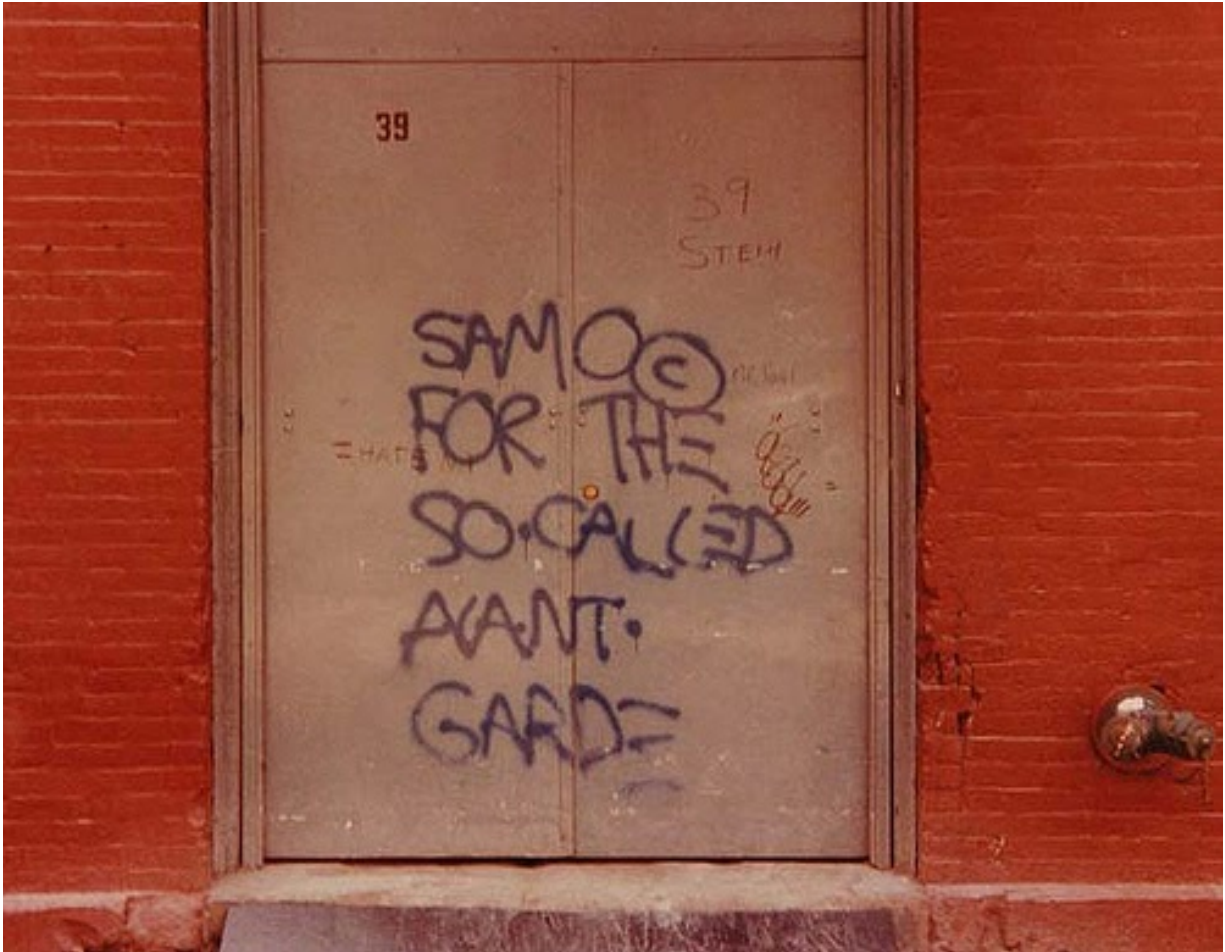


## An Imaginary Conversation with Samo Tomšič



(Kudos to Jean-Michel and Al)

*Samo Tomšič is the author of “The Capitalist Unconscious,” published by Verso in 2015. In this extensive investigation he critiques capitalism and the forms that it necessitates. What follows combines excerpts from his text with elaborations regarding the state of commodity-form prose in late-stage capitalism, or as I refer to it, Capitalist Realism.*

How has the form of contemporary prose been compromised by commodification? From fiction, to journalism, to memoir— how is it that they all share a common style, a common look, and a common feel? How is it that they all mean in the same way? I’m talking about prose style and how it’s (been) affected and changed in formal ways by commodification and its pressures. This common prose that I refer to as commodity-form prose has to share certain like-characteristics— so that you know how to read it, you know how it means, even how it represents you. All the heavy lifting has been done for you already, all you have to do is engage in some projective identification.

## Control Is Nearly Total

p 6: "...the false and abstract universalism imposed by capitalism, namely the universalism of commodity form."

My thesis is simple: capitalism has made demands of the prose within its realm, it has and continues to shape it, as have and do the (university) writing programs which presently exist to represent it. The sameness of the prose is an indication of this demand— literary fiction, memoir, journalism all share a common prose style, along with the assumptions that this prose style embodies. This prose has a function: to serve and to preserve a view of the world and a model of human subjectivity— one based on stability, univocal conceptions of and relations to language, belief in the veracity of memory, and of an ego identical to itself. Not contingency, not instability, but the totality of narrative necessity. Indeed, it makes certain assumptions about the world and about human subjectivity. It's a mode of thinking (and make no mistake, prose is a form of thinking) based on assumptions and conventions, ultimately based on pleasure— as is your reality. Based that is, on the ego...

**"The ego has a horror of the letter as such."** –Jean-Claude Milner

The ego hates and fears literature. Literature destabilizes the ego, hence the need for Capitalist Realism. Ours is a society that resists literature except those forms of literature that reinforce and sustain the ego and the narcissistic subject demanded by capitalism. These are the commodity-forms shaped by the demands of capitalism, enforced by editors and writing programs. This society doesn't care about literature, it only cares about reproducing itself; it uses its desubstantiated literature to help achieve this.

