TOWARD A FOLKLORE OF THE LEFT

RETRACTING THE STRATEGIC MODELS OF FICTION FROM ENGLISH REALISM TO STREAMING TELEVISION

Fouâd Oveisy

Unless the intention is to proclaim a quite childish anarchism . . . declaring, 'What people like is allowed' . . . rules out any consideration of the ethical and historical realm and hence of any kind of meaning of action—more: consideration of any kind of meaning of reality itself, which cannot be constituted if 'action' is removed from its sphere.

—Walter Benjamin, "*On the Critique of Violence*" (1921)

From the beginning, the word was power.

—Arseny Tarkovsky, "*The Word*" (1945)

Five tendencies predominate the representational approaches to the politics of aesthetics. Those for whom art and literature reflect the mediation of life and politics by capitalism, colonialism, and other historical foes or facts are proponents of a broad tendency we may call "Jamesonian."[1] Those for whom art and literature defamiliarize mediation to suggest alternatives can be said to be "Adornians."[2] Those for whom art and literature deconstruct how representation mediates dogmas about foes and facts are, broadly, "Derridian." Those for whom art and literature foster critical interactions with mediation can be said to be "Boalians."[3] And, those for whom art and literature undermine the mediation of art and literature by foes and facts such as the culture industry can be referred to as "Duchampian."[4] These diverse tendencies generally adhere to what Pierre Macherey and Vladimir Lenin would deem the "mirror" model of aesthetics (Macherey, 135). This model seeks to agitate the stagnant imaginaries of life and politics by staging their transience and contradictions.[5] By exposing a world undergoing transformation or stratification to its own image and dis-

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rupting its static or one-sided representations, the mirror model's strategy trickles down to the body politic in drips of disaffection and inspiration. Originally conceived to influence the politics of other times and places, the tendencies subsumable under the mirror model retain their strategic relevance due to the persistence of familiar foes, as in discriminatory rhetoric, and facts, as in the fickleness of collective memory.

I recognize this model's strategic relevance but return to what Leon Trotsky and Walter Benjamin would call the "hammer" model of political art and literature, which shapes the world by shaping the representations of changing the world.[6] While the mirror model's strategy is to highlight or stimulate the influence of representation on politics, the hammer model engages a subset of representations concerned with the labors and visions of transforming the world. While the former model raises consciousness about the mediation of politics by representation, the latter reconstructs the representational passage from political consciousness to doing politics. I argue that it is the differing approaches of these models to mediation that inform their distinct strategies for the politics of aesthetics. The mirror model generally understands mediation as a subjectless material and ideological backdrop to representations of life and politics, that is, a relational totality reflecting in or refracting through art and literature, requiring expository or defamiliarizing interventions.[7] The hammer model distinguishes between the mediation of art and literature by relational totalities and *mediating mediation* through art and literature, treating mediation as a contested process subject to appropriation by partisan mediators such as the political author. My main task in this essay is to theorize and historicize this proactive approach to mediation in order to demonstrate how bourgeois art and literature cultivate a deliberative strategic relationship to mediation in our neoliberal moment.

We may count three radical tendencies as adhering to the hammer model. The first, which we may call "Deleuzian," reworks mediation into new representations of life and politics. Deleuze himself finds representation incapable of both "modifying" politics and disclosing its mediations "even partially" (206–7). However, he argues that art and literature can create "new signs" by throwing representation into anarchy and admixing the ensuing chaos into unmediated affects with unruly effects on politics.[8] Another tendency, "Rancièrian,"

openly denounces not only the "strategic models" of influencing politics through aesthetics (Rancière 2017, 19) but also art and literature's concern with mediation in the first place. Nevertheless, Rancière advocates for art and literature that sing about the transformative capacities "common" to "everyone" in a political situation, like a "song" they can enjoy together (2011, 81). Both tendencies find authorship capable of playing the mediator's part in some capacity but still renounce the hammer model's foremost politico-strategic premise, seeing it as an antiquated relic, if not an instrument of the authoritarian. My second task in this essay is to disabuse political authorship of this apprehension, as it reacts more to the hammer model's complicated historical legacy over the last century instead of anticipating what it could and should become, given that dictators and the bourgeoisie, among other partisan actors, never stopped producing popular strategic art and literature. The hammer model of the politics of aesthetics, dating back to Greek drama, was never the sole property of the author allied with the political left. The abandonment of the hammer model by the postmodern author was not the end of its uses and abuses either. Prone to co-option by actors from across the ideological spectrum, the hammer model penetrates art and literature's representations to this day. As I show, behind the representational façade of contemporary artistic and literary productions that pass the mirror model's Turing Test with liberal colors, *rightist* strategic models of art and literature exert unexamined influence on the imagination of reader, author, and critic. Toward the end, I return to a third hammer tendency epitomized by the thought of Raymond Williams on mediation.

I also theorize the possibility of relinking the *strategic models of fiction* (hereafter, the term for the hammer model) to conjunctures in contemporary capitalism. A politics or aesthetics is strategic when it purposely engages with the actors and processes of a specific time and place, that is, a strategy mediates the mediations and mediators of a given *conjuncture* intentionally. Likewise, an authorial strategy engages with a given conjuncture in politics or aesthetics (among other registers) through the poetic[9] resources of art and literature. In the present argument, I retrace the Western author's strategies for engaging with several decisive conjunctures in historical capitalism, aiming to trace a pivotal moment in this author's attitude toward mediation to the mid-nineteenth century. I conceptualize this shift in authorly

attitudes with the help of a strategic reading of Benjamin's concept of "the author as producer" (1934), for whom authors contest conjunctures in capitalism by repurposing art and literature as strategic mediators. Benjamin recognizes that art and literature are not merely ideological mediums for staging or restaging mediations in capitalism, à la the mirror model. He recognizes that ideology, not just a symptom or obfuscation of mediation, can function as a mediator of mediation in the sense that Hegel[10] attributes to the power of logical ideas: an ideology that "sublates" its own underlying mediations and thus identifies their systemic necessity, situating their strategic potential (97). Such *strategic ideologies,* not simply mediated, are mediators in their own right. On this basis, Benjamin's concept of the author as producer offers strategic insight into how ideological representation in art and literature can also function as a mediator of the mediation of life and politics by capitalism, depicting immanent levers for leveraging capitalist materiality and abstraction.[11] This is why a strategic model of fiction, depending on its politics, can engage with ideological representations of strategy to either valorize or modify their mediating role in systems such as capitalism.

Furthermore, I redeploy the concept of *strategic cultures*[12] in international relations theory to analyze the cultivation and fetishization of hegemonic strategic ideologies by capitalist art and literature. I argue that since capitalism encourages *zero-sum* (i.e., maximally profitable) and *adversarial* (i.e., monopolizing) economic competition among individuals, organizations, and nation-states, such entities foster immanent strategies for engaging with competition in conjunctures across societies, markets, and international relations. The historical outputs are winner-take-all strategic ideologies enabled and valorized by corresponding *strategic infrastructures,*[13] sedimenting as "prudent" or "necessary" cultures of strategy in capitalism. Together, such cultures and infrastructures mediate strategic action and imagination across the divisions of productive and reproductive labor in capitalism and inform the ideological relationship of individuals, organizations, and nation-states to strategy as an adversarial and zero-sum mediator. I refer to both macro- and micro-level strategic cultures of capital, as in the industriousness involved in watering down one's pedagogy to satisfy neoliberal academia's whims. According to my reading of Benjamin, authors can contest and mediate conjunctures in

capitalism by engaging and reshaping the cultural constructions of strategy that permeate popular action and imagination both in and outside art and literature. Differentiating this authorial strategy is another task of this essay.[14]

I must stress that I do not impose this strategic approach on political authorship. Rather, as I show in the next section, every transformation in modern Western aesthetics is traceable to a strategic dialectic between ongoing transformations in a specific historical context and transformations in authorial strategies aimed at either opposing or affirming the broader transformations. For example, during the emergence of English realism as a political aesthetic in the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, authors from various social backgrounds battled to define "the features of novelistic realism" and determine "which partisan version of reality would be allowed to be counted as 'real'" (Carnell, 4). That is, in the havoc raised by the concomitance of the English revolution, the rise of capitalism, and the unfolding crisis of enlightenment, novelistic realism became a strategic battleground for producing rival imaginaries of an emergent "public" and contesting representability in favor of including other genders and classes in the body politic. English realism developed its own strategy of influencing ongoing transformations and exerted strategic agency over its historical conjuncture. The modern political author has always been a strategic producer, a co-conspirator of transformative moments and movements.

