴⁰ In principle, a reaction in drama is not in agreement because otherwise there is no development and no drama. The drama's ultimate antagonism can be that one of the speakers inflicts silence upon the other. With that, the drama eliminates itself. Well, due to the marked social antagonism in nineteenth-century capitalism, I consider this to be a dramatic phase. Capitalism can destroy itself because one party ultimately inflicts silence upon the other. That is clear to the authorities as well, and hence the strategy of militarization which led to narrativization.

38

In its turn, the narrativization of the first seven decades of the twentieth century goes wrong again from the Seventies. James Fulcher terms the phase which capitalism then enters *remarketized capitalism* (and Susan Strange calls the protuberances of this *casino-capitalism*).⁴¹ In this phase, Sennett finds the growing IT industry and technology to be characteristic. The pioneers, the employers and employees but also the investors in that industry take great risks, change jobs quickly, know little loyalty to their company and live in permanent uncertainty – *Unsicherheit*. Coincidence or not, this all happens at the point where capitalism has realized an ultimate globalization. Who or what must orchestrate capitalism? That can no longer be national governments, with their ideal of the powerful nation state. We're talking of great uncertainty. What kind of vectorization is involved now?

Take the following untitled poem from the Dutch poetess Saskia de Jong:

⁴⁰ The Latin word for actor *hypocrita* comes from the Greek *hypokritēs* that comes from *hupokrynomai*: "to answer" or "to make up one's own mind". See Wikander (2002). In the case of absurd theatre, in which speakers do not respond to each other logically, there is immediately another kind of logic involved, a poetic one. More on that later.

⁴¹ James Fulcher (2004:47-57, 78-81 en 94-95).

a naked city stands, a name and deeds
a treasure a fathom full with rustling
who is going for counsel to the perpetrator
when in the streets houses the unguarded fall

er staat een naakte stad, een naam en daden

een schat een vadem vol met ruisen

wie gaat te rade bij de dader

als in de straten huizen de onbewaakte vallen

(Saskia de Jong, "(...)", *resistent*, 2006:11)

In Western languages sentences run from left to right. In poetry this horizontal direction is projected vertically. There appears to be *another* projection, then, besides Jakobson's. That projection does not simply lead to a vector from top to bottom, but changes an *axis* to a *plane*, or even a space. This poem, for instance, begins with "a naked city stands" but this is related diagonally with retrospective effect to "fall". We will have to move continuously back and forth, up and down, and diagonally. That leads to uncertainty. What happens? Where does it come from? These questions are barely answerable. We find ourselves on a poetic plane. Whether we speak of narrative forms of uncertainty or dramatic ones, they are all geared towards the future on the basis of questions such as: What is going to happen, or what is the other going to say? But the direction suggested by these questions is, in a sense, one-, perhaps two-dimensional. Poetic uncertainty is multi-dimensional.

39

The resulting poetic uncertainty can be ignored by looking for the anecdote, the story behind the poem. Another solution can be that, however strange the poem might seem, there is always a kind of unity on the plane of content.⁴² Or one looks for a central image, a metaphor, which connects the parts of the whole.⁴³ This kind of strategy can maybe work for individual poems, but not really for the poetic *per se*. It cannot be decided beforehand or afterwards which word in the passage just cited is driving the other words or connecting them. One could say: "It is clear that its about a city!" The answer to that is: No, there is a city, a fathom, a treasure, a perpetrator, a rustling, a fall and a nakedness – and so on.

The poetic opening up of vectors and the principle uncertainty with which that goes hand in hand means that I, further to the analyses of Sennett, Bauman and Fulcher, can label the current phase of capitalism as a poetic one. Do not misunderstand: the previous phases have not been supplanted. There are enough dramatic confrontations. But a social revolt does not seem imminent. As Ellen Meiksins Wood (2003) and Saskia Sassen (2006) have argued convincingly, nation states certainly still have a role, but they do not orchestrate capitalism by providing it with a mission, in the form of a story, that is geared towards the future. It is possible that authoritarian great powers will provide capitalism with a new vector, like Azar

⁴² That is called semantic isomorphism or semantic similarity. See for example W. Bronzwaer, *Lessen in lyriek* (1993:154).

⁴³ See for example Peter Brooks, who in his *Reading for the Plot* sets the story against poetry and says of the latter: "Lyric poetry strives toward an ideal simultaneity of meaning, encouraging us to read backward as well as forward (through rhyme and repetition, for instance), to grasp the whole in one visual and auditory image.." (1992:20).

Gat (2007) indicates. For now, the situation is that capitalism has encompassed the whole world. What will come from this? Wonderful openings are possible. They may equally well be destructive.

6. THE POETIC INTEREST

How, in relation to contemporary capitalism, can the poetic play a critical role? Or does the capacity to formulate a positive alternative elapse this time because capitalism itself is in a poetic phase? One possibility is to return to Jakobson's idea of poetic estrangement and to radicalize it. However, where that capacity to unsettle is concerned, one of the more controversial Dutch poetic theorists of recent years, Jeroen Mettes, has argued convincingly that that which surprises or makes strange is not decisively poetic. The making strange is simply too often resolvable, or elapses over time because it has become recognizable. According to Mettes, who is here following the work of Gilles Deleuze and Derek Attridge, the poetic is better defined in terms of rhythm, which leads to forms of increased *intensity*. That is to say: language may speed up or slow down, it may remain exactly the same rhythmically, it may increase or decrease in volume, or it's quality may change.⁴⁴

Take the following poem from the South African poetess Antjie Krog. In this poem there is a mountain: the Table Mountain. But the poem is not just "about" this mountain.