In this sense one can understand how it's possible to view commodity-form prose or Capitalist Realism as a form of colonial literature. It, through market forces, colonizes the mind, requiring that you learn its language, which is taught at all the colonial outposts— the universities, the writing programs, with their agents the teachers/editors/publishers, et al.— serving to displace your 'indigenous' language. Your 'indigenous' style is filtered through the style that is proliferated as the preferred or commercial style, constituting an ideological requirement.

*"An author has the right to create his own language to some extent. I have always said that a writer's only moral obligation is to produce an original language from the language he started with. If I have done this, then I am satisfied. If I have transformed the language and claimed some new space for it...then that is literature for me. Those writers who haven't modified the language could disappear from the literary world, and no one would know the difference."*

–Juan Goytisolo, Interviews with Spanish Writers, Dalkey Archive Press, 1991, p 141

What are the demands and characteristics of commodity-form prose? First of all it's prose that reinforces and sustains the ego and egocentrism. Sustaining capitalism means sustaining a view

of and certain assumptions about human subjectivity— assumptions based on the centrality of the ego, as well as on the stability (and a belief in the veracity) of identity.

The characteristics of commodity-form prose or Capitalist Realism include— a reduction of the subject to consciousness, a belief in self-consciousness and intentionality; the supposition that language consists in stable referentiality and a normative form of communication; that it's transparent and image-based; a rejection of negativity in the form of self-difference or symbolic castration (simply stated, the entry into speech, the symbolic operation that constitutes the subject as split and decentralized, that is, as subject of the unconscious; this is the production of a non-self-identical subject structured by lack, made possible by alienation as constitutive of human subjectivity); an adherence to social realism and to an idealist rejection of materialism. This is why Capitalist Realist prose is the prose of journalism and of the memoir (autobiography being an attempt to reconstruct the social relation, based as it is on a belief in the veracity of memory).

*cf footnote 2*

The capitalist subject itself is a commodity form, that is, an object or product, not a process. Under Capitalism the self as commodity form is based on identification and, as celebrity for example, can exist as a brand, as a way of representing social relations, which is what commodities do.

Capitalist Realism involves a common, conventional readability: if you don't challenge readability and comprehension with your prose you have no choice but to adhere to the dictates of conventional readability and that in itself is a form of morbidity— a pleasure, but morbid nonetheless. Convention is morbidity, it's a form of stasis, a repetitive pleasure clung to habitually, it doesn't confound nor upset. In other words, if you don't challenge readability, if you don't challenge comprehension (how meaning is made), if you don't challenge your reader to explore a new relation to language you're engaging in morbidity— psychological, social, cultural, artistic morbidity. A morbidity that serves the interests of capitalism and its narcissistic subject.

*cf footnote 1*

In this society you have to write stories so people can see themselves (their selves) represented in a familiar, easily graspable manner as characters (as reductive and false as that is)— you don't have to worry about how meaning is produced, the basic structure of meaning is shared in all of Capitalist Realism.

Literature has been co-opted by commodification; convention functions as a control mechanism (pleasure-based as is your reality). It allows for some thinking. You need to employ the standard, conventional prose templates or people can't comprehend, they simply don't know how it works and are too lazy to attempt to find out.

*“Même si les gens lisent, ils ne lisent pas. Il y a un mécanisme idéologique, ou un préjugé, qui oblitère jusqu'à la possibilité même de lecture.”*

—Philippe Sollers

## Control Is Nearly Total

I make no excuses, I'm trying to reframe literature, which has a certain emancipatory power—precisely from mental colonization. What else was Burroughs attempting? And how did he go about it if not through a careful deconstruction/reconfiguration of 'narrative' prose, including the contingent and its effects, meaning and its instability...

p 59: "...the unconscious effects of the capitalist discourse; the capitalist colonization of the mental apparatus."

These unconscious effects have resulted in what can be referred to as Capitalist Realism, a form of prose that adheres to certain qualities and characteristics which have the effect of serving to sustain capitalism.

Capitalist Realism is a model of fiction determined by how it's going to be used. A model of totality which implies that the world is finished, and has achieved the final, highest state of evolution and development, armed with reason and empiricism. This is used to justify a representation or image of the ego. The belief that consciousness and its agent the ego are the end-all of existence, the crown of creation.

How can we identify commodity-form prose?

—It's the prose that's written in the form of dominant realist convention, with a descriptive and psychological bias;

—It's the prose that all the writing programs teach (a best-seller is great advertising for their programs), i.e. literary fiction or, in other words, pulp with pretensions;

—It's the prose all the editors want and enforce through demand— it's what sells, representing social relations (as all commodities do), reinforcing those relations. It sells because people don't have to struggle to figure out how it works/means, and because you can see yourself in it (it's based on semblance);

—It's idealistic (in its reduction to consciousness) and non-materialist (you don't see the language, only images). A stable univocal equivalence of signifier to pre-existing signified.

"...Adorno speaks of mass culture as a "language of images"... This language of images lends itself to the "will of those in charge," all the more so as it attempts to pass itself off as the language of this whom it supplies":

"By giving visual representation to what slumbers in the preconceptual layers of their minds [this language of images] simultaneously shows them how to behave..."

*"Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing,"* Miriam Hansen, *New German Critique*, Number 56, Spring-Summer 1992, p 47

As a commodity form it has to adhere to certain strict standards— self-identity (an ego identical to itself); egocentrism (not a decentralized, non-identical subject of the unconscious containing its

own difference as otherness and structured by lack); psychologism (how it represents and reflects you); clock time or continuity (plot/narrative), implicating totality; socio-political realism through a belief in a univocal relation between signified and signifier, that is, a belief that you are showing the world as it is; all of which are comforting illusions allowing for shared comprehension—this is what editors insure, what writing programs teach you. These are the basic standards of commodity-form prose and fiction (memoirs and journalism included). Of course we now understand that memories are as fictive as any novel.

