

**A Dialogue Between Two Cultures:
Postcapitalism, Postsocialism, and D. Harlan Wilson's *Technologized Desire*
Conducted by V. Ulea**

VU: *Technologized Desire: Selfhood and the Body in Postcapitalist Science Fiction* is a fascinating read. The title caught me right away and I was not disappointed—I read this scholarly book like one reads a sci-fi thriller, skipping my lunch and dinner, enjoying page after page, and praising the keen analysis and wit of the author. To me, it was a truly ingenious work of “art and sci-fi.” And of course, my focus was primarily on the political-economical margins given in the subtitle since I belong to the category of readers who used to live in a socialist country. Naturally, while reading the book, I often wondered what the term “postcapitalism” would mean for the writers of the fiction that you analyze in the book and whether or not we should also introduce a term “postsocialism” for Russian fiction written after the Perestroika. All that you wrote in *TD* about capitalism, including corruption of human condition by “capital terrorism,” capitalist schizophrenia, “technocapitalist oppression,” and the role of multimedia is actually an inversion of what Russian postcapitalist and postsocialist fiction writes about socialism as a creation of evil. There you find socialist terrorism, socialist schizophrenia, technosocialist oppression, and of course, the oppressive multimedia, infecting the body in the same way Burroughs’ capitalist media-virus does. And the Burroughsian subject—“a cog in the culture machine”—seems to be a replica of Lenin’s famous “wheel and screw” widely used by social-democrats. “Postcapitalist” sci-fi directs its satire against capitalist slavery killing the selfhood. Antisocialist fiction, such as Zamyatin’s *We*, is directed against socialist slavery whose global dream is to turn an individual into a mechanism easily manipulated by the Marxist “machinists.” The means of determination of the individual are the same in both socioeconomic systems as depicted in the fiction of both eras. The difference is that if capitalism uses images and other technological means to make an individual a slave of his or her own desires, socialism uses the same to kill any desires and make an individual an emotionless machine by the name *we*. Still, the meta-goals remain the same: to manipulate humans by using technology and turning them into robots.

DHW: I like this reference to Zamyatin, even though I don't mention his work in *Technologized Desire*. *We* was one of the first books I read when I began studying science fiction seriously in graduate school. In fact, I've written several papers on *We*, but mainly in terms of the spatial anthropology Zamyatin constructs, and my book focuses on western culture and society and the ways in which American capitalist technologies have pathologized the western human condition. Still, the machinic nature of the numbers/characters in *We* is similar to what I discuss in *Technologized Desire*, despite the fact that Zamyatin was writing against a different system of ethics, codes, oppression, etc.

My concept of postcapitalism is inherently troublesome. I don't spend a lot of time defining its coordinates or trying to categorize certain texts within a postcapitalist rubric. The book is meant to be a starting point for further discussions on the issue, which may or may not have validity in the eyes of other critics. Also, combining the prefix “post” with the word “capitalism” is technically absurd. Putting “post” in front of any academic word is technically absurd. The modernists screwed it up. They had the audacity to call their work “modern,” and what's more modern than modern? Nothing. To be modern—again, technically—is to be as new and contemporary as something can be. So antecedents of the modernists tacked “post” onto the word, which is all they could do. So “postmodern” is . . . what? Beyond modernism? Well, yes, insofar as it comes after modernism. That goes for poststructuralism, postcyberpunk, postimpressionism, etc. But there are many, many similarities between modernism and postmodernism, and it doesn't mean that the latter is a unique, new formation. This is further problematized by the notion that, in the twenty-first century, we inhabit a post-postmodernist universe. Where does it end?

