

# Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

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Volume 40

Issue 2 On 24/7: Neoliberalism and the Undoing of  
Time

Article 2

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1-1-2016

## Introduction

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### Recommended Citation

Chronister, Necia and Koepnick, Lutz (2016) "Introduction," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 40: Iss. 2, Article 2.  
<https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1882>

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# Introduction

## **Abstract**

The task of this special issue is to unearth the often denied logic of neoliberal rationality in Germany over the last few decades by exploring how various literary texts, films, and artistic projects, at the level of both content and formal experimentation, have sought to visualize the ramifications of deregulation and ceaseless self-management. The volume features scholarly work on various literary texts, performances, films, time-based art works, and theoretical interventions that explore the nexus between neoliberalism, new media culture, and the landscapes of temporal experience.

## **Keywords**

neoliberalism, 24/7, Jonathan Crary, Wendy Brown, time, German literature, contemporary German film, German performance art

## Introduction

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Numerous influential scholars, including most prominently Michel Foucault, have identified the intellectual origins of contemporary neoliberalism in the work of Freiburg sociologists, economists, and philosophers as they began to formulate the tenets of so-called Ordoliberalism toward the end of World War II. Though it would take the scholarly interventions of the Chicago School of economics during the 1950s and the economic politics of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan during the late 1970s and 1980s to consolidate neoliberal thought into a doctrine of comprehensive deregulation and relentless economization of all aspects of life, its historical emergence was deeply affected by particular German and Austrian constellations. And yet today, as the neoliberal doctrine of self-management extends market metrics to all spheres of public and private existence, its Austro-German roots are largely forgotten. Instead, Thatcherism and Reaganomics, with their concerted efforts to eliminate traditional structures of solidarity and to unravel existing social networks—because “There is no such thing as society”—often made neoliberal calls for deregulation appear to be a primarily Anglo-American invention.

While West Germany during the Kohl era witnessed processes of privatization and monetization comparable to those of the Anglo-American world, the old Federal Republic’s sluggishness, as well as the continued pressures of both union organizations and new social movements, placed certain limits on the scale of capitalism’s domestic transformation that did not exist in the USA and Great Britain. In the wake of German unification in 1990, public money and planning also played an all-too-visible role in aligning the trajectories of two different societies and economies and thereby obscured the fact that the figure of the *homo oeconomicus*—of private self-investment and unfettered self-reliance—had come to inhabit the center of government post-unification. A rhetoric of democracy, individual freedom, and solidarity between East and West masked the fact that public funds ultimately served the expropriation and privatization of properties and businesses, one goal of which was to attract foreign investors. After the turn toward the millennium, debates about the future of the European Union as well as the harsh realities of economic crises and the rhetoric of Angela Merkel’s austerity politics disguised the extent to which previous forms of labor had long been displaced by new modes of human capital. Competitive entrepreneurship had come to eclipse the value of common production; legal frameworks had been deeply suffused by economic reason; and the market—in spite of all its failings—was seen as the principal site of truth, the organizer and

true form of all human activity. Like the spirit of industrial mass culture, neoliberalism also was—and continues to be—seen largely as an import from abroad, a grafting of American capitalism onto domestic structures. Similar to the previous critique of cultural consumption in the name of aesthetic refinement, German opposition to today's neoliberalism often involves intricate processes of projection and displacement. No matter how legitimate the challenge to the total economization of state, social policy, and private life might be, it often conjures the specter of US economic imperialism to screen out neoliberalism's very German roots.

The task of this special issue is to unearth the often denied logic of neoliberal rationality in Germany over the last few decades by exploring how various literary texts, films, and artistic projects, at the level of both content and formal experimentation, have sought to visualize the ramifications of deregulation and ceaseless self-management. As we understand it in this volume, neoliberalism in the twenty-first century advocates radical reductions in government spending in the hopes of unfettering the efficiency of the private sector. As it endorses utter flexibility and risk-driven career moves, neoliberalism at once presupposes and produces personalities eager to operate under relentless pressures to achieve and succeed. It favors strategic forms of individualism such that fear about possible losses in competitiveness is to stimulate individual creativity and productivity. Neoliberalism envisions society as a network of self-reliant nodes tirelessly pursuing their desired forms of connection and perfectly able to refuse unwanted bonds at all times, all the while dismantling traditional networks of care, solidarity, and sociability.