“Form is itself a metaphor and that of fiction is perhaps the most inclusive for our society. The form of the traditional novel is a metaphor for a society that no longer exists. Mario Praz has described the detective story as a bourgeois fairy tale, but one could apply the description as well to the novel of social realism. Its present function is to sustain a series of comforting illusions, among which one might include the feeling that the individual is the significant focus among the phenomena of “reality” (characterization); the sense that clock, or public time is finally the reigning form of duration for consciousness (historical narration); the notion that the locus of “reality” may be determined by empirical observation (description); that conviction that the world is logical and comprehensible (causal sequence, plot). The fairy tale of the “realistic novel” whispers its assurance that the world is not mysterious, that it is predictable—if not to the characters then to the author [or to the reader— R.M.]—that it is available to manipulation by the individual, that it is not only under control but that one can profit from this control. The key idea is verisimilitude: one can make an image of the real thing which, though not real, is such a persuasive likeness that it can represent our control over reality. This is

the voodoo [a kind of sympathetic magic— R.M.] at the heart of mimetic theory that helps account for its tenacity. Though such schizoid illusions are fostered by concepts of imitation, one cannot have control “over” that of which one is part, or even formulate it completely—one can only participate more deeply in it.

—Ronald Sukenick

We’re all being socialized and colonized through the dominant prose. Shouldn’t literature challenge us? Challenge how we think of ourselves? How we think our relation to language and the symbolic? Literature is meant to be disruptive, challenging, challenging to your identity (with negativity and self-difference, not reinforcing your fictional self-identity), challenging to your relation to language, reconfiguring, generating new relations to language/the symbolic (as language is how we experience the symbolic)...

Literature is not some side-project of capitalism. It must stand apart from capitalism in order to be true to its inherent potential. It must endeavor to reproduce the initial creative leap or gesture, not the preceding one...

“...the fact is that in one’s work, one has only two choices—either to reproduce existing forms or to create new ones. There is no other.”

—Monique Wittig

Capitalist Realism reinforces the ego and ego-centrism, and this means your imaginary identity, whatever it happens to be. Bear in mind that your identity, like the ideological fantasy of your

reality, is determined by pleasure.

Commodity form, as fictitious capital, the creating of value out of value, is comparable to the demand for self-valorization, to celebrity, to being 'famous for being famous'.

## **Control Is Nearly Total**

p 95: "...the closed world of universal commodification, where the commodity form is the ultimate horizon of other forms of thinking..."

p 96: "...the central problem of modern political thought: commodity form as the ultimate horizon of social relations in capitalism."

This commodity-form prose is a template for like-minded thinking, which is what makes it sellable— everyone knows how it works, you don't have to figure it out, it doesn't challenge you, indeed it acts to reinforce and sustain the imaginary ego-identity of the narcissistic capitalist subject.

Writing programs teach writing in this style without suspecting that they're acting to reinforce the narcissistic subject of capitalism, thinking that they're liberating and empowering people. They believe they're doing so (empowerment can be viewed as a kind of adaptive strategy in capitalist society) when it's more correct to see in it a form of adaptive indoctrination into the dominant, conventional expression of subjectivity, which serves to represent the interests of the social, economic, and political order, not unlike adaptive ego-psychologies and psychotherapies.

## **Real Control Is Invisible**

Like those who denounced all other forms of art as deviant in favor of a dictated Socialist Realism, Capitalist Realism is just as dictated, just not by heavy-handed coercion or defined strictures but by soft forces, economic and narcissistic in character. It's a question of the carrot not the stick, of rewards not punishment.

**CAPITALIST REALISM EMPOWERS NARCISSISTIC SUBJECTS**— This is true as well for identarian concerns, which are expressions of the narcissistic subject of capitalism.

**THE NEED IS FOR A UNIVERSAL SUBJECT BASED ON SELF-DIFFERENCE**, containing otherness to displace all identities based on an ego believed to be identical to itself.

**YOU ARE NOT YOUR MEMORIES**— This fact is a form of castration, which Capitalist Realism refuses/forecloses.

Think of the flood of memories and the implied belief in the veracity of memory *when they're constructions after all, recreated each and every time they're remembered*. It's not just that

writing about yourself, your race and/or gender, etc. is the only acceptable mode any longer—it's that these narratives can be bulwarks against symbolic castration.

YOU ARE NOT YOUR IDENTITY, YOU ONLY IMAGINE THAT YOU ARE.

“I knew from the age of two that I was in the wrong body.”

First of all, we are all in the ‘wrong body’ since we all contain our own otherness. Some just feel it more acutely than others. Second of all, this statement relies on a univocal relation to memories, reflecting an equivalence of signifier and signified in ‘realism’, as well as the belief that your memories are real and accurate, not recreated each time you remember, not a form of retroactive construction and elaboration, not a secondary revision of primary material. Indeed, you spend as much time and energy avoiding some identifications, albeit unconsciously, as you do embracing others.

This is what narrative is, a secondary elaboration of primary material— continuity not contingency. As I have stated repeatedly, it has and serves a social function. It's a kind of journalism of the ego/self and it doesn't take (your myriad positive and negative) identification(s) into account except to use them. When you go to a horror or action-adventure movie or read a romance novel you're allowing yourself to be manipulated, that is, exploited in the service of the Other (the use of stereotype and convention take the place of cognition).

MEMOIRS AND UNIVOCAL RELATION TO MEMORIES—

- Based on a belief that you are your memories and on a belief in the veracity of memory;
- Memories, like stories, are social in nature, and are not adequate representations of the past; they allow you to comprehend and interact with others;
- Memoir is a means of reconstructing social relations...

You are not your memories, in fact memories don't exist to be accurate representations of the past— they exist to allow you to be social. Or, simply stated, to exist in a society that shares the ‘form’ of the memories. Just as you don't exist to others unless you appear to them, you don't exist unless you appear to yourself.

That's the why of the story form, why stories are social, even the stories you tell yourself: they allow you to relate to others. It's always a ‘narration of the relation’ (Alenka Zupančič). Does contingency utilize non-relation? Does cut-up as technique bank on non-relation, does non-relation equal negativity/castration? Does it introduce non-relation and instability, utilizing contingency and the disruption of meaning?

The capitalist subject is a narcissistic subject, a self-identical ego, not containing its other within itself. Centralized, not decentralized or split, not the subject of the unconscious...

