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Cultural Critique, Volume 132, Summer 2026, pp. 21-33 (Article)

Published by University of Minnesota Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2026.a996029>



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A VERY SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

CAPITALISM AND THE NOVEL FORM

Anna Kornbluh

The novel is the artform unique to capitalism. A categorical statement that should license clarity about the novel form, the historicity of that form, and its futurity. The uniqueness derives from historical coevality: capitalist production and circulation forms and transforms in the same epoch as the novel, and the novel is the first wholly commodity art, produced in a market it was also producing, produced by professional writers, produced for emergent professional and merchant and waged-labor classes, produced about market-farers. The uniqueness also founds sharp insights capacitating for the future: novels think about capitalism intensely, and offer indispensable support to not only imagining but also strategizing futurity. Since the critique of political economy originates in querying the configurations of knowledge peculiar to the capitalist mode of production, Marxist theories should take special interest in, and offer special purchase on, the novel form.

Fully flexing this special purchase is one future to be hoped for among those conceivable at the interface of Marxism and form. In the past, both Marxist and non-Marxist historians of the novel have addressed the historical concurrence of the novel and capitalism through the rubric of ideology: the novel promotes individualism and instructs in middle classness; the novel promotes self-discipline and human-capital optimization; the novel promotes liberalism and credit.¹ Marxist novel critics have expanded this rubric to emphasize subjectivity: the novel as the art of the rising bourgeoisie; the novel as the art of the quashed uprising proletariat.² Less common as an emphasis, but expansively beneficial to these historians and critics, is the theoretical account of how the novel form constitutively engages the capitalist mode of production. For Georg Lukacs the novel “thinks in terms of

totality,” and for Fredric Jameson the novel takes shape from the problem that totality is unavailable to representation.³ It is this latter framework—less characterological, thematic, or plot-based—and more *formal*—that best broaches the issue before us in “Marxism, Form, and Futurity.” With these theories we might ask what aesthetic techniques for mediating the social structures of the capitalist life-world contribute to the political construction of futurity beyond that world. If Marxism itself opens futurity through its orientation toward freedom and flourishing, does formalist reading of the novel, as an art of totality thinking and world building, enhance that dimension of futurity?

For the Marxist theoretical tendency such as it stands, “historicity” has been a more recognized feature of the novel than “futurity.” In locating history as the stuff of the political unconscious, Jameson identifies an “uninterrupted narrative” with a “vast unfinished plot,” “a single great collective story . . . the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity.” History is the history of struggle—and it is not too much of a leap to conceive struggle itself as the movement for futurity. The literary reader’s fidelity to the novel’s historicity familiarly involves the prevalent, paradigmatic, and long-lived genre of “the historical novel,”⁴ as well as a general portal to historical values and ancestral minds, and the general way novels present history in the simple past tense, or time capsule the present as future past. It could less familiarly involve affirming futurity, reading in the modal specificity of the novel the social architecting that evinces a will to construction.⁵ Futurity felicitously marks the making that novels do, the projection of possible social space they undertake, the inquiry into contradictions of sociality they express, and their vociferous claim to the enduring benefits of practicing and witnessing creativity. Through their imaginative acts and projective aesthetics, novels offer political optimism. Exceeding the determining destructions of the present, scaffolding utopian struggle, “futurity” is the Marxist name for the critical axis of the novel form, its integral world-making and creative departure.

By way of instantiating the novel form’s futurity, this short essay argues that across its three-hundred-year history, the form of the novel consistently mediates capitalism, through integration of inner and outer, exemplary and exceptional, character and context, event and narration; through the heteroglossic conducting of discourses and the

heterogeneous conducting of mentation; through the union of divergent elements by abstracting and then again concretizing.⁶ “Form” for the novel is this aestheticized integration, which is also to say, the aestheticization of dialectics. Historically determined, novel form engages the contingent dominant of capital itself, but the logical autonomy of form ensures that this determination isn’t purely determined: the novel form reflects, encodes, and performs capital, but it may simultaneously practice critique.

In arguing for this categorical understanding of the novel as the art form unique to capitalism, an immodest historical scale will paradoxically grant some specificity of context and of form. While critics often describe the endogenous evolution of the novel’s aesthetic modes, it is also possible to articulate such evolution to the historical developments of phases in capitalism. One lexicon: picaresque, realism, modernism, postmodernism, post-postmodernism. Another lexicon: mercantilism, industrialism-financialism, imperialism, secular stagnation, ecocidal exhaustion. On demarcating the boundaries and transitions among these modes and phases, the literary historians barely agree, and the economic historians much less so. Underlap in these two lists probably illustrates that cultural production lags in metabolizing economic production, while the overlap certainly illustrates that different modes of the novel significantly coincide with cognizable transitions in capitalism.

