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"I would prefer not to": Routine and Agency in Office Fiction

Sixta Quassdorf

In recent years, fiction writers have been increasingly interested in the office as a revealing symbolic setting with which to address the individual's embeddedness in socio-economic structures. This article focuses on two recurrent motifs in recent office fiction – routine and agency – which are already anticipated in one of the earliest examples of American office fiction: Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853). Routine, as a result of doctrines of rational efficiency, highlights the "mechanical," boring, and repetitive nature of office work and its consequences on human beings. The question of agency and resistance implied in Bartleby's famous formula, "I would prefer not to," becomes pressing in a neoliberal context where the transformation of political and social organization according to the logic of corporate business generates a totalitarian system. The present essay discusses these generic issues – agency and resistance – with particular reference to David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011) and Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018).

Keywords: Contemporary American fiction, office fiction, working conditions, agency, "Bartleby, the Scrivener," David Foster Wallace, Ling Ma

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> By examining white-collar life, it is possible to learn something about what is becoming more typically "American" than the frontier character probably ever was.
> – C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*

When the sociologist C. Wright Mills observed the typicality of "white-collar life" in the early 1950s, he was referring to a socioeconomic development that had begun to take shape at least a century earlier. In the mid-nineteenth-century, office work found its first canonical portrayal in American literature in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) which drew attention to that "interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing [. . .] has ever been written" (635). Melville had apparently recognized the significant role that office workers would play in the future, despite their then lowly status and their engagement in an occupation that clashed with nineteenth-century conceptions of masculinity. Nevertheless, the following generations of writers have only reluctantly acknowledged the office as a promising setting for their literary works, leading Bryan Burrough and others[1] to pose the question: "where is the office in American fiction?"[2] On an international scale, however, Anne Mulhall notices that the last two decades have been especially productive and contends that "the office novel has become a genre in its own right." Lydia Kiesling concurs with respect to the United States, so long as female writers are taken into account, and Michael Lindgren even maintains that the genre "belongs to our time just as the comedy of marriage belongs to the late 18th century and the social-realist novel to the late 19th." Even though the latter claim may seem exaggerated, the office features in a number of recent literary works by Helen DeWitt, Dave Eggers, Joshua Ferris, Ling Ma, Ed Park, Amy Rowland, David Foster Wallace, and others.[3]

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[1] See Ferris; Flanders; Lanchester; and Saval, "Bartlebys All!" and *Cubed.*

[2] The office appears, however, in office romance, which developed as a genre in the late nineteenth century when women were admitted to office work (Berebitsky 10, passim). What distinguishes office novels from the schema-based mass production of office romances is their literary intention and reception (see Dobson 264). As to literary office fiction, only a handful of twentieth-century novels, such as Sinclair Lewis's *The Job* (1917), Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Don DeLillo's *Americana* (1971), Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), and Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* (1995) come to mind.

[3] Examples of recent office novels include Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* (2007), Ed Park's *Personal Days* (2008), Sam Lipsyte's *The Ask* (2010), Matthew Norman's *Domestic Violets* (2011), Helen DeWitt's *Lightning Rods* (2011), David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011), Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013), Amy Rowland's *The Transcriptionist* (2014), Julie Schumacher's *Dear Committee Members* (2014), Helen Philipps's *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* (2015), Elisabeth Egan's *A Window Opens* (2015), Halle Butler's *Jillian*

Despite the disagreement about "paucity" (Burrough) vs. "boom" (Kiesling) in office fiction, it seems clear that the office as the typical American workplace can be turned into a fruitful synecdoche for American life itself (Biederman). It constitutes an ideal place for addressing "the crossovers between work and affect" (Mulhall) and the individual's role within organizational superstructures. These superstructures are typically depicted as machine-like and inhuman, indifferent to individuals' needs. Or, in Melville's terms, the office novel explores the consequences of having to work "silently, palely, mechanically" (642) and the persistence of the human as expressed in Bartleby's phrase "I would prefer not to" (643, passim).