In her recent book, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, political scientist Wendy Brown provides compelling arguments to understand neoliberalism not simply as a recent change in labor practices or investment flows, but as a comprehensive rationality through which people are interpellated as human capital and governance has mutated into a form of management itself. Emphasizing that market rationality has penetrated all areas of life and informs the way we act politically, Brown considers our contemporary moment as one in which the *homo politicus* of ancient philosophy and Enlightenment thinking has been replaced by the figure of the *homo oeconomicus*:

In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*, which itself has a historically specific form. Far from Adam Smith's creature propelled by the natural urge to "truck, barter, and exchange," today's *homo oeconomicus* is 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.  
(10)

Under neoliberalism, not only do all areas of life become marketized, but “neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*” (31). Individuals have become entrepreneurs of the self, always seeking to boost their worth as investments far beyond their actions on the market. Neoliberalism thus implies an always forward-looking gaze into the future at the expense of the present, a drive to boost one’s value now for the promise of investment in the future. Neoliberalism’s rationality thus shapes individuals into human capital that must compete for value, thereby also precluding the ability to participate in the *demos*, that is, to organize and express shared political concerns. And when social solidarity does manifest itself—as in the Occupy movement—it is ineffective against a government that functions as a firm rather than a representation of the people.

This volume raises several questions: How do German literature, film, and art—so long in relative denial about the full force of neoliberal rationality, or too distracted by other developments to recognize it—thematize neoliberalism’s praise of goal-oriented individuality and entrepreneurial competitiveness today? How does it represent the disintegration of the *demos* in the name of individual gain, the transformation of the human into human capital, and the concomitant undermining of democratic self-rule in the wake of utter privatization and deregulation? To what extent does it encounter neoliberalism’s emphasis on perpetual self-management as a threat to the future of art itself, to the playfulness of mimetic experience as well as to the autonomous exploration of alternate social, political, and sensory worlds?

To speak of neoliberalism and the arts today is not only to speak about how social and economic pressure recalibrate the general conditions of aesthetic production, circulation, and reception, and how writers, filmmakers, artists, and musicians represent these pressures—the transformation of labor, the disintegration of social networks, the commodification of all aspects of public and private life—in their respective works. It is also to speak about how the technological affordances and economic exigencies of contemporary self-management affect the mediums of literature and art itself, i.e., how the economic rationality of the present permeates the way in which different literary platforms and (moving) image technology today manage the perhaps rarest commodity of contemporary culture, the readers’ and viewers’ attention. It is not difficult to see that today’s culture of ubiquitous computing and ceaseless electronic networking echoes and energizes some of the keywords associated with contemporary

neoliberalism. The rise of the digital is often celebrated as an advent of unprecedented freedom, mobility, self-determination, and autonomy. Hand-held devices allow users to navigate unknown spaces and connect with other users at all times; desktop screens invite viewers to travel to distant spaces and times; existing interfaces open ever newer windows onto the world and move merchandise efficiently across the globe; social media enable us to meet friends and families at our own pace and shut down unwanted communications. Digital devices seduce users with the promise of instant communication, amusement, and distraction, while also keeping workers plugged in well beyond conventional work hours and thus soliciting free labor. Like the entrepreneurs of neoliberal markets, the self-proclaimed addicts of computational culture are always on. They approach time as if it knew of no identifiable demarcations and transitions, breaks and repetitions, retardations and accelerations, periods of absent-mindedness and pleasurable zones of non-intentionality. Returning to the questions for this volume, how do German authors, filmmakers, and artists respond to the economy of attention associated with the rise of digital culture and how it may reinforce the neoliberal disintegration of the *demos*? How does their work, by investigating and putting to work the specificities of their respective mediums, make us think about the experience of time, the speed of communication, and the pressures of compulsive connectivity today? How do they use the contemporary mode of ceaselessly being “on” as a space to insist on the categorical possibility of unscripted experience, of imaginative counter-narratives, of critical pause and non-intentional wonder?