To read that coinciding as generative for literary form, and to esteem generative forms as indispensable to fathoming capitalism, we will consider five examples, each exemplary of the aesthetic modes in our schema, each dating from the historical periods in our schema. Chosen for this representativeness, they are also chosen for their greatness, which may be the same thing: great novels being those which, obliquely to philosophy or political strategy, differential to great poems, provide insight about ways of collective living and imaginatively ignite their enlargement. In this rough schema, we will not long linger with any special unassimilable singularity of any of these novels, but the historical breadth and formal correlations should bring into relief the novel’s capacity for dialecticality, foremost how understanding the present provokes the future.



To punctuate futurity, let us sidestep the obvious arrangement of this schema in chronological order and begin now, with some analysis of the form of a recent novel, overtly oriented to the spectrum of the possible in the very near future of ecocidal extraction: Kim Stanley Robinson's *Ministry for the Future* (2021). As the title telegraphs, the future requires planning. *Ministry's* plot and milieu consider the question of coordinated action to ensure a future of freedom amid a patently destructive capitalism we can only deem "too late." Thus underlining ecocide as something like a phase of production rather than a limit to production, illustrating the banal ways in which the spasmodic end of the habitable earth might not bring the end of capitalism, it simultaneously deploys the form of polyfocal and omniscient narration, with deep description and marked ellipsis, to enact coordination and centralization, political counters to economic degradation. Ministry is service and care, the root of administration. Using old features of novel form like abstract narrativity, prosaic length, and quotidian realism, *Ministry* ventures that the administered world need not be the dystopian nightmare hypothesized in the twentieth century, for the twenty-first century demands centralized care, and that "bigger is better" (453).⁷ Using the novel's faculty for dialectics, it proposes unflaggingly that "every good work has to begin somewhere" (148) and that every available tactic, from carbon tax to geoengineering to assassination to mutual aid, must be leveraged. Using variable setting from Kerala to Zurich to San Francisco, using the perspectival agility that can palpate psychic stress in discrete individuals and physical strain in glaciers, the form of the novel intercalates and resounds: Everything is connected, its layers aver. The political problem of administration, "waiting to scale" (251)—*the* political problem of climate crisis, wrought of the subordination of political order to profit extraction—finds here an aesthetic treatment that reframes pregiven questions of sovereignty or horizontality into experiments with the affordances of collaboration, centering, and verticality. This last property of a world order arranges resource disparities as responsibility debts, and ordains black-ops off-page action covertly from the highest offices. The form moves from trying to contrive adequate rendering of the scale of capitalist ecological challenge to instructing in techniques for configuring political response. Distinctively, crucially, strategically, it matter-of-factly includes the zombie persistence of capitalism as the milieu and tactic for action. It

is able to imagine *a* future of the world, *because* it does not imagine the end of capitalism. Ensemble characters with asymmetric focalization, ranging locations with diverse social registers, modal realism out of time but of our time, heteroglossic cantata of domestic romantic chatter, atmospheric description, scientific recitation, political theorizing—all of these formal features coordinated together in the way that only the novel can do makes for a theory of the possible future.

The history of the novel is littered with other such efforts at future thinking, many of which simultaneously chronicle the history of capitalist transitions, crises, and transformations, through formal innovations that track them. So now that we have peeked at a novel from our present which plots our near future, let us swerve all the way back to the first English novelist, since England has always been the first when it comes to capitalism. *Ministry for the Future* invokes its predecessor of three hundred years directly, in a conversation debating black-ops and the psychic toll of mass suffering in the capitalist climate crisis. The minister herself directs a traumatized radical care-worker to try not to take the weight of the world on his shoulders, and he broaches his *Moll Flanders* reading: “it was the same for her”—by which he means, bearing world loss constantly.

That *Moll Flanders* (Defoe, 1722) should make this appearance for this precise point is a testament to its own mixedness as a form: tragic but deeply comic, repetitively digressive but unified in its propulsion by precarity, a story of conversion that rationalizes remaining utterly the same. The novel emerged as this monstrous mixing, new and old, high and low, epic and news, feasting upon hitherto existing genres against their decorum, heteroglossia hedonism: travelogue, confession narrative, epistolary exchange, journalism, comedy ending in marriage, tragedy middling in death, accounting ledger. There are many ways to explain this mixing as form, but surely one of them marks the unsuitability of the age of trade, including the transatlantic slave trade, to epic conventions and poetic presentation—and thus underlines the compensatory ordering work done by a synthetic discourse metabolizing a world whose previous girders were, as the saying goes, melting into air. *Moll Flanders* makes of such melting a formal principle: at the level of syntax, character, plot, narration, the inverse propulsive coincidence of opposites and collision of contraries makes for tippy rhythm.