Characteristics of the Genre

When Mulhall and other critics speak of a "genre in its own right," they are not primarily referring to the quantity of recent novels set in offices. Instead, as products of their time, genres can turn into prolific means of literary and cultural analysis (see Lanzendörfer 3). The cultural contingency of Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" has already been mentioned: the white-collar worker heralding a new era of business organization. Bartlebyan motifs, such as routine work and resistant agency, are recurrently alluded to, modified, reversed, and commented on in later office fiction so that Melville's short story counts as a foundational narrative for the genre.[4]

As will be shown in more detail below, twentieth-century office novels tend to thematize the individual's restricted place within a totalizing bureaucracy; that is, the "incorporation" of the individual. While incorporation remains a pressing subject, twenty-first-century office novels, in the wake of severe economic recessions, also address tendencies towards ex-corporation in the shape of impending lay-offs (see Ferris; Norman; Park) or dystopian scenarios (Eggers; Ma; Philipps). Agency now seems to be threatened from both inside and outside the socioeconomic system. Consequently, the office novel not only serves as a diagnostic tool with regard to shifts within the socioeconomic structure, but if understood as "social action" (Miller), it also helps discuss, under-

(2015), Anna Yen's *Sophia of Silicon Valley* (2018), Elizabeth Cohen's *The Glitch* (2018), and Ling Ma's dystopian *Severance* (2018).

[4] See Acree; Biederman; Kiesling; Lindner; Mulhall; Saval, "Bartlebys."

stand and tackle the "specific problem or anxiety in the world" (Bedore) of office life and beyond.

According to Jonathan Culler, genres also need to prove "functional in the process of reading and writing" (136). Hence, in addition to the diagnostic and the rhetorical functions of "social action," they also operate "as norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text" (136). Kiesling's observation about office novels being partly "disguised as 'chick lit,' 'girlfriend literature,' or even 'erotica'" makes the effect of perspectivizations through genre clear. The genre "chick lit" not only suggests derogatory connotations for literature written by and for women but also implies a "kind of light commercial fiction" (Baldick) about the romantic whims and sorrows of a modern professional woman, while also targeting a (youngish) female audience. If the same novels are approached as examples of the office novel, they not only potentially de-gender their audience but also more clearly invite a transposition from a fictional, purely personal account to a material socioeconomic context, where the private and the public interact. Moreover, as the workplace setting implies income, an essential precondition for living a self-determined life in a moneyed society, an individual's dependence on their job and thus the overarching socioeconomic structure comes into perspective. Because individuals' economic well-being typically lies beyond their power, the genre of the office novel invites a critique of the neoliberal idealization of individualism and personal responsibility for one's life, and calls for a materialist critical approach.

The genre of the office novel has been disguised and misidentified in other ways. Its concealment behind "chick lit" and other forms of genre fiction may be the accidental consequence of patriarchal indifference within the publishing industry or the effect of marketing policies, but it is a genre that also deliberately fuses with, for instance, office romance (DeWitt; Ferris; Yen), erotica (DeWitt), gothic fiction (Philipps) or even the zombie novel (Ma). Hence, the office novel can be seen as another instance of the "genre turn" that tends to obliterate dichotomies between "high" and "popular" fiction (see Dorson). This blurring of boundaries, seen as a phenomenon parallel to the general neoliberal demand for flexibility and fungibility, may, however, further the totalizing tendencies of late capitalism and end in perfect incorporation.

At the same time, genre may offer a counterstrategy. Modern genre theory (see Culler; Fowler; Schaeffer) has abandoned the taxonomic top-down organization of genres that relied on reproductive conformity to conventions. Rather, literary genres are now understood as offering "possibilities of meaning" (Culler 137) which emerge within a dialectic

of bounded freedom, with the boundaries of the genre being malleable. "The real *definiens* is always the text, the *definiendum*, always provisional, being the genre" (Schaeffer 177). Accordingly, genres exist by virtue of differentiation, variation, and metamorphosis and merely form "networks of partial resemblances" (177) in a dialectical process. In other words, individuals are given priority while their embeddedness is accommodated – abstract meaning outside structuring conventions does not exist (Culler 116 ff.). Genre, thus understood, can represent an alternative model to top-down organization, a model which might help mend the failures of present-day socioeconomic and sociopolitical hierarchical structures.