Though certainly not without its conceptual problems and polemical shortcuts, Jonathan Crary’s recent book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* serves as a critical point of departure for this special issue. In Crary’s scathing perspective, today’s regime of 24/7

presents the delusion of a time without waiting, of an on-demand instantaneity, of having and getting insulated from the presence of others. The responsibility for other people that proximity entails can now easily be bypassed by the electronic management of one’s daily routines and contacts. Perhaps more importantly, 24/7 has produced an atrophy of the individual patience and deference that are essential to any form of direct democracy: the patience to listen to others, to wait one’s turn to speak. (29)

In Crary’s understanding, new media culture as we know it today exploits and disciplines attention to foster a logic of ongoing competitiveness and strategic gain; to redefine the consumption of mediated images for the sake of maximizing self-regulation; and to blur any meaningful difference between work and non-

work, private and public spaces, the distant and the near. Under the global rule of always-being-on, time has no time at all. It obliterates the possibility of vacant or unstructured periods, of absent-mindedness or reverie, all in the name of efficiency and self-directed functionality, of connecting to and networking with other places at all possible times. Any act of viewing today, Crary argues,

is layered with the option of simultaneous and interruptive actions, choices, and feedback. The idea of long blocks of time spent exclusively as a spectator is outmoded. This time is far too valuable not to be leveraged with plural sources of solicitation and choices that maximize possibilities of monetization and that allow the continuous accumulation of information about the user. (53)

The more we use advanced media today to connect to the world at all times, the more isolated we become, locked into the confines of highly instrumentalist and reified forms of subjectivity. Coupling its heroization of strategic agency to the abolishing of sleep, 24/7 does away with what defines the ethical substructure of nightly slumber, namely our trust that no one will harm us during periods of diminished receptivity to the world. Sleep's increasing disappearance in a culture of ceaseless connectivity erodes what is at the heart of the ethical and the political—the promise of caring for others and being cared for by others in states of vulnerability. 24/7's vision of ceaseless self-management is the nightmare of what may define us as ethical beings. Always on and in anticipation of stimuli, we no longer remain open to the voices of the other just as we no longer appear able to face the unexpected, the wondrous, the magic, poetic, and beautiful, i.e., that which ruptures or restitches the very fabric of time.

Various contributions to this special issue on neoliberalism's orders of time leave little doubt that Crary's rather apocalyptic vision fails to identify operative points of resistance to the vanishing of temporal experience under the regime of 24/7. Similar to how Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer located fundamental pathologies of twentieth-century modernity already at the origins of Western civilization, thus leaving little room for the specificities of historical agency, so does Crary's Foucauldian matrix know neither of historical alternatives to nor forces that may critically rub against the rule of late capitalism's time regime. That is, Crary does not account for limitations to capitalism's ability to control and capitalize on people's diverse experiences of time—time of work and leisure, of production and consumption, of love and death. One of the aims of this special issue of *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature*, though inspired by the critical intervention of Crary, is to create a more nuanced picture. The volume features scholarly work on various literary texts, performances, films, time-based art works, and theoretical

interventions that explore the nexus between neoliberalism, new media culture, and the landscapes of temporal experience in further detail. More specifically, while focusing on very different materials and putting to work various theoretical frameworks indeed, the contributors to this volume all seek to investigate the question of whether the regime of 24/7 self-regulation, disrupted attentiveness, and strategic individualism is as hostile to aesthetic work and structures of temporal experience as Crary argues; whether literature and art today may not be able to find new ways of beating the timeless time of neoliberalism and computational culture at their own game; and whether we, in our hope to identify forces of difference and disruption, can do more than simply embrace or nourish the power of slumber.

As Brown and others have argued, the reach of contemporary neoliberalism is by no means as even, universal, and homogeneous as its proponents and many of its most polemical critics argue. It lacks a certain sense of self-identity, has shown considerable spatial and temporal variability, and responds variably to different social, political, and institutional traditions: “Alertness to neoliberalism’s inconstancy and plasticity cautions against identifying its current iteration as its essential and global truth and again making the story I am telling a teleological one, a dark chapter in a steady march toward end times” (Brown 21). The contributions gathered in this volume are driven by a similar ethos: a desire to face neoliberalism’s attack on the fabrics of temporal experience head-on, yet without fatalistically declaring an immanent end of time. Each of the essays gathered here pushes back at the notion that neoliberalism is an all-consuming force by examining cultural productions that aesthetically probe the limitations and weak spots of neoliberalism. Though written from different vantage points, each essay seeks out the spaces within and outside of neoliberalism in which resistance is possible, situating neoliberalism and its economy of ceaseless self-management and on-ness historically, and precisely in so doing, avoiding the apocalyptic undertones of much of contemporary criticism.

