

CRISIS

FRAMEWORK

Collection 28

NEOLIBERALISM AND Nihilistic Aesthetics

FRAMEWORK acknowledges the Bidjgal and Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we produced this publication, learn and share ideas.

Introduction

The term 'neoliberalism' in popular discourse has begun to reflect a complex network of global realities. Being used more like a catchphrase, 'neoliberalism' has started to describe social inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation, rather than, the political or economical ideologies under which it was implemented. If the term has come to stand for so much, I argue, in order to understand what its characteristics truly are, that we should seek to learn its historical definition, and the circumstances underpinning its public deployment. The purpose of this paper, then, is to question the true nature of neoliberalism, and determine whether it is nihilistic, or not. By turning to nihilistic aesthetics of contemporary artists, this paper will conclude that: the contemporary implementation of neoliberalism is inherently nihilistic due to the birth of authoritative conservatism, which instead of allowing a 'transvaluation of values', what Nietzsche argues is necessary to escape it, has instead increased nationalism and authoritarianism under the guise of a fight for freedom. Contemporary works of art increasingly demonstrate perpetual exhaustion, repetition, capital figures, nostalgic futures, and naive sensibilities, all characteristic of the repetitive crisis neoliberalism revels in; and aptly, as Slavoj Zizek and Mark Fisher argue: "it is easier to imagine the end of the world, than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Fisher 2009:8, Zizek 1994:1). The neoliberal rejection to enter new territory, along with the purposeful use of irony present in nihilistic aesthetics, is exactly what Giorgio Agamben argues: is characteristic of the dark and nihilistic veil over the history of Western civilisation. Through a considered

investigation on the concept of nihilism, I hope to leave the reader thinking about the positive effects of its potential. Nihilism is the rejection of meaning, in order to find new meaning, significance, and values elsewhere. Nihilism asks us to take control, and produce positive change which respects the individual, rather than, risk stuttering within a vacuum of stagnant political ideologies.

Liberalism places individuality at its axis, its main focus is to defend individual personality and conscience against centralised coercive and threatening powers (Gane 2012:134; Brennan et al. 2012:115). A. F. Hayek and Milton Friedman were the strongest intellectual advocators who turned away from this type of classical liberalism to look at neoliberalism which offered an opportunity to initiate an advance in the social and economic liberties of the individual (Hall 2011:706; Jones 2012:13). For these thinkers, liberalism was inferior to neoliberalism, as it was a responsive type of philosophy, and therefore could not set its own agenda. Neoliberalism on the other hand had the potential to open both economic and individual freedom by asserting market powers (Gane 2012:135; Hall 2011:711; Brennan et al. 2012:116). Hayek and Friedman argued that economic freedoms offered by capitalist markets would minimise state regulation, provide choice, and avoid a centralisation of power within governments (Friedman 2002:3). Fear of totalitarianism and centralised power was high amongst early neoliberals after witnessing the violent crimes of two world wars in the first half of the 20th century (Friedman 2002:3; Jones 2012:3; Gane 2012:140). Advocating for a removal of welfare, social services, and urban planning and investment, meant that neoliberals could do away with paternalistic governments, which they believed, was the only path to allowing individual diversity and variety to flourish (Friedman 2002:4; Brennan et al. 2012:118). Therefore, freedom, individuality, and economic liberty is the foundation of neoliberal thought (Gane 2012:134).

Although neoliberal concepts were formed throughout decades of academic thought, they did not enter public politics until the 1970s. The soar of neoliberalism during this time was due to two major factors. Firstly, economic crisis in the 1970s saw a great oil shortage, debt crisis, and stagflation with minimal growth in economic markets (Jones 2012:2; Hall 2011:705; Gane 2012:142). Secondly, Hayek

and Friedman both agreed that academic ideas seeped into politics too slow. To create public engagement they mingled with journalists, politicians, experts and intelligistas. This engagement paid off, and later became known as transatlantic neoliberalism to describe the networks of think tank entrepreneurs which were involved in furthering the popularity of neoliberalism's ability to provide a much needed economic growth (Jones 2012:3; Gane 2012:141). Well socialised, these ideas turned into organisations such as the Institute of Economic Affairs, and the Atlas Foundation. These gave neoliberal ideology credibility which strengthened the financial grounding of the movement by attracting investors and well needed access to political parties. It was well organised and awaited global implementation (Jones 2012:9; Gane 2012:141). By the 1980s neoliberalism was made notoriously popular by Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher. They claimed that faith in markets would develop individual liberties, minimise government powers, and provide much needed economic growth to all (Jones 2012:5; Gane 2012:143).

