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Corrupting Capitalism: Michael Ende's Momo and "Cathedral Station"

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Corrupting Capitalism: Michael Ende's Momo and "Cathedral Station"

Abstract

Michael Ende, the well-known author of *The Neverending Story*, foresaw dramatic changes in the fabric of society resulting from a turn toward neoliberal policies. One such far-reaching and dangerous change has to do with a diminishing of temporal autonomy, the ability to freely determine the use and meaning of our time. This article explores how neoliberalism is shaping our concept of time and our experience of it. In an effort to demonstrate the process and the line of reasoning behind the monetization of time, and to connect time to more qualitative considerations of the human condition, I shall demonstrate how Ende conceptualizes time as an integral part of the accumulation process of capitalism. I also discuss a fairly cryptic short story, "Cathedral Station," that envisions "the mystery of money." Utilizing Walter Benjamin's critique issued in his 1921 fragment "Capitalism as Religion," I outline Ende's dystopian vision of the uncontested, unquestioned reign of capitalism as a religious cult. Read together, the novel and the short story offer a way of contrasting two extreme byproducts of capitalism's colonization of time, namely what I would call an "ideology of work" and an "ideology of growth." The first of these is a result of capitalism's commodification of time according to liberal ideals such as choice, freedom, and self-interest. The second is a decidedly neoliberal phenomenon in that the "financialization of everything," to use David Harvey's phrase, results in the ever-present expectation of unlimited, exponential growth. By drawing out these two interconnected ideologies through close readings, the subtle processes of capitalism's colonization of time are revealed.

Keywords

neoliberalism, capitalism, Michael Ende, time, ideology, work

Corrupting Capitalism: Michael Ende's *Momo* and "Cathedral Station"

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During the spring semester of 2015, the University of Memphis—my employer—changed its motto from “*Dreamers. Thinkers. Doers*” to “*Driven by Doing*.” I was troubled by the dropping of “dreamers” and “thinkers” from the school motto since, to my mind, this change portends an alarming development in higher education and academic culture in general, namely, that there is little time left for the careful cultivation of the imagination and the intellect. “Driven by Doing” sounds almost impatient in its focus on action, suggesting as it does speed and energy, attributes that are sought within a fast-paced global culture. The university administration is doubtless reacting to the overall financial and cultural climate by rebranding itself, thereby—perhaps unwittingly—unveiling itself as a site for neoliberalism’s embrace of the market as an ethics, as universal determinant of life and human activity (Nilges 362). *Dreaming* and *thinking*, it would appear, are becoming luxuries for our undergraduate students, most of whom work nearly full-time in addition to pursuing their studies. Having to think about their college time in terms of money—as time spent accruing crippling student debt and not generating enough income, now or later, to significantly offset it—is a perfect example of how neoliberalism is now shaping our concept of time and our experience of it, for the logic and system of neoliberal capitalism relies on the commodification of time: “time is money” has become a reality that severely limits the awareness that there exists a choice between the two.

German writer Michael Ende, the well-known author of *Die unendliche Geschichte* (*The Neverending Story*), foresaw dramatic changes in the fabric of society resulting from a turn toward neoliberal policies. One such far-reaching and dangerous change has to do with a diminishing of temporal autonomy, the ability to freely determine the use and meaning of our time. In an interview from 1993, he predicted that the world was headed toward either an economic or an ecological catastrophe, that we are, in fact, waging war against our children (*Lebensformen. 40 Jahre Momo*). His definition of “war” remained fairly abstract, as it is waged not over territory, but rather over time: Ende understood it as the gradual process of the destruction of nature and the diminishing perspectives of our children’s future. As I aim to show in the following essay, temporal autonomy—for ourselves and our children—was one of Ende’s primary concerns. Furthermore, in an effort to demonstrate the process and the line of reasoning behind the monetization of time, and to connect time to more qualitative considerations of the human condition, I shall demonstrate how Ende conceptualizes time as an integral part of the accumulation process of capitalism.