A universal subject is a non-identarian subject. What if literature were the laboratory for new ways of thinking subjectivity? Only a society in need of a certain particular subjectivity would restrict or hinder that...

*cf footnote 1*

p 140: "By imposing the universalism of commodity form, capitalism annihilates other forms of subjectivity and universality."

Capitalist Realism is a standardized prose template, one which is not recognized as such; it's a standard that is upheld by publishers, editors, and writing programs. It's easily recognized and allows for a familiar enjoyment, since you know how to recognize yourself in it and know how it means, how it makes meaning.

*"I cannot read twentieth-century novels as a rule, because they are written according to the literary canons of the nineteenth century. This is not to say that I don't like nineteenth-century novels, which I do, but I simply cannot read many contemporary works because they follow the literary dictums of the nineteenth century."*

–Juan Goytisolo, *Interviews With Spanish Writers*, Dalkey Archive Press, 1991, p 143

Capitalist Realism or commodity-form prose is not innocent, it contains certain assumptions precisely about human subjectivity.

*The material organization of language reproduces conceptions of the mind...*

Capitalist Realism exists in its privilege, like a form of structural racism it is for all intents and purposes invisible and permeates society. Capitalist Realism is commodity-form prose, that is, prose that is sellable and, as such, implies a certain adherence to convention and conventionality. This is what constitutes its template. It is in essence a standardized prose template that people can easily access and comprehend. Any prose that exists outside of these conventions necessitates a free play of collaborative reading; you have to work to understand how it means. Conventions in this sense can be considered to be control mechanisms, they in essence allow for same thinking and a similar or same subjectivity in our ego-crazy.

"The identification with the stereotype is advanced by the appeal to a particular type of knowledge or skill predicated on repetition: the identification of a familiar face, gesture or narrative convention takes the place of genuine cognition."

*"Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing,"* Miriam Hansen, *New German Critique*, Number 56, Spring-Summer 1992, p 51

## **Capitalist Realism is a form of colonial literature**

Adorno: "By reproducing [the reified consciousness of the audience] with hypocritical subservience, the culture industry in effect changes this consciousness all the more, that is, for its own purposes: it actually prevents that consciousness from changing on its own, as it deep down, unadmittedly desires. The consumers are made to remain what they are: consumers."

*quoted in "Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing,"* Miriam Hansen, *New German Critique*, Number 56, Spring-Summer 1992, p 52



The subject in capitalism is the narcissistic subject. Capitalism is founded on self-interest and private property. As such it is ego-based, indeed embracing ego-centrism, and this subject is the subject represented and expressed in Capitalist Realism with its plot, character, voice, story, etc.

So you find endless characters to identify with, not an alienated subject who contains its own self-difference. The truth being that you can't identify with something without identifying with its other as well. Think of the porn analogy– you think that you only identify with your sexed representative but you actually identify with all the figures, some you just don't accept. In fact, you spend as much time denying identifications as you do embracing them.

We need to recognize not just an unreliable narrator, but an unreliable identity! Not one that engages in the illusions of belief in the veracity of its memories, that believes it is self-present and self-aware, but one that always is misrecognizing itself– you only ever imagine you are your self!

Identarian categories belong to the logic of the semblance. You can identify with the other but not with the Other. The Other is in other words the symbolic order, a radical alterity, which cannot be assimilated through identification– the small other is a reflection or projection of the ego or specular image. Speech and the unconscious originate in the Other, it is a locus where speech is constituted. The mother occupies the place of the Other for the child– she receives the child's vocalizations and retroactively sanctions them as message– Castration (as complex) occurs when the child discovers that the (m)Other is not complete, but lacks/desires...

## **Control Is Nearly Total**

p 151: "The capitalist subject mocks castration, declares it an anachronism and a remainder of the phallogocentric universe that the postmodern has overcome..."

...And the language of these capitalist subjects continues to be construed as transparent, continues to be construed as adequate, univocal, stable– cf the autistic prose of Jonathan “you can no longer see the language” Franzen. Or consider the remedial prose of Zadie Smith, or anything where gender play is considered ‘innovative’ yet formally remains the same prose retaining the ego-based narcissistic characteristics of Capitalist Realism. It's easy to see that those who believe in their identities are threatened by such play– they attempt to retain sexual roles in order to preserve their pleasure-based sexual expressions...

A penis is a prosthetic phallus. When we seek to define symbolic castration we must address the accession to speech, as well as the subject as decentralized (subject of the unconscious) and non-identical, not self-aware or self-present, but always misrecognizing itself.

p 152: "Lacan insists that capitalism is grounded...on the foreclosure of negativity. Capitalism rejects the paradigm of negativity, castration: the symbolic operation that constitutes the subject as split and decentralized. Through this foreclosure capitalism determines other discourses that can emerge in the capitalist universe. Psychoanalysis can prosper under these conditions only by adopting

the demands of the market: reintegration of individuals, adaptation, strengthening of ego, reduction of 'disorders', strategies that in the end support the capitalist fantasy of an uncastrated subject, which would respond to the capitalist imposition of perverse position. Capitalism only tolerates a psychoanalysis that has abolished the central Freudian-Marxian lesson: alienation as constitutive for the production of subjectivity and for the production of jouissance. ...we need to be constantly reminded that the scandal of psychoanalysis lies in the fact that it understands sexuality through the absence of a corresponding natural need. Capitalism...strives to make sexuality inseparable from sex, which would be the commodified image of sexuality. The immediate conclusion would be that commodification simply is the rejection of castration."

One can see a full panoply of beliefs linking sex and reproduction– from the religious to the social, all anti-LGBT attitudes rely on a reductive link between sex and reproduction. It's clear that religious and all other discourses which seek to link sex and reproduction are attempts to prevent anything from disrupting the 'commodified image of sexuality' (puritanism as opposed to non-productive expenditures), constrained as it is to perform under the auspices and watchful eyes of the self-proclaimed servants of social order. They are always attempts to characterize any other expression of sex as disruptive of the social order– the break down of society and its moral order, anti-family, gays as perverted, outside of the norms of society, etc. – when these other expressions of sexuality and their accompanying discourses are just acknowledgements that sex and reproduction are not linked for humans. If sex is not linked to reproduction than what is it? Sex as pleasure is socially disruptive. There can be no wholesomeness, no wholeness, no totalizing vision or version of human sexuality...