Unfortunately the implementation of neoliberalism did not quite offer what Hayek and Friedman argued it would, and instead conservatism arose. The term 'authoritarian populism' is given to this era by Stuart Hall (Hall 1979:14), a time he argues is the conception of 'Law and Order' society. Instead of neoliberalism developing freedom and individuality, it flattened variety, and reinforced hegemony (Hall 1978:160). Minimising perceived threats to freedom became of utmost importance to the governments of the neoliberal revolution. Social protests increased government surveillance, kicking off what is now known as the 'war on terror' (Springer 2015:8). Anything deviating from the law became a threat, and neoliberalism ironically responded by centralising powers of authority, whilst releasing its hold over free markets. Protesters at this time asked the government to do something, to listen to

trade unions, to listen to students, to take power and control, to reform or change, but as we now know, neoliberalism does not take paternalistic control. Instead, it sides with employers, with economics, and with the market (Hardt et al. 2001:266; Hall 1978:166). Threats to the fabric of society, like these protestors speaking out, resulted in perfect opportunities for British and American conservatism to resurface under the guise of protecting civilian freedoms (Hall 1978:166). This type of conservatism has its roots in the history of British war successes, colonial conquests, and the entitlement to engage in free trade and economic markets (Hall 2011:709. Hall 2011:716). British values for Thatcher were strong, as was America's right to freedoms stated within their first amendment. Neoliberalism was the perfect opportunity to resurface each country's historical imperial control (Hall 2011:716).

To understand the exhausting effects of this conservative mentality we must first consider nihilism from Nietzsche's perspective, then; I shall commit to incorporating examples of nihilistic aesthetics in order to demonstrate the neoliberal cultural reality. For Nietzsche, nihilism grapples with the complex existence of god. He understands that if we reject god in the name of human technology and rationality, then we risk losing value and meaning in everything else. Whereas, if we acknowledge the existence of god, then we devalue all achievements of humankind (Kaufmann 2008:101; Schutte 1984:2). Further, Nietzsche had absolute contempt for anyone who took for granted any given set of values which distinguished class, religion or society. He argued that we must consider all values, and reject the ones which do not work. This would therefore create a society whereby nothing is oppressive, and instead, develop modern principles which fostered vitality and freedom (Schutte 1984:3; Kaufmann 2008:103). For Nietzsche, nihilism will be overcome by intellectually investigating any given set of values, (Kaufmann 2008:109) thus providing opportunities

to understand truths and realities behind culture and morality (Pearson et al. 2006:298). The only way

to do this, Nietzsche argues, is through a 'transvaluation of values'. This task necessitates a strong comprehension of contemporary society, whereby, self-knowledge is utilised in order to learn of our truths, values, and culture; thus, fostering direct contemplations over our social and political reality (Kaufmann 2008:107; Pearson et al. 2006:298).

One contemporary artist attempting to reconsider the nihilistic process of value affirming actions is Jennifer Rubell. In her work titled Ivanka Vacuuming [see p.6] she employed an Ivanka Trump look-alike dressed in plastic barbie pink to perform the feminine task of vacuuming. To engage audience viewers within the process,

Rubell provided a giant pile of bread crumbs in front of the performer. Audience members were encouraged to throw bread crumbs onto the carpet for Ivanka to clean up. With repetition emphasised, Rubell aimed to acknowledge the ongoing cultural labour of feminine work as inextricably linked to Ivanka Trump's political position. Ivanka is constantly left to clean up her father's publicity mess, on top of being a mother, White House advisor, all while running her own business.

Ivanka in this performance is depicted as perfectly kept together despite the exhausting effects of repetitive cultural expectations (Capps 2019:n.p). This never ending cycle, rather than actually achieving anything, reinforces conservative political values and expectations, rather than striving for improved vitality.