Although Michael Ende always insisted that he did not write for children, his books—especially *Momo* (1973)—are marketed primarily as fairy-tale novels and fantasy fiction to a younger audience. The branding of his work, to my mind, explains why it has received so little consideration for its literary accomplishments. Only recently has *Momo* generated the kind of critical attention it deserves for its treatment of economics, a topic that Ende discussed in many essays and interviews during his life. He published *Momo* at the beginning of the 1970s, a period known for “stagflation,” when the deregulation of global financial markets was first implemented. Historically, this puts *Momo* smack at the transition from industrial capitalism toward finance capitalism. Although Ende never considered himself a Marxist, the fight against capitalism’s infringement on time puts him solidly in the territory of the Marxist critical tradition, one which reaches back to Aristotle for its understanding of the “emancipatory potential of leisure,” and which Nichole Shippen has called the insistence on discretionary time and temporal autonomy for the realization of freedom (171). My critical approach to Ende’s work is, therefore, based on Shippen’s claim that the logic and system of capitalism fundamentally rely on “the domination over the control, meaning, use, and allocation of time” (172).

In order to draw out the principles on which capitalism’s “colonization” of time depends, I will focus on how Ende treats the two “mysteries,” as he called them: the “mystery of time” and the “mystery of money.” In the main section of this essay, I shall focus on the mystery of time and its relationship to capitalism in *Momo*. Then I shall illuminate a fairly cryptic short story, “Die Bahnhofskathedrale” ‘Cathedral Station’ that envisions the mystery of money. Utilizing Walter Benjamin’s critique issued in his 1921 fragment “Capitalism as Religion,” I outline Ende’s dystopian vision of the uncontested, unquestioned reign of capitalism as a religious cult. Read together, the novel and the short story offer a way of contrasting two extreme byproducts of capitalism’s colonization of time, namely what I would call an ideology of work and an ideology of growth. The first of these is a result of capitalism’s commodification of time according to liberal ideals such as choice, freedom, and self-interest. The second is a decidedly neoliberal phenomenon in that the “financialization of everything,” to use David Harvey’s phrase, results in the ever present expectation of unlimited, exponential growth (33). I hope that by drawing out these two interconnected ideologies through close readings, I may reveal the subtle processes of capitalism’s colonization of time. At heart, *Momo* is a story about how a financial system built on the dynamics of exponential growth will ultimately end up robbing people of happiness. It is the story of liberation from economic exploitation in which Ende envisioned a crisis of finance capitalism and the emancipatory potential of an alternative use of time in simple yet striking images. “Cathedral Station,” on the other hand, is the story of the disastrous end of finance capitalism in the hands of

the neoliberal logic of growth. Read together, the texts provide a critical perspective on capitalism's exploitative practices and their effects on human life.

The Mystery of Time

Momo, a ragamuffin girl, takes up residence in an unnamed city's decrepit amphitheater. The curious townspeople, although themselves poor, give generously to make her comfortable in her new home. They bring her discarded furniture, spend time fixing up a small bedroom for her within the ruins, and share their food with her. Poor and shabby, she has one form of wealth: time. In everything she does, she exudes patience and serenity. She uses her time to listen in a way "dass dummen Leuten plötzlich sehr gescheite Gedanken kamen" (15) 'that made slow-witted people have flashes of inspiration' (11) and that "ratlose oder unentschlossene Leute auf einmal ganz genau wussten, was sie wollten" (16) 'worried and indecisive people knew their own minds from one moment to the next' (11). Children especially delight in her presence, inventing exciting games, their imagination ablaze with adventures.

Momo has two close friends. Contemplative Beppo Roadsweeper, an older man of few words, possesses an understanding of being-in-the-moment that would move any Zen monk to tears. His practice of mindfulness and inner productivity are based on deliberate slowness. The way to finding "flow" is only to think "an den nächsten Schritt ..., an den nächsten Atemzug, an den nächsten Besenstrich. Und immer wieder nur an den nächsten" (37) 'concentrate on the next step, the next breath, the next stroke of the broom, and the next, and the next. Nothing else' (28). Working in this manner allows a person to enjoy her work, he explains, "Das ist wichtig, dann macht man seine Sache gut. Und so soll es sein" (37) 'which is important, because then you make a good job of it. And that's how it ought to be' (28-29). Momo's other close friend, Guido, is the opposite of Beppo. His passion for storytelling bleeds into his work, much to the amazement of tourists and to the amusement of the townspeople. Through his storytelling, Guido embodies the creative potential inherent in a leisurely life.

Momo and her friends live a happy, quiet life in a community where people care for one another.

Enter finance capitalism, in a plume of smoke.