Since its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century, the genre of the office novel has reflected changes within socioeconomic reality and has shaped reading expectations towards a materialist critical approach. As will be shown in the rest of this essay, the office novel also suggests ways of reacting to, and dealing with, the specific problems and anxieties of office life, and perhaps of life itself in view of the office's pervasiveness in late-capitalist US society.

The Incorporation of the Clerk

The historical developments that led Mills to maintain that "white-collar life" was becoming "typically 'American'" deserve attention in view of the generic function of the office novel. When "business became big business" (Saval, *Cubed* 34), administration became more complex. Activities like accounting, sales, shipping, marketing, PR, advertising, and legal advising needed to be professionalized and thus have led to countless new white-collar occupations (Saval, *Cubed* 34; Trachtenberg 84). However, the outnumbering of blue-collar workers by white-collar ones was only a minor part of Mills's concerns. For much as the high-rise office building shaped American cityscapes, the logic of corporate business administration shaped the entire country, including its politics, its culture, and the private lives of its citizens (Trachtenberg 5). In short, the capitalist economy had advanced from being one realm among others within the sociopolitical spectrum to the all-encompassing paradigm – America has become "incorporated" (Trachtenberg passim). Sam Biederman thus identifies the office as a synecdoche for corporate America; that is, an America that had shifted its connotations from the republican ideals of a Jefferson or Whitman to an "alliance and incorporation of business, politics, industry, and culture" (Trachtenberg 230).

Being a direct product of the business corporations, white-collar workers became integral to the dissemination of corporate ideology. Compared to blue-collar workers, office workers enjoyed higher social prestige, secure jobs, and better pay. They could cherish hopes of promotion and thus have faith in the American dream (Saval, *Cubed* 169; Trachtenberg 211; Williams 575 ff.). White-collar workers, therefore, adopted and disseminated a conformist acceptance of mainstream ideologies much more markedly than any other social group. With the growth of the middle classes, Herbert Marcuse saw this uncritical attitude as a generalizable phenomenon of "one-dimensional thought" in modern capitalist societies (1).

The generic topos of boring office routine seems to relate directly to the kind of "one-dimensional thought" which values the rationale of machine-like efficiency above everything. Boredom reflects the stale routine of a bureaucracy which "develops the more perfectly the more it is 'de-humanized'" (Weber 216). The machine logic of business organization aiming at the utmost efficiency through smooth and frictionless processes does not accommodate human "affect" (Mulhall; Berebitsky 6), creative thinking (Arendt 473), or conscious action (Horkheimer and Adorno 30). The logic of the system demands rules and laws to be followed, not autonomous thought and action.

Male characters in particular are caught in modern versions of Bartleby's working "silently, palely, mechanically" (Melville 642). The seemingly "pale" masculinity of a white-collar worker clashes with the archetypal image of Mills's "frontier type." Instead of self-reliant virility, independence, and an exploratory spirit, they have to submit to "unmanly," dull work, and the power of bureaucracy.[5] Even well-paid managers like Joseph Heller's Robert Slocum lack self-efficacy in the face of intricate hierarchical structures and have to grapple with work routine. Boredom and depression follow, revealing the inadequacy of what has long been criticized as the dominance of instrumental rationality in modern societies.

The process of incorporation under instrumental rationality has continued into neoliberalism. While professionals like lawyers and doctors have given up independent practice and joined larger law firms and health corporations, universities are being restructured according to business principles. Nevertheless, the past few decades have also seen the opposite: a process of ex-corporation in times of recession. With the threat of expulsion from the system into the void, the office begins to

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[5] See also William H. Whyte's influential study *The Organization Man* (1956).

display greater potential for a personal drama of "life and death," which for Burrough is the prerogative of the novel. These twenty-first-century office novels address the repercussions of economic crises with the threat of redundancy and the imperative to work tirelessly like a machine to avoid redundancy. The farcical and satirical tone that, for instance, Elizabeth Cohen, Helen DeWitt, Elisabeth Egan, Joshua Ferris, Sam Lipsyte, Matthew Norman, Ed Park, and Anna Yen adopt seems to betray disbelief in the ridiculously inhuman strains of modern (office) life.