From the instant of the title page, whose first line “the fortunes and misfortunes” establishes the ups and downs that will be the business of the book, the telling is suffused by paradoxical formulations: “I had a husband, and no husband” (64), “being now, as it were, a woman of fortune, though I was a woman without a fortune” (106), “happy but unhappy” (120), “he had a wife and no wife” (133), “a robbery and no robbery” (254), “reasoned me out of my reason”—and on and on and so on.⁸ Such constructions effect a rhythm of instability, a chronic unpredictable vertiginous undertow, riptiding the overwhelming deluge of prose without chapter breaks. For macrostructure, a cyclical plot: born in Newgate, Moll returns to Newgate to be reborn; her fortunes and misfortunes generate the recursive compulsion of another caper and another caper and another husband and another husband and another loss and another loss. For narration, a first-person true history and confession that records deeds but little of internal states, a full rendering that forms itself as an “account”—as prefigured in the long title page, a reckoning preoccupied with enumeration. Counting up sins, counting up dead children, counting up booty from a heist, counting up net worth—this is the culture of debt and credit the breathless listy prose encodes, a relentless inventorying of things and persons lackluster in their nominalism (unadorned and undetailed), but staggering in their quantity. For character stands of course an anti-hero: not a romance knight of honor, but a kleptomaniac harlot, and to boot a lusty upstart of an insurgent class, who though born into poverty believes she can industriously ascend to “lady,” and not merely by marrying “this amphibious creature, this land-water thing called a gentleman tradesman.” What else but this rollicking repetitive fluctuation could have been the form of mercantilism? The fortunes and misfortunes of seafaring merchants, the crests and troughs of ocean ventures. Thrownness not as ontology, but as the contingent historical material condition of the catastrophe of the market: here a shipwreck, there an orphan, here a desperate virgin, there a ruined investor, floundering and flailing in the fierce swells after feudal fixity. Mercantilism is circulation-intensive (as would be other historical phases of capitalism in later centuries) and it is this current and flow of trade, in all its volatility, which the Defovian novel formalizes.⁹

Episodic highs and lows, propulsive repetitive losses, and first-person narrative accounts are the eighteenth-century novel’s aesthetic

formalization of mercantilism, which begins to pose as a problem for futurity the balancing of security and freedom. The historical transition to industrial and financial capitalism is marked by shifts in all these aesthetics that correspond to the shifts toward geographic concentration, physical coordination, specialized division, and systematic integration which define industrialism. The nineteenth-century high-realist mode of the novel effectuates this mode of production, and we can take as an example Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864). His final completed novel, it stands in many ways as monument to *figural* realism—to the project of constructing meticulous metaphors with some promissory note that they will yoke themselves, in the last instance, to the earthly world. The quality of conclusive allocation of meaning—characters getting their due, tropes come home to roost, wealth distributed on a moral scale, dust to gold to dust—aestheticizes the driveline of industrial coordination of production fueled by and fueling finance (i.e., innovations in circulation). Presented in an integrated third-person omniscience, moving among multiple focal centers and dramatizing the gaps and differentials in character knowledge, tightly incorporating a bildungs plot and a marriage plot and a murder mystery and an orphan plot and more, *Our Mutual Friend* welds motifs of waste, recycling, and death to plots of impersonation and wealth accumulation. Its formal airlessness—repetitive figures that come home to roost, rhetorical questions that are answered anyway, wayward accumulations that arrive at their destination—enacts the stilted coordinations of industrial manufacturing and investor capital.