Reminiscent of Wallstreet bankers, the cigar-chomping men in gray, agents of the so-called Timesaving Bank, are the perfect personification of the corporation in late capitalism. Existing solely for and on the profit generated by resources stolen from people who have "bought into" them, these creatures quite literally vanish into thin air if prevented from capitalizing on people's time. Among their first clients is Figaro, a barber who enjoys his work and lives to serve his customers. The men in gray use Figaro's occasional doubt about living a

fulfilled life to sell him a time-saving plan. Echoing his thoughts, an agent tells him that he's wasting his life, "mit Scherengeklapper, Geschwätz und Seifenschaum. Wenn Sie einmal tot sind, wird es sein, als hätte es Sie nie gegeben. Wenn Sie Zeit hätten, das richtige Leben zu führen, dann wären Sie ein ganz anderer Mensch. Alles, was Sie benötigen, ist Zeit. Habe ich recht?" (61) 'cutting hair, lathering faces, and swapping idle chitchat. When you're dead, it'll be as if you'd never existed. If you only had the time to lead the right kind of life, you'd be quite a different person. Time's all you need, right?' (49). The agent uses "simple arithmetic" to prove that a time-saving plan would be in Figaro's best interest. "2,207,520,000" seconds, the numeric sum of his life's time, is the "capital" at his disposal (50). Figaro, who heretofore has "nie gedacht, dass er so reich sei" (61) 'never realized how rich he was' (51), soon watches in horror as the agent subtracts time used for sleep, work, eating, caring for his ailing mother, and keeping a parrot, denominating the latter as a needless extravagance whose demands on his time amount to fifteen minutes a day, or thirteen million seven hundred and ninety-seven thousand seconds in forty-two years (51). The original number is lowered further by "nutzlosen Dingen" (62) 'useless pastimes' (51) such as meeting with friends, visiting a wheelchair-bound acquaintance, or the time spent "jeden Abend vor dem Schlafengehen eine Viertelstunde am Fenster zu sitzen und über den vergangenen Tag nachzudenken" (63) 'sitting by the window for a quarter of an hour every night, musing on the day's events' (52). The bottom line is that Figaro has "wasted" more than half of his original "capital." Shocked, he accepts the agent's advice to start saving time. In this calculation, the emphasis is on the accumulation of capital, i.e. time. What remains unidentified is what this capital will be used for, meaning there is no definition of "the right kind of life" that Figaro seems to crave. The men in gray are capitalizing on the general and all-too-human feeling of discontent, using it to their economic advantage. The agent puts Figaro "on the clock" of industrial time. Later, we see him in his new life: a hurried, unhappy cog, who, by saving time, has given up on what had previously made his life meaningful—human relationships, leisure, and beauty.

The crucial step in a capitalist colonization of time is that it is now part of the rationalization process, and since the invention of quantitative units of time, it has been possible to measure it using a "simple arithmetic" employed by the time-saving agent. Within an industrialist society, Benjamin Franklin's formula "time is money" encapsulates the principle that time can be transformed into a commodity to be sold to employers. Only, in Ende's vision, time remains time, even as it is being used as a form of currency. Since work time is now part of the production cost for the owner of the means of production, it is treated as a resource that can be traded within a marketplace. As one of the Timesavings bankers observes, "ihr wisst es nicht, was das ist, eure Zeit!" (97) 'human beings

have no conception of the value of their time' (81), in contrast to corporations. In *Momo*, this process is depicted not as making use of time, but as exploitation. It is a "mühseliges Geschäft" (97) 'wearisome business' (81), the banker states, "den Menschen ihre Lebenszeit stunden-, minuten- und sekundenweise abzuzapfen ... denn alle Zeit, die sie einsparen, ist für sie verloren... Wir reißen sie an uns... wir speichern sie auf... wir brauchen sie... uns hungert danach Aber wir, wir wissen es und saugen euch aus bis auf die Knochen ... wir brauchen mehr ... immer mehr" (97) 'bleeding people of their time by the hour, minute, and second. All the time they save, they lose to us. We drain it off, we hoard it, we thirst for it. . . . We suck them dry, and we need more and more time every day' (81). Time is now a scarce resource that is thoroughly imbued with the vocabulary of capitalism. It becomes a part of supply and demand; it can be spent, saved, and wasted, not only for the seller (worker), but also for the buyer (employer).