Humans are premature in many ways. Born helpless, our desires give rise within this helplessness and its enveloping ignorance– is there any wonder why there are so many expressions of human sexuality?

p 185: "The foreclosure of negativity...in the capitalist discourse allows only an abstract truth of the subject and of society."

And yet those that would seem to have the most at stake get trapped in the circle of their own thinking as full, self-identical subjects. They in actuality adhere to the narcissistic subject of capitalism, specifically through identitarianism. This belief in identity is a narcissistic diversion from a true subversion in capitalism, the universal subject based on lack, self-difference, and negativity, produced by alienation as constitutive of subjectivity. Is your goal to be accepted, to become a full-fledged member of society, or something else?

p 200: "Marx and Freud both insisted that the symbolic networks operate beyond consciousness and are endowed with causality, the power to work back on conscious subjects. Their autonomy involves two main consequences: a subject, whose being comes down to non-identity and loss, and a surplus-object whose being is marked by intensification or increase."

The complaint that you can't understand non-conventional prose, or any kind of prose that's not

standard Capitalist Realism prose is not so much a question of not understanding, as it reflects the fact that you've been indoctrinated ideologically and you can't/don't know how to see any other way— you have blinders on, you can only see certain prose styles, only certain prose possesses meaning for you (because you know how it means, you grasp the template)...

"The identification with the stereotype is advanced by the appeal to a particular type of knowledge or skill predicated on repetition: the identification of a familiar face, gesture or narrative convention takes the place of genuine cognition."

*"Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing,"* Miriam Hansen, *New German Critique*, Number 56, Spring-Summer 1992, p 51

It limits your vision, your ability to see, to comprehend newness. You can't understand how non-conventional prose means because you don't expect to have to work for the meaning, it's always been handed to you. Commodity-form prose is a mental template...

You have to learn to see with new eyes...

p 219: "...The imperative...produce knowledge that will serve the market and the reproduction of capitalism.

"Lacan emphasizes that in the university discourse knowledge appears as 'all-knowledge', not because it would know all but because it is rooted in the foreclosure of negativity that supports its wholeness. University knowledge knows itself as knowledge and even claims to be nothing but knowledge: Stalinist bureaucracy but also capitalist I-crazy, the rule of self-interest and of the 'strong ego'.

"...[embodying] the master that Lacan illustrates with the reference to the transcendental ego, an ego that would be identical with itself, and more precisely, the signifier, which would be its own signified: 'The myth of the ideal I, of the I that masters, of the I whereby at least something is identical to itself, namely the speaker, is very precisely what the university discourse is unable to eliminate from the place in which its truth is found.'"

And what of an 'author's voice', as in 'she has a clear, strong voice'? *Voice* as univocal, adequate, non-conflictual representative of self/subject— an ego that's identical with itself.

*cf footnote 2*

"As an artist I feel a responsibility to write about difficult subject matter." That is, not forge a new relation to meaning and language. Is this the ultimate in feel-good literature? Allowing you to occupy a privileged moral position?

p 219: "The university discourse was not Lacan's final word on capitalism....When he determined the foreclosure of castration as the defining feature of capitalist discourse."

Which brings us to the University discourse and their MFA programs doing their best to teach the prose that made Jane Austen great— flat, egocentric prose based on an assumed stability of

language and of meaning, psychological in character (in how it represents motivations, reasons, etc.), a lowest denominator prose based on a conceptual template assumed to best capture and represent human subjectivity, purporting to represent an 'inner life' which is inherently univocal and self-identical. A far-ranging template shared by journalism and memoir/biography/autobiography...

The writing programs and the Universities...all the best sellers...they're so proud to serve the market...To have a New York Times best-selling author is a victory for these programs...

The University discourse turns knowledge into semblance...

"We thus have two extremes: on the one hand the enlightened hedonist who carefully calculates his pleasures to prolong his fun and avoid getting hurt; on the other hand the *jouisseur* proper, ready to consume his very existence in the deadly excess of enjoyment—or, in terms of our society, on the one hand the consumerist calculating his pleasures, well protected from all kinds of harassments and other health threats; on the other hand the drug addict (or smoker, or...) bent on self-destruction. Enjoyment serves nothing, it is of no use whatsoever, and the great effort of the contemporary hedonistic-utilitarian "permissive" society is to incorporate this un(ac)countable excess into the field of (ac)counting. One should thus reject the commonsense opinion according to which in a hedonistic-consumerist society we all enjoy: the basic strategy of enlightened consumerist hedonism is, on the contrary, to deprive enjoyment of its excessive dimension, of its disturbing surplus, of the fact that it serves nothing. Enjoyment is tolerated, solicited even, but on condition that it is healthy, that it doesn't threaten our psychic or biological stability: chocolate yes, but fat-free; Coke yes, but diet; coffee yes, but decaffeinated; beer yes, but alcohol-free; mayonnaise yes, but without cholesterol; sex yes, but safe sex, etc. We are here in the domain of what Lacan calls the discourse of the University, as opposed to the discourse of the Master: a Master goes to the limit in his consumption, he is not constrained by petty utilitarian considerations...while the consumerist's pleasures are regulated by scientific knowledge propagated by the University discourse. The decaffeinated enjoyment we thus obtain is a semblance of enjoyment, not its Real, and it is in this sense that Lacan talks about the imitation of enjoyment in the discourse of the University."

Slavoj Žižek, *The Incontinent of the Void*, MIT Press, 2017, pp 201-202

Capitalist Realism seeks to avoid this surplus enjoyment, that which would threaten psychic stability, and replaces it with a safe version of desubstantiated literature. This is the version of literature promulgated by the University writing programs as well as by editors and publishers linked to consumerist society. It is properly speaking a semblance of literature, a colonial and colonizing literature.

p 226: "Lacan's formula of the capitalist discourse continues the line according to which capitalism essentially tends towards the foreclosure of castration. Its worldview strives to heal the subjective split by way of the fetishization of the object, which would establish a univocal relation between the subject and jouissance. Of course, the foreclosure of castration does not imply that jouissance becomes accessible. On the contrary, the foreclosure radicalises the deadlock of

jouissance and turns the superego into an insatiable demand for jouissance."