40 Listen:

From inside from outside
From inside outside from outside inside
From the most inside outside to the most outside inside
From inside and outside name-givers to inside and most outside mountain

From inside from outside
From inside outside do outside inside hang together
Do inside name-givers hang with most outside mountain from inside to outside
From outside to inside
From inside outside

From inside Camissa from inside sweet water
From inside Camissa from inside fresh water
From the most inner inside fresh water fresh sweet
From inside from outside

⁴⁴ Mettes, in *Yang* 2006:1, refers primarily to Deleuze's *Logique du sens* and Attridge's *Poetic Rhythm*.

Van binne van buite
Van binne buite
van buite binne
Van binneste buite na buitenste binne
Van binne en buite benoemers na binne en buitenste berg

Van binne van buite
Van binne buite hang buite binne saam
hang binne benoemers met buitenste berg van binne na buite
van buite na binne
van binne buite

van binne Camissa van binne soet water
van binne Camissa van binne vars water
van binneste binne vars water vars soet
van binne van buite

(Antjie Krog, “Rondeau in vier dele”, *Liffkreet*, 2006:111)

The poetic quality and action does not in the first instance depend on surprising figurative language which is ultimately resolvable and thereby allows one the profit of a fine insight. The monomaniacal repetition, the abstraction too, is definable in terms of intensity, through speeding up and slowing down, or rather remaining the same. The white spaces in the poem are lingering points that ask for a pause. The poem stutters, forcing as a result hesitation and delay. We are asked to invest affectively in a world with an outside and an inside, and from outside the inside, and from inside the outside; a world in the present in which histories too are encapsulated, in short: a full world.

41

Investment in the poem does not lead to immediate gains, like if we would gain “meaning” for example. In the case of poetry the nature of our mode of reading changes, as Mettes suggests: “Reading, then, becomes less a matter of interpretation – the search for a meaning ‘in’ the text. It becomes more a drawing or following of lines, that can cross the page. The text does not have an inside anymore, there is an Outside that imposes itself.”⁴⁵ Consequently, reading becomes more a matter of *doing* this poem. Thereby we get into an affectively loaded situation, perhaps also in another realm of the conscious or unconscious, in the form of meditation, for example, or trance, song, dance, exaltation, or even numbness.

In terms of the analogy between the poetic and capitalism it is relevant that capitalism has led to new forms of enormous intensity. My gran could see Muhammad Ali herself, in action, in the middle of the night, *live*. But from that example it is apparent how capitalism prefers *one* kind of intensity. If capitalism already lingers through repetition, or pauses and invests time,

⁴⁵ “Lezen is dan minder interpreteren – het zoeken naar betekenis ‘in’ de tekst – dan het trekken of volgen van lijnen, die dwars over de pagina kunnen lopen. De tekst heeft geen binnenkant meer; een Buiten dringt zich op.” Mettes in *Yang* 2006:3.

then it wants demonstrable profit and within the foreseeable future – a foreseeable future that must be realized more and more quickly. Put another way, capitalism has canonized *one* form of intensity: that of continuing acceleration. That has led to, and still leads to, a frenzy, to specific forms of anesthesia and addictions, to immense destruction, to *unpaid costs*, and all that for the sake of short-term profit.

In relation to that hunt and the damage it causes, the poetic is of importance, it seems to me, not only to people in their humanity but for the whole of the living world. How for example? The foremost Dutch literary scholar of recent decades, Mieke Bal, who started out as a literary scholar but then engaged with, or sought encounters with other disciplines and media, analyses in one of her studies photos from the American artist Andres Serrano. In connection with these, she posits that they resist the “culture of speed”, as Walter Benjamin called it, and present us with possibilities of “an alternative temporality in which the past is subsumed but *not* lost in the present, because the present itself, *its* pace and instantaneity, is called to a halt, slowed down, and made an object of reflection”(Bal, 1999:65, emphasis in text). That reflection is necessary because a happy, or even just inhabitable world, cannot exist by virtue of a self-perpetuating acceleration that only serves those who reap the most of what is sown. We know in the meantime that the poetic knows acceleration, works with it, and has contributed to it. But the poetic may accelerate in a different direction, possibly being even faster there than capitalism. Or it slows down, almost becoming stationary, geared intensely toward a shifting “now” that draws histories into itself. It makes everything, potentially, of equal value. It draws in rich and poor, ugly and beautiful, mechanical and organic, in an intense manner. It deems blade of grass and mountain as being of equal importance, just as much as butterfly and human, or screwdriver and Rembrandt.

42

Should we wish to be able to partake of this, among other things *close reading* is required, a reading that never holds up, but does *uphold*. It is my firm intention to uphold myself and you in Rotterdam by continuing to *read closely*. I do not mean that in the classical sense of the *New Critics*, but as a form of scholarly attention which forms *one* parameter of the research I plan to take on. The broader framework of this is formed by the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Attention will be paid chiefly to systematic relations between literature and societal structures, or to systematic-historical connections. I gave an example of these in the above exploration. Within this framework, further research is warranted in order, in the words of Bram Leven, to consider capitalism as a system of power and relate it back to the origin of capitalism in relation to literature. Or it warrants research on how technological innovations were already encompassed in literature, but have also clutched back at literature and have made possible new forms of literature and orature.

And through all that, one set of questions will remain important: Who or what *can*, or *cannot* co-operate, act, speak, be heard or sensed in the system – on both a micro and macro level? “Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out”, says the mad King Lear when he characterizes briefly the state of affairs at the supposedly normal court. I wish to contribute to research on all these things, and still some more. I wish to stimulate such research – from now on not only in Leiden, but in Rotterdam too.

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