The agent derives the scarcity of Figaro's time by subtracting life already lived from the equation, as well as erroneous expenditures of activities unrelated to time. Now time is defined only in its relation to the capitalist system as work time and time off. The logical conclusion for the accumulation of capital through work is consequently the minimization of time off. In André Gorz's view, "industrial society views itself as a 'society of workers'" (13). Work, in the form in which we recognize and perform it, and to which we give such a central place in the life of the individual person and society as a whole, "was invented, then subsequently generalized only with the coming of industrialism." Consequently, work is seen as "an activity in the public sphere, demanded, defined and recognized as useful by other people" (13). Within its status as an ideology, we can identify two constitutive aspects. First, work is portrayed as a necessity for the individual person. To survive in a capitalist society, people have to sell their time in order to earn a living. Second, work is seen as the only way to gain success in life. One of the agents sums up the supposed logic behind the ideology: "Wer es weiter bringt, wer mehr wird und mehr hat als die anderen, dem fällt alles übrige ganz von selbst zu: Freundschaft, Liebe, Ehre, und so weiter" (*Momo* 94) 'climb the ladder of success, amount to something, own things, ... everything else comes automatically: friendship, love, respect, *et cetera*' (79).

The relationship between capital and time is, I believe, fairly fluid. Every period since the early industrial revolution has shaped this relationship according to its tenets. There is consequently a set of aspects that are particular to industrial capitalism based on liberal and neoliberal ideals. Liberalism assumes that individuals make rational decisions regarding how to allocate their time and privileges the individual and his/her choice, often disavowing the economic, political, and social constraints that inform and shape choice. How one chooses to spend one's time is presented as a personal, individual matter, firmly rooted outside the political-economic discourse. "The experience of not having enough

time,” Shippen argues, is a “historically specific condition of late capitalism that is both created and simultaneously ‘solved’ by capitalism through time-management schemes, labor-or time-saving techniques, and the commodification of services” that were once provided in the household (22-23). For example, in the US, managing the demands of one’s own life and working for compensation is currently called finding a “work-life balance.” Filed solidly as a personal problem, any difficulty due to time constraints must stem from the individual’s inability to budget her time, and thus constitutes an individual plight rather than a political or economic issue. The underlying structural issues as to why we need to manage or save time, Shippen explains further, “are not part of the public conversations around the public policy issue of time” as they pertain to parental or family leave, paid sick leave, vacation time, or retirement, to name just a few of the more pressing issues (23). She concludes that time has become de-politicized as a result of the colonization of time by capital that determines both the individual as well as the collective experience of time itself (xiii). This happens to such an extreme that time constraints are experienced as a normal and inevitable part of life instead of a political issue, that is, a situation that can be questioned, challenged, and—it is to be hoped—transformed.

Ende shows us how capitalism invades the use, meaning, and allocation of time. The gray men’s “time-accountancy” (to use a term coined by Jay Griffiths), makes the perceived lack of time a matter of Figaro’s personal choice and responsibility. He, too, is made to choose between “useless pastimes” and saving up capital, that is, time. But how? The agent has a plan for him:

Sie müssen zum Beispiel einfach schneller arbeiten und alles Überflüssige weglassen. Statt einer halben Stunde widmen Sie sich einem Kunden nur noch eine Viertelstunde. Sie vermeiden zeitraubende Unterhaltungen. Sie verkürzen die Stunde bei ihrer alten Mutter auf eine halbe. Am besten geben Sie sie überhaupt in ein gutes, billiges Altersheim, wo für sie gesorgt wird, dann haben Sie bereits eine ganze Stunde täglich gewonnen. Schaffen Sie den unnützen Wellensittich ab! Besuchen Sie Fräulein Daria nur noch alle vierzehn Tage einmal, wenn es überhaupt sein muss. Lassen Sie die Viertelstunde Tagesrückschau ausfallen und vor allem, vertun Sie Ihre kostbare Zeit nicht mehr so oft mit Singen, Lesen oder gar mit Ihren sogenannten Freunden. Ich empfehle Ihnen übrigens ganz nebenbei, eine grosse, gutgehende Uhr in Ihren Laden zu hängen, damit Sie die Arbeit Ihres Lehrjungen genau kontrollieren können. (67)

Work faster, for instance, and stick to essentials. Spend only fifteen minutes on each customer instead of the usual half hour, and avoid time-wasting conversations. Reduce the hour you spend with your mother by

half. Better still, put her in a nice, cheap old folks' home, where someone else can look after her—that'll save you a whole hour a day. Get rid of that useless parrot. See Miss Daria once every two weeks, if at all. Give up your fifteen-minute review of the day's events. Above all, don't squander so much of your precious time on singing, reading, and hobnobbing with your so-called friends. Incidentally, I'd also advise you to hang a really accurate clock on the wall so you can time your apprentice to the nearest minute. (55)