The office novel seems to convey that much of the malaise of American experience is linked to the totalizing tendencies of capitalism, for which the office serves as a synecdoche. By pointing out the culprit, the genre refutes the prevalent euphemisms of "corporate politesse" (Biederman) and questions the rhetoric of strong individualism by emphasizing individuals' dependence on forces beyond their control. Furthermore, in view of the increased and all-pervasive commodification which does not even stop before our "public personas" (Pham), the office novel explores both the boundaries and the potentialities of agency in today's socioeconomic reality.

Routine and Agency in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* and Ling Ma's *Severance*

Wallace's *The Pale King* and Ling Ma's *Severance* have been chosen for detailed analyses as they are exemplary of the genre. Wallace excels at describing the confining routine at work, while Ma highlights the contingencies of human agency, which is in keeping with the perceived tendency that gender identity affects which Bartlebyan motifs are foregrounded – routine work or resistant agency. For women, the office has had an entirely different connotation historically from what it has had for men. The admission of women to "decent" and prestigious white-collar jobs meant a major step towards opening the limiting "frontier" of the home to the public space and thus a major step towards gender equality (Berebitsky; Saval, *Cubed*). Not surprisingly then, many female characters in office fiction are more energetic and enthusiastic about their jobs than their male counterparts. When the women collide with the instrumental logic of corporate rule, their active response, their "refusal and resistance" (Mulhall), is regularly highlighted. Nevertheless, as the analyses of Wallace's and Ma's novels will show, both topoi are ultimately interrelated and defy simple schematization.

Routine at Work in Wallace's *The Pale King*

According to Marshall Boswell, Wallace's novels assume an "omnivorous, culture-consuming 'encyclopedic'" dimension (vii). In *The Pale King* (hereafter *TPK*), the "omnivorous" dimension surfaces through the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as "a synecdoche for a wide range of urgent issues, including the ethics of citizenship, the concrete effects of supply-side economics, US tax policy, and post-Reagan political history, just to name a few" (Boswell viii).

Boswell thus also recognizes the synecdochic role of the office. Furthermore, Wallace's notes explicitly state that the question of "human examiners or machines" is the "Big issue" in *TPK* including "Paying attention, boredom, ADD, Machines vs. people at performing mindless jobs" (545), which recalls Bartleby's writing "silently, palely, mechanically" (Melville 642).

In contrast to other office fiction, which typically centers on "the feelings around work" (Saval, "Bartlebys" 22; Mulhall), Wallace's *TPK* also excels at the minute description of both the actual office work and the clerk's immediate affective responses. Passages like the following abound:

> Then three more, including one 1040A, where the deductions for A.G.I. were added wrong and the Martinsburg printout hadn't caught it and had to be amended on one of the Form 020-Cs in the lower left tray, and then a lot of the same information filled out on the regular 20, which you still had to do even if it was just a correspondence audit and the file going to Joliet instead of the District, each code for which had to be looked up on the pullout thing he had to scoot the chair awkwardly over to pull out all the way. Then another one, then a plummeting inside of him as the wall clock showed that what he'd thought was another hour had not been. Not even close. (376-77)