Narrative is the presumed mode of assemblage even though repetition is more realistic. Your life is better defined by contingency and repetition, not by a totalizing egocentric, psychological prose— which serves as a representation of the capitalist subject. This is the conception of subjectivity endemic to capitalism.

Capitalism forces us all into a 'position of perversion', in which objects cover over lack— and self functions as object— you are in essence forced to occupy a perverse position. That's a standard/'natural' position in capitalism — as everything is rendered a commodity. Capitalism produces such a position in the service of the Other's jouissance.

pp 150-51: "...if there is a relation between capitalism and perversion, then this relation should be sought in the already mentioned imposition of the object-position, which means that every subject is confronted with the imperative to become the support of the Other's jouissance and hence the object of exploitation. The exploitation of labour is precisely this— turning labour into a commodity, imposing on every subject the position of the object-source of value. Capitalism is not perversion, but it demands perversion from its subjects. In other words, capitalism demands that the subjects enjoy exploitation and thereby abandon their positions as subjects."

p 151: "Perversion entails a rejection of psychoanalysis, in the face of which analysts can only acknowledge the irreducible singularity of its mode of enjoyment. Such a position has unpleasant political implications. It immediately suggests that capitalism entails a generalization of the perverse jouissance at the level of the social link, an insurmountable horizon, in which a thousand perversions may blossom, while the general social framework remains unchangeable: the closed work of commodity form, whose polymorphous nature enables the processing, integration, and neutralization of all forms of antagonism."

How is this perverse position replicated and reproduced in the commodity-form prose of Capitalist Realism? You allow yourself to be exploited, becoming the object-instrument of an Other's "will-to-enjoy", to assume a position of service to the Other's jouissance, which is not your will but the will of the Other. In commodity-form prose the author functions as Other, and it is your identifications that are being exploited. You allow yourself to be willingly manipulated through identification, which cover over lack. They are consumer objects just as much as anything else, these figures you identify with; even the 'voice' of the narrator is such an object. These are the 'thousand perversions' that are allowed to blossom while 'the general framework remains unchanged'. And all while forms of antagonism— alienation, the split, decentralized subject, that is, all negative identifications are neutralized.

—You are being indoctrinated into a certain type of prose — because it reflect the interests of capitalism. You do what you do for/in the service of the Other...To realize that vision...

— The conceptual matrix of your ideological fantasy/reality gathers all the characteristics of Capitalist Realism (necessary as it is for capitalism) — egocentrism, adequacy of language, etc. —

in a style which is promoted through sales, (if it sells it's good) – which determines what is taught as good, acceptable prose, reproducing the entire colonial system...

– Prose is not innocent, it possesses/is based on certain assumptions – commodity-form consumerist prose contains certain assumptions, in fact, every prose style contains/assumes/is based on a conception of human subjectivity...

– So your favorite authors have helped to create the capitalist subject – Austen, Twain, etc., the prose has not progressed since then. It's supposed to be literature, not a fairy tale, it's meant to be challenging, unnerving, upsetting, offensive, forcing you to see language with new eyes, destroying and renewing the social code...

*cf footnote 1*

– CHANGE THE RELATION TO LANGUAGE!

– If reality is created discursively, what is realism then? It's just a play, like a mirroring or mimicking, a close approximation of this discursive reality – or more pointedly, how this discursive reality is structured – implying that Capitalist Realism, the discursive means by which we produce reality describes or reflects our produced reality. Narratives are just fantasies, secondary elaborations of primary material – ideological fantasies (your reality is an ideological fantasy) that shape our lives and give them meaning...

*cf footnote 2*

– Capitalist Realism, the commodity-form of literature, is shaped by market forces and demands, by the forms of modern publications, magazines– ego-based, representing social relations. As commodity-form it has to adhere to strict standards – and these are part and parcel of the writing programs. And I denounce the whole rotten temple of (value for value) money changers...

– Commodity-form prose is an inadequate representation of human subjectivity and thus of the path forward for us...

– You've been ideologically indoctrinated, i.e. colonized, you've been convinced that there is no alternative...

– You've been ideologically indoctrinated to accept commodity-form prose as the only possible prose, the only possible prose expression of human subjectivity and that's because it serves the interests of capitalism and its minions – editors, publishers, writing programs, universities – they are all in the service of capitalism...

## **Real Control Is Invisible**

– Or if there are alternatives to commodity-form prose they are lesser alternatives, or suspect, incomplete, or damaged, 'experimental'...

Capitalist Realism prose is one of the ways discursive reality in capitalist society is produced and maintained;

–How the ego-crazy, or subjectivity in/of capitalism reproduces itself;

–How social coherence is produced;

–It's an ideological expression– “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” –Althusser

–Every prose style is a representation of the mind; most of what passes for prose today is based on a 19th century model;

–Capitalist Realism limits the possibilities of literature, hence limits the possibilities of human subjectivity.

p 151: “...capitalism entails a generalization of the perverse jouissance level of the social link, an insurmountable horizon, in which a thousand perversions may blossom, while the general social framework remains unchangeable: the closed world of commodity form, whose polymorphous nature enables the processing, integration and neutralization of all forms of antagonism. The capitalist subject mocks castration, declares it an anachronism and a remainder of the phallogocentric universe that the postmodern has overcome once and for all. Castration, and consequently psychoanalysis, is considered to be merely one of those famous grand narratives, whose end needs to be acknowledged. In the end, this position conceives capitalism as a vicious circle, from which it is impossible to break out.”

Identarianism, a celebration of identity (even fluidity and the celebration of fluid identities), embodies the logic (and marketing categories) of capitalism...It's a narcissistic logic – self-interest based on private property...