Work becomes the dominant factor in life, and time itself is defined only by its relationship to it. In individualistic cultures, Linda Goodhew and David Loy observe, achievement is valued higher than affinity with people (104). Figaro's capitalist time-saving endeavors will require him to abandon previously cherished social commitments: visits to a disabled friend, hobbies, in essence all leisure activities as well as his habit of "squandering" time by contemplating his life. He submits himself, and his subordinates, to measurable, quantifiable clock-time. But to what end? The agent already predicts that with all this time-saving, Figaro won't have any left over in the short term, but after years of accumulation, his "capital" will have increased by an exponential factor. The agent remains vague about the ultimate benefits for the timesaver, and for good reason. We know, all too well, that you cannot cash in on the time you save, for it is not capital, it cannot accumulate, it cannot be saved up. It can only be repurposed.

The effect of saving time on society is oppressive. The men in gray notice Momo's potential to disrupt their plan of a capitalist takeover as the people around her are "infected" by her calmness and patience, an infection which slows them down, and which also enables them to see the appeal of a completely different experience of time. In an effort to realize their plans without her interference, the men in gray try to bribe her with consumer goods—a speaking doll, "Lola," that requests more "things," and that unwittingly teaches Momo a new sensation: boredom. The antidote to boredom, an agent of the Timesavings Bank explains, is consistent consumption. "Man muss nur immer mehr und mehr haben, dann langweilt man sich niemals. Aber vielleicht denkst du, dass die vollkommene Bibigirl eines Tages alles haben wird und dass es dann eben doch wieder langweilig werden könnte. Nein, meine Kleine, keine Sorge! Da haben wir nämlich einen passenden Gefährten für Bibigirl!" (92) 'As long as you go on getting more and more things, you'll never grow bored. I know what you're going to say: Sooner or later, Lola will have everything, and then I'll be bored again. Well, there's no fear of that. Here we have the perfect boyfriend for Lola' (77). Boredom, this passage suggests, is a phenomenon that is only partially a temporal experience. The doll fails to keep Momo's attention. Unlike her friends, it fails to participate in creating and enacting a story—such as an imagined expedition at

sea that they think up together—that can lead to a shared experience. Boredom replaces imaginative play, which finds its stimulation in narrative and outside the material object, with a demand for the novelty of consumer items. When the novelty wears off, the market supplies a fresh stimulus, ceaselessly recreating its own cycle of consumption and production: the perceived need for the object and the need for labor to pay for it.

When the lure of continuous consumption fails to persuade Momo, the agent attempts to guilt her into joining their cause, questioning,

was haben deine Freunde eigentlich davon, dass es dich gibt? Nützt es ihnen irgend etwas? Nein. Hilft es ihnen, voranzukommen, mehr zu verdienen, etwas aus ihrem Leben zu machen? Gewiss nicht. Unterstützt du sie in ihrem Bestreben, Zeit zu sparen? Im Gegenteil. Du hältst sie von allem ab, du bist ein Klotz an ihrem Bein, du ruinierst ihr Vorwärtskommen! Vielleicht ist es dir bisher noch nicht bewusst geworden, Momo, - jedenfalls schadest du deinen Freunden einfach dadurch, dass du da bist. Ja, du bist in Wirklichkeit, ohne es zu wollen, ihr Feind! Und das nennst du also jemand liebhaben? (70)

how much your friends really gain from the fact of your existence. Are you any practical use to them? No. Do you help them to get on in the world, make more money, make something of their lives? No again. Do you assist them in their efforts to save time? On the contrary, you distract them—you're a millstone around their necks and an obstacle to their progress. You may not realize it, Momo, but you harm your friends by simply being here. Without meaning to be, you're really their enemy. Is that what you call love? (79)

As their attempts at recruiting Momo fail, the men in gray plot to turn all of her friends into time-savers until she must join them out of loneliness. While she visits Professor Hora, the keeper of time, and learns about the origin of human time, the men in gray have turned the city into an ultra-modern urban center.¹ The timesavers of this new economy have “mehr Geld und konnten auch mehr ausgehen. Aber sie hatten missmutige, müde oder verbitterte Gesichter und unfreundliche Augen” (70) ‘more money and had more to spend, but they looked tired, disgruntled, and sour, and there was an unfriendly light in their eyes’ (59). Capitalism, unrestrained and unrestricted, has poisoned every aspect of life in the unnamed city of Momo’s world. It has defined and structured the general meaning and experience of time.

