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Assessing the Neoliberal *Künstlerroman*. 'Creative' Self-Realisation and the Art World in Michael Cunningham's *By Nightfall.*

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Abstract: This article identifies in recent novels concerned with the analysis of the contemporary art system fertile ground to explore the relationship between literature and neoliberalism. Its main objective has to do with acknowledging the impact of artistic systems of valorisation and regulation in processes of self-definition and self-fulfilment taking place in broader spheres of the social. Simultaneously, the article also engages with the conditions of possibility of alternative art worlds. The article recognises the *Künstlerroman* form as a particularly suitable platform to understand the subsumption of literary production under neoliberalism. At the same time, it also acknowledges the potential of that form to articulate critical positionings against neoliberal reason while envisaging alternative futures.

Keywords: Art World; *By Nightfall;* Cunningham, Michael; Neoliberalism; Self-Realisation; Visual Arts.

Word Count: 8532

Assessing the Neoliberal *Künstlerroman*. 'Creative' Self-Realisation and the Art World in Michael Cunningham's *By Nightfall.*

Introduction

Let's start by stating the obvious: neoliberalism has substantially altered life writing and life picturing, both in qualitative and quantitative ways. Concerning the first level, suffice to mention how personal identity has become increasingly associated with a process of individualistic customisation and selection that arises from a belief in the fact that most of the things we do are significant, worth recording (and sharing) and pretty much unique, the sum of these moments being a sort of exhibition carefully curated so as to epitomise individual originality. Concerning the quantitative, it is worth recalling how social media has transformed these processes of self-curating into the most common denominator of social interactions. Not only are we the most pictured generation in history; the intrinsically artistic task of life picturing, the anticipation and incorporation of professional demands as if they were personal life choices, and the unprecedented amount of time and effort invested in the narration of the self, are also conditioning social life to unprecedented levels.

The increasing weight that the definition of the self has taken is highly eloquent of the fact that neoliberalism is much more than an economic system, as Richard Sennett (1998), Andrew Ross (2004) or Luc Boltanksi and Eve Chiapello (1999) among many others have argued. Rather, there is an urgent need to understand the many ways in which culture actively *produces* neoliberalism through the configuration of specific modes of subjectivity. The adoption of artistic strategies under 'creative capitalism' (including the increasing customisation of social presence; the flexibilisation of work and its identification with personal self-fulfilment under the figure of the entrepreneurial self; the consecration of originality and exclusivity as identity markers; and a long etcetera) is behind this revolution of the social role of life writing. Neoliberalism, in other words, cannot be understood outside a process by which, as Axel Honneth (2004, 469) claims, 'members of Western societies were compelled, urged, or encouraged, for the sake of their own future, to place their very selves at the

centre of their own life-planning and practice.' And yet, what can be expected from any kind of aesthetic appreciation seems to be more unclear than ever. Even if we accept that 'the boundary between reality and fiction may well become blurred' (Honneth 2004, 472), at stake are the ways in which art and literature reproduce and challenge that blurredness. At a time when life is increasingly curated through acts of individual differentiation that are nevertheless routinely connected to our social presence (virtual or otherwise), the consequences of the neoliberal uses of aesthetics in the process of becoming citizens and subjects remain all the more uncertain.

A good example of this is provided by Michael Cunningham in his sixth novel, *By Nightfall* (2010), a reinterpretation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* in light of the New York contemporary art scene. In one early scene of the novel, middle-aged art dealer Peter Harris and sixty-something gallery owner Bette Rice meet at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in front of Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, most widely known as the most expensive shark ever sold within the art world. Cunningham's recreation of Hirst's quintessentially postmodern and ultra-luxury take on the art world fulfils an interesting function: it opens up a space where the characters' feelings of self-guilt for living a privileged life, ruminations on death and tragedy, and modernist aesthetics can emerge. It is in front of Hirst's shark that Peter comes to know that Betty has a terminal cancer, and although both characters' stiff upper lip sense of conventions and civility does not allow for much more than standard commiseration, a space of intimacy suddenly appears, at least for the kind of intimacy anyone could expect when being in front of an eight million dollar, formaldehyde-preserved shark.

The shark scene is important in the novel because it triggers the chain of events that will mark the character's evolution: Peter comes back home disoriented, and, because of this disorientation, bumps into his attractive and carefree brother-in-law while he is taking a shower. This act of mistaking Mizzy (short for Mistake) with his wife Rebecca will call into question the grounds upon which Peter's life was built. Importantly, this includes a sense of artistic appreciation that is simultaneously related to a sense of detachment from mundane issues and financial speculation. Mizzy's abrupt irruption into Peter's life introduces a sense of unpredictable queer excitement that

goes against the grain of the art dealer's carefully controlled and curated lifestyle. This excitement will have profound consequences for the main characters of *By Nightfall*, among them that of calling into question a kind of marital stability built on mutual trust and relative but carefully planned emotional indifference. In this context, Mizzy represents 'the real thing' that irrupts into Peter's life without previous notice. It is all the more telling that the first encounter with that 'real thing' happens by mistake: Mizzy is not something sought, but rather a reminder of the impossibility of keeping things always under control.