– There is nothing innovative or transgressive about it (or rather it's a false transgression) it just matches the logic and serves the interests of capitalism...

– It lends itself to the maintenance-resuscitation-preservation of capitalism (for a typical capitalistic reward, narcissistic in nature)...

– It takes the place of revolution in capitalist society (so in a sense it takes the pressure off of capitalism)...

– Is the equivalent of wanting to see yourself reflected, read about someone who looks like you...a reduction to psychologism, semblance/identification...

– This has more to do with capitalist society than you might suspect or imagine, and is how the ego-based subject of capitalism reproduces itself.

–Identarianism and Identity politics –are expression of the narcissistic subject of capitalism, and as such, a rejection of a universal subject based on self-difference/negativity...

The anxiety expressed by trans-subjects is applicable to all of us, not just those who embrace it as a new normativity...Or, in other words, I've tried performativity, it doesn't work, there's always something missing, something left-over...

p 233: "Political language was absorbed into the abstract language of economic categories, which consequently led to the reduction of subversive social movements first to democratic and later to identarian politics.

"...Back in the democratic context, identarian politics pursued the proliferation of minoritarian identities and moved towards the problematic of representation (e.g., gender quotas), which successfully neutralized the language of revolutionary politics. The subject of identarian politics no less rejects the actual subject of revolutionary politics, which is constitutively pre-identarian, non-individual and non-psychological, hence irreducible to particular identities or identifications. In the end, identity politics proposes its own version of a narcissistic subject.

"...For the non-identical subject of the unconscious, Freud and Lacan argued that it could be discovered only under the conditions and within the horizon of the modern scientific revolution. This means that the subject of modern politics is the subject of modern science, and while politics grounded on the economic and legal abstractions repeats the capitalist rejection of this negative subjectivity,..."

Can literature aid us in the search for a revolutionary subject?

There's a certain morbidity to commodity-form prose, it's antiquated. Are there forms of prose that involve a new conceptual matrix, of subjectivity, is that a possibility, can we move forward, see with new eyes? Everything else has changed, our conception of the universe, our conception of human subjectivity, but this prose, partaking of the canons of the 19th c., is unchanged. Why? What purpose does it serve? Why is it the same prose? There's obviously something at stake. It's been and is being promoted because there's something at stake, this prose that Jane Austen employed and is still being employed today. Why hasn't it changed, does it represent something fundamental, an ensconced conventionality? It must promote something fundamental – a view of human subjectivity that is embraced and propagated by economic powers.

*"Our knowledge of the world comes to us by way of other people; the language we learn pre-exists us, and to a great degree our thoughts conform to reestablished concepts and linguistic structures. As we assimilate to these social conventions/conventional structures, anything else registers as threat..."*

–Unknown Source

This threat is the mechanism that keeps Capitalist Realism in place.

Ask yourself how prose is determined by and reflects your society. Ask yourself what it's in the service of and what it represents, what is its purpose? It's promoted because it has and serves a purpose – it's not an adequate representation of human subjectivity (it's ego-based, relies on narrative, and believes in the adequacy of language). Repetition is more realistic; just think of your life, is it a story or a series of repetitions which you make sense of/give meaning to through imaginary narrative, a form of secondary elaboration?

p 234: "(Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus)...One of the crucial tasks of their versions of the critique of libidinal economy is the liberation of desire from commodity form, the unique formal envelope of thinking in modernity, by means of which capitalist abstractions colonize the mental apparatus and determine unconscious mechanisms.



Capitalist Realism is one of these capitalist abstractions, a formal envelope of thinking, a template and model for the colonization of the mind...

Adorno: "By reproducing [the reified consciousness of the audience] with hypocritical subservience, the culture industry in effect changes this consciousness all the more, that is, for its own purposes: it actually prevents that consciousness from changing on its own, as it deep down, unadmittedly desires. The consumers are made to remain what they are: consumers."

*quoted in "Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing,"* Miriam Hansen, *New German Critique*, Number 56, Spring-Summer 1992, p 52

Sellable, standard prose is commodity-form prose, it makes certain assumptions about the world and about human subjectivity. What does that imply? It implies convention and conventional readability/comprehension – there's no mystery, you know how it means, you don't have to figure out how to read it (the very definition of convention, like painting-by-the-numbers, you just color it through projection). You know how to read it, which means you're being lead by the nose. Convention is a control mechanism (pleasure-based, as is your reality), it allows for sameness of thinking. People need the standard prose templates or people can't comprehend. This holds for memories as well. Literature has been co-opted by commodification in form and style. Literature and memories are formulaic in their essence...

"The identification with the stereotype is advanced by the appeal to a particular type of knowledge or skill predicated on repetition: the identification of a familiar face, gesture or narrative convention takes the place of genuine cognition."

*"Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing,"* Miriam Hansen, *New German Critique*, Number 56, Spring-Summer 1992, p 51

## **Control Is Nearly Total**

p 234: " For both Marx and Lacan, the negative, which, again, means the non-narcissistic subject, is the necessary singular point on which political universalism should build. The capitalist appropriation of the subject cannot ground any real political universalism because it places the subject in the position of the object."

Capitalist Realism involves a common, conventional readability; if you don't challenge readability and comprehensibility, if you don't challenge your reader to explore (find) a new relation to language with your prose you adhere to the dictates of conventional readability and that in itself is a form of morbidity, a morbid pleasure, but morbid nonetheless. Convention is a morbidity, psychological, social, cultural, artistic morbidity, it's a stasis, a repetitive pleasure clung to habitually, it doesn't upset (and can be said to be based on the death-drive)...

The characteristics of this prose are egocentrism, belief in the veracity of identity and of memory

(self-identical self), a belief in the stability of language and of meaning, a belief in narrative as the assumed mode of assemblage (a totalizing view)...

**What is innovation, transgressive creativity?..How is it possible?..First of all, a transgression of what?..Convention (as social code), dogmatism?..**

Transgressive creativity exists outside of commodity-form, the dominant form reflecting the narcissistic subject of capitalism, subverting it. A commodity is a representation of social relations based on a template for same thinking, for comprehension, social comprehension, helping to create identity and identities, as social fabric...So again, transgression involves the destruction of social codes in order that they might renew themselves...and then it starts all over again...

