Some Thoughts on Capitalist Futures: An Excerpt from the SFRA 2021 Keynote

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I would again like to thank Graham J. Murphy and the executive committee of the SFRA for the kind invitation and the opportunity to speak at SFRA. It was a really enjoyable experience and I regret that it wasn't possible in a personal format. When asked by the *SFRA Review* to publish the keynote, I had to admit to myself that it did not feel ready for publication in its current form. I feel it needs further exploration, giving me a chance to incorporate aspects that were cut short from the text, adding new thoughts from the discussions afterwards and so on. But I still felt that some form of it should be included in this issue to mark its presence at the conference, whose topic "The Future of/as Inequality" is just too entangled with the exploits of capitalism to not comment on it in one way or the other. This short essay is my way of letting you in on my thought process. I have trimmed the keynote ramblings and instead offer up an extract from my "50 shades of capitalism" and their expression in science fiction.

So, as with the keynote itself, I wanted to start with a two preliminary remarks. The first is that the ideas expressed are largely based on my research for the "FutureWork" project, which is funded by the Federal Ministry of Research and Education.[1] And the second is a self-position. Given the intersectional nature of inequality, I would like to acknowledge that I am in many ways privileged: a white, male, cis-hetero European. But inequality is intersectional, and I would like to mention that I am a first-generation academic, struggling my whole professional life with the precarity that has become so endemic to academia. And I struggle still to this day without a full-time and secure position, even though funding from a Federal source sounds like quite a feat. The irony of this is not lost on me. This essay, then, wants to explore the underlying socio-political construction that enables, entrenches, and arguably generates these inequalities. Yup, you guessed it: It's capitalism.

Following Chris Harman, I would argue that capitalism is the central reason for many, if not most, of the problems, we are facing:

> Capitalism transforms society in its entirety as its sucks people […] into labouring for it. It changes the whole pattern by which humanity lives, remoulding human nature itself. It gives a new character to old oppressions and throws up completely new ones. It creates drives to war and ecological destruction. It seems to act like a force of nature, creating chaos and devastation on a scale much greater than any earthquake, hurricane or tsunami. Yet the system is not a product of nature, but of human activity, human activity that has somehow escaped from human control and taken on a life of its own. (11)

Thus, when thinking about the future as/of inequality, I return, evermore, to the idea that the central aspect we need to address is capitalism. As Marc Fisher argues, we need to articulate "new economic science fictions" as it becomes a "political imperative" to oppose capitalism and counter it by "economic science fictions that can exert pressure on capital's current monopolisation of possible realities." In this essay, then, I want to pause and consider what futures our current science fiction has in store for us.

There are so many different forms of capitalism that it is hard to limit one's exploration, so I decided against the more "classical" forms such as mid-20th century industrial capitalism or European-style Rhine capitalism. And I also excluded attempts to paint capitalism more positively, such as sustainable capitalism or green capitalism, both of which argue that the structure of capitalism can be used to promote ecological policy. Instead, I describe today some examples of what I call the "50 shades of capitalism" of the 21st century, which we encounter in an ever-growing amount of scholarly work.

A good and recent example is what Naomi Klein has termed "disaster capitalism," by which she means "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities" (6). In Germany, we are currently seeing examples of this in the way the Corona-crisis is being handled with disaster capitalists making huge profits of medical masks, testing, and app development. And I am sure there are similar examples in other countries around the globe. In popular culture, Steven Soderbergh's science-fictional film *Contagion* (2011) shows us Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law), who peddles a homeopathic drug called Forsythia through creating fake news stories, ending up making millions in stock options.

Biocapitalism, as another example, takes "materials such as egg-cells, sperm or organic tissue […] as disposable things" and uses them for "processes for capitalist accumulation" (13), as Susanne Lettow argues. The human (and non-human) body—not its labor, but the biomaterial itself—generates value. A famous example here would be the immortal cell line taken from Henrietta Lacks in 1951, which is to this day used for research and capitalist exploitation. Thierry Bardini takes this concept further, extrapolating a "genetic capitalism" (130) that will extend the idea of biocapitalism to include gene sequences, leading capitalist society not just to discipline or control its subjects but ultimately to generate them. And here we are fully in the realm of the future as inequality as expressed in the dystopian worlds of biopunk and its explorations of a posthumanity.

In the worlds of Paolo Bacigalupi, for example, posthumans are specifically engineered for obedience and servitude. In *The Windup Girl* (2009), the title character is described as an object—and here the novel can be criticized for including a problematic racialized and gendered reduction of the character. Emiko, the windup girl, is a Japanese invention created in the image of Geishas to serve the whim of a society growing old. Into her genetic make-up, her creators inject genes of loyalty and obedience taken from dogs and other companion species. A similar loyalty is bred

into the warrior species, so called augments or half-men, in the Ship Breaker trilogy.[2] Tool, the character linking all three novels, has overcome this genetic programming which binds him to military obedience, when his generals slaughter his whole pack and leave everyone to die. Both Emiko, the server, and Tool, the military grunt have been created merely to fulfill a purpose within the framework of capitalist value production.

The economic frame behind the genetic engineering becomes even more obvious in Stephanie Saulter's *Gemsigns* (2013), in which humanity becomes sterile, forcing massive shifts in demographics. Genetic engineering of servile workers becomes the solution to re-establish a growing economy, and posthumans are engineered so that they can fulfill a range of services, from autistic mathematical savants to superabled physiques for heavy work. The so-called 'gems' are property of large biotech corporations and only after years of exploitation are finally granted civil freedoms. The novel discusses the problematics of inequality, the need of the society to have gems work for the well-being of all. For genetic capitalism to function, gems need to be seen as objects, similar to dangerous machinery, in need of maintenance and supervision. In the novel, biotech corporations retain a narrative of differences of species in order keep up hegemonic superiority and the extraction of surplus value.