And yet, risks and hazards in *By Nightfall* are always ambivalently associated to containment and control. For Peter, 'control' comes mainly in the form of art, a game whose rules he knows to perfection, a field based on newness and originality that nevertheless emerges in the novel as a symbol of monotonous regulation. This explains why the shark scene turns out to be even more relevant: the characters are not driven by any sublime appreciation of Hirst's masterpiece. On the contrary, banality and the difficulties for emphatic communication preside over the scene. After all, the all-the-more real shark that dominates the scene is enclosed in a cage, rendering this sense of containment a symbol of the limitations of an ultra-specialised and exclusive contemporary art scene.

Containment and sanitised engagement with the practicalities of 'life out there' are also at the heart of a previous episode that is strongly linked to the shark scene: when crossing New York in a cab on the way to a gallery opening, Peter and Rebecca are stuck in traffic because of a car accident involving a horse. The dead animal is already covered when the taxi finally reaches the spot where the accident occurred. Peter's feelings about this partial absence of 'the real thing' (part of the corpse can be discerned) are highly eloquent:

> If anything, he's sorry the horse has been covered up. He wants to see it […] For the traditional ghoulish reasons, but also for…evidence. For the sense that he and Rebecca have not only been inconvenienced by an animal's death but have also been in some small way a part of it; that the horse's demise includes them, their willingness to mark it. (Cunningham 2010, 8; hereafter *By Nightfall* is quoted by page number only unless otherwise stated.)

The dead horse works as an imperfect witness of an absence. It represents a significant interruption into the monotonous life of the novel's main characters, which does not reach the level of a tragedy. Cunningham's take on Hirst's shark works similarly: Hirst's work is a trigger of significant and meaningful, if contained, emotional interaction. Yet it is not by virtue of its artistic qualities that it accomplishes that function. Both scenes are marked by a similar sense of containment, that produced by the taxi's boundary and the shark's water-filled vitrine. In both cases, 'the real thing' is close, but not close enough to alter the characters' lives in drastic ways. The same thing occurs with Mizzy: Peter's homosexual romantic intercourse is represented as an exciting way out of marital normality. And yet, love and sex in *By Nightfall* are as inconclusive as contemporary art (at least the kind of art Peter deals with) can be.

Cunningham's under-analysed novel (at least if compared with *The Hours* and *Specimen Days*) can be interpreted in relation to many issues, including mourning and 'AIDS literature' (in *By Nightfall*, Peter's brother, with whom Peter always mixes up Mizzy, died of AIDS [see Pearl 2013]) or 'sexual identity' (Tobin 2015, 244) in Mann's *Death in Venice.* In it, we can also identify an allegory of the failure of intercultural communication in the post-11/S American context, a social commentary on the exclusionary consequences of elitist cultural production, and a sentimental intimation of the failures of modernist aesthetics. Without downplaying these possible interpretations, what interests me in this case is that *By Nightfall* also works as an ironic musing on how the irruption of finance into self-identification and the monetarisation of contemporary culture under neoliberalism are not necessarily at odds with the maintenance of sanitised spaces of contention and aesthetic enjoyment. Hirst's shark can be an all too obvious example of this, and it would be tempting to draw a parallelism between Hirst's self-referential artistic postmodernism and the sense of containment that ultimately prevails over Peter's encounter with life (and death). There is, however, more.

Dealing with the relationship between capital accumulation and personhood, Daniel Hartley (2019, 132) conceives it of as 'simultaneously impersonal and personalizing.' Is this not a perfect

definition of the kind of intimacies that Peter and Bette exchange in front of Hirst's shark? Is not *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* a clear example of capital becoming simultaneously materialised and dematerialised, a powerful and overwhelming force but also a reality apparently detached, encapsulated, available to be looked from the outside? The shark scene that opens *By Nightfall* is impersonal (a rather generic exchange on beauty and loss, Hirst epitomising the art museum's shift from the educational to a resource for mass tourism.) At the same time, it is in front of Hirst's work that both Peter and Bette start their inconclusive journey of self-definition: the former will start questioning his upper-class, middle-aged values; the latter will finally come to terms with her own coming mortality, deciding to leave everything and pursue a dream of self-fulfilment vaguely associated with starting over in Spain.

Cunningham's interest in the New York art scene provides a first-hand take on the crucial role that cultural creativity plays in defining neoliberalism. As many voices have pointed out, criticism ends up being simply unproductive when it limits itself to the task of 'spotting' neoliberalism as a theme (Berardi 2012; Nilges 2015). Rejecting this limited process of identification, the challenge lies in understanding how literature produces and normalises neoliberal reason. As Nilges (2015, 360) puts it, 'an alternative analytical path might begin by examining the processes of mediation through which both terms, the novel and neoliberalism, are connected.' Taking this affirmation to its utmost consequences implies accepting the fact that neoliberalism manifests itself as a totalising force that profoundly alters our capacity to conceive of spaces and temporalities outside its realm.