The most striking effect of capitalism’s destructive attack on every aspect of life within the extreme scenario of *Momo* is, however, on children. British

writer Jay Griffiths (herself a great fan of *Momo*) devotes her delightful book, *A Sideways Look at Time*, to alternative experiences of time. Adults, she argues, “generally have learned clock-time. Children live in the heart of the ocean of time itself, in an everlasting now” (27), and during socialization, have to learn a “hierarchy of time;” for example, “who they must wait for and who they cannot interrupt” (205). They are taught to “fit into adult time” (206), a process which, I argue, is taken to extremes in *Momo*. The adult timesavers rally to have the authorities legislate against children at play, eliminating much of the temporal autonomy necessary for sound human development. Citing the threat of societal discord, they claim that uncontrolled children “verwahrlosen moralisch und werden zu Verbrechern. Die Stadtverwaltung muss dafür sorgen, dass alle diese Kinder erfasst werden. Man muss Anstalten schaffen, wo sie zu nützlichen und leistungsfähigen Mitgliedern der Gesellschaft erzogen werden” (*Momo* 186) ‘become morally depraved and take to crime. The authorities must take steps to round them up. They must build centers where the youngsters can be molded into useful and efficient members of society’ (156). Kids are considered “Menschenmaterial der Zukunft” (186), the raw material of the future, a term Ende once described as bad words, akin in offensiveness to the word “Stundenlohn (als ob man Lebenszeit verkaufen könnte!) (Ende, *Zettelkasten* 203) ‘hourly wage—as though you could sell the time of your life.’² Children’s time is seen as a total conceptual threat to the capitalist economy, for “childhood is fundamentally in opposition to the schedulization, punctuality and uniformity of factory-time” (Griffiths 203). Placed in centers called “child depots,” they must learn “useful” things for the future. One of Momo’s friends gives a shocking example: “Heute spielen wir Lochkarten” (*Momo* 216) ‘Today we’re playing data retrieval’ (183). Fun is no longer in play, and play is no longer fun. All has become work.

Realizing Momo’s potential threat to their coercive system—she is a child, after all, and one whose leisurely zest for life is infectious—and unable to convert her through the lure of consumption, the men in gray change strategy. They devise a way to let her lead them to Professor Hora and, in this move, to unlimited access to and control over time. However, Momo, the figure whom they had regarded as their bailout program, ends up destroying them and the Timesavings Bank. To save her friends, Momo steals time back from the men in gray through interventionist market control. She is aided by Professor Hora, who brings time to a standstill, thus destroying the supply of hour lilies which the men in gray smoke in cigars—their only sustenance. Fearful that their stockpiles will not last, the men start economizing themselves to death. Momo then frees all the stockpiled hour lilies, restoring the stolen time to its rightful owners and destroying the capitalist overlords. The final words of the last dying man in gray are very telling indeed: “‘Es ist gut,’ murmelte er, ‘es ist gut -, dass nun-alles-vorbei-ist---’” (264) ‘I’m

glad . . . it's all . . . over . . . ' (222), he exhales, at last revealing that they had known all along that their actions have been unethical.