Opening with a scavenger on the Thames, who pilfers the pockets of floating corpses and asks “Has a dead man any use for money? Is it possible for a dead man to have money? What world does a dead man belong to? T’other world. What world does money belong to? This world. How can money be a corpse’s?” (16), the book circles outward from that necrotic ooze to other forms of lethal tender, wealth made of mortifications: Mr. Venus, Articulator of Bones, who sells skeletons and other detritus of estates; the Veneerings, financial speculators; Fledgeby, Riah, and others running the usurious moneylending firm Pubsey & Co; Jenny Wren, recycler of rags into dolls; and most centrally, the Boffins, the golden dustmen, who inherit dust mounds and the business of traffic to and from them.¹⁰ According to *Household*

Words, Dickens's magazine, dust heaps feature "cinders, ashes, . . . bits of coal, . . . soft-ware and hardware. The former includes . . . everything that will decompose . . . The hard-ware includes all broken pottery,—pans, crockery, earthenware, oyster-shells, &c . . . bones,..rags,..tin things, . . . bits of old brass, lead, . . . broken glass vessels..articles of jewelry . . . and other valuables." Echoing the literary journalist was the sociologist Henry Mayhew, who appraised the dust heaps as site of value: "What appeared worse than worthless to us was Nature's capital—*wealth set aside for future production*" (160, emphasis in original). Waste arrested in a heap will leap back in to circulation.

Cataloguing the concrete dirty material of value, *Our Mutual Friend* simultaneously studies the abstractions installed by capitalism, most especially the literary one identified by Marx: personification. Across its many coordinated plots, *Our Mutual Friend* hinges on a character who crafts himself as a person he is not, in order to escape his ordained identity of inherited wealth—a character who impersonates, in order to thwart the personification that capitalism effectuates for "persons and things in general" (as the novel establishes). Subplots also involve personations, impersonations, personifications, by good and bad characters, animate and inanimate objects. When the personations reveal themselves, the function is to insure wealth has arrived where it belongs. The question posed on the first page will be answered affirmatively when a dead heir comes back to life. Circulation circles back; tropes like the persona are spooled out to the point of absurdity to then be retethered to referents. This motion itself effects the cycle of value that is this novel's ultimate object of mediation.

If a concretization of circulation propels *Our Mutual Friend*'s figural realism, which begins to pose as a problem for futurity the adequate frameworks for social exchange, then a different discursive endeavor, at wider and wider scope of abstraction, operates in its successors. *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) perfects the abstraction critics regularly delineate as the high modernist mode. Titled for a woman like *Moll Flanders*, it nonetheless ostends social security in the position of marriage, while concealing a first name, "oway" from position. A hostess from the first page, Mrs. Dalloway's office is crafted in congruence with that of the novel itself, which hosts many minds in its liquid discourse. That stream is of course the medium of this form, and its ebbing and flowing effect an absorptive associative integration which

sluices the sutured “world” between the wars. The stream burbles over the past even as the setting situates the events on a single day, the punctuated “moments” on a Wednesday in June 1923, moments as the pearl that rounds the past into itself, moment as the integer of quotidian life: eating drinking walking cleaning shopping mending. The current of dailiness swirling with the intensities of personal memory and world history contrives a new kind of synthesis, and new kind of now solvent now slipping dialectic. The stream is an image for the dexterous agility of the narration, “that something central which permeates,” its flight from one mind to another, and more so its flight to something like a common mind: “nothing exists outside us except a state of mind” (57).¹¹ It is an image for the liquidation of barriers and the liquification of connections, for the tide that envelops. In this way the narrational form of Mrs. Dalloway enacts a kind of cognition of totality, of connectedness as principle. Connections between shopping and war, between servants and nobles, between Clarissa the aging socialite and Septimus the young veteran, between sanity and insanity, the outer social system and the inner mental life.

Connections of the sort liquesced by the stream are not a spiritual matter of human interest but materially structured. The setting of the novel is here essential: as complementary axis to the emphasis on time, moment, Big Ben, the hours, the space of London provides the sensory stimulation, collective serendipity, and mass rhythm to establish what diverse characters share and to motivate the stream’s rills and rivulets. Clarissa declares, “I love walking in London” (6) as a companion to her opening decision to buy the flowers herself, and before the declaration the narration has poured together why: “In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motorcars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June” (4). Where lists in Defoe instantiate the flat quantitative accounting logic of mercantile capital, the qualitative, associative, variable rove of the Woolf stream texturizes conjunctures surprising and even forced, the annexations of imperialism. In this particular list, the sense of place enfolds the sense of time, dance becomes transportation becomes music becomes transportation again, and scenes in streets and parks, on the

bench and on the bus, set the texture of connective experiences. A novel can take place any place, earthly or heavenly, real or made-up, and the work of world-building is required for each. The meticulously evoked textures and impressions of London provide a woof for weaving common experiences in different bodies and minds; London as capital of the world asserts itself in the style of the stream as material crucible of connectivity. Thus does this novel begin to pose as a problem for futurity the city and the loci of collective life.