## **Control Is Nearly Total**

Transgressive creativity challenges readability, comprehensibility, it undermines convention (as social code), renders it unstable, reveals it to be illusion, to be ideological fantasy (which is what Capitalist Realism prose is, indeed what our realities are, ideological fantasies) – the prose reflects, giving form to (as you suture through projection) your reality, illustrating it, acting as template, defining it...

### **THE PROSE ITSELF IS AN/THE IDEA –**

When Joyce wrote *Finnegans Wake* what was he producing? Not a child's game, but a thinking machine, an idea machine, one that stands, exists (and shall always?) outside of the conventional mode of conceiving human subjectivity (which is egocentric)...

A fragmented text upends the illusions of consistency and continuity (narrative continuity – a pattern after the fact, a secondary elaboration of primary material). There is no stream-of-consciousness, etc...We are broken up by the real (gaps) and unconscious eruptions...

Narrative is a secondary elaboration (just as all memories are elaborated retroactively) allowing for the illusion of consistency. Narrative, as the equivalent of a worldview, fills in the gaps (which are the real). Narrative is the literary version of 'everything happens for a reason'...

Challenging literature, literature you don't know how to read, demands that you discover how it means– not like conventional prose, literary fiction (pulp with pretensions), which you know how to read, you know how it means...

The cut-up techniques and texts of Wm. Burroughs which work to inscribe contingency and rest on the instability of meaning...

Juan Goytisolo and his permutations of grammar, his use of names while refusing characterization, valorizing the signifier over the signified, the process over meaning...

Ph. Sollers of *H* and *Paradis* with his 'polylogue' or plurality of voices that rest on no firm identity, no firm references, no continuity, no stable identity. It seems like standard prose but the foundation keeps shifting...

– "Three voiced periods" by Reid Matko is an example of an attempt to use literature to expose and explore pre-identity and pre-identarian subjectivity. It is an inscription of the minimal theater of subjectivity– the encounter with the symbolic, and the demands that it makes. And no one has the eyes to see it with – that's what it means to be ideologically indoctrinated – you only have eyes to see certain things, in certain ways, you can't see or even apprehend anything else...

Memoirs are a kind of journalism of the self; stories you tell yourself about yourself...This is a form of psychological journalism...But you are not the stories you tell yourself...

p 236: "The shared modernity of the critique of political economy and psychoanalysis consists in the fact that their materialist theory of the subject went against the reduction of subjectivity to consciousness or to private interest. From the Marxian and Freudian perspectives, to say false consciousness is to pronounce a pleonasm, since there is no other consciousness than false consciousness."

Humans always project their mental models on foreign universes; Capitalist Realism is a 'mental model' and identarianism is just another version of the narcissistic subject of capitalism. I embrace the Lacanian/Marxian subject which contains its own self-difference, based on negativity, lack, and self-difference, this being a universalist stance. The self is never self-aware or self-present but always misrecognizes itself...

In other words, I can only ever take you for what you mistake yourself to be...

Self-difference equals castration, the subject containing its own self-difference – as opposed to self-identity, the narcissistic subject – Capitalist Realism, as reinforcing human narcissism, is a dead language, 'the living dead language of the commodity'..

A step forward would be, in a Barthesian move, to replace story with field...

p 236: "...but in order for capitalism to emerge the commodification of the subject... need(s) to take place."

Can we think of celebrity as a form of commodification?..Can we think of the self as anything but a brand, as a type of commodity?..Is being famous for being famous comparable to creating 'value out of value'?..100 million people follow Kylie Jenner and she's a cipher, a commodity-form that you fill with your own projections. As fictitious capital, is the creation of value out of value comparable to the demand for valorization of the self, for self-valorization?..

## **Control Is Nearly Total**

## Notes

1/ It is possible to study only meaning and signification in literature but to do this would mean the reduction of language to a phenomenological horizon,

thus overlooking what it is in the poetical process which falls outside the realm of the signified and the transcendental ego and what makes what we call 'literature' something other than a 'knowledge'; in other words making it, 'the very place where the social code is destroyed and renewed'...

*Language and Materialism*, Coward and Ellis, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1977, p 148

2/ ...”Barthes reveals realism as a social practice of representation which exploits the plurality of language in a limited way...realism stresses the product and not the production. It represses production in the same way that the mechanism of the market, of general exchangeability, represses production in capitalist society. It does not matter where a product comes from, how it was made, by whom or for what purpose it was intended. All that matters is its value measured against the general medium of exchange, money. In the same way, it does not matter that realism is produced by a certain use of language, by a complex production; all that matters is the illusion, the story, the content. What we value is its truth to life, the accuracy of its vision. We do not read Agatha Christie or John Braine for the productivity of their language, we read for the story, the impression we produce of a real world. When we pay attention to the 'style' of writers like Raymond Chandler or Len Deighton, it is because this style produces the illusion of a character: the hard-boiled individualist using his limited powers against a social system he does not fully understand. We do not look at the production, but the product...

This repression of production takes place because realism has as its basic philosophy of language not a production (signification being the production of a signified through the actions of the signifying chain), but an identity: the signifier is treated as identical to a (pre-existent) signified. The signifier and the signified are not seen as caught up together in a process of production, they are treated as equivalents: the signifier is merely the equivalent of its pre-established concept...Language is treated as though it stands in for, is identical with, the real world. The business of realist writing is, according to its philosophy, to be the equivalent of a reality, to imitate it. This 'imitation' is the basis of realist literature, and its technical name is *mimesis*, mimicry. The whole basis of *mimesis* is that writing is a mere transcription of the real, carrying it over into a medium that exists only as a parasitic practice because the word is identical to, the equivalent of, the real world. Realism naturalizes the arbitrary nature of the sign; its philosophy is that of an identity between signifier and signified on the level of an entire text as much as that of a single word.”

*Language and Materialism*, Coward and Ellis, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1977, pp 46-47



(Kudos to Jean-Michel and Al)