But not only does capitalism gain from the building blocks of life, controlling and genetically creating life, as Bardini argues. Capitalism has also found a way to accumulate profit from the "dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death," as Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee claims, resorting to "death, torture, suicide, slavery, destruction of livelihoods, and the general management of violence" (1548). Based on Achille Mbembe's idea of necropolitics, Banerjee calls this necrocapitalism. By using colonial legacies to declare continuous states of exception, necrocapitalism is able to define death worlds in which, as Warren Montag argues Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* has found a sibling: "he who with impunity may be allowed to die, slowly or quickly, in the name of the rationality and equilibrium of the market" (11).

By extrapolating necropolitical practices and combining them with the idea of genetic engineering as a capitalist technique, Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu* (2018) is a biopunk novel that explores the darkest aspects of capitalist exploitation. On the one hand, the novel extrapolates that genetic engineering will be able to bring back the Caspian Tiger, hunted to extinction because it was in the way of imperialist practices such as deforestations and the establishment of plantations. The ironic commentary of Lai's novel is that the returned tigers are resurrected only to be killed for capitalist exploitation once more, their bone marrow extracted and distilled for its perceived traits in Chinese medicine. But the genetic capitalist practice—creating new biomaterial to be used for capitalist accumulation—turns on society. The Tiger Bone Wine is highly addictive, making it even more profitable and creating a huge farming industry. As a long-term side effect though, it also carries in its DNA a deadly virus that eventually kills the majority of the people—mostly men—creating needs for alternative reproduction of the species. Julia Gatermann argues that Lai here criticizes western science and its interconnection with capitalist practices—in this case, I would argue, a form of genetic capitalism turning towards necropolitical exploitation.

With the effects of the plague thus comes the need for workers, the need to replace the dying labor to uphold the privileges of the elites—so a leading biotech company in the novel clones Asian women as slave labor. But with most men dead, the species also needs another way of procreation. The solution is the genetic engineering of the clones, splicing with lizard and other animal DNA to select for special traits such as the ability to regrow organs and function as donors, or the ability to self-reproduce through parthenogenesis. The so-called 'Grist sisters' are the ultimate commodity for necrocapitalist practices, as their organs can be sold to the rich, while their self-reproduction in litters of four to six clones allows them to be slowly worked to death with a constant flow of new sisters being born. Gatermann here pointedly argues that Lai employs these necrocapitalist practices as a critique of techno-Orientalism reducing the Asian body to a machine—a critique that here produces a "powerful image of colonial exploitation and dehumanization".

But so far, we have a blank spot in our discussion, that of Information, capital-I. There are a variety of ways to describe this—more shades of capitalism. Yann Moulier Boutang calls this "cognitive capitalism" and argues that it "is interested in the valorisation of intelligence and innovation" (41) based on "collective cognitive labour power" (37). Shoshanna Zuboff calls it "surveillance capitalism" that "claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales" and uses it for "behavioral modification". Lastly, Mackenzie Wark argues that this is indeed not capitalism anymore, but something else, something worse. Wark claims that there is "a whole political economy that runs on asymmetries of information as a form of control" that should not be lumped together with capitalism as it is determined by a new level of abstraction:

> It may even amount to a new kind of class relation. Sure, there is still a landlord class that owns the land under our feet and a capitalist class that owns the factories, but maybe now there's another kind of ruling class as well—one that owns neither of those things but instead owns the vector along which information is gathered and used.

Wark calls them the 'vectoralist class,' which is exploiting its own labor form, the 'hacker class,' people "who produce new information out of old information." Wark continues: "This is not capitalism anymore; it is something worse. […] The dominant ruling class of our time owns and controls information." And vectors are present in all of today's capitalist practices, be it GM, Nike, or Pepsico. Today, Wark argues, a "company is its brands, its patents, its trademarks, its reputation, its logistics, and perhaps above all its distinctive practices of evaluating information itself." Vectoralism is post-capitalist in the sense of creating a new mode of production, a new political economy.

In SF we find this new political economy most prominently expressed in the British TV series *Black Mirror* (2011-19), with many episodes commenting exactly on the issue of information, vectors and who has access to them. In "The Entire History of You," a device allows for the recording and playback of all of a person's experiences, which leads to a close scrutiny of personal

performances and decisions, every memory painstakingly available for revision. In "Be Right Back," a new online service creates virtual duplicates of deceased love-one via all their social media history and the information that is available about them. "Nosedive" explores a society based on the rigorous evaluation of each and every social interaction, gathered in a social score that determines benefits and restrictions within this society. And "Hated by the Nation" investigates the idea of shitstorms and social media rage becoming a real threat when the hashtag *#deathto* is used to kill people with controversial media performances. In all, the series explores different examples of how vectoralism might be seen as the "something worse" that Wark warns us moves beyond 'mere' capitalism. Vectors of information, today, are engrained in all aspects of our social, cultural, economic, and political life—the vectoralist class thus exerting new power relations over us.

To conclude, then, science fiction today shows us how strong capitalism (or vectoralism) is still going strong. Whether we have to accept this, accelerate through them, or fight to abolish them depends on our ability to form new economic scenarios in which post-capitalist worlds are possible, in order for us to form them into realities. Science fiction can help us to understand how capitalism impacts us, but it can also help us formulate those new scenarios and hopefully save ourselves from the abyss that we are currently staring down into. Thank you very much.

Notes

1. Funded by the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) under the funding numbers 02L18A510 and 02L18A511, supervised by the Projektträger Karlsruhe (PTKA).

2. A young adult series comprised of *Ship Breaker* (2010), *The Drowned Cities* (2012) and *Tool of War* (2017).

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