Within neoliberalism there has not been a 'transvaluation of values' as such, but paradoxically, a reinvigoration of conservative values which are strongly connected to British imperialism (Hall 2011:716). Because of this, we could come to understand the authoritarian approach as influenced by classical liberalism, rather than neoliberalism (Gane 2012:135). Due to this, I argue that neoliberalism is inherently

nihilistic, as values are constantly reinforced rather than questioned. One way these values are reinforced, or homogenised, is through crisis (Hall 2011:727). Neoliberalism is a transformative power, attempting to result in the same homogenous outcome time and time again. It does not exist as a stagnant framework "with an end-state", and due to this, it has a high success rate (Springer 2015:7; Hall 2011:706). Crisis resulting from neoliberalist progression such as environmental degradation, increased nationalism and racism, authoritarianism, violence, and social exclusions, are all causes which are further utilised for its own advancement (Springer 2015:7). In other words, governments increase their neoliberal emphasis when their society's freedoms, values, or culture is threatened (Springer 2015:8).

The cold and empty reality of authoritarianism, violence, and social exclusion caused by neoliberalism eerily adheres to Rolf Nowotny's installations and sculptures. Nowotny's work generally depicts the horrors of the human body within contemporary society, and perhaps, the awkwardness and displacement of the natural body under conservative endeavours to create a homogeneous society (Lillemoose 2017:n.p). In his most recent work, Troublesome Engines (dead memes) [see p.7], we see a tired and exhausted little Thomas The Tank Engine derailed from its path. As a series of sculptures, these trains appear to represent an inevitable cultural exhaustion of British foundation, but also, an absurd longevity born out of contemporary internet meme culture. The subject of many meme references, one might ask themselves how many times can a cultural icon adopt new meaning? Meme references, like this, are so referential that it becomes easy to attribute its aesthetic to the realm of nihilism. The burnt out engine keeps on going, because it thinks it can, and because there is nowhere else to go. These sculptures endearingly and ominously capture the draining effects of neoliberalism's persistence unto society's

Jennifer Rubell, 2019, Ivanka Vacuuming, durational performance, exhibited at Flashpoint Gallery, photography by Ryan Maxwell, available at: <http://jenniferrubell.com/projects/8-projects/57-ivanka-vacuuming>, (accessed 1 December 2019)



Rolf Nowotny, 2019, Troublesome Engines (dead memes). Antique O gauge model trains, thorns and epoxy, image accessible at: <http://rhizomeparkinggarage.com/rolf-nowotny.html> (accessed 1 December 2019)

culture.

Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri argue that neoliberal crisis is also characteristic of capitalism, which has enormously benefited from economic deregulations. Continuous cycles of struggles against disciplinary powers keep capitalism shifting, causing it to undergo structural change (Hardt et al. 2001:261). "In other words, capitalism undergoes systemic transformation only when it is forced to and when its current regime is no longer tenable" (Hardt et al. 2001:268). This was seen in the 1970s when neoliberalism gained political public favour. Younger generations were dropping out of school, experimenting with drugs, and protesting in favour of feminism. This generation saw the lives of their parents as a 'certain death', and they wished to avoid the same inevitable rigidity in their futures (Hardt et al. 2001:274). Hardt and Negri have described this shift as a type of 'transvaluation of values' within Nietzsche's nihilistic context. Although this type of change was entirely centered around a capitalist reality. Unions, strikes, and protests were unprofitable, and therefore, this cultural movement provided instrumental change and prolific progress for the economic sector (Hardt et al. 2001:267). Shifts in desire were centered around social environments created through capitalism. Nicholas Gane points out in his paper on the Trajectories of Liberalism and Neoliberalism (2012) that Foucault, in his lectures on biopolitics, argued that this type of restructuring is a pertinent example of the political legitimacy, social organisation, and rationale adopted from free market capitalism (Gane 2012:137).

This type of social reality is described by Mark Fisher as capitalist realism. Fisher agrees with Slavoj Zizek on the topic of imagining futures, and that, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than a world which has shifted its desires to the extent of political and state reform. This type of sentiment can be viewed when we look again to further examples of nihilistic aesthetics. Jon Rafman's

Legendary Reality is a short animated film which offers us a most melancholic tone, which I feel is best described as a type of nostalgic future. The glitched and gloomy depictions of the future provides an unexpected nostalgia whereby the viewer is reminded of films like Ridley Scott's Bladerunner and Luc Besson's The Fifth Element with flying cars buzzing about the protruding skyline. While the protagonist is never visually depicted, his internal monologue dictates an undesirable reality:

"He tells me that this is the realm of the crack, the realm of failure, the realm of death; and unless you affirm failure and death, you're going to be unhappy. He says that redemption, repentance, resurrection used to be our spiritual tools. But these pathways have been forgotten, ruined, or abandoned. Instead each attempt at writing is a new beginning. A raid on the inarticulate. There is only the war to recover what has been lost and found and lost again. Under conditions that seem more and more favourable. You must destroy versions of yourself that provide no easy solution. Murder the selves that whisper untruths."