In *Momo*, Ende resolves the threat of capitalism's coercive influence on society by suggesting an economic solution, albeit one in the guise of fairy-tale magic. Within the logic of this novel, Ende finds a way to depict the process of time/capital accumulation that, as Shippen explains, "dispossesses people of control over the use and meaning of their time to the political and economic advantage of capital" (2). The men in gray stockpile people's time. They alone have found a way to accumulate the capital that is time by freezing the stolen flowers. By re-releasing this capital to people, Momo liquidates the frozen, dormant money reserves so that people may once again control their time, and by extension, its meaning, use, and allocation. In the documentary *Lebensformen. 40 Jahre Momo* ('Forms of life. 40 years of *Momo*'), Onken discusses his 1983 correspondence with Ende in which he asked the author for confirmation that *Momo* was indeed based on Silvio Gesell's idea of "aging money."³ It was. "Aging money," also called "free money" (*Freigeld*) is currency that will automatically lose its value over time, money that is part of the natural cycle of life and death: as a means to an end, which is to facilitate the exchange of services and commodities, there is technically no need for it at the end of the transaction. There is thus no incentive to hoard or store it. This is the compromise that *Momo* suggests. By returning money to the natural cycle of life and death—rendered beautifully in the image of the growing and dying "hour lilies"—money will never lose its status as a means to an end, become an end in itself, or accumulate in the hands of someone whose only interest lies in profit for its own sake. Frank Bohner sums this up as the reasonable "Zähmung des Geldes wirtschaftlich und politisch" (41) 'economically and politically reasonable taming of money'⁴ or, put more simply, "Geld, das dient und nicht herrscht" (41) 'money that serves, but does not rule.' In the *Lebensformen* documentary, Ende explains that the principle of "aging money" is pitted against the current financial system in which we create the fairy-tale that matter can increase itself. It troubles him that only corporations that generate growth are considered healthy. Dynamics of exponential growth, like the interest rate system, he claims, have become an ideology that nobody questions. Economic growth, Ende observes, is becoming the only answer, for economists as well as politicians, to any problem which they face. Consequently, growth has become an almost uncontested ideology, even while people are beginning to realize that an economic system based on growth requires the dangerous exploitation of people and natural resources. Within this context, Ende foresees—this was in 1993—that there is now only the choice between an economic collapse or an ecological and societal catastrophe.

This catastrophe was already present in his mind in 1973, with the publication of *Momo*. The short story "Die Bahnhofskathedrale" 'Cathedral

Station,' published in 1983, paints a bleaker picture. It can be read as an alternative outcome to the capitalist takeover delineated in *Momo*. Ende said elsewhere that materialism, which he used synonymously with capitalism in this context, is "eine Weltanschauung, die sich selbst nicht zu Ende gedacht hat" (Beuys 67) 'an idea that has not thought itself through.'⁵ With "Cathedral Station," the author offers a possible outcome to the growth logic inherent in capitalism as it is practiced today.

The Mystery of Money

In his article "Michael Ende, das Mysterium des Geldes und die Finanzkrise" 'Michael Ende, the Mystery of Money, and the Financial Crisis,' Bohner explains that for decades, banks have been suggesting to their clients that "beim Zinsmonopoly jeder gewinnen würde" (40) 'everybody stands to win in the game of 'interest monopoly'.'⁶ Yet, few people ever ask the question: Who actually has to work for the interest profits generated by the continuously growing assets? Whose time will be used? Bohner points out the fallacy inherent in this assumption, contending that "Zinsgewinne seien nur möglich, weil die Zeit für das Kapital arbeite" (40) 'profit from interest is only possible because time is working for capital.' Ultimately, it is people who have to raise—by working—the gigantic interest rate profits of a few of the very wealthy. The idea that time is money, concludes Bohner, "realisiert sich erst durch den Zins" (40) 'only materializes through interest rates.'

"Cathedral Station" is a short story from a collection of fantastical, and often cryptic, stories entitled *Spiegel im Spiegel. Ein Labyrinth. Mirror in the Mirror. A Labyrinth*, a book that is reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges's late work. As he did in *Momo*, Ende intertwines the mystery of time with the mystery of money, only in "Cathedral Station" he presents a different outcome to an economic process built on accumulation. The protagonist is a firefighter who arrives at a train station with a woman whose bag is ticking. "Das ist kein Wecker" (33) 'That's no alarm clock' (33) she responds to the firefighter's question, and we later learn that it is a bomb, albeit one that is not intended for the transit station. The ticking is echoed and intensified by a countdown being broadcast to the masses of "vogelscheuchenartige[n] Figuren" (32) 'famished-looking creatures' (32) crowding the station concourse, where the clock, positioned where one would have expected a rose window, has an illuminated dial but no hands. The station itself resembles a cathedral, but the object of worship is clearly money, as shown by the altar that is in the shape of a "mächtigen Tresors mit fünf Nummernschlössern auf der Tür, die als umgekehrtes Pentagramm angeordnet waren" (33) 'massive safe with five combination locks arranged like the points of an inverted pentagram' (33). Every now and then, the safe door

opens and a batch of banknotes tumbles out. The allusion to the occult is quite clear. In a discussion on culture and politics, Ende called money “das magische Mittel par excellence” (Kreuzer, Ende, Kanitschneider 19) ‘the ultimate magical tool,’⁷ as it enables you to turn everything into everything else. There can indeed be a “schwarze Magie” ‘black magic’ of money, he explains (19). He references Goethe’s *Faust II*, in which money is a “Verlängerung der Alchemie” ‘an extension of alchemy,’ creating value out of nothing, without a real material equivalent—paper money. Like the money that tumbles out of the safe door, paper money is essentially “imaginäre[s] Geld, das auf Grund zukünftiger Leistungen geschaffen wird, die erst erbracht werden” ‘imaginary money based on future work that is yet to be done’ (19).