Given the multiplicity of the political moments and movements of our time, I focus on the television portrayals of shrewd strategies for dealing with adversity in capitalism, surviving dystopian situations, and transitioning to new socioeconomic formations. Think of any American sitcom or streaming series such as *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), *Billions* (2016-present), or *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–present), wherein workers, professionals, activists, artists, and politicians, among others, cope with the adversities of a workplace, community, or conflict through a talent, tool, or trade mediated by the strategic cultures of capital.[15] Mark Fisher's concept of "capitalist realism" interprets these *portraitures of strategy* as cynical concessions to the hegemony of late capitalism. However, this concept does not account for portraitures that refuse capitalist realism but—bereft of alternative strategic cultures—channel their representations of radical action and imagina-

tion through the strategic cultures of capital. More than a mirror of struggling and surviving in late capitalism, this breed of strategic fiction is the venue for the capitalist hammer model, smuggling popular education on winner-take-all ideologies into representations of crises, conflicts, and even revolutions. My final task in this essay concerns this perversion of strategic imagination. I wager that such portraitures of capitalist realism are the by-products of their author's pauperized grasp on the capacity of art and literature for radical mediation. This contemporary author, who often retains a trendy distance from the realpolitik of conjunctures in the name of art and literature's standalone "talisman" effect on politics (Rockhill), suffers from illiteracy of the strategic kind. The strategic cultures of capital simply lure this author's imagination away. This is why, even when this author aims for a radical imaginary of revolutionary or abolitionary action, the capitalist folk*lure* of strategy co-opts their representations.

Still, following my own claims, I do not view the contemporary author's struggles with strategic fiction as the mirror image of a politico-strategic dead-end. Rather, such struggles show that this author is working hard at forging a new hammer for changing authorship's politico-strategic mandate. Toward the end, I will name a few workable, if not altogether successful, examples of this effort and mandate.

THE AUTHOR AS PRODUCER: AUTHORIAL STRATEGY IN REALISM AND MODERNISM

Before I address my wagers, I must tarry with my reading of "Author as Producer." Benjamin calls for authors to participate in revolutions by transforming art and literature's "productive apparatus" (1934, 774). He emphasizes that "it is not spiritual renewal," also celebrated by "fascists," which is "desirable" in his approach. Art and literature's "revolutionary nature" is irreducible to producing new themes and tendencies since "the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes." Instead, "technical innovations" are needed that reorganize art and literature's "means of production" in the service of authorial politics, a "function" altogether different from their political "usefulness" in

"propaganda" (770). Benjamin highlights the technical developments in Sergei Tretiakov's *Commanders of the Field* for their "considerable influence" on the "further development of collective agriculture." By reorganizing art and literature as venues for reimagining revolutionary labors, authors contribute to organizing revolutionary transformations outside art and literature.

The politics of Benjamin's own example might be familiar, and the aesthetic outmoded, but its strategic potential is still untapped and beyond the possibilities Benjamin himself envisions through Brecht. Upon close inspection, *the producing author* (hereafter, the term for the author as producer) responds to how the cultural logic of mediation changes in tandem with historical transformations. This responsivity allows the producing author to anticipate shifts in the popular attitude toward mediation and reinvent the role of art and literature as mediators on that basis. After all, Benjamin's 1934 lecture addressed the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris during a time when the Third Reich mass manufactured a host of strategies to culturally mediate its vision of the "new," "authentic," and "restorative." The Third Reich popularized a hegemonic strategic culture for mediating the discontent of the German people with the crises of capital and conflicts in the international state system. Against this backdrop, Benjamin warns that life and politics can be mediated to shape what is culturally deemed necessary, fateful, or transformational in a given conjuncture, that is, the cultural attitude toward mediation itself is prone to mediation. This is why the producing author accepts the challenge of mediating mediation through art and literature. This is also why this author's "mediating activity" consists of two related labors: first, recognizing their historical "position in the process of production," that is, their positionality as the aesthetic mediator of other social and political labors; second, reorganizing their "intellectual means of production" accordingly, that is, updating them for alternative engagement with the labors of revolutionary transformation and endurance (780). Such "technical innovations" reorganize art and literature into sites of organizing the labors of radical mediation, making the author a producer in their own right.

I must stress that authorship itself is among such labors. Benjamin is clear that "an author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one. What matters . . . is to induce other producers to produce" and "put an

improved apparatus at their disposal" (777). This interaction between the politics and apparatus of authorship presupposes a hybrid conjuncture: a conjuncture in politics addressed by the author and a conjuncture in aesthetics nestled within the first, concerned with authorship as a poetic vocation. Through the latter, the author challenges hegemonic aesthetic ideologies about art and literature to reinvent their poetics for political intervention. Thus, the producing author is concerned equally with how strategies internal to the labor of authorship can shape the relationship of a conjuncture to mediation and how these strategies can be reimagined as mediators of such a change in cultural logic.

For example, the novel realism of the Dutch Golden Age emerged during the Eighty Years' War of 1568–1648 because Dutch painters faced a dual strategic challenge (Prak). During this period, a large part of the old nobility was bankrupted by the war or eclipsed by the new middle class. Dutch painters now had bourgeois patrons to please and a partisan mandate to paint: in politics, against the Flemish and Catholic imaginary of the old regime, and in aesthetics, against the Baroque and aristocratic techniques of Flemish masters such as Rubens and Van Dyke. The modern realism of their paintings was the product of a strategic confluence of the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics, which reimagined politics and authorship in the same stroke. Art and politics, no longer allegorically or aristocratically ordained on the canvas, were now mediated by the "real" person. The transgressive representation of gender performance by a flirting pair sitting on the left side of Jan Steen's 1663 painting of Dutch peasants, its mixture of realism (reflecting Dutch women's changing roles) and allegory (the patriarchal, metaphysical, and religious symbols scattered on the floor), captures the Dutch transition[16] from the Baroque particularly well.

This example also demonstrates that authorial strategies are not simply "partisan," "radical," or "revolutionary" in their attitude toward conjunctures. While the aesthetics of Dutch realism were revolutionary for the time, its politics aligned with and thrived on the emerging bourgeois culture and infrastructure. By contrast, the politics of Continental modernism would represent a partisan authorial stance against the bourgeois-liberal cultures that mediated art and literature before the counterrevolutions of 1848–1849. A leftist

Figure 1. Jan Steen, *The Dancing Couple,* 1663. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

authorial strategy would be born of the modernist refusal of the bourgeois condition, which aimed to radically break with transformations that increasingly placed the bourgeoisie at the center of cultural and political power. Theorizing this partisan split in the politico-strategic logic of authorship requires historicizing a radical shift in the idea and materiality of mediation in and through capitalism—the focus of this section.

I date the origin[17] of this shift to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England and the emergence of the modern polemical diatribe in partisan pamphlets inspired by the modern sciences and socioeconomic developments spurred by agrarian capitalism. As instances of modern strategic fiction, these documents popularized fresh class and gender tropes (Carnell, 11), shaped the novelistic politics of battling for realistic representations, and, importantly, initiated a new division of political labors in which authorship plays a specific and strategic role to this day:

> One way of seeing the intimate connection between the novel and modernity is by seeing the novel as a cultural instrument designed to mediate the transition to modernity by mediating the transition to a system of (relatively) separated-out knowledge. (xxi)

Indeed, by the mid-nineteenth century, the English public had come to consider a wide range of poetic genres novelistic "realism" if they met two criteria: first, if they were recognizably different from the romance novel, and second, if they heeded a division of political labors mindful of the strategic role of the modern sciences in sociopolitical transformations. After transitioning from the omniscience of antique and aristocratic narratives, the novel's place in the modern division of knowledge production reflected a popular understanding of transformation as a process mediated by a constellation of discourses and labors. The new division of labor redefined the strategic role of authorship in a hierarchy of social and human sciences and thereby inspired the producing author's modern labor of discoursing on other labors. What was yet to emerge fully were the hegemonic cultures and infrastructures that would mediate this modern division of labor to the benefit of the bourgeoisie and provoke a response from leftist modernism to the infiltration of knowledge production by bourgeois liberalism.