Our special issue opens with Hester Baer, Carrie Smith-Prei, and Maria Stehle’s investigation of feminist interventions in the neoliberal cycle of labor and consumption in their article titled “Digital Feminisms and the Impasse: Time, Disappearance, and Delay in Neoliberalism.” In their contribution, Baer, Smith-Prei, and Stehle argue that feminism has reached an impasse in neoliberalism, a system that appropriates and commercializes everything, including gestures of resistance. However, as the authors demonstrate, installation and performance art by Noah Sow, Chicks on Speed, and Hito Steyerl have made use of the impasse to render certain traps of neoliberalism visible. Baer, Smith-Prei, and Stehle argue that these artists create fleeting moments of solidarity, action, and collaboration that play on neoliberal hypervisibility and disappearance and employ delay as a means of resisting neoliberalism’s control over time, which relies on

instantaneous access via the digital. In doing so, these artists reconceptualize utopian moments for the future or the present. Furthermore, Baer, Smith-Prei, and Stehle highlight their collaborative work as feminist scholars in their text via thought bubbles that the reader can scroll over. These thought bubbles reveal scholarship to be a process that is dialogical, that takes place within and outside the workplace and on the go, and amongst more quotidian conversations about the home and personal life. In providing these thought bubbles, Baer, Smith-Prei, and Stehle make use of the digital format of *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature*, and in the spirit of the art they are discussing, reveal certain aspects of intellectual labor that are normally kept unseen.

Lilla Balint's article "Sickness unto Death in the Age of 24/7: Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Arbeit und Struktur*" similarly investigates the digital as one of the central sites of neoliberalism's regime of 24/7. In examining Herrndorf's final work, in which the German author chronicles his day-to-day experiences living with terminal brain cancer, Balint identifies illness as something that illuminates 24/7's demand to be always "on" and poses the question: how does one die in the digital age? Investigating questions of genre in Herrndorf's final work—which began as a restricted-access website for relatives and close friends and then developed into a public blog before being published posthumously in print—Balint draws out questions regarding communication, the integrity of human life, individualism, and autonomy. Balint demonstrates that for Herrndorf, blogging became more than just digital self-management, as per the mandates of 24/7, but a means of maintaining linguistic integrity until his suicide. What is more, Herrndorf's work presents a counterexample to the isolated individual laborer that 24/7 supposes, as Herrndorf's decline prompted the editing of his work by friends in a show of solidarity to preserve his dignity and the dignity of the literary work.

In her article, "Corrupting Capitalism: Michael Ende's *Momo* and 'Cathedral Station,'" Heike Polster examines two literary texts by German author Michael Ende from 1973 and 1983, respectively, both of which render time and other abstract forces of capitalism visible in frighteningly cartoonish narratives ostensibly intended for children. In Polster's reading, *Momo* proposes a Marxist redistribution of time-wealth as a means for restarting the economy in a socially fair way that no longer makes labor the center of life, whereas "Cathedral Station" conceives of money as a religion that traps its followers. In this latter narrative, time is not something that can be recovered and redistributed, but only something that ticks down to society's impending failure. Exploring the representation of time in these two literary texts together, Polster draws on Nicole Shippen to argue that leisure is political and a possible site of resistance.

Sabine von Dirke's contribution, "Time's Deadly Arrow: Time and Temporality in Narratives of Immaterial Labor," examines the relationship between immaterial labor, the rise of digital culture, and capitalist time regimes as

presented in three works of German literature: W. E. Richartz's novel *Büroroman* ('Office Novel,' 1976), Wilhelm Genazino's *Abschaffel*-trilogy (1977-79), and Rainer Merkel's, *Das Jahr der Wunder* ('The Year of Miracles,' 2001). Von Dirke looks to these examples from German literature to argue against an implicit nostalgia for the more "socially responsible" state-regulated capitalism following the Second World War that she sees being described in sociological accounts of neoliberalism. She points to a number of different capitalist time regimes represented in these novels in the form of office clocks, punch clocks, flextime regimes, and contract-based work, all of which regulate (often banal) labor that leads to the eventual death or dissatisfying lives of characters. Arguing against Richard Sennett's assertion that non-linear career trajectories in the era of neoliberalism rob workers of the ability to think of their lives as stages, and thereby break the "arrow of time," von Dirke demonstrates through her analysis of these novels that capitalist time regimes have changed but are not new. Freedom from capitalism's time regime requires not reforming capitalism, but rethinking a social order that frees capital from labor. While technology may be exacerbating capitalism's hold on our time, it might be the tool that can free us.