At any rate, as a postmodernist, or post-postmodernist, or whatever, I'm guilty of the name game. But I'm not the first person to use the term postcapitalist. By my usage, I don't mean to suggest that we have moved beyond capitalism, that we are living under the aegis of a new social system of control (all systems, to varying degrees, rely on an element of control). I address this in the final pages of *Technologized Desire*. I talk about two dominant visions of postcapitalism. One allies it with the postapocalyptic, i.e., postcapitalism is what emerges in the wake of a global cataclysm. The other, more common usage denotes an extrapolation of contemporary capitalism. What this extrapolation looks like is subject to debate. In my view, postcapitalism hinges on a pathology of subjectivity, selfhood, the body, desire and community. It is really this pathology that I explore in my book. I study science fiction texts set in futures distinguished by various technocapitalist machineries that have been extrapolated from the present and recent past. These machineries affect and infect the characters in the texts. So I'm interested in how the technologies we create, and how the systems we create to employ those technologies, in turn recreate our bodies and minds. This process of machinic (re)creation is inescapable: it subjectifies us whether we like it or not. That's the gist of postmodern slavery.

VU: I agree. In “postcapitalist” or, to put it in a broader context, “anti-capitalist” fiction, American capitalist technologies are blamed for having pathologized the western human condition. In the same way, the socialist technology and media was blamed by some “underground” soviet fiction for pathologizing human conditions. It seems to me, however, that in both cases the focus is shifted from characters to their environment. The old problem of determinism has been widely discussed, starting from Greek tragedy. Regardless of the common view of the outcome in Greek tragedy as predetermined by the will of gods, the analysis reveals just the opposite: the sign of the outcome actually depends on the degree of strength and richness of characters’ potentials. According to the founder of predispositioning theory, Aron Katsenelinboigen, in *Concept of Indeterminism*, a chance occurrence is always absorbed by the system’s predisposition. Chaplin’s character in *Modern Times* comes to mind as one that withstands the manipulation of the technocratic city, which makes him rather a character of a strong potential no matter how obtuse and clumsy he may seem to others. Argonauts, on the contrary, turn into lifeless puppets by listening to Sirens; thus they exhibit the extreme case of zero willpower. To which category do the characters of “postcapitalist” sci-fi belong? Are they paralyzed by technocratic desires? Do they have a freedom of choice in their decision making? What kind of social message does postcapitalist literature convey by creating easily manipulated characters?

DHW: *Modern Times* is a great example of comedy and humor being used as a means of agency, although I think an argument could be made that Chaplin's character is just as constructed and inscribed as the social and cultural machinery that he ostensibly subverts. All of the books I analyze are “serious,” per se, except for *Army of Darkness*, which is slapstick, really low-grade boyish humor, but I love it. Director Sam Raimi has said that a lot of the protagonist's behavior in that film—and its precursor *Evil Dead 2*—was inspired by the Three Stooges. I implicate the over-the-top comedic element of the film as a pathological effect of the protagonist's wish-fulfillment fantasy to be a dynamic technocapitalist subject. He fails repeatedly, and you could say that comedy is part of the residue of his chronic inability to be a “real man” (i.e., an alpha male who excels and prospers within the capitalist matrix). This is an uncommon reading of *Army of Darkness*—most viewers see it as a silly and enjoyable cult film. Which it is. Authorial/directorial intent aside, though, there is a resonant thematic strain that runs from beginning to end. So my reading basically deemphasizes mere visceral enjoyment of the film's humorous antics in favor of an interpretation of the antics' origins and the traumatic kernels that produced them.

The other primary texts I analyze are all fairly serious narratives that take themselves seriously, except for William S. Burroughs' cut-up novels, which oscillate between being dead serious and obscenely funny. But the texts all point to the same problem. My view is somewhat dystopian—akin to the view Zamyatin adopts in *We*, only via American capitalism. In the end, there is no

agency from technocapitalist inscription, construction, subjugation, etc. Agency is as much an illusion as individuality. But that doesn't mean life amounts to a pile of shit. And it's not as dire as it is at the end of *We* for the lobotomized D-503. From my personal and scholarly perspective, there's room for happiness and creativity and love and all that stuff. I'm very much in line with Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of rhizomatics, desiring-machines, and the Body without Organs. I won't go into detail about them here—D&G spend two long, dense toms fleshing these concepts out—but basically they posit that one must lose oneself in order to find oneself (and then lose oneself again, and again, and again). Subjects must negotiate a constant moibus strip of sociocultural production/destruction. You can't jump off the moibus strip. But you can run and play around on it and have fun.