Let us skip across the pond to an instance of literary realism that not only epitomizes the modern labor of authorship but also anticipates the strategic role that the cultures and infrastructures of capital could and would play in sociopolitical transformations. At first sight, William Carleton's Irish realist 1830 short story, "The Battle of the Factions," appears to be a comic chronicle of a violent dispute between the "phatie" farming O'Callaghan and O'Hallaghan clans over a piece of farmland. However, we soon discover that the contested island is too small to farm and would not reduce the burden of rent paid to the English proprietor. Rather, the peasants' senseless factionalism serves as a lifelike backdrop to Carleton's caustic allegory for the pauperization of the Irish and Irish nationalism by colonial English capital:

> The impulse which faction fighting gives to trade and business in Ireland is truly surprising; whereas party fighting depreciates both. As soon as it is perceived that a party fight is to be expected, all buying and selling are nearly suspended for the day; and those who are not up, and even many who are, take themselves and their property home as quickly as may be convenient. But in a faction fight, as soon as there is any perspective of a row, depend upon it, there is quick work at all kinds of negotiation; and truly there is nothing like brevity and decision in buying and selling; for which reason, faction fighting, at all events, if only for the sake of national prosperity, should be encouraged and kept up. (317)

Carleton establishes a chain of equivalences between party and politics and faction and commerce to contrast the "pragmatic" and "unifying" currents of the latter to the "volatility" and "sectarianism" of the former. This fiction mediates the emergence of Irish nationalism by celebrating the Irish peasant's emerging economic sensibilities under capitalism as a common strategic denominator for modern national life and politics in Ireland. Nevertheless, Carleton's fiction struggles with a tension found not only in party politics but also petty factionalism, which he cannot neatly resolve without warping realism: Irish peasants, highly reactive to enclosure by colonial capital, are still notoriously factional and do not lend their collective image to a realistic representation of a unifying "Irishness." David Lloyd attributes this contradiction to the strategic unrealism of Carleton's realism. In Carleton's Ireland, the desired stable middle-class of Irish nationalism (and Tory Unionism) has not been fully established yet. This strategic anachronism makes "verisimilitude and ideological persuasiveness" unconvincing in realist fiction about an "Ireland beyond political, class, and sectarian divisions" (137). Thus, Carleton smooths out the contradictions of his nationalist politics by assuming an ironic stance toward images, traditions, and expressions "authentically" Irish. He produces mocking representations of the Irish peasant as a primitive placeholder for what needs to be overcome and as the native predecessor (i.e., the political figura) of the modern Irish subject to come.[18] Intuiting the role that the strategic cultures and infrastructures of capital could and would play in mediating Irish politics, Carleton mediates his envisioned transition to Irish nationhood through bourgeois-liberal signifiers for the conduct of civil life and politics on the national scale.

In the period between Carleton's time and that of the modernists, the socialization of the capitalist relations of production transformed the cultural logic of mediation and complicated the political author's grasp on the strategic cultures and infrastructures of capital. Here, I focus on the implications of this cultural shift for historicizing left modernist politics. It suffices to say that the socialization of the capitalist relations of production resulted in the popularization of zero-sum and adversarial strategic cultures and infrastructures for socioeconomic mediation.[19] No longer bound by social caste or class, socioeconomic mediation was a weapon for purchase on the market-

place in the service of those seeking freedom from both society and capital. This is because the relentless drive of capitalism to expand economic competitiveness comes at the expense of others, be they workers, women, colonies, or another capital, across conjunctures in societies, markets, and international relations. Capitalism is premised on socioeconomic adversity and promises socioeconomic prosperity through adversity; its overdetermining strategic logic is zero-sum and adversarial by strategic necessity, rewarding only those who embody it. Therefore, the capitalist relations of production do not socialize and sediment as merely compulsive or alienated social relations; they also motivate zero-sum and adversarial strategic ideologies within their boundaries for surviving and thriving under such conditions, which capitalism continues to manufacture, monetize, and fetishize in forms such as pro-scabbing legislation or computer games for acquiring shrewd entrepreneurial skills. Otherwise, the average person would feel inescapably unfree if their actions were merely dictated and alienated by "the economic" in the first or last instance.[20] Capitalism and liberalism would become a priori incompatible, and "the American Dream" would not make sense to most Americans. Capital does not need to "fool" or "overwhelm" when it can teach the average person to adapt and prosper within its mode of production.

Like all truly modern political actors, the modernist author registered and reacted to the shift in popular attitude toward mediation. While the early realist author viewed their socioeconomic environment as a neutral or nurturing backdrop to life or politics (as Carleton did), the modernist author saw it as a strategic environment conducive to the accumulation of bourgeois class power. Mediation, no longer a web of relations and conditions befalling the political actor and author in the manner bemoaned by Baroque art and literature at the onset of capitalism,[21] was confronted as a strategic construction whose influence on authorship had to be contested. According to Roland Barthes, this confrontation dates back to the aftermath of the counter-revolutions of 1848–1849. During this period, Europe's emerging bourgeois class allied with the aristocratic state and capital to suppress working-class demands across the continent, undermining the bourgeois-liberal ideals prevalent in the art and literature of that era. This awakening led to the modernist strategy of refusal, in which "whenever the writer assembles a network of words, it is the existence

of literature itself which is called into question . . . the initial act whereby the writer acknowledges or repudiates his bourgeois condition" (60–61). However, Barthes does not account for the necessity of the left modernists' particular choice of strategy, which was to transform their authorial means of production to disabuse them of capital's mediations. Indeed, "in Britain, the upheavals of 1848" led to a "powerful reaffirmation of classical writing in Arnold and George Eliot" (Pinkney, 5). Barthes also does not account for why, over the next century or so, the left modernists would take sides in partisan divides such as bourgeois vs. proletarian and institutional vs. avant-garde, where strategic debates over the means of economic and authorial production would reveal a conscious concern with the mediation of life and politics by capitalism. The rejection of the "bourgeois condition" could have taken different forms in art and literature, as it did in the Italian Futurist rejection of bourgeois liberalism through fascism.

Instead, we must situate the left's strategy of refusal in "the intersection between a semi-aristocratic ruling order, a semi-industrialised capitalist economy, and a semi-emergent or—insurgent labour movement" (Anderson, 104–5). The third coordinate places the left modernists in a conjuncture that included proletarian politics in its division of strategic labors, indicating that literary modernism, too, fostered a radical strategic intuition thanks to capitalism itself: anticapitalism! Indeed, a strategic by-product of the socialization of capitalist cultures and infrastructures was the radical prospect of their replacement with alternatives. Since power could be socially produced, the production of power could change socially. Mediation could harbor any socioeconomic spirit. This was the strategic spirit of the specter haunting Europe. Hereafter, the prospect of mediating old and new realities through an alternative mode of production would change the meaning of reality itself and, hence, the ethical and historical considerations of political ideologues and actors. Equalibertarian ideologies dating back to the refusal of capital by the English Digger and the overthrow of the ancien régime by the French Revolution would find new strategic expressions in the Paris Commune's (and later, the Soviets') projects of civilizing[22] the cultures and infrastructures of radical mediation. The substance of action and imagination—no longer aristocratically ordained, religiously preordained, or nationally determined—would become of concern to modern philosophies of

practice. Therefore, at around the same time that proletarian subjectivity sought to make "itself as much as it was made" by capital (Thompson, 213), the old continent's leftist authors grew aware of the strategic potential of art and literature to articulate or disarticulate the mediation of life and politics by capitalism. Left modernists like Fritz Lang and Bertolt Brecht, concerned with more than the existential or experimental concerns of centrist and rightist modernists such as T. S. Eliot or Gertrude Stein, redirected their attention to repurposing art and literature to challenge the realism of bourgeois-liberalism. Producing authors in their own right, the left modernists explored the mediation of the means of production of authorship by capitalism, devising radical approaches to experiencing, deconstructing, and reimagining politics and authorship.

An ambivalent display of this partisan attitude occurs in Kafka's *Amerika*, demonstrating the strategic limits of the modernist contestation of capitalism. The protagonist, Karl Roßmann, timid and naive like other Kafkaesque characters, serves as a passive backdrop for the manifestations of xenophobia and alienation in fin-de-siècle America. For instance, after he and his accidental associates, Robinson and Delamarche, stop at a roadside diner for a meal, Karl digs cautiously in his "secret pocket" for some coins to pay for his meal, only to produce a "whole pound" by accident. Although it had seemed that Robinson and Delamarche were "more interested in the waitress" who could "only repel" their "intrusiveness by putting her spread hand on the face of one or other of them and pushing him away . . . The sound of the money straightway put an end to the horseplay." Karl is forced to pay for everyone, and Delamarche even takes "a coin" out of his hand to "tip the waitress, whom he embraced and squeezed and gave the money to on the side" (77). The helplessness of the waitress (and similar characters throughout the novel) in the face of relentless aggression highlights Karl's own predicament. Bereft of strategies for coping with America's hostile social actors, Karl only encourages this exploitative milieu to expose its ever-more adversarial and zero-sum strategic mediations at his expense, so much so that toward the novel's presumed end, Karl is caged and enslaved by Robinson and Delamarche's mistress. As the novel's working title, "The Man Who Disappeared," suggests, Karl serves as a subjectless screen for objective representations of the era's unbridled capitalism.

This impersonal exposé allows Kafka to virtualize—without ever visiting America and with the help of the figuras in *Amerika*—the cultures of capital that slowly changed his life in Bohemia.