The rote tasks described seem curiously opaque to both the fictional character and the reader. However, the fictional character is told to "avoid the temptation to think that you [. . .] need more information" (342). Just as the copyist Bartleby does not need to understand what he copies, so the clerks at the IRS do not need to understand the myriad sections and subsections of the tax returns that they receive – each employee processing only *one* or, at most, *a few*, of these sections – nor does the reader. Like factory work according to Taylorist ideals, office work,

too, is divided into tiny segments; it thus appears to be purely mechanical, meaningless, and constitutes a testimony to "white-collar alienation" (Saval, "Bartlebys" 22). The clerk becomes a "dronelike cog in an immense federal bureaucracy" with "inflexible rules of operation" (Wallace 79). Clerks are pressed to "maximize efficiency in spotting which returns might need auditing and will produce revenue" (546). No wonder the examiners are called "data processors" (340) and, as a matter of defense, begin to ask, "What am I, a machine?" (370). While Mulhall diagnoses an increasing penetration of the economic into private life in her general analysis of contemporary office fiction, critics observe with respect to Wallace's novel a growing penetration of machine logic into human thinking (Giles; Wouters). The "incorporation" of the human being becomes manifest.

Like the tax examiners facing an overabundance of apparently unintelligible data to be processed according to machine logic, the reader also struggles when confronted with a plot which consists of "a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens" (Wallace 546). This "series of set-ups" is perceived as a plethora of mere text data that, at first, do not seem to form a comprehensible whole. Saval's "feelings around work" ("Bartlebys" 22) thus transfer themselves directly to the work of reading – Wallace does not merely narrate, but also demonstrates. As a result, the reading process is not unlike the clerks' work. Among many other things, this parallelism between the clerks' fictional work and the reader's actual involvement evokes an implicit understanding of the daily heroism in boring routine and mindless drudgery:[6]

> Lock a fellow in a windowless room to perform rote tasks just tricky enough to make him have to think, but still rote, tasks involving numbers that connected to nothing he'd ever see or care about, a stack of tasks that never went down, and nail a clock to the wall where he can see it, and just leave the man there to his mind's own devices. (379)

Wallace reveals the seemingly unspectacular, hidden issues of "life and death" in seemingly meaningless, compartmentalized, and alienating work. When the context of their work is kept from the clerks and pushing papers appears as an end in itself (cf. Chapter 25, where twenty-eight characters are shown "turning a page" over and over, 310-13), they feel reduced to senseless data-processing machines. Their struggle against the resulting meaninglessness of existence becomes, at least allegorically,

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[6] Of course, the tax examiner's work is essential for the material common good of society, and that of the reader is potentially beneficial to the immaterial common good.

a matter of "life and death." In other words, clerks also run the risk of losing what remains of their "humanity": that limited residual freedom and potential inherent in Bartleby's "I would prefer not to."

Still, Wallace insists that "[f]iction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (qtd in den Dulk 43), even in the most dystopian scenarios. Human beings require meaning; they construct meaning wherever possible and thus generate coping strategies against deadly routine. Wallace's clerks, many of whom remind one of Bartleby's "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn" appearance (Melville 642), develop a peculiar strength. If, according to a hypothesis offered in the novel, neoliberal America aims at manipulating its citizens through steady and stultifying distraction (293), then the capacity for concentration and tenacity which Wallace's characters develop, and which the author apparently also demands of his readers, acquires a subversive potential. Those who are able to concentrate, to dedicate themselves to detail and discriminate relevant data from mere data noise, may not fall victim to

> one of the great and terrible PR discoveries in modern democracy, which is that if sensitive issues of governance can be made sufficiently dull and arcane, there will be no need for officials to hide or dissemble, because no one not directly involved will pay enough attention to cause trouble. No one will pay attention because no one will be interested, because, more or less *a priori*, of these issues' monumental dullness. (84)

In a restless and confusing world, the capacity to concentrate, pay attention to detail, and resist stultification by easy distraction is a crucial strategy against a manipulative, infantilizing "Politics of Boredom" (Clare 444). "Sometimes what's important is dull. Sometimes it's work," but the dull may be worthwhile, Wallace tells us (138). His accounts of paranormal phenomena which transcend bodily restrictions as a result of full concentration and tenacity underline this credo: e.g., the "office phantom" which appears to examiners in states of "concentrated boredom" (314), Drinion's levitating when he is fully immersed in work or in listening to his interlocutor (see 485 ff.), or the boy who takes up the challenge to "be able to press his lips to every square inch of his own body" by daily, disciplined practice (394). Interestingly, the dehumanized bureaucracy itself conditions this specific resilience, and thanks to human creativity, human responses to machine rule are never entirely predictable. Creativity is thus a further prerequisite potentially to subvert oppressive powers, comparable to Bartleby's "I would prefer not to."