Urbanism and geopolitical space as vector of totalizing connection are metabolized more thoroughly in many novels of the post-modern era. Responding to the material transformations loosely deemed “globalization” and the attendant challenges of orientation, mapping, and sense-making, theorists and historians have described the specificity of this period in terms of the totalization of the world market, the total commodification of art, and the compression of time and space under a regime of speed and penetration. The novels animated by these transformations and challenges have often constructed polyfocal fractured narratives, careening irony, and realist setting, and relay a tenuous and often mystical web of connection. Karen T. Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (1997) is a sterling representative of this mode of representation, a work at once socially realist and magically realist, splicing and hashing aesthetic modes to grasp traffic as quotidian fact in fossil fuel culture, as commerce sweet and illicit, as the movement of bodies and organs across the invented borderline, as the asymmetrical circulation that propels late capitalism. Los Angeles and Mazatlan, port cities both, provide the spatial ground for what is also a tightly temporally structured work, progressing through seven parts, one for each day of the week, and seven chapters each part, with seven consciousnesses unordered but evenly arrayed across the chapters. Utilizing a technique of split narration first practiced in Dickens’s *Bleak House* and essential to Robinson’s *Ministry*, one of the seven consciousnesses speaks in the first person, while the others in third highlight not only social difference but also the epistemic difference of close third and distant third: evoking ethnic diversity without discrete enumeration as seven (two Japanese-American characters, one Singaporean who impersonates a Vietnamese, a Chicano, a Mexican, a Black American, and a South American indigenista). Now social realism, now magic realism, then allegory, then science fiction,

here sincere, there ironic: The vacillating modes of this kaleidoscopic text evoke the combined and uneven accumulation of multinational corporations and geopolitical treaties. The unrepresentability of capitalism is both epistemic reality and aesthetic gauntlet in this phase of time-space compression, multinationalization, and financialization. Postmodern novels like *Tropic of Orange* answer this charge with sheer aesthetic heterogeneity.

That such heterogeneity could also be the basis for social reconstitution is importantly, and dialectically, enunciated by the novel, through repeated axes. The traffic jam that becomes a new asphalt city for the unhoused; the geopolitical trade agreement personified in a wrestler; the piece of fruit on the lam that spins a new latitude: all these hypertropes argue for the possibilities already present in the order of things, for the contingency whose underside is reconfiguration. Futurity pulses in the aleatory intersections arising from polysemic traffic, and the recurrent motif of mapping (“if someone could put down all the layers of the real map, maybe he could get the real picture”) (81) grants that futurity a spatial avenue: Building a different future and better logic of interconnection requires activating space as the medium of social relation. *Tropic of Orange* expertly relays the logic of reification as the logic of traffic—“All these people living in their cars. The cars living in garages. The garages living inside guarded walls. You dump the people outta the cars and you left with things living inside things” (43)—and it also opens these exchange problems to their recircuiting. Here is posed as a problem for futurity the values of and in coordination among heterogeneous loci for collective life.

Three hundred years of lurches and leaps, dispossession and destruction, immiseration and accumulation: 1711, 1865, 1925, 1997, 2021. In each of these texts, the novel mediates capitalism not through direct representation of social problems or class antagonism, not through voicing ideology or focalizing proletarians, but through the formalization of logics of production and circulation, through questions of totality, and through the aestheticization of dialectics, the mode of thought adequate to the mode of capitalism. Long associated with historicity and now most often the object of scholarly arguments that it does not and never has existed¹² or that it is an outmoded repository of culture from the vantage of twenty-first-century image platforms, the novel can be comprehended, from a properly Marxist

framework, as intrinsically futurist: the form that builds a world in such a way as to disclose, counter, and reimagine the logics of capitalist modes; the form which interrogates stability, exchange, location, coordination as fundamentals of collective life. As long as capitalism is not dead, the novel cannot be either.

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Notes

1. See Watt; Armstrong; Lynch; Poovey; Gallagher.
2. See Goldmann; Lukacs; Jameson.
3. These questions stem from Lukacs; Jameson; Wegner; Tally.
4. See Lukacs 1983.
5. On architecting and the novel, see Jameson 1985 and Kornbluh 2015.
6. Some of these ideas about form, dialectics, and critique are composed in the introduction to Kornbluh 2019; also see Kornbluh 2017. On heteroglossia, see Bakhtin.
7. See Robinson.
8. See Defoe.
9. On circulation intensivity and production intensivity as an alternate schema of capitalist history, see Arrighi.
10. See Dickens.
11. See Woolf.
12. For example, see Trismegistus, 405–15.

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