Postcapitalist literature conveys both a negative and positive social message. The literature poses a spatial dilemma. I'm talking about space that is psychological as well as social, cultural, physical, etc. Nobody can get out. If somebody thinks they can get out, they are disavowing reality, a common reaction, disavowal being one of humanity's most needed and overused traits (i.e., we don't like who we are so we pretend we are not who we are, or we don't like something that happened in our lives so we pretend it didn't happen—and most importantly, we believe it). We need to disavow things on a regular basis in order to maintain sanity. But that doesn't mean we're operating within the confines of "reality."

VU: Yes, of course, the works you consider in *TD* have limited comedic flavor, though all of them do possess the satirical view of schizophrenic society that you brilliantly analyze in one of my favorite chapters in the book, "Schizosophy of the Medieval Dead." The same satirical tone is inherent in Zamyatin's *We*, Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog* and *Diaboliad*, and other Russian "postcapitalist"/"anti-socialist" works. Their satirical arrows were aimed at the hypocrisy regarding a "just" socialist society, the glorification of collectivism, the protective role of the government and condemnation of individualism as a vicious child of a rotten capitalist society. The diabolic socialist apparatus that threatened to "lobotomize" the individual was opposed to the capitalist free market and independence from the government. I wonder what kind of socioeconomic system is depicted as ideal in western postcapitalist literature. Is the harmonious existence feasible for the characters of postcapitalist sci-fi? Are they capable of change? If so, how would you describe the vector of the change they fight for?

DHW: What is an ideal postcapitalist socioeconomic system depends on one's perspective. Like everything. Perception determines reality and desire, however ludicrous or sensible, however wrong or right. This goes for fictional diegeses as much as the real world. I know people (friends and colleagues alike) who are outrageously unperceptive, to a laughable degree, and yet they see themselves as rather perceptive, sagacious, empathetic, etc. Hence disavowal: we see what we want to see. And people make choices and decisions, often big ones, based on misperceptions every day. So an ideal version of anything is moot and further complicated by issues of class, race and gender, all of which contribute to identity and of course perception and desire.

As for postcapitalist literature in particular, a good example is Australian novelist Max Barry's *Jennifer Government*. I devote chapter 4 of *Technologized Desire*, "Capitalism Unbound," to this novel. All of the characters are cogs in the machinery of hypercapitalism, or, as Barry calls it, "capitalizm." But everybody's cogness, so to speak, varies. It's a matter of Deleuzoguattarian degrees and intensities. Unless you are a citizen of a "fragmented market" (e.g., Africa and the Middle East), you must play the game or cease to possess an identity. And the depth and dynamism of your identity is determined by how effectively you play. Barry's imagined near-future, with some key exceptions/extrapolations, looks a lot like capitalism today. As a model for one kind of postcapitalism, then, we could say that a harmonious existence is a matter of consciousness and power-knowledge. To what degree are we conscious of our role as gameplayers? How does this awareness affect us? Does this awareness contribute more to our benefit or detriment? It's all very subjective and personal.

Change is feasible for the postcapitalist subject, but again, only in terms of degrees and intensities. The subject can move up and down the same spectrum but s/he can't jump onto another spectrum or simply jump into space, which would constitute . . . death? Or perhaps some kind of terminal zombification. Take Sam Lowry, the protagonist of Terry Gilliam's postcapitalist film *Brazil*. Throughout the film, Lowry is processed and reprocessed by the technologies and socius of a schized, mediatized, dystopian future. In the end, the only way he is able to escape, to *change*, is by going insane. This is actually something I harp on in *Technologized Desire*: madness as a vehicle of agency. Perhaps the only vehicle, and not a particularly attractive one.