Loops, Routines, and the Conditions of Agency in Ling Ma's *Severance*

The ability to pay attention to detail, the capacity to differentiate the relevant from the redundant, and the theme of the mechanical in a capitalist society, as in repetitive routines and loops, also play a major role in Ma's *Severance*. At first glance, however, *Severance* differs considerably from *TPK*. In interviews, Ma explained that she wanted to trace the source of an "undercurrent of anger [. . .] which had to do with working in an office" (qtd in Shapiro) – that is, the failure of corporate America. Moreover, she categorized *Severance* as an "apocalyptic office novel" (qtd in Lindner), testifying to the contemporary "genre turn" (Dorson). The apocalypse is marked by the outbreak of an epidemic, the fictive Shen Fever, which depopulates first China, then New York and the entire United States. The symptoms of the fever are loss of consciousness, while the body continues to execute habitual routine tasks in an apparently endless loop, until, eventually, the fevered waste away and die of starvation:[7]

> For the most part, from what we had seen, the fevered were creatures of habit, mimicking old routines and gestures they must have inhabited for years, decades. The lizard brain is a powerful thing. They could operate the mouse of a dead PC, they could drive stick in a jacked sedan, they could run an empty dishwasher, they could water dead houseplants. (28)

Ma thus addresses the question of "life and death" openly and highlights its urgency by placing the novel not in a distant future, but in the period around 2011. The parallels between Bartleby's wasting away and that of the fevered engender a major question of the novel: if the results of stopping completely, like Bartleby, or continuing endlessly, like the fevered, are similar, is the essential difference not grounded in an obvious either/or dichotomy? The answer is complex: "But what is the difference between the fevered and us?" (60) asks Candace Chen, the first-person narrator, with "us" meaning the survivors of the apocalypse.

In her pre-apocalyptic New York office life, Chen is committed to her job. Besides her regular paycheck, what Chen "like[s] best about working" (65) is its trance-like state, comparable to Wallace's "concentrated boredom" (Wallace 314), and reminiscent of Bartleby's "dead-wall reveries" (Melville 653, passim). Being an immigrant and knowing

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[7] Ma's fevered show some similarities with Colson Whitehead's zombies in *Zone One* (2011). However, Whitehead's zombies attack and eat humans, while Ma's fevered do not represent a threatening mass.

what uprootedness means, Chen appreciates the stabilizing effect of the repetitive in routine. She also sets up her own daily routines in periods when work does not structure her day. Routine *per se* is neither bad nor good; it can mean deadening boredom, but also a safeguard against a Bartlebyan "forlornness" (Melville 653) and chaos. Routine may even turn into "bliss" (Wallace 546). Again, the essential feature is not an abstract dichotomy, but the concrete and more complex conditions of bliss, or hell, or anything in between.

Despite her positive attitude towards her job, Chen is not blind to its dubious social and environmental implications: "The company had huge collective buying power, so we offered even cheaper manufacture rates than individual publishers could achieve on their own, driving foreign labor costs down even further" (12). She coordinates the production of Bibles in China for the American market. Not coincidentally – logistics being a key issue for corporations (Bernes; Trachtenberg 56) – the Shen fever follows the path of the books whose production she oversees. By "just doing [her] job" (Ma 85), she is both subject to, but also part of, an abusive system. The abusive economic system is represented as the grand master loop that incorporates and produces the specific loops and routines in Ma's novel, such as the "loop" of the "rote, mechanical movement" that the Chinese workers have to perform (89), the "infinite loop" of fevered action and habit (62), or the "endless loop" of TV programs (176, 236). The incessant circulation of capital seems to suck everyone and everything into its swirl, striving for total commodification and incorporation. Who would be capable of finding a point of severance in that swirling loop, or room for true agency?