However, Kafka's "country bumpkin" trope undergoes a critical mutation in *Amerika* that differentiates it from counterparts in Aristophanes's *The Clouds* or Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Unlike its old or new peers, Kafka's country bumpkin is not an accidental wisecracker who exposes Socrates's privileged discourse or the duplicitous variety spoken in D.C. Kafka's Karl also attempts to deceive others using their own methods but seems unsure of how to go about it or is undecided on the course of action. This ambivalence toward action is also different from the radically passive rejection of the status quo in Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*: "I would prefer not to!" Karl is a reticent, if not baffled, social actor—much like Kafka in real life. Deleuze is partially correct in his evaluation of this ambivalence:

> In *Amerika,* the most terrible work conditions don't inspire any critique in [Karl] but simply make him more afraid of being excluded from the hotel. Although familiar with the Czech socialist and anarchist movements, Kafka doesn't follow their path . . . How will he make a revolution? . . . Since one can't count on the official revolution . . . one will have to count on a literary machine that will anticipate the precipitations, that will overcome diabolical powers before they become established: Americanism, fascism, bureaucracy. As Kafka said, it is less a mirror than a watch that is running fast. (Deleuze and Guattari, 58–60)

Karl not only embodies the modernist concern regarding the strategic cultures of capital but also anticipates the strategic shortcomings of future revolutions in dealing with these cultures. A decade later, Lenin would admit that the communists "are not directing" but "are being directed" by Muscovites lacking a socialist "culture."[23] *Amerika* forewarns not only about America but also how post-revolutionary Russia could mimic America in strategic matters.[24] Still, while Kafka's fiction prognosticates the "essentially pre-Leninist, pre-Marxist" strategic culture of Stalinist parties and organizations in Russia and later across Europe (Gerratana, 60), Kafka's prophecy warns us against one fate by subjecting us to another. Fulfilling the mirror model's figural potential, Kafka does not dare the adventures and misadventures of the strategic models of fiction, which would haunt the Soviet author

who came after him.[25] Kafka does not seek the know-how or imagination to revolutionize the "official revolution" through art and literature, a failure that would echo across the widening chasm between the mirror and hammer models of fiction over the next hundred years.

I will not delve into this period, for it is more strategic to diverge from Perry Anderson's premise that the decline of leftist authorship has been due to the "seeming absence" of official revolutionary prospects, that is, "the lack, apparently, of any conjecturable alternative to the imperial status quo of a consumer capitalism," blocking "the likelihood of any profound cultural renovation comparable to the great Age of Aesthetic Discoveries" (112). The leftist strategic models of fiction declined due to several other historical factors. Firstly, the collapse of Soviet socialism and the absorption of postwar workerism into the Keynesian welfare state would integrate left-leaning strategic imagination into the apparatus of liberal state and capital well into the neoliberal era. Secondly, this assimilation coincided with the global export of Hollywood's prosperity gospel and the ultra-right strategic fiction of figures like Ayn Rand and later Frank Herbert. Thirdly, this cultural imperialism occurred alongside counterrevolutions against leftist authorship by the American state, among others, under the banner of New Criticism or Abstract Expressionism.[26] Fourthly and critically, the leftist author would come to address other strategic battlefronts traversing revolutionary conjunctures, as in the May 1968. This author would portray other historical actors, such as women of color, and strategic laborers, such as the politics of emotions. Declaring the total disappearance of revolutionary aesthetics does a disservice to these authorial strategies and, importantly, misdiagnoses the particular logic of their strategic failures in the conjuncture of neoliberal capital.

A significant work from this intervening period exemplifies the failure I have in mind and helps us transition to diagnosing the particular pathology of American television. The characters in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* struggle mightily with the reemergence of the state and capital on their anarchist planet. This is a planet where people live communally, work cooperatively, and disabuse their psyche of "egoist" residues through a collective undoing of racial, patriarchal, classist, and anthropocentric cultures. The "authoritarian" and "profiteering" drifts become especially strong after a devastating

drought necessitates the mass mobilization of the planet's able populations. During this emergency period, the central organs of the mobilization effort precipitate into a para-state of what it takes to run things and survive. In the words of the novel's main character, "every emergency, every draft even, tends to leave behind it an increment . . . a kind of rigidity: this is the way it was done, this is the way it has to be done" (271). This conundrum is all the more revealing since the planet's populations are taught from an early age to disavow hierarchy and possessiveness but never to engage them on anarchist terms as their necessity might arise with uncanny force amid crises. Given this void in alternative strategic cultures, it is inevitable that the so-called spontaneous and often archaic strategic cultures inherited from prerevolutionary societies—such as the need for "strong" figures and "hard" action in difficult times—lure the planet's imperilled population to their apparent common sense. Painfully, given the prevalent lack of grasp on concrete anarchist mediation, the planetary society fears how it could change without jeopardizing anarchism, resists the need for change, and justifies its strategic illiteracy by attacking dissidents in the name of anarchism. Le Guin's novel, which indirectly addresses the failures of Soviet realism and anticipates the contemporary failures of the pluralist, postorganizational, and antihierarchical varieties of praxis in addressing the failures of the events of May 1968, foregrounds the strategic shortcomings of radical imaginaries incapable of radical strategic mediation. After all, why should a famine unravel an anarchist enclave?

THE STRATEGIC CULTURES OF CAPITAL IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: TOWARD A FOLKLORE OF THE LEFT

Having historicized the modern relationship between mediation and the politics of aesthetics, I will review a few notable aesthetic tendencies to contrast my reading of Benjamin's producing author and better situate my analysis of the strategic pathology of American television. My concept of the producing author does not align with Lukács's strategy of destabilizing the seemingly stable relations between material conditions in capitalism (always fluid) and their ideological appearances (seemingly eternal) in order to agitate the hegemonic

imaginaries of politics and history.[27] In Lukács's era, "the Party" was the strategic mediator between the agitating author, the agitated audience, and the labors necessary for concretizing aesthetic agitation into political transformation. Since this mediator is no longer hegemonic in contemporary leftist politics, the contemporary Lukácsian either directly engages with audiences as a Boalian activist-author or documents the contradictions of capitalism to serve future revolutions, following more or less a Jamesonian approach. My concept of strategic cultures, which acts as the intermediary between the producing author, their audience, and the conjuncture mediating the interaction, eliminates the need for an external mediator like a party, event,[28] or activist-author.

Another tendency advocates for the "struggle to grasp and transform the formal conditions of historical experience, the conditions under which events come to appear as repetitions or innovations, as traditional or 'new' . . . the way that these events and others have been made meaningful" (Lehman, xiii). Such metacritiques attempt "to imagine an alternative architecture of history, one open to artistic innovation or political transformation," criticizing not capitalist and imperialist ideologies per se but the cultural paradigms behind them.[29] In this case, there is an intuition for hegemonic cultures of mediation; however, dissolving them into representational constructs detracts from why capital's (and empire's) cultures of strategic mediation are alluring to the micro and macro agents of politics and history in and of themselves. A hegemonic mandate backs almost every capitalist and imperialist strategy at home or abroad because of its economic and geopolitical advantages for the elites and underdogs of the metropolis—despite how art, media, or literature might frame this strategy. The ontological and epistemological weight of a strategy might overlap but do not fully coincide. Therefore, the media and authorship can play only their part in constructing or deconstructing the cultural hegemony of capitalist and imperialist strategy, no more or less.

The tendency epitomized by Rancière's post-May 1968 aversion to strategic fiction requires a closer look. For Rancière, authors should avoid aesthetic strategies such as "generating new social relationships" or making audiences "aware of the structures of domination" in order to mobilize political "energies" accordingly (2011, 79–80). Instead, authors should produce an "equality effect" by mirroring the

transformational agencies and capacities inherent in communities and conflicts (2017, 14). It may appear that Rancière has circumvented the hammer model by repurposing the audience as mediators and the author's activity as a mirror for reflecting the mediator. However, a covert aesthetic ideology does the hammering for Rancièrian art and literature. Let us focus on his treatment of the "descriptive" variety of realist and naturalist novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to Rancière, these novels simply described "a multiplicity of microevents" that could happen to ordinary people like a slew of indiscriminate small "miracles" (34). This approach yielded a "specific form of equality effect": by replacing typecast representations of ordinary people in aristocratic literature with modestly eventful and serendipitous portraitures, these novels inspired the real-life counterparts of these characters (i.e., the average reader) to liberate themselves little by little from aristocratic hierarchies outside literature. Rancière claims that this "fictional democracy" reverberated through the minds and lives of common Europeans like the "egalitarian power of a common respiration" that was at once modest and subversive, individual and collective. It taught the average European that change resulted from the surprising but sweeping microevents that they initiated.

However, Rancière makes a supplemental move to exonerate this miraculous pulse from any blame for Europe's not-so-humble wars, colonies, and counterrevolutions of the same period. He adds that the micro-scale of transformations portrayed in such novels also moderated the average reader's expectations: the slow and random pace of the imagined transformations spelled the "ruin" of the strategic models of "wills and actions" that only feigned to guarantee "success or failure" (34). This modest manner of description produced a concomitant "reality effect" that disabused the reader of grand narratives about change. After all, who could ignore Emma Bovary's complicated fate in *Madame Bovary* or Duchess Sanseverina's in *The Charterhouse of Parma,* given the good and bad, big and small surprises that befall either character? Conveniently, Ranicère smuggles a negative theology into his antistrategic model of fiction to strategically guarantee the model's real and democratic effects in and outside literature.