At the same time, however, I would argue that *By Nightfall* is not simply a novel *about* art under neoliberal conditions. It does not voice a defeatist take on literature's limited potential to challenge these conditions either. Cunningham's novel does more than capitulating and identifying in the New York blue chip art gallery landscape a self-enclosed medium, a clear symbol of what Jamie Peck (2010) defines as neoliberal reason. Instead, contemporary visual art, and especially the contrast between Peter's managerial role and self-contained aesthetic ambitions, becomes a tool through which Cunningham reflects on the mediating role that literature plays between the socio-political and the economic. The contradictions at play in the visual art medium are mobilised in *By*

Nightfall to provide a critical understanding of the ways in which art and experience arises as instrumental in the process of narrating the self. As the novel unravels art as Peter's self-enclosed space, it pinpoints the spatial and temporal coordinates that led to its creation and normalisation. In *By Nightfall,* art becomes crucial to understand the contradictions behind the process of individualisation in neoliberal times. The novel, therefore, has recourse to the contemporary art world to historicise the overlapping between the personal and the impersonal while envisaging more productive processes of identification.

'The Finality of Nothing Happening': *By Nightfall* and *Homo Artisticus*

At first, then, *By Nightfall* seems to reproduce one of the main features of neoliberal culture: its commitment to an endless *presentness* and the artistic influence on the increasing centrality of self-realisation and self-definition. A closer look at the emotional responses to the artistic exchanges taking place in the novel, however, allows us to recognise something else: not just a critique or a parody of neoliberal reason, but also an attempt to critically analyse and historicise its normalisation through the engagement with a specific and historically-located art system.

One of the main strategies mobilised in *By Nightfall* to this end has to do with showing how Peter Harris attempts to come to terms with his own work-driven self. Cunningham's sixth novel is concerned with the kind of social interaction and civic agency that a highly economised art world could allow. When looked at from this perspective, one of the main questions that emerges is that of the degree of aesthetic evolution available when art loses its original form to become something else: a blurred act whose boundaries coexist with broader areas of social (re)production, including financial speculation and urban gentrification. The New York art scene depicted in the novel, with ultra-rich collectors arbitrating over artistic taste on the basis of how particular pieces fits into their mansions, and wannabe artists and curators leveraging their options, determines how Peter and most of the characters in the novel appreciate themselves. Their capacity to succeed professionally conditions (and is conditioned by) their ability in crafting and displaying a meaningful life story. That story is

carefully designed in aesthetic terms, yet it is also fraught and limited, as it remains contained within a sanitised sphere that regulates transgression in relation to social interactions and personal choices. In *By Nightfall*, art represents much more than a creative medium: it also sets up the logic that regulates that sphere, curtailing the characters' room for manoeuvre. Art, therefore, becomes the central field that renders self-appreciation and life picturing possible while restricting the options and uses of this task of definition.

In her definition of neoliberalism, Wendy Brown stresses that there is no single human prototype that fits into the mould. Rather, neoliberalism manifests itself through the configuration of flexible subjects whose characteristics and prerogatives vary geographically and chronologically. Instead of conceiving of the universal figure of the *Homo Economicus* as the quintessential protagonist of neoliberalism, Brown (2015, 10) envisages neoliberal capitalism as affecting 'an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues.' For Brown (2015, 21), neoliberalism transcends the domain of economics, having to do ultimately with 'a distinctive mode of reason, of the production of subjects, a 'conduct of conduct', and a scheme of valuation.'

By exploring *By Nightfall* we can assert that the *Homo Artisticus* (which should not be understood, either, as a totalising figure standing for neoliberal reason at a global scale [see Deckard and Shapiro 2019]) is behind many of the characteristics of that scheme of valuation. Workaholic and aesthete Peter Harris offers the best example of this. He invests in art, with his personal aspiration for self-fulfilment being indissolubly tied to a managerial task of selecting and discarding via his anxiety about discovering true artistic geniality. Peter, in other words, is not just obsessed with artistic excellence and absolute beauty; he is also directly responsible for the production and professionalisation of aesthetic excellence. Crucially, Peter is not an artist but rather someone who uses art as both an inspiration and a way of making money. Both levels, the appreciative and the professional, ultimately come together in Peter's persona, affecting his capacity to make sense of his own life.

Alongside this conflation of the personal and professional, Peter's relentless search for artistic genius and beauty implies repetition within sameness. The managerial routine that presides over the scenes at Peter's art gallery and the exhaustion that he feels in relation to having to curate one exhibition after another and secure one sale after another does not hinder Peter's aesthetic utopianism. In this sense, Peter remains all the more an example of neoliberal reason by hiding his personal crisis under emotional and aesthetic aspirations to self-fulfilment. The urge towards continuously experiencing supposedly unique experiences**,** towards thinking 'the various possibilities for personal identity as being the stuff of experimental self-discovery' (to go back to Honneth [2004, 470] once again), also determines the construction of Peter's over-aestheticised self.