Total severance is rejected as a viable alternative; the narrator doubts that opting out of the loop is a solution. In an inner monologue, Chen muses about her lover Jonathan:

> You live your life idealistically. You think it's possible to opt out of the system. No regular income, no health insurance. You quit jobs on a dime. You think this is freedom but I still see the bare, painstakingly cheap way you live, the scrimping and saving, and that is not freedom either. You move in circumscribed circles. You move peripherally, on the margins of everything, pirating movies and eating dollar slices. I used to admire this about you, how fervently you clung to your beliefs – I called it integrity – but five years of watching you live this way has changed me. In this world, money is freedom. Opting out is not a real choice. (205-06)

Despite Jonathan's admirable integrity, he only negates. He does not even idealize a Thoreauvian simple life, but merely wants "somewhere

cheaper" (200). Jonathan subscribes to the concept of negative freedom, the freedom *from* something. His exclusive "preferring not to" tends to "avoid all commitments, all responsibilities" and denies the "facticity" of "human existence" as a precondition for becoming an autonomous self, as the existentialists (den Dulk 45-47) and also Ma's narrator would have it: "It's only possible for a while, when no one depends on you" (201). Freedom, apparently, cannot be a solipsistic concept, but acquires its meaning only within a social context (just as the meaning of a text can only unfold within the boundaries of genre). Chen is not satisfied with merely "preferring not to." She also wants to prefer something. She sees the necessity of positive freedom – a concept that acknowledges resources as a precondition for freedom (see Sewell 9 ff.). "In this world, money is freedom" (Ma 206). Freedom, and thus agency, are not found in an abstract opposition between being in or outside the loop. As "outside" can only mean fantasy, the self has to relate to the world by assessing "individual limitations and possibilities" (den Dulk 45). In other words, it is a wrong question to ask for severance.

Chen does not sever herself from the world but determines her preferences and seeks to clarify her space of agency "in relation to her accidental situation" (den Dulk 45). Yet, the determination of preferences is a tricky endeavor in times of growing incorporation. Whether at work or at leisure, repetitive drudgery and all-pervasive consumerism equally dull the senses. Besides descriptions of mind-numbing and dehumanizing work in China and the United States, the names of brands, stores, products, and of movies and TV shows are recurrently represented as cultural reference points and objects of desire. By succumbing to the desire-producing machinery of product marketing and the culture industry, consumers lose the ability to define their preferences autonomously, and another loop comes into play: the "circle of manipulation and retroactive need" (Horkheimer and Adorno 121). When people in the novel act out American lifestyles as they have seen them portrayed in the movies or consume for the sake of consumption, they are just as reduced to mere patterns of behavior as the fevered: "The End begins before you are ever aware of it. It passes as ordinary" (Ma 9). The epidemic in Ma's novel is thus only the overt manifestation of what covertly has already prevailed. It models the threat of instrumental rationality, which tends to sever means from ends, action from thought (Horkheimer 21 ff.); and if "Shen" can mean "soul" but also "body" in Chi-

nese, the fever symbolizes an unhealthy severance of the body from the soul.[8]

This severance could be checked, and alienation decreased, if people could somewhat *personalize* the structures they encounter and – as in *TPK* – pay greater dedication to detail. Chen is "detail-oriented to the point of obsession" (Ma 17). She has learned, not least through her job, many specifics about production, marketing, and consumer manipulation: "I know that they are all selling the same thing, year after year [. . .] I see through everything. I can't be touched" (139). However, it remains unclear why Chen and the other survivors with their very different personalities are not affected by the fever. There is no obvious safeguard against the dynamic power of incorporating capitalism.