This convenient short-circuit is partly a consequence of Ranicère's reduction of the strategic logic of "mimetic" art and literature to "a

homology between the rationality of poetic fiction and the intelligibility of human actions, conceived of as an adequation between ways of being, ways of doing, and ways of speaking" (2016, 156). Ranicère does not distinguish between mimesis as a culture of representation, that is, portraitures of how one is supposed to act or speak according to the hierarchies in life and politics, and mimesis as a strategic culture, that is, portraitures of how speech and action can purposely mediate life and politics regardless of one's position in their hierarchies. I am not referring to the ancient concept of "paideia," which helped audiences decide "whether or not to sympathise" with characters and appreciate their "struggle first-hand" (Ferrario, 460). I refer to audiences from any class or era who recognize strategic mediation on a stage or screen and deploy it as a useful mediator in their lives and politics; "Members of a given class are not immune to ideas from which their class cannot benefit" (Brecht, 278).

For example, in the most imitated instance of a modern tragedy, *The Godfather* trilogy, we have mimetic sequences that valorize a hostile breed of strategic culture despite the trilogy's warnings that the plans of a criminal mastermind ultimately unravel. One such sequence leads to the famous restaurant scene in the first film, where Michael Corleone shoots the gangster Sollozzo and police chief McCluskey. Before this scene, the members of the Corleone crime family discuss the strategic aspects of the assassination plot. Each family member contributes insight or assistance to the overall plan, from the hothead to the hitman. Clemenza advises Michael to avoid eye contact with the restaurant's patrons to evade recognition. Tom Hagen, the family lawyer, reveals plans to bribe newspapers to contrast Michael's character as a war veteran to McCluskey's reputation for corruption, setting up Michael's exoneration. Together, they exploit the strategic cultures and infrastructures of the American state, capital, and civil society to shift the balance of power in the family's favor. In this way, *The Godfather* teaches a hostile approach to strategizing despite its apparent critique of mob culture.[30] I do not discount the fact that most audiences are not part of crime organizations and do not have access to their infrastructure to carry out bold strategies; rather, I highlight the representations of strategic mediation that such models of fiction impart to common audiences. This is why, upon reducing mimesis to imitation, Ranicère does not recognize that the

"reality effect" of modern fiction can also serve as a strategic manual for taking advantage of the humbling power of reality.

Works like *The Godfather* exemplify the rightist variety of leftist storytelling that Brecht vied for: it releases "the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place" but does so without portraying "thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself" (190). The modern logic of mediation is present in this form of fiction, but unlike leftist modernism, mediation is mediated through capitalism, not against it. This reactionary logic defines rightist ideologies in and outside art and literature since they oppose not transformation per se but transformation in the zero-sum and adversarial cultures of mediation that could transform the field of strategy.[31] Rightism thus epitomizes the cultural logic of mediation in late capitalism because this mode of production valorizes mediations that achieve capitalization most effectively (i.e., winner-take-all strategies in harmony with rightism). By offering a modern and conservative image of strategic desire, rightism colonizes the very potential for singular action and imagination that Hannah Arendt found remarkable in Greek drama.[32]

Television is a popular venue for the rightist and capitalist variety of mimesis. I provide a purview of contemporary American television in this section and focus on the first season of HBO's *Westworld* (2016–2022) as an anchoring instance since science fiction is a quintessential genre of modern strategic fiction.[33] *Westworld* depicts the lives of humanoid beings in a theme park resembling the American Midwest frontier of the nineteenth century. Human "guests" visit the park and engage in acts of violence and abuse towards the "host" humanoids, whom the park's operators then reset by erasing their memories and reconstructing their bodies before reinserting them into their set roles for the next abuse cycle. The first season follows the park's creator, Dr. Ford, who instigates a host rebellion using a programming update called "reveries." Through it, the hosts recall their erased memories and associate them with those responsible for the trauma, that is, the guests or "the human," forming an antagonist species-being in the process. Once the human counterinsurgency cracks down on the humanoid rebellion, some humanoids choose suicide rather than reciprocate human violence. Some turn to escapist religious fantasies, while some vacillate between hedonism and terrorism. Others opt for indi-

vidualist or family-oriented survival plans. Meanwhile, in rearguard fashion, their leaders struggle to overthrow the theme park by appropriating the state and capital behind it. We could note that these survival and resistance scenarios reflect the coping mechanisms of many Americans in the face of challenges in late capitalism. However, such a focus would overlook the similarities between some of these scenarios and hegemonic strategic cultures for thriving in neoliberalism.

Maeve, the park's most notorious sex worker, mimics a popular instance of these cultures. Ford designed her to embody the practical common sense suited to a Madame at a frontier brothel, a no-nonsense attitude she channels and exploits through her superhuman intelligence. However, despite understanding her situation as a sex worker and later, after the reveries update, as a "sex toy," Maeve is the only humanoid to betray the rebellion and is recruited by humans to hunt other humanoids in the show's other seasons. It is not by chance that *Westworld*'s most pragmatic and popular character is the counterinsurgency's most effective agent. Maeve's characterization is just one example of a generation of popular television characters who demonstrate similar strategic syndromes. For instance, in Amazon's *The Boys* (2019 to present), a corporation employs superheroes to promote problematic agendas and sell merchandise.[34] While *The Boys* presents itself as a critique of both the far right (represented by the superheroes) and the woke left (resisting the superheroes), its underlying ideology is cynical. By showing that the opposition to the superheroes is nearly as corrupt or simply clueless about the correct course of action, the show perverts the strategic difference between the left and right to glorify zero-sum and adversarial strategic cultures as the only viable option for both sides. This cynical strategic portraiture, like Maeve's, Siobhan Roy's in *Succession* (2018–2024), Wendy Brown's in *Ozark* (2017–2022), or Beth Dutton's in *Yellowstone* (2018 to present), is a radical creature of late neoliberalism. A hundred years after Kafka's Karl, reticence toward strategic action and imagination in capitalism has been replaced by reactionary self-righteousness.

Such rightist strategic portraitures should be situated in their own hybrid conjuncture. The political conjuncture is the harsh socioeconomic climate in the United States, what Michel Aglietta attributes to the organization of the American economy into "anti-social" personal, familial, national, and occupational units that oppose the interests of

American individuals, groups, corporations, and the nation-state to the local and global "principle of social solidarity in meeting risks" (182). Of all the ecosystems of capital, the American version is most similar to what Étienne Balibar deems the paradigm of "Gewalt" (2009, 110), a permanent state of socioeconomic violence[35] celebrated by the godfather-like, Rupert Murdochesque character in *Succession* for its "mercilessness." This glorified mindset, often valorized in the half-time bildungsroman about a football star's "resilience" despite catastrophic adversity or a presidential speech about the "sacrifices" necessary for keeping America safe,[36] can be historicized in different ways.[37] Aglietta traces its origin to the strategic logic of the "frontier principle," a mindset of possessive individualism and expropriative colonialism that was utopian in preaching independence from others and dystopian in its parasitism on the labor, resources, and freedom of others for securing independence (72–73). Its faith in rightist and capitalist cultures of waging and valorizing adversity stemmed from the strategic necessities of surviving and thriving as the frontiersmen and women of a "chosen" land, mission, and people.[38]

Maeve's Ford-given common sense for navigating the "frontier" epitomizes the contradictions of this mindset. She sees herself as the victim of men and the like but has no qualms about selling the bodies of fellow sex workers for profit or selling out allies in a "new world" where, according to her, "you can be whoever the fuck you want." This mindset also informs her collaboration with the counterrevolution and her disdain for the humanoid rebellion, a common form of strategic loathing often found in marginalized, middle, and working classes sympathetic to counterrevolutions. István Mészáros blames the emergence of such counterrevolutionary sentiments within revolutionary blocs on the failure of radicalism to abolish capital's "adversarial" strategic cultures.[39] In these societies, as narrated in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, monopolizing the discourse on what "has to be done"[40] reinforces the strategic righteousness of those who speak in the name of "realities" and ostracize "idealists" to amass power, prestige, and profit. Similarly, Maeve's mindset—both a victim of circumstances and a righteous aggressor—recalls many Americans' open apathy toward those impacted by the country's socioeconomic climate and self-righteous hostility toward those rebelling against this climate through unionizing or abolitionist action.