Jon Rafman, 2019, *Legendary Reality*, duration 15:43, available at:
<http://jonrafman.com/legendaryreality/> (accessed 1 December 2019)



LEGENDARY REALITY



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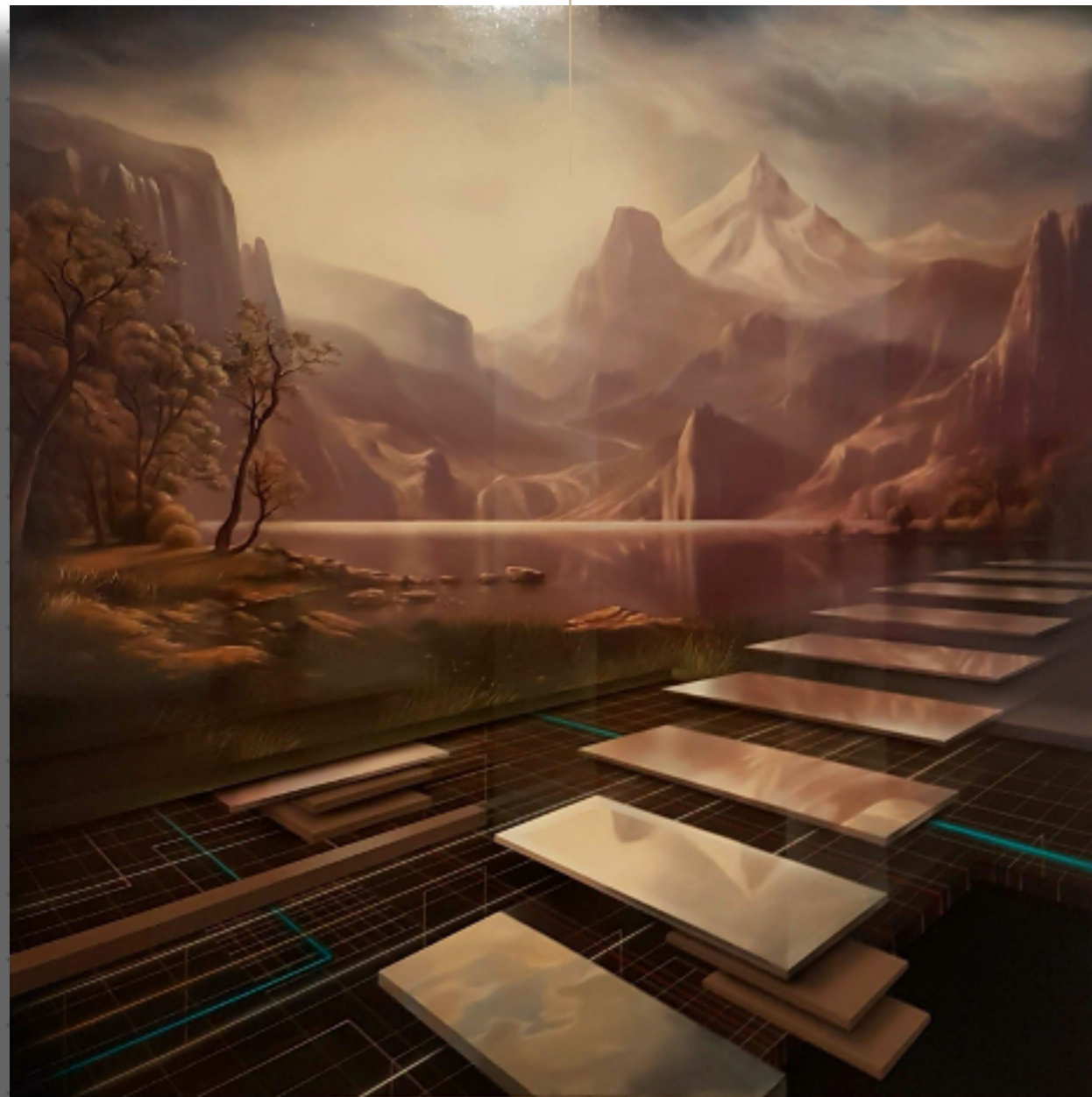


The short film urges us, just as Nietzsche has, to discard our untruth and take up new beginnings. It emphasises that there is only a war left to recover what is lost and found, and it asserts that the realm of the future is the realm of failure. By depicting a future that is familiar, Rafman emphasises the same nihilistic issues Nietzsche was disturbed by, that is, a future whereby no new morals, values, or truths are contemplated, but instead; historic moralities rule over humankind's achievements.