The fever shows capitalism's failure. After the collapse, however, individual agency is not automatically set free. The survivors keep being attuned to familiar patterns of behavior, to hierarchical structures and instrumental reason. They continue to act like consumers, raid houses for goods, and their promised land, the so-called "facility," turns out to be a shopping mall: "Everything we want is here, in these stores," says the increasingly authoritarian group leader Bob (164). In the end, Chen must fear for her life; she flees from the group and has to start anew on her own. While her leaving is not an act of free will, Chen consciously chooses where she goes and why. She does not simply try to retrace her former life, follow habit, and fulfill a loop (a fatal urge for two other survivors). Nor does she sever the loop by rejecting history altogether and starting on a blank page. By assessing the "limitations and possibilities" of her "facticity" (den Dulk 45), she decides to go to Chicago, where Jonathan once lived and where her mother always dreamed of living. She thus grounds her future in the experiences of others, creates something unprecedented based on precedence, and turns the loop into a spiral.

Chen severs herself from the oppressive structures of instrumental rationality by founding her new life on memories of family, on human bonds rather than on instrumental, materially useful considerations. Unsurprisingly, as one critic notes, the fever does not spread from human to human, but "from object to human" (Goodman). This seems to provide an answer to the question about essential differences. It makes a difference whether one pledges oneself to objects and structures, or,

[8] A Chinese-speaking colleague has informed me that "Shen" is a homophone for "body" and "soul." Ma herself, however, maintains that the name of the fever derives from the "industrial manufacturing hub" in the Shenzhen region (Shapiro).

beyond the logic of instrumentality, to other human beings. Chen has thus found her way of acting like a human being.

Machine Rule or Human Agency

Acceptance of "facticity," careful examination of "limitations and possibilities" (den Dulk 45), and subsequent action according to the perceived choices available seem to form the relevant preconditions in order to avoid alienating incorporation in both *TPK* and *Severance*. Yet there is not only the agency of the defending individual; human agency also lies behind the oppressive structures. While both Wallace's IRS and Ma's fever present an overpowering system in the form of a huge anonymous institution or a deadly disease (a seemingly "natural" catastrophe), we also find deliberate human intention behind these constructs. In *TPK*, the change of the IRS from a moral to a corporate institution is explicitly linked to the "pro-tech" Systems Director Dr. Lehrl, as opposed to the "Old School IRS-as-Civics believers" like District Director Glendenning (543). In *Severance*, oppressive agency is most clearly depicted through the authoritarian survivor Bob, who practices recognizable pre-apocalyptic methods like "a typical, power-hungry middle manager" (Schaub). Interestingly, his aspirations are not taken seriously by the other survivors until they belatedly realize that he has become too powerful – an implicit warning to nip such developments in the bud. By acknowledging agents of power, both novels implicitly contradict the neoliberal credos of "inherent necessities" and "there is no alternative." Instead, they affirm the possibility of subversion and change.

Other office novels certainly differ in many aspects from *TPK* and *Severance*. Nevertheless, a genre that highlights the structural embeddedness of the private in the public, such as the office novel, is bound to raise questions about the agency of power in one form or another. Yet the source of power is often not easy to locate. Power is disguised by hierarchical fragmentation (Heller; Philipps; Rowland; Wallace), outsourced to cash-rich anonymous clients (Ferris; Norman; Lipsyte), situated in remote cities or states (Egan; Park), or protected by the charisma with which the powerful are endowed (Cohen; Egan; Yen). If Bartleby shared his office with his boss, hemmed in by larger buildings blocking the view (the future corporate skyscrapers), later novels may contrast the limited horizons of the cubicle with the view from the top floor, where "sky is all that can be seen at this height" (Rowland 223-24). The

exploration of the forms of power is thus another inherent trait of the genre.

Office novels acknowledge the materiality of the individual in socio-economic structures and explore that individual's responses and options in a rationalized, totalizing system. The genre thus raises questions about the subject's role in corporate America through its synecdoche, the office, and reflects contemporary anxieties about looming economic, social, political, and also environmental collapse, which we would all prefer not to see happening. In fact, while the genre is very much about "prefer[ring] not to," it is also about how to prefer: that is, how to focus on the human, and to look for "what's important" even if it is buried in "monumental dullness," namely, to "cause trouble" (Wallace 84), and to act like the responsible citizens we would prefer to be.

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