In *By Nightfall,* experiences replace objects as the ultimate creative commodity. At the same time, the consumption of supposedly unique and exceptional experiences plays a central role in self-definition. Peter's relationship with Mizzy is always portrayed as a seductive enterprise worth pursuing. Although Peter is always conscious of the costs of that enterprise, his infatuation with Mizzy always remains under the contained limits imposed by the professional and managerial logic that determines Peter's life, allowing him to afford the episodic interaction with difference and risk that Mizzy represents. At some stage, Peter compares the thrill experienced by engaging with 'real life' in comparison to the emotions and affects that artworks can trigger. What he looks for is 'a look into the depths of the human other. Videos of passersby aren't the same. Nor are obscene urns of dead sharks or anything, really, that's wry or detached or ironic, that's meant to shock or provoke.' (115-116)

Peter's search for beauty can be read, therefore, as the colonisation of his personal emotions and individual goals by the premises of flexible work and professional adaptability. Ironically, this process is normalised and made possible by the urgency to conceive his own life in aesthetic terms that Peter derives from his engagement within the art world:

> Peter can be too delicate for his own good, that he is unambiguously in the art *business,* and, maybe more to the point, is too goddamned hard on himself, he has never taken on an artist for purely cynical or commercial reasons. *Do you understand, crazy old Peter Harris,* do you

> understand that genius is *rare,* I mean by definition, and it's one thing (a good thing) to search ardently and earnestly for the Real Deal but it's another (a less-good thing) to obsess over it, to roll through your forties still nursing the suspicion that no one's great enough, no artist or object can be forgiven for being, well, human in the first case and intractably *thing*-like in the second. (145)

This fragment reveals the regulatory role that the creative principles of flexibility and individualisation play in the extension of a neoliberal logic into every sphere of social and professional life. In inserting professional aspirations into the domain of everyday life and self-realisation, Peter Harris reunites many of the features of the creative class paradigm as championed by Richard Florida, for whom creators represent the ultimate paradigm of entrepreneurial selves that are ultimately fit to strive within the context of ever-changing urban metropolises. More than this, by connecting all his personal and professional choices to aesthetic decisions, Peter parallels (and parodies) the idea that creativity provides a universal boost to self-development (more about this in a second). This is achieved by stressing Peter's commitment to the present. In effect, one of the main impressions resulting from the reading of *By Nightfall* is that of time stuck within an endless present marked by moderate societal recognition and physical decay, processes that are always compensated by the pleasures of professional life. Peter's self-definition is instrumental in supporting this view: 'He wanted to be a wheeler and dealer (as some would call him), a denizen of the present, though he can't live in the present; he can't stop himself from mourning some lost world, he couldn't say *which* world exactly but someplace that isn't this.' (22) From this standpoint, Peter justifies his position as an art dealer by comparing his duties with those of art historians or conservationists: Peter ultimately rejects art history because he is busy making that history while making himself through that process. Peter's obsession with artistic genius and the discovery of the next big thing within the NYC art world hides more than a desire of upward mobility. It also reveals how professional self-realisation in the present occupies all the space of personal development.

If this would be all *By Nightfall* has to offer, the novel could be easily dismissed as describing and replicating the artistic logic and the 'emotional turn' at play in neoliberalism (see Jameson 2013). The controlled and contained experience of normative transgression lived by Peter can be described as a personal process of neoliberal self-fulfilment, a process made possible by the particular conditions of the New York art world. At the same time, by looking at the novel from a different perspective it is also possible to see a critical account of how that specific art world becomes possible. One of the main features is the sense of presentism that prevails over the novel. The whole plot unfolds within two days, and the novel ends without any major personal or professional consequences for its protagonists. Even in the domain of the personal, things seem to be reversible: when Peter tells Rebecca of his attraction for Mizzy, a scene that condenses all the emotional anxieties of the main character is downplayed and rendered anecdotal. Life goes on after all, and Peter and Rebecca may even not get divorced. As the novel concludes by giving the impression that nothing serious or drastic happened, it consolidates a flat and immediate sense of the present marked by unalterable professional routine.

In his attempt to problematise the contemporary as a multi-layered and contested site of negotiation, Terry Smith (2016) argues that 'we must take the challenge of contemporary world-being, which I see as a matter of pursuing these goals, urgently: picture all the worlds in which we live in their relation to each other; work together to create and sustain a viable sense of place for each of us; establish and maintain coeval connectivity between worlds and places.' By reading *By Nightfall* as a critique of the normalisation of a reduced understanding of the present in tune with neoliberal reason, we can see how Peter's failure to achieve the three goals marked by Smith is the result of a broader systemic collapse, that of an art system that not only emulates but also precedes the dematerialisation of global finance.

We have seen so far how the temporal logic prevailing over *By Nightfall* is that of endless innovation and emptied consumption of 'transgressive but nevertheless contained' experiences, something that derives from the sense of weariness concerning aesthetic change that is shared by all characters in the novel. The consequences of that irrelevance are felt in the case of Peter in the form

of anxiety over the achievement of aesthetic realisation, which ultimately leads to the collapse of his controlled, upper-middle class and heteronormative mode of conviviality. Finally, in *By Nightfall* coevality is looked at only from afar: The only thing that Peter cannot afford himself to do is to take Mizzy's artistic aspirations seriously. Mizzy remains seductive for Peter because of his incapacity to recognise in him what the art world Peter champions denies to the many. Both characters are defined as pursuers of beauty and aesthetic fulfilment, but what seems to be a relation among equal parts changes completely if we think that the former has the managerial power to confer professional recognition as an artist to the latter.