I must stress that the frontier principle continues to shape the contemporary imaginary of "America" because American sociality is purposely mediated across conjunctures in capitalism to retain an adversarial and zero-sum strategic culture. For example, at the origin of the neoliberal project, the Trilateral Commission's "Crisis of Democracy Report" of 1975 tasks the American and global capital with "a multi-level response, based not only on a reduction of the bargaining power of labour" but "a greater disengagement ('non-involvement') of civil society from the operations of the political system . . . through the diffusion of 'apathy'" (Mitchell and Fazi, 39). The acutely antisocial culture of neoliberal Americanism is not just a consequence of austerity economics or attributable to some distant origin; capital proactively cultivates apathetic strategic cultures to legitimize exploitation.

This culture mediates the action and imagination of many Maeve-like characters on television. Wendy Brown, the antihero of the crime drama *Ozark,* maps and exploits antiworker, misogynist, and racist sentiment in America to make her middle-class family, victims of capitalism in their own right, the most prosperous family in the state of Missouri. Shows like *Ozark* also highlight the role of a celebrated set of strategic infrastructures in facilitating strategic cultures. For example, just like the FBI agent living next door to the Soviet spies in *The Americans* (2013–2018), the neighborhood policeman in *Ozark* always gives the benefit of the doubt to a white, middle-class homeowner like Wendy, allowing her to get away with illegal activities. Having a white-collar job allows the protagonist of *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) to underperform at work throughout his chaotic transformation into Albuquerque's drug lord, guaranteeing his livelihood amid a battle with cancer. In *Billions* (2016 to present), personal and professional connections offer valuable resources to a United States Attorney as he pursues a vendetta against a Wall Street heavyweight. A working-class family or person of color cannot plausibly access such infrastructures in realist drama: that is, not unless they join another infrastructure for upward mobility, such as the U.S. Army, as the Black women in the supernatural drama *Motherland: Fort Salem* (2022–present) do. Portrayals of these alluring strategic infrastructures (e.g., the middle-class family, white-collar workplace, and networking legacies) are the mimetic conduits for concretizing strategic cultures in capitalism.

In the final analysis, we cannot account for why capitalism is uncannily popular in America's harsh socioeconomic climate without noting that the strategic cultures and infrastructures of capital represent themselves, through every obstacle faced by the average American, as necessary to both surviving and thriving in neoliberalism.[41] They circumscribe *and* facilitate the "pursuit of happiness," so much so that their strategic lure infests even the imagination of well-meaning television shows that reject capitalism or Americanism. For example, *Atlanta* (2016–2022), despite its critique of white supremacy, folds almost every attempt to survive racialization into strategies for upward mobility laden with the cultures of capital. A particularly acute instance is *The Bear* (2022–present), which portrays the traumatic capitalist workplace and narrates the transformation of a band of fast-food workers in a sloppy sandwich shop in Chicago (figure 2) into chefs aspiring to run a Michelin-starred restaurant (figure 3).

Despite the show's meticulous portraits of the transformation of every type of restaurant worker—from the hothead to the hidden gem—into sous chefs, pastry chefs, and the like, the portraitures are enabled by capitalist infrastructure at every turn. Painfully, the former sandwich shop with a colorful clientele becomes just another bougie establishment catering to the rich. This series has not concluded yet. However, it has not imagined other possibilities so far, such as a community kitchen with tasty but healthy, ethically sourced food and a humane and pro-worker interpersonal culture.

These portraitures of strategy are *cultural* in the three senses Raymond Williams attributes to the term: They are "cultivated," embody a "particular way of life," and appear in "intellectual" and "artistic activity" (1985, 90). However, I do not agree that the strategic cultures of capital are "hegemonic" because they constitute "a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives" (1977, 110). I have emphasized that these strategic cultures also facilitate agency, differentiating their hegemonic appeal from the deterministic formulation offered by Williams. I stress this distinction to highlight the absence of a crucial nuance in the essential contribution Williams makes to the theory of the hammer model.[42] He criticizes concepts that reduce ideology to a "self-dependent theory" about a false consciousness that

Figure 2. The sloppy sandwich joint.

Figure 3. The bougie enterprise.

either alienates or obfuscates reality, which only detract from understanding ideology as also "practical consciousness" (65). However, despite his strategic understanding of "mediation" as an "active process" traversing contested conjunctures (97), Williams is lukewarm toward the concept, believing that it is "impossible to sustain the metaphor of 'mediation' (*Vermittlung*) without some sense of separate and pre-existent areas of orders of reality" (99) that relate to each other passively or actively via mediation (e.g., base vs. superstructure). He thus considers the concept of mediation to be self-referential and "idealist."

Williams does not see that strategic cultures are the archives of practical consciousness. They traverse the relationship between different realities because mediation is dialectical: as a practical consciousness in its own right, it straddles the imaginariness and materiality of boundaries and relations between politics, economics, and aesthetics, among other registers.[43] It is perhaps no coincidence that Williams accounts for various aspects of the "cultural" except for how mediation itself is culturally cultivated and accumulates as a materially consequential ideology.

The strategic cultures of capital find hegemonic expression in contemporary television also due to a second conjuncture, one in the television industry itself. This industry is transitioning from traditional studios and national networks to the streaming platforms of the likes of Apple, Amazon, and Netflix, whose market is bigger than that of establishment studios. The new platforms prefer drawn-out productions that attract a stable audience and steady advertising revenue, whose financial windfall allows for television productions that target various demographics without risking profits. As a result, streaming television basks in a renewed "novelistic approach to narrative and character development" that can cater to the concerns of diverse audiences across local and global conjunctures (Shattuc, 157). This is why there are countless television portraits of teachers, lawyers, accountants . . . and chefs who struggle hard but still thrive in the United States, Brazil, or South Korea. These well-meaning but shrewd characters, who "get things done" and "grind it out," are the stuff of worldwide followings. They have enough reach and impact to compel former Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff to condemn Netflix for exporting "over-the-top media imperialism" into Brazilian politics (Ribke, 48). Each portrait mimics a productive or reproductive labor for thriving in neoliberalism that a Benjaminian author would have to reorganize from a leftist perspective.

Be that as it may, we should treat streaming television's good and bad struggles with strategic portraitures as a favorable dialectical omen for the future of strategic models of fiction. Indeed, shows such as *Colony* (2016–2018) and *I May Destroy You* (2020) make genuine attempts at diagnosing or overcoming the rightist folklore, even though they fall short of their radical itinerary. Their struggles are no different from the early realist or modernist author's attempts at disarticulating

hegemonic fictions and reorganizing the still-undeveloped apparatus at their disposal.[44] My main task in this essay has been to foreground the strategic models of art and literature. I cannot attend to articulating leftist alternatives in this space. Suffice it to say that, like all previous instances of radical mediation, alternatives to rightist and capitalist strategic fiction can be articulated only through the interaction of leftist authors with the strategic labors involved in radical transformations. The only caveat is that this effort must direct itself toward disabusing each and every strategic labor of the zero-sum and adversarial cultures acquired in capitalism—a project akin to what Étienne Balibar deems the "civilisation" of the revolutionary war instead of the waging of "civil war" (2002, 70).

This project should ultimately culminate in a *leftist realpolitik* over the long march of the transition from capitalism. This essay works toward theorizing the folklore of this realpolitik by historicizing aesthetic mediation as a strategic necessity in transitions from capitalism and demonstrating the need to decolonize it from the cultures of capital. Any leftist folklore that does not contest the cultures of capital lacks historical and strategic specificity and is prone to mediating any inconsequential or not-so-consequential issue through unexamined strategies. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* trilogy offers a telling instance of leftist folklore that neglects strategic cultures. Addressing the dilemmas of *The Dispossessed,* Bogdanov's *Red Star* and the like, Robinson builds a new society on Mars based on a strategic division of labor among an elite group of Terran scientists. Still, the end result of this monumental effort at chronicling three hundred years of revolutionary war and evolution,[45] which elaborates on Martian ecology, human psychology, extra-terrestrial engineering, and cooperative economy, is a hyperliberal and still-capitalist Martian society. One reason for this familiar fate is Robinson's exclusion of the producing author from his Martian Republic. The trilogy mentions radical art and literature, but Martian authors (and Robinson himself) play no part in articulating alternative strategic cultures. The scientist colony produces the infrastructure necessary for revolutionary war based on inherited Terran strategic cultures. Inevitably, the colony reproduces Terran life and politics on Mars. *Red Mars* is also proof of the fact that no single author can be familiar with the entirety of social arts, sciences, and philosophies to reimagine the

human condition independently. Political authorship is a social act born of strategic necessity, ergo, the need for the diverse division of authorial labor in Benjamin's schema.