Continuing on the topic of capitalist realism, Fisher argues that it asserts nothing. It does not attempt to argue for a new type of culture, but conversely, preserves it. The traditions we find ourselves in are not contested, modified, or called into question (Fisher :2009:9). Instead, Fisher uses Žižek's argument that anti-capitalist sentiments work to ironically assert capitalism as the dominant organising structure within society (Fisher 2009:11). This is pictured in the work of Akinola Davies Jr who aimed to starkly depict fashion brands and symbols as social identities. The products of capitalism, bought within a free market economy, visually separate class, wealth, and status. They are the ultimate physical manifestation of the given truths and values that Nietzsche so ardently warns us of.



Peter Daverington, 2008-9, *The New Colony: from Bierstadt to Neuromancer*, oil and enamel on canvas, personal archive



makeup of the referenced work. Irony, for Agamben, offers the artist a superiority over the subject, but inevitably forces it into terra aesthetica, where it will wander for eternity, lacking any real content (Agamben 1994:56). For Agamben, art demonstrates Western civilisations' dark nihilistic veil. By saying this, he asserts that: there have never been new values, and as long as Western civilisation is governed by the same political morality as the ancient Greeks, then art will never come out of "its interminable twilight" (Agamben 1994:58).

An apt example of this limbo is exhibited by Peter Daverington's *The New Colony: from Bierstadt to Neuromancer*. Daverington took up the form of 16th century landscape painting to depict mountainous landscapes juxtaposed with futuristic and minimalist icons emerging from modernism. His paintings evoke a sense of technological nostalgia where collective imaginations interpret the eerie scene as a crossing of time periods. Upon considering this style he knew that romantic landscapes were a "no go zone, career suicide" (Frost 2016:n.p). The appeal of authoritative irony and bad taste offered a curiousness which is very graphically realised as a floating between worlds, a true example of Agamben's terra aesthetica.

Nihilist aesthetics describe a reality that is characteristic of late capitalism, they reiterate the hollowness of the current morality of authoritarian governments, and emphasise the physical societal structures capitalism is responsible for (Fisher 2009:13). Nihilistic aesthetics offer us opportunities to see the world for what it might really be, a capitalist realism, where there is exhaustion with no near future. This aesthetic, purposefully ironic or not, for Giorgio Agamben, is absolutely linked to nihilism. Once the work of art becomes self-referential, he argues, that it must also be self-annihilating (Agamben 1994:56). The 'double back' which references culture, aesthetics, and bad taste, annihilate any prospect of new values, instead they re-emphasise the robust existence of the initial ideological

Conclusion

Nietzsche once argued that we wish to see ourselves represented and reflected in all our actions and events (Pearson et al. 2006:302). Perhaps this assertion was his dilemma over society's disillusionment. On one hand we wish to see a reflection of ourselves, but on the other, we barely consider, contemplate, and inquire into the very morality that governs our social life. When social, environmental, and economic catastrophe emerge over our world in the near future, it appears that there will always be neoliberalism to save us. And to accompany this, nihilism will be there too. Agamben argues that this nihilism is characteristic not just of neoliberalism, but of all Western civilisation, beginning with ancient Greece. By doing this he instantly sends contemporary societies morals, truths, and values backward in time - implicating all of Western civilisation, rather than capitalism, free markets, and economic sectors alone. Though Agamben's point is relatively clear, he does not offer us any new values or recommendations, and neither did Nietzsche. I argue that we must look to the nihilistic aesthetic born out of the current contemporary iteration of neoliberalism to emblematically and pragmatically consider the real effects that nihilistic 'authoritarian populism' and 'law and order societies' have onto individuals and communities. Then, by going back to nihilism as a conceptual reference point, we might be able to discuss new ways of approaching and restructuring truths, values, and morals which can offer us intellectual freedom and vitality.

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