Michael Feher (2009, 27) has famously argued that, as human capital, 'our main purpose is not so much to profit from our accumulated potential as to constantly value or appreciate ourselves.' Yet it is crucial to acknowledge that, besides being accumulated, that potential is historically constructed and unevenly distributed. Under this lens, Mizzy's hedonistic tendency towards escapism also becomes a clear indicator of the powerful role that the regulation of expertise and artistic apprenticeship play in the configuration of the creative self. He is first pictured by his failed attempts at defining himself through artistic means. He goes to Japan in search of an alternative and meditative self-discovery, fails in that enterprise, and realises that artistic subjectivation is not fully open for him: although he wants to be an artist, he lacks the systemic recognition that people like Peter could grant. By the end of the novel, when Mizzy expresses his concerns about the excessive attention received from his family, what emerges is an anxious thirst for normality that is intensified by the expectations that everyone has about him. What is interesting is that the same phrase can be easily read in terms of lack of accessibility to the restricted medium of contemporary visual art: 'I've been treated as something special for so long and I've tried my hardest to *be* something special but I'm not, I'm not exceptional, I'm smart enough, but I'm not brilliant and I'm not spiritual or even all that focused. I think I can stand that, but I'm not sure if the people around me can.' (191)

Concurrently, Peter's incapacity for 'imagin[ing] the lives of others' (236) would imply not just a lack of empathy but also professional privilege. This explains the fact that, even when the character of Peter appears as most pitiable, he remains afloat, covered by a system of consolation that

is emotional inasmuch as it is economic: he 'could continue to feel honorable that way, he could live on as a solid second-stringer, respected but not feared.' (228) Earlier on, the magnitude of Peter's amorous tragedy is also downplayed by acknowledging that no matter what, he has 'the finality of nothing happening. He has his life back (not that it was taken from him); he has the real hope of increased prosperity.' (221) In inserting the emotional failures of a set of characters obsessively concerned with aesthetics into the consolidation of the immaterial logic of global finance within the New York art world, *By Nightfall* provides a critical account of the affective costs resulting from the normalisation of a limited understanding of the contemporary equivalent to 'waiting for the next big thing.' By engaging with the normalisation of a managerial and entrepreneurial logic within the art world, a holistic understanding of the role of culture within neoliberalism is made possible.

The art world that allows Peter and the remaining characters of *By Nightfall* to define themselves can be understood in the systemic terms defined by New York-based artist, activist and art historian Gregory Sholette. For Sholette (2017, 20-21), who writes with the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis in mind, art worlds are 'an integrated system of production, and not, as some postmodernist critics contend, merely a bundle of overlapping practices, discourses or subcultures with varying degrees of autonomy, connectivity and interdependence.' In defining art worlds as a contested terrain striving to impose and regularise their logic, but also remaining subjected to continuous negotiation and revalorisation, we can see in Cunningham's novel an attempt to historicise the forces beneath the logic that leads to the normalisation of a *specific* art world, the one that acted as a catalyst of the budgetary crisis of the late 2000s. Written only two years after the 2008 crisis, *By Nightfall* can be read as an art world fiction mainly concerned with criticising the process of affective identification and subjection/subjectivation that make possible the incursion of global finance within the art system in the first place.

It is not only time that comes to be at odds with the processes of self-definition taken up by the characters of *By Nightfall.* Space is also subjected to an equally critical scrutiny. Against the non-place of Peter's art gallery, where scenes of poverty from Kolkata feature side-by-side with upcoming talents from New York City, *By Nightfall* contains subtle but eloquent references to the economic

world system that enable the 'structure of feeling' (to put it in Williams' terms) associated with Peter Harris' art world. These references include wealthier art collectors from China who are received with a mixture of admiration and mistrust, or the possibility of professional retirement in Spain and spiritual contemplation in Japan. Space is also presented as fragmented and contested within New York, as when Peter compares the Manhattan art scene with the activity of 'small-town eccentrics somewhere along the Hudson Valley, arguing with whomever will listen about integrity as the only virtue that means a goddamn thing, perpetually preparing for their annual show at some local gallery.' (150)[1] To be sure, these locations are hardly defined, remaining metaphors standing for wealth, leisure or provincial backwardness. Although the spatial implications of the totalising aspirations of the New York art scene displayed in *By Nightfall* could be further problematised (for example, by contrasting Peter's experience as an art dealer with the tradition of alternative art institutions developed in Manhattan by Black and Latino communities, or by making more explicit the role that 'Peter's art world' plays in global finance)[2], it hints at the fact that Peter's emotional limitations also emerge from the totalising sense of space deriving from the Manhattan art scene. The characters' individualisation emerges, therefore, as both the result of and a response to a broader cultural logic that simultaneously arbitrates over the usefulness and applicability (or lack thereof) of art as a source of consumption and financial speculation while leaving aside the possibility of aesthetic enjoyment and the privilege of self-appreciation. This is expressed at its best when the unreliable voice of Peter manages to connect his own sense of disorientation with a broader experience of being adrift deriving from the art world where he operates: 'They're crazy-making, these sea changes. They're not