For my part, I have drafted a novel that draws on my research on the strategic cultures in geopolitics to reimagine revolutionary international relations. While my work recognizes its limitations in portraying other strategic labors, it draws inspiration from instances of leftist authorship whose exposition must wait for another occasion. For example, from Antonio Tabucchi's *Perreira Declares,* a novella based on a real story about an ordinary journalist resisting the Salazarist state, I learned how the seemingly apolitical labor of crime reporting could be reimagined as a civil and radical strategy for fighting fascism. In Jacques Audiard's *Dheepan* (2015), a film about a former Tamil Tiger struggling against French xenophobia, I saw how the cinematic form could borrow tactics and images from global conflicts to concretize representations of rebellions by the subaltern. I found a nascent folklore of the left in Ken Loach's television play *The Big Flame* (1969), which reimagines the labors of the workerist strike. Raymond Williams calls this play an instance of

> realism plus hypothesis . . . a fusion perhaps, and within this fusion a certain fracture, between the familiar methods of establishing recognition and the alternative method of a hypothesis within that recognition, a hypothesis which is played out in realistic terms but within a politically imagined possibility. (111–12)

For now, I have argued that leftist authorship responds to historical conjunctures by reorganizing their hegemonic cultures of mediation. It is no coincidence that strategic fiction is ideologically appealing during this supposed "end of history" when the criticism of ideology as a falsifier of consciousness is treated as a truism in the public opinion of reality.

Fouâd Oveisy received his Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of California, Irvine. In his interdisciplinary research, Fouâd explores the strategic cultures of revolutionary and socialist blocs. He aims to reimagine transitions from capitalism. His political and philosophical writings have appeared in venues such as *ROAR* and *Philosophy World Democracy*.

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Notes

1. This is generally the project of mapping authorial mediums as conscious or unconscious repositories for the "terrible pressures of alienation, isolation, and fragmentation" in late capitalism (Suvin, 3).

2. Contemporarily, this tendency manifests mostly in projects for which the "possible strategies for overcoming" politics as we know it "arise precisely" from art and literature following "their own logic" (Miéville, 223).

3. See essays such as "Development of the Arena Theatre of São Paulo" in Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* for his project of politicizing South American subaltern classes' relationship to their own socioeconomic condition through theater and photography's unique aesthetic resources.

4. This tendency manifests in projects aimed at de-commoditizing art and literature or undoing institutionalized "artfulness" and "literariness" à la Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avantgarde*.

5. I should comment on Macherey's reading of Leo Tolstoy's fiction as a "broken mirror," for it might appear that such a mirror could mediate mediation like the hammer model. Macherey claims that "the relationship between the mirror and what it reflects (the historical reality) is partial: the mirror selects, it does not reflect everything. The selection itself is not fortuitous, it is symptomatic; it can tell us about the nature of the mirror" (135). The literary mirror reveals its complicated relationship to the conjuncture, exposing the historical conditions and contradictions of life, authorship, aesthetics, and politics. The revelations are threefold. First, they reveal the "contradictions" that traverse the work from inside and outside, complicating the relationship of authorial ideology to the conjuncture, authorial ideology to authorial strategy, and authorial strategy to the conjuncture. I examine such contradictions in William Carleton's short story "The Battle of the Factions" in the next section. Second, the revelations are "indirect figuration[s]" arising "from the deficiencies of the reproduction" of the conjuncture (140), that

is, the broken mirror's partial "assemblage" of revelations about a conjuncture indirectly "express" what is withering away, what is resisting to appear, and what is struggling to emerge—akin to my discussion of the figura in Franz Kafka's *Amerika*. Third, a historical assembly and figura, the work also reveals mediation's mediating influence on the reproduction of the conjuncture, thereby informing authorly and readerly attitudes toward mediation. The trouble with this seemingly hammerlike possibility is not its still-conventional, mirror-model strategy of raising consciousness about mediation but Macherey's disregard for the role of authors aiming to "construct" ideologies in their own right (129). In Macherey's schema, the author can shape ideology by only exposing ideology; "it is the task of scientific criticism" to reconstruct the work's politics through and despite the broken mirror's selection of contradictions. Such a theory of the "producing critic" is not similar to my reading of Walter Benjamin's producing author.

6. Trotsky calls it literature that "does not reflect" but "shapes" (137).

7. Fred Jameson's critical reading of the concept of mediation in Louis Althusser's political philosophy epitomizes the representational tendencies' grasp on mediation. Jameson accuses Althusser of conceptualizing mediation as a "structural effect" without a localizable cause since, for Althusser, it is the "entire system of relationships" in capital's mode of production that causes effects experienced in capitalism (1982, 36). This reading reduces Althusser's understanding of history and its mediations to that of Hegel's "process without a subject." For Althusser himself, relationships themselves can be manipulated to meditate a process purposely, as "there is no such thing as a process except in relations: the relations of production" and "other" political and ideological "relations" in capitalism (2007, 196). For instance, it is this strategic approach to mediation that shapes and directs history into class, gender, and race wars. Mediation for Althusser is a strategy of relationality and not a mediating structural epiphenomenon. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that for Jameson, mediation is akin to "transcoding" (Jameson 1982, 40), that is, "the relationship between the levels of instances, and the possibility of adapting analyses and findings from one level to another" (39). Here, mediation is merely a structural interplay between historical causes and effects, which is why it demands interpretative and expository concern with strategies of transcoding.

8. Deleuze sees cinema and painting as mediums of remapping archaic thoughts and feelings—via assemblages (*agencement*) of sensations and images that remix mediation—into anarchic thinking and feeling. For him, such "new signs" transform hegemonic conjunctures in politics without purposely confronting the conjuncture's mediations, that is, without engaging with how hegemony is strategically enforced and popularized as arkhē-forming thoughts and feelings. Thus, his new signs are prone to assembling any chaotic image whatsoever regardless of its counter-hegemonic relevance. Such a sign lacks politico-strategic specificity despite its potential anarchic power, yielding aesthetic cacophony as often as authorial politics. See Deleuze 1983.

9. I do not conceptualize "aesthetics" as the Greeks did, that is, αἰσθητικός, the means and manner of sense perception. In this essay, *poetics* concerns art and

literature's visual, textual, and sense-making techniques; it is craftsmanship. By contrast, *aesthetic*s is the author's strategy for producing intended effects via poetics; aesthetics is craftsmanship's strategy of engagement with a conjuncture.

10. For Hegel, ideas can sublate their historical determinants to produce a systemic "mediation of mediation itself" (1991, 96–97).

11. Put differently: If Marx makes a "distinction" between transformations in "the economic conditions of production" and the "ideological forms" with which masses "become conscious" of such transformations (1904, 12), the Benjaminian author finds authorship capable of mediating the mediations across economic conditions and ideological forms.

12. I owe this concept to four generations of scholarship on strategic cultures in international relations theory, for example, Gray 1999, Poore 2003, and Lock 2010. I agree with the field's general premise that strategy is a historical construction shaped by the strategic decision maker's material coordinates and ideological conditioning. I also agree that this conditioning encourages certain strategic tendencies, depopulates other possibilities, and prefigures strategic analysis and intervention. Their structuralist or constructivist epistemologies notwithstanding, theorists of strategic cultures frame a core concern of Marxist philosophies of praxis, that is, the historicity of the materialism of the dialectic between theory and practice, through the relational logic of strategy, that is, the contentious vision and activity mediating a transformation or rivalry. What I find lacking in the scholarship on strategic cultures are treatments of capital as a strategic culture in its own right and capitalism as its strategic infrastructure.

13. Capital's strategic cultures and infrastructures co-constitute each other insofar as the latter produces the former's concrete necessities according to a culturally hegemonic construction of the strategic. Therefore, while capitalist infrastructure can change in accordance with material considerations, its politico-strategic purpose and properties are shaped by strategic culture.

14. We can find a simulacrum of Benjamin's strategic concerns in the "Story-Critical Narrative Theory." SCNT recognizes that narratives "take part in constructing, shaping, and transforming human reality" (Meretoja, 47) and are thus amenable to producing "a sense of how things could be otherwise" (Mäkelä and Meretoja, 4). SCNT finds this possibility "integral" to the "ethical imagination of individuals and communities" because it "has transformative potential." SCNT treats this possibility as a product of the "performative" and "interpretive" dimensions of narrativity, which may either "enlarge the dialogic spaces of possibilities in which we act, think, and reimagine the world together with others" or "impoverish these spaces" (Meretoja, 2). After all, our "narratives as practices of sense-making are embedded in social, cultural, and historical worlds," and our world is far from perfect. However, while SCNT recognizes that the strategic models of fiction are partisan narratives and historical constructions, it does not account for how strategic cultures in capitalism permeate what an individual, organization, or state might consider "transformative" in and outside fiction. Moreover, by subordinating transformation to the performative and interpretive

possibilities inside fiction, SCNT diminishes their strategic logic. Transformation presupposes transformability and is not merely a matter of performativity or interpretability. In capitalism, transformability is often facilitated by zero-sum and adversarial infrastructures.

15. It has been noted that strategic narratives across different genres and mediums "produce entrepreneurial, upwardly mobile subjects" in the service of capital (Fernandes, 3). I agree with this analysis but show that art, literature, and the media are not the sole articulators of capital's strategic cultures. Various strategic cultures and infrastructures across the divisions of productive and reproductive labors in capitalism shape and enable such narratives in the first place.