In short, postcapitalism permits and even encourages "Perestroika," loosely speaking, but only in illusory forms that stoke the fires of postcapitalism.

VU: It's very interesting, because the actual "Perestroika" was the return of the "prodigal son" to capitalist values. The dream of returning to the "humane" capitalist society has been widely provided by Russian fiction and film of socialist and postsocialist eras. The return to free market, the reduced role of the government, and the resurrection of conservative values through the Russian Orthodox Church clearly suggest that. As you may know, XXVII Congress of the CPSU (1986) introduced and confirmed a great number of socioeconomic programs, which suggested an essential step toward capitalism. This included the law of self-employment, establishing of cooperatives and the development of the private sector and free market. The understanding of the natural link between capitalism and prosperity for the country had also led to NEP (New Economical Policy, 1920) proposed by Lenin who clearly saw that Marxist ideas put the Russian economy on the edge of collapse. Lenin insisted on reopening small private businesses, though the state still controlled large industries and banks. He knew very well that bailouts would destroy the country, and regardless of his vicious communist agenda, he wanted Russia to be prosperous . . . Speaking of which, Putin's recent famous warning to Obama regarding his socialist changes confirmed only once again the position of post-soviet Russia regarding capitalism as invigorating economic "stimulus." All these beliefs are subjects of postsocialist Russian fiction. It's clearly not the "perestroika" we observe in postcapitalist sci-fi. I wonder in which direction postcapitalist sci-fi will move and how it is going to develop as a genre. What is your prognosis as a scholar and fiction writer?

DHW: It's difficult to say what direction postcapitalist science fiction will go in, both in terms of the fiction itself and the criticism of it. For me, they are interlinked and important to one another's evolution. But remember, postcapitalism, while it isn't a term I coined, is a term that I have "capitalized" on. I try to initiate a theory of postcapitalism in *Technologized Desire*. But it's very likely that critics will discard it, or ignore it, or just not dwell on it. And most authors of postcapitalist science fiction don't think of it as postcapitalist and probably don't know or care about what postcapitalism is. That's fair. I don't expect anything from critics, authors or general readers. But it would be cool if I started a kind of trend, however minor or ephemeral.

That said, personally I believe postcapitalist science fiction will intensify in its representation and application of certain issues. This is a direct result of electric technologies, which are always developing, and which inevitably intensify everything, for better and for worse. The biggest issue as I see it is the reproduction of the human body and mind by technocapitalist forces. The media always-already changes us, subjecting us to greater economies of influence. Americans especially are obsessed by money: the making of money and the remaking of the self in order to make more and more money, to recreate ourselves into more fluent and productive capitalist animals. I won't say money isn't important. It is. And it's stupid, too. It makes people do stupid things. Often horrible and catastrophic things. But this is a systemic problem. Generally speaking, one can't merely choose not to be a capitalist to some extent. One must always-already make the choice—a *terminal* choice, I call it in the book—to be a capitalist, whether one likes it or not. Of course, this choice is a delusion as it is not a choice at all but an ontological prerequisite.

In my fiction I play around a lot with this notion of terminal choice. No doubt I will continue to do so. I often write characters who operate under the aegis of an illusory will to power brought on by technocapitalist constraints. This operating illusion elicits metaphysical rifts in my characters' diegeses. Hence my preoccupation with irreality. It isn't always the case, but many of my irreal fictions attempt to represent realms of the capitalist/pathological unconscious. It's certainly the case with my Scikungfi trilogy, which includes *Dr. Identity, or, Farewell to Plaquedemia* (2007), *Codename Prague* (2010) and *The Kyoto Man* (2011). All three of these novels are set in irreal dystopias where capitalism has more or less gone hogwild. The result: ultraviolence, unbridled sexuality, rifts in the schema of cause and effect, metaphysical absurdity, mutated/mediatized bodies, etc. Bleak stuff, I guess. But fun to write.