[1] Amateurism is presented in the novel in ambivalent terms. On one hand, concerned as he is with upward mobility, Peter despises second-class artists. On the other, he is capable of recognising that artists "have the customary array of louche habits but they're not nut jobs, they're laborers, they have to be in this economy. They put in their hours. They sleep at night." (157)

[2] Despite the increasing attention that the contemporary art world is receiving in recent literature, the analysis of alternative and peripheral art worlds remains an underdeveloped and nevertheless crucial task if we are to understand what literature can contribute to the examination of the uneven relationships between the production, display and circulation of visual art objects.

calculated, not in the sense of a conspiracy of international art dealers (sometimes he wishes they were), but they're not exactly about the art, either.' (74)

In what is the most exhaustive analysis of *By Nightfall* so far, Maria Mäkelä (2017, 116) provides a narratological interpretation of how Peter's unreliable and contradictory voice works as a way of 'challenging our notion of the author as the ultimate securer of knowledge and values.' Mäkelä (2017, 122) also alerts us to the 'the fear that our attention may be directed to the "wrong things"—that is, the risk of a misguided or misplaced point of view on events and experiences—merges lived experience with an artistic project.' In providing this sense of disorientation, *By Nightfall* makes evident the emotional consequences of the professionalisation of life-picturing. Taking this reasoning one-step further, we can argue that the contradictions emerging from Peter's process of self-definition do not only happen at the level of narration. Rather, they are driven by a over-aestheticisation of personal experience that is rendered possible by the shortcomings of the art world the characters inhabit. We can recognise in Peter's commitment to aesthetic identification one of the main goals of human capital under neoliberal times.

Even if it happens in a context of a 'lack of ultimate authority' (Mäkelä 2017, 127), then, the urge towards self-realisation experienced by Peter can be read as a collective symptom of a mode of cultural creativity that fails to provide meaningful guidance while disguising that failure through a performance of transgression and limited empathy. As cultural critic Oli Mould (2018, 160) has argued, these empathic limitations are the result of 'art that is "aware" of inequality within urban space, but 'performs' this as part of a consumption cycle. The knowledge of protest and critique toward such injustices is *given* to an audience to consume rather than as something to enact.' At the beginning of the novel, as part of the incident with the dead horse, both Rebecca and Peter acknowledge the limited capacity for social change that any aesthetic engagement with reality can have: 'There are, of course, desperate people out there, some of them refugees, some of them criminals; we do as well as we can with these impossible contradictions, these endless snarls of loveliness and murder.' (11) The key thing about this affirmation is not that it reproduces a sense of timeless despair that could be easily translatable to the impression of ceaseless novelty deriving from

the increasing economisation of contemporary art. On the contrary, what these comments make visible is the limitations of a particular aesthetic sensibility. *By Nightfall* hints at the broader social consequences of the collapse of a specific vision of the contemporary, portraying our time as contested and open for negotiation.

Mediating Expertise

The sense of systemic crisis deriving from Peter Harris' contradictory aesthetic aspirations can also be linked to a broader process of negotiation of literary autonomy and expertise under shifting neoliberal conditions. This process demands attentive consideration, for, as Sarah Brouillette (2014, 207-208) has argued, the situation of literature under neoliberalism is a much more complex one than that of pure subjection. Rather, cultural production must be seen as 'an ongoing locus of struggle.' (Brouillette 2014, 206) It is for this reason that the exploration of the synchrony and asynchrony existing among different *loci*—such as literary production and the contemporary visual art world, as in the case of *By Nightfall*—provides fertile ground for the articulation of imaginative responses to the flat temporality imposed and normalised by neoliberal reason. Of course, the relationship between literature and other forms of cultural creativity is by no means new. At the same time, however, the similar but not identical processes of subsumption into the fluxes of consumer capitalism experienced by literature, art, etcetera, emerges all the more crucially in our times.

In this final section, I will argue that *By Nightfall* provides an interesting example of this: in Cunningham's sixth novel, literary authorship is not only defined in correlation with the negotiations at play in other creative media such as the contemporary visual art scene, but also in relation to other literary texts and, more importantly, the role of the writer within the literary industry.

In her analysis of the novel, Mäkelä acknowledges the metafictional dimension of *By Nightfall*, which not only obviously takes on Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (as recognised by Peter himself), but also on Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace.* Mäkelä (2017, 116) argues that what unites these three works is the use of gnomic statements to gesture towards 'authorial

insufficiency' and 'non-monolithic authorship.' If these statements are redefined in *By Nightfall* as a 'space for ethical contingency', something similar happens with the abundance of metaliterary references that populate Cunningham's novel (Mäkelä 2017, 134). These, I would argue, hint at something other than postmodern referentiality, something that has to do with the redefinition of literary authorship.