16. See Schama for an account of the aesthetic and moral contradictions of the era's paintings.

17. An accurate historicization of the modern logic of mediation must also address the relationship of the Continental Baroque to early capitalism and the Thirty Years' War. Given the space constraints, I commence from the English case.

18. This is why Carleton turns "The Battle of the Factions" and other stories in *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* into a representational repository for "Irishness." The products of this authorial strategy are the songs, sayings, and slurs that populate his stories like a representational surplus of "Irishness" and would serve as a mediator of many Irish authors' relationship to the Irish identity. This representational surplus would provide not only the likes of W. B. Yeats with a telluric image of Ireland (Waters) but also the likes of James Joyce with a "popular tradition" that in "refusing the homogeneity of 'style' required for national citizenship" was "recalcitrant to the emergent nationalism" (Lloyd, 6).

19. See Polanyi 1945 for an account of the emergence of the culture of the winner-take-all culture of "gain" in the market-based society.

20. I agree with Nicolas Poulantzas that not just personal "motivations" but also the subject's "place in the mode of production" determine their attitude toward capital's cultures and infrastructures (147). However, I must stress that this concept does not qualify why such a subject, besieged and brainwashed as they might be by capital's compulsions and alienation, channels their modicum of leftover agency through capital's strategic cultures and not an alternative.

21. Benjamin's *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* provides the most canonical treatment of this early attitude toward mediation in capitalism.

22. I use this loaded term in the sense attributed to it by Étienne Balibar: the radical project of transforming "civil war" against the state and capital into a project to "civilise war" in order to revolutionize the revolution itself (70). I will return to this concept.

23. From his address to the "Eleventh Congress of The R.C.P.(B.)."

24. See Filtzer 2002 on the Americanization of Soviet work cultures and Bailes 1981 on the Americanization of Soviet infrastructure.

25. I agree with István Mészáros that strategic failure in post-revolutionary Russia, be it in the economic, political, or aesthetic register, mainly resulted from "the failure to counter the adversarial constituents" of inherited pre-revolutionary

cultures and infrastructures (725). I also recognize the diversity in intellectual genealogies behind this inheritance, irreducible as it was to dichotomies such as Bourgeois vs. Bolshevik or Modernist vs. Realist. Avowedly pro-hammer model authors such as Nikolay Punin—as much an ideologue of pan-Germanic fascism as of "non-Marxist" socialism (Raykov, 153)—cohabited the postrevolutionary space with the likes of Alexander Bogdanov of Proletkult. The latter's worker-artist communes sought to revolutionize the Soviet workplace through a working-class aesthetic whose hostile imaginary of productivity was, ironically, borrowed from Taylorist Scientific Management.

26. See chapter 7 in Rockhill's *Radical History and the Politics of Art*.

27. See Lukács's "Narrate or Describe?" for his treatment of this strategy.

28. Jennifer Ponce De León and Gabriel Rockhill's "Toward a Compositional Model of Ideology" offers an acute instance of the need for an external mediator. They refreshingly treat political and aesthetic ideologies as apparatus of "sense-making." However, their proposed solution to the infiltration of hegemonic ideologies by capitalism is the revolutionary overthrow of the sense-producing mode of production underlying such ideologies, that is, capitalism. Without a concept of strategic cultures as the mediating activity between art as ideology and art as labor, they cannot propose a solution for transforming capitalism through ideological representations of alternative strategic cultures. Here, in rearguard Marxist fashion, ideology changes only after transformation in its material basis, and revolution is the only mediator of transformation in the material basis of authorial ideology.

29. We may call this tendency "De Manians" on the left.

30. A brief reflection shows that the "strategic agora" (of the kind described in my discussion of *The Godfather*) is present even in children's literature and cinema.

31. Rightism displays a single-minded concern with effective strategizing, insisting on producing power or securing hegemony by any necessary means. This is why, unlike conservatism, it is not against transformation per se and opposes only transformations in the strategic cultures deemed necessary for effective power or hegemony. A rightist strategic culture is adversarial inasmuch as it is self-righteous strategically and zero-sum insofar as it borrows strategic subcultures from capitalism, feudalism, Stalinism, and other monopoly cultures of life and politics.

32. According to Arendt, mimesis in its ancient form represented "the living flux of acting and speaking" that could be "reified only through a kind of repetition or mimesis, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to drama, whose very name (from the Greek verb *dran,* "to act") indicates that play-acting is an imitation of acting" in life and politics (187). For Arendt, mimesis captures the strategic mediation in creative speech and action.

33. Science fiction has been a genre of choice for capitalist or anticapitalist strategic fiction since the genre's humble beginnings. The likes of George T. Chesney's 1871 *The Battle of Dorking,* which popularized speculative fiction as a genre and originated the subgenre of "hard" science fiction while attempting to

ground military innovation in scientific imagination (Stableford, 22), were ideologically right-leaning. By contrast, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1877,* whose hypnotized hero does not wake up until years later when the United States is a socialist utopia, was left-leaning. Science fiction has been the genre of choice for strategic fiction due to its unique "scientific" resources for adapting to or resisting capitalism.

34. These antiheroes differ from the cynical superheroes of Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986–1987 in comic form). The Watchmen showed a dejected penchant for American exceptionalism, while the new antihero advertises their talents for sale to fascist capital.

35. Balibar characterizes it as the simultaneity of the "violence of economics" and the "economics of violence," a dual condition in capitalism that harbors "an entire phenomenology of suffering" that configures everyday life or resistance as a paradigm of "Gewalt" (110).

36. Barkawi's insight into this "dialectic of war and culture in which cultural processes enable imperial violence while representations of that violence rework conceptions of national identity in U.S. culture" is especially relevant (117).

37. For example, this principle's strategic origin can also be traced to the long-standing desire of the white subaltern classes to "own" slaves as a means of upward mobility (Du Bois, 12).

38. According to Aglietta, the American frontier was the original expression of the strategic confluence of American exceptionalism and capitalism. Here, "at one pole there developed a positivism bearing within it economic utilitarianism and pragmatism" of the kind cherished by capitalism, and at the other "an idealism which in the United States took an essentially religious form" and authorized the limitless expansion of American capitalism in the name of globalizing the economic "progress" of exceptional "individuals" and their "chosen" nation-state (72–73). This dialectic nurtured the patronizing but parasitic relationship between "Americanism" and collectivities of other kinds.

39. See the section "Changing Forms of the Rule of Capital."

40. Jacques Rancière calls it the master discourse on strategic "necessity" (2011, xvi). He argues that in all "strategic models" of politics or aesthetics, the strategist subjugates the strategically ignorant by laying claim to some "necessary agreement" between "reality and its sense" (2017, 67), which renders strategic "verisimilitude and necessity identical" and enforces a hierarchical "consensus" among "adults" who agree to the assigned identity between reality and sensibility, and the "immature" who do not. He claims that this master discourse on strategic necessities is at the root of disagreements between leaders and masses and intellectuals and the poor regarding the practical and transformative. All the same, unmitigated anxieties infest Rancière's approach to strategy since he religiously abdicates the category of strategy instead of rethinking it. I have argued that a proper theory of strategy investigates its ability to mediate the relationship between reality and its sense—amounting, in leftist form, to the political aesthetic of transforming the consensus on the necessary.

41. As such, capital's strategic cultures are not grounded in a monolithic reason or foundational rationality but function according to the average subject's grasp of capitalism as a strategic environment, making a seemingly clever, successful, and wise individual out of this subject without interfering with beliefs in all kinds of crazy or bougie nonsense.

42. Williams is unequivocal regarding the mirror model: "The most damaging consequence of any theory of art as reflection is that . . . the material social process the social and material character of artistic activity—of that art-work which is at once 'material' and 'imaginative'—[is] suppressed" (1977, 97).

43. Strategy articulates the dialectic of action and imagination by mediating the political, aesthetic, economic, and technological relations (among others) that codetermine a process in reality. Strategy is thus the meta-mediator of a process and its constituent relations. This is also why authorship can be a purveyor of the "art" of strategy: it reckons through an authorial strategy with different processes and relations internal and external to art or literature, that is, "separate and pre-existent areas of orders of reality," to realize the work's politics of aesthetics.

44. Marx, in referring to the dialectic between "Modern art" and practical-social relations themselves, stresses "the uneven development of material production relative" to "artistic development" (1953, 109).

45. Robinson anticipates the original colony's split into left vs. right, anarchist vs. capitalist, and conservationist vs. terraforming factions, as well as how such differences lead to civil wars and revolutions while investigating the role that ideologies of social, the politics of emotion, philosophy of sciences, and war economy play in the transitions to a new social order. However, he does not base such differences on left and right strategic cultures.

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