In their contribution, "Biopolitical Education: *The Edukators* and the Politics of the Immanent Outside," Marco Abel and Roland Végső begin with the question: what is cinema in the age of biopower? If biopower, and its economic manifestation as neoliberalism, is power that is no longer consolidated, but dispersed at the micro-level such that it is rendered invisible (exemplified by the ubiquity of cell phones and thus also surveillance), then how can we understand cinema as part of the biopolitical system? To get away from a reading of cinema as primarily visual, but rather as affective, Abel and Végső investigate Hans Weingartner's 2004 film *The Edukators*, which many read as harboring nostalgia for, and disappointment with, the political movement of the late 1960s, a time when one could protest the political system from the "outside." Biopower and neoliberalism, Abel and Végső argue, are so totalizing that an outside no longer exists. They argue that on the levels of both content and form, *The Edukators* is cinema that proposes a means of resistance via "the immanentist politics of the radical inside." Just as the characters in the film break into the homes of the wealthy and rearrange their furniture in order to create affective states of fear and confusion, the editing of the film manipulates our expectations of realist cinema, rearranging our sense of time and sequence in order to create similar feelings as viewers.

In the final contribution to this special issue, "Eyes Wide Open: The Look of Obstnacy, the Gaze of the Camera, and the 24/7 Economy in Antja Ehmman and Harun Farocki's *Labour in a Single Shot* (2011-2015)," Richard Langston challenges Jonathan Crary's supposition that 24/7 has alienated individuals via endless work and consumption to the extent that sleep remains the only bastion of

resistance against that cycle. Similar to Abel and Végső, Langston investigates the role of cinema within the logic of neoliberalism, but instead of looking to feature film, he examines the collaborative project of Harun Farocki and Antja Ehmann, *Labour in a Single Shot*, which compiled short videos of amateur filmmakers from around the world showing laborers performing work. Examining the centrality of labor and looking as themes in Farocki's film career, Langston situates *Labour in a Single Shot* as an answer to previous investigations of looking, in which turning the cinematic apparatus in on itself never sufficed to disrupt the power inherent in the cinematic apparatus and in which the image never "looked back." Instead, the act of "looking back" that the laborers engage in in *Labour in a Single Shot* provides a momentary rupture to their work and thus provides evidence of a knowing force of resistance against neoliberalism. He argues that technology brings these workers together in the digital realm, becoming a potential tool for the emergence of a new kind of collective and a reorganization of labor power via the visual.

What is particularly striking about this collection of essays is the pragmatic optimism they reveal. While simultaneously examining neoliberalism as a totalizing force that threatens to limit our modes of resistance by encroaching on our time, our attention, our access to an "outside," and our ability to participate in the *demos*, these contributions all read German literature, film, and digital media for their solutions and find space within the totalizing system to evade and resist. All of these contributions discuss the roles of both labor and time for the actualization of identities and render visible the otherwise less perceptible strictures on both, all the while making visible those impulses to resist that exist in the world. Going beyond a mere discussion of the role of technology in the apparatus of neoliberalism, many of the contributions participate in the reclaiming of technology as a site of resistance, making good use of the digital format for collaborating, embedding links and references to online images, and for making the labor of academic work visible.

New media and networked computing, as the contributions to this special issue indicate, provide critical resources for how neoliberalism shapes the lives, economies, expectations, and communities of the present. And yet, contrary to common belief, computational cultures do not automatically need to result in cultures restricted to mere data collection and informational management, uncritical objectification and neo-positivist affirmation, seamless surveillance and total measurability. Though computers are of course designed to break down the world into quantifiable elements, statistical maps, and algorithmic equations, there is no reason not to embrace computational interfaces as mediums of daring speculation, of conceptual experimentation, of political provocation and probing subjectivity, of exploring what may be unpredictable and may remain fundamentally ambiguous. "On 24/7: Neoliberalism and the Undoing of Time" is

driven by the belief that not all cows in the night of neoliberal media culture are of the color black. The essays gathered here identify critical points and spaces of resistance against how neoliberal media culture today impels its users to manage their time. Just as importantly, various contributions to this special issue of *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* make active use of the journal's online format to move scholarly reflection into a new space of communication and foreground the very process of academic labor and collaboration. Though few cultural arenas have more willingly ceded to the new regimes of electronic self-management and self-metrification, and an attentional economy of always being on, as the academy itself, the essays of this special issue serve as a powerful reminder that the 0s and 1s of digital culture by no means disable the possibility to think outside the box, to rub against the orders of the day, and—in Johanna Drucker's words—embrace contemporary media culture's bugs, glitches, exceptions, anomalies, and deviations as both political and epistemological counterpoints to the neoliberal credo of total reliability, functionality, self-control, and quantification.

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