In 2004, six years before writing *By Nightfall,* Cunningham wrote an introduction on the occasion of Michael Henry Heim's new translation into English of *Death in Venice.* In the introduction, Cunningham acknowledges that the figure of Aschenbach acquired a valence in parallel to a sense of uncertainty that he connects with the process of aging: 'Aschenbach has long been a perversely mythic figure to me. As I approach the age at which Aschenbach expired I've fallen into the habit of asking, every now and then, when I'm uncertain about a sartorial gesture, whether the scarf or ruffle in question makes me look a bit *Death in Venice*-ish.' (Cunningham 2004, x) The arguments that Cunningham (a writer largely familiar with the tradition of the 20th century American novel, as *The Hours* (1998) reveals) employs to justify his fascination with Aschenbach point at a shift in aesthetic judgment that turns the once supposedly excessive figure of *Professor* Aschenbach into a model for our contemporary emotional uncertainties. For Cunningham (2004, xvii), this Aschenbach *feels* 'more intimate and personal', much more like our contemporary ('[Aschenbach] is both of his time and beyond it', and that has to do for him with a crisis of literary authority [2004, xv])

As we have seen, the danger of this celebration of authorial fluidity and this endeavour of updating Aschenbach as an exemplary model for a passion-driven, future-less conceptualisation of the present is linked to the normalisation of the neoliberal values at play in the art world depicted in *By Nightfall*. What this introductory essay forgets to acknowledge is that, no matter how hesitant and 'translational', it is Cunningham's own renowned voice within the field of American fiction that reintroduces *Death in Venice* within the shifting dynamics of the world literary market. Although the possibility of reading Aschenbach as more contemporary because our passions and fear of loss and decay have gained valence is interesting, it should be connected to the idea that it is precisely the

collapse of revolutionary horizons and emancipative futurities that lies behind this shifting of values. The premise that literary fiction is always open for interpretation by the reader and that, when we read, 'we are all writers and translators' remains dangerously close to the 'emotional turn' that prevails over Peter Harris' finance-driven art world.

Although Cunningham's admiration for Aschenbach allows for a three-sided comparison between Aschenbach, Peter Harris and Cunningham himself, it would be misguided to read *By Nightfall* as simply a deferred personification of *Death in Venice.* The point is not to downplay Cunningham's introduction to *Death in Venice* as naïve. If we read it alongside *By Nightfall*, it is possible to recognise a more developed and *systemic* approach to the conditions of possibility of artistic authorship under a neoliberal logic. The unreliability of the narrative voice in Cunningham's novel also indicates a critical distancing from, and an attempt to ground, the postmodern utopia of a democratised literary field by virtue of the reader's capacity for endless interpretation and 'rewriting' of the novel. Under this perspective, the fact that 'this [Heim's] Aschenbach felt larger, and at least a little bit more profound', 'less clownish and more tragic, more like a man whose desperation and delusion are not only sad but also heroic' (Cunningham 2004, x) acquires a new dimension. *By Nightfall* would be, then, not just meta-referencing *Death in Venice* but updating it from the point of view of the precise socioeconomic conditions that regulate aesthetic realisation, empathy, aging, loss or decay. In sum, I see *By Nightfall* not so much as a commentary on Mann's novel, as on Cunningham's own and contradictory ideas (as expressed in the introduction to the Mann translation?) on the personal *and economic* consequences of the waning potentiality of a specific system of artistic value and recognition.

Conclusion. Assessing the Neoliberal *Künstlerroman*

In conclusion, a critical appreciation of the articulation between neoliberalism and culture can be gained by understanding the contemporary novel focused on the art system as a literary intervention mainly concerned with how becoming self also means becoming (public) subject. The *Künstlerroman*

is indissolubly attached to modernist aesthetics, including the focus on the figure of the individual artist and the importance conferred to art in the context of the process of spiritual growth and personal self-realisation (suffice to mention here the well-explored cases of Mann, Woolf or Joyce, who are all familiar for Cunningham). The fact that both individual authorship and the role of aesthetic apprenticeship are being drawn does not make the *Künstlerroman* impossible in our days. On the contrary, if the novel on the art system is conceived (as is the case in *By Nightfall*) as a laboratory for the articulation of alternative systems of appreciation and interpersonal valorisation and, by extension, alternative art worlds, we must conclude that there is much at stake in reassessing the *Künstlerroman* as one of the most productive literary forms of neoliberal culture.

The *Künstlerroman* emerges therefore as a suitable platform because it points to the increasingly influential role that creativity is taking in the neoliberal configuration of the *Homo Artisticus* as an increasingly influential model for the conceptualisation of the self. This figure gestures towards the intrinsically artistic component implied in the normalisation of human capital as the predefined form of personal and professional realisation. In the neoliberal *Künstlerroman*, artmaking is conceived as being something more, and something other, than the production of works of art by particularly talented individuals called artists. This tendency would include the explorations of artistic creativity by a wide range of writers such as Don Delillo (*The Body Artist*), Margaret Atwood (*Cat's Eye*), Kazuo Ishiguro *(An Artist of the Floating World, The Unconsoled*), Ian McEwan *(Saturday*), Enrique Vila-Matas *(The Illogic of Kassel*), José Saramago (*The Cavern*) or Donna Tart (*The Goldfinch*). In these art fictions, 'art' is not understood as a topic nor as autonomous field.

As it happens in *By Nightfall,* curators, art dealers and collectors are not strange in these narratives. In most cases, an emphasis on the managerial role of art and an inquiry into the uses of the figure of the artist in processes of subjectivation substitute in this body of novels for more conventional engagements with the aural figure of the individual artist. The potential of the 'neoliberal *Künstlerroman*' would, therefore, not imply longing for any lost spaces of autonomy that both literature and art could have lost due to their increasingly active role in the configuration of neoliberal social and personal aspirations. Rather, we should understand the recurrent interest that

contemporary writers are paying to the art system as part of their attempt to imagine alternative systems of value and realisation within the contemporary and to define socially transformative modes of aesthetic appreciation and engagement. Under this lens, we can understand the fascination with the visual that we find in many texts of the 1990s and 2000s as much more than a thematic choice concerned with the end of metanarratives and the literary exploration of immediacy. Instead, we can conceive literary discourses focusing on the artworld as a laboratory where heterogeneous ideas of artistic autonomy, cultural labour and self-identification are tested not just at the level of discourse but also in the ways in which art is used to reposition the function and the position of narration. When literature plunges into the art world, it can produce active investigations on the reconfiguration of cultural fields under creative capitalism.

Although more research is needed to understand what the neoliberal *Künstlerroman does* (and not just what it represents), by approaching *By Nightfall* we can already glimpse the potential of this form of the novel. A first element that renders this form interesting has to do with its capacity to situate the novel's immersion into neoliberal fluxes as part of a broader process of questioning the role of narration for envisaging ways out of the romance with self-investment derived from the expansion of entrepreneurial mode(l)s. In *By Nightfall,* we have signs of these ways in the hesitations we find in the introspective third-person voice that gives account of Peter's journey. The point with Peter's hesitations is not only, as Mäkelä affirms, that the narrator has relinquished his role as 'ultimate securer of knowledge and values'. If Peter's 'own aestheticised life-storying' is indissolubly marked by the appetite for (partially transgressive) experiences, his engagement into the art world makes it also fragmentary. Peter's middle class tragedy continuously oscillates between the personal and the artistic. His main affliction has to do with his incapacity to imagine a future for himself other than decay and social irrelevance. In *By Nightfall,* art is not a field where these values are reproduced; rather, it is Peter's involvement in the art world that determines his hesitations at a personal level and, ultimately, provokes his incapacity to redefine his own life. In this context, the hesitant voice of the narrator emerges as a symptom of the exhaustion of modes of individual creativity based on aesthetic

detachment and nostalgic longing for a time when both art and literature could claim to operate within autonomous spaces.

Related to this, a second element of interest we can infer from understanding *By Nightfall* as an exemplary case of neoliberal *Künstlerroman* has to do with the capacity of this form to insert the process of becoming subject within a broader consideration on the socioeconomic consequences of identification under 'creative capitalism'. The *Künstlerroman* form becomes then essential to understand the heterogeneous ways in which neoliberal reason materialises. The contemporary iterations of the genre allow us to simultaneously analyse the increasing weight that self-investment is acquiring in processes of subjectivation while also remaining attentive to the regularisation of value and valorisation associated to that process in historical and context-sensitive terms. This capacity to locate and historicize the present-ness of the neoliberal artistic persona allow us to recognise the figure of the 'artepreneur' as part of broader socioeconomic configurations. More importantly, as we have seen in the case of *By Nightfall* in relation to the novel's geopolitics, specific personal choices and processes of self-realisation emerge in this context as part of an uneven system of global exchange that has artistic production at its centre.

In relation to this, a third element that justifies the relevance of the neoliberal *Künstlerroman* has to do with its potential to explore issues of cultural labor. Whereas the focus on individual realisation and aesthetic growth that traditionally characterised this form of the novel would move the material side of artmaking to a second plane, in novels such as *By Nightfall* artistic authorship and the regulation of talent and artistic valorisation occupy a central role. A first interpretation of this role would identify in this interest for more mundane issues a clear indicator of literature's own limitations to deal with the totalising aspirations of neoliberalism. However, as stated before, what is at stake is much more than the question of what form of the novel is more capable of representing neoliberalism. In the case of *By Nightfall,* artistic expertise is mobilised in ways that go beyond the identification of the writer and the narrator: the fact that Cunningham wrote the novel after providing an introduction to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* speaks volumes about the ways in which Peter's hesitations are also leveraging the flexible kind of expertise required from writers nowadays. *By Nightfall* can be

read, then, as much more than a metaliterary exercise: when looked at alongside Cunningham's prologue to *Death in Venice*, the novel becomes an investigation on the possibilities of artistic life-picturing in times dominated by the flexibilisation of cultural labour. As we see in the novel, the results of this flexibilisation do not necessarily include a process of deskilling. On the contrary, we can read *By Nightfall* as a clear example of how individual authorship and expertise remain crucial in the configuration of systems of economic and aesthetic appreciation even when, or precisely because, the form of artistic practice (and, we must add, the form of the novel) is blurring with broader areas of individual impersonation and social reproduction. Taken together, then, the three elements mentioned here (the recognition of processes of aesthetic growth and self-discovery as part of an wider redefinition of self-narration in relation to the entrepreneurial self, the capacity to insert processes of life-writing and picturing into historical and systemic analysis, and the ability to raise issues of cultural labour) turn the *Künstlerroman* into a key platform for better understanding how neoliberalism and culture produce each other. What is more, they also allow space for envisaging the kind of radical affective bonds and personal subjectivation that could derive from alternative art worlds.

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