One of the people prostrating himself in front of the altar then picks up a bundle, “hielt es feierlich mit beiden Händen hoch und zweigte es der Menge. Diese sank auf die Knie, die Orgel brauste gewaltig, und ein tausendstimmiger Chor schrie: ‘Wunder und Geheimnis!’” (“Bahnhofskathedrale” 34) ‘to display it to the crowd, solemnly holding it aloft in both hands, whereupon all present fell to their knees, the organ music rose to a crescendo and innumerable voices chanted, ‘Miracle and mystery most marvellous!’” (“Cathedral Station” 33-34). While the money is distributed to everybody present, the firefighter realizes that “sämtliche Mauern, sämtliche Säulen und Pfeiler, auch der des Torbogens, gegen den er gedrängt stand, aus solchen aufgetürmten Geldscheinbündeln bestanden” (34) ‘every wall, every column and pilaster including those of the arch against which he was pinned, consisted of similar wads of banknotes. The entire building was constructed of paper-money bricks’ (34). Noticing that there are candles perched precariously amid the masses of flammable currency, the fireman realizes that it is bound to end in disaster. But only he seems aware of the risk.

The train station as a cathedral of money serves as a powerful metaphor for our contemporary financial system. As an abstract communal infrastructure, it exists to facilitate the exchange of goods and services. It is indeed a “transit station” of sorts, since its purpose is to re-route funds. This purpose has been distorted in Ende’s story, for no trains are leaving the station, there’s no “trafficking,” and nobody is going anywhere. Instead, the station is selling “Transit Junction Bonds” for free, “eine einmalige Gelegenheit” (35) ‘a unique opportunity’ (35) that the fireman turns down, claiming that he’s “nicht reich genug, um mir etwas leisten zu können, das nichts kostet” (35) ‘too poor to be able to afford something that costs nothing’ (35). The bonds are shares in the “Wunderbare[n] Geldvermehrung” (35) ‘*Miraculous Cash Reproduction Process*’ (35), the salesman explains, which “wird immer weitergehen. Sie hört niemals auf. Und solange sie nicht aufhört, will niemand abreisen. Und solange niemand abreisen will, gehen keine Züge. Alles wird bleiben, wie es ist!” (36) ‘which will go on forever. It never stops. No one’ll leave while it lasts, and if no

one wants to leave there won't be any trains. Everything will stay just the way it is' (35). Here, Ende portrays the assumption that the entire economic system is built on growth, the "Miraculous Cash Reproduction Process," in which everybody, willingly or not, is a participant.

Ende condenses his critique of the financial system into a sermon delivered by the cathedral station's priest: "Mysterium aller Mysterien – und selig ist, wer daran teil hat. Geld ist Wahrheit und die einzige Wahrheit" (41) 'Blessed are they that partake in the mystery of mysteries! Money is truth—the one and only truth' (40). Participating in money-worshipping has become a religious practice. Money has become akin to a divine entity with followers as it is not questioned by its converts, because, after all, "so viele gescheite Leute können sich doch wohl nicht irren" (35) 'All these shrewd investors can't be wrong!' (36). The system's critics are shunned, like the fireman, as "Ungläubige" (42) 'unbelievers' (40). Ende was not the first to notice that money, which is only one manifestation of capital, has followers that are as devoted to it as to any religion. Where Max Weber, for instance, viewed capitalism as a formation conditioned by religion, Walter Benjamin pointed out the essentially religious nature of the capitalist system itself. In a 1921 fragment entitled "Capitalism as Religion," Benjamin observes that capitalism seeks to assuage "the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers" (288). In his mind, capitalism "is a religion of pure cult, without dogma" (289). "Things have meaning only in their relationship to the cult," Benjamin explains, since "capitalism has no specific body of dogma, no theology" (288). Its three decisive traits, according to him, are its cultic structure, its permanence, and its guilt-producing character. I disagree with Benjamin that there is no dogmatic aspect to capitalism. After all, it, too, is an organized collection of beliefs that relate human beings to an order of existence. It, too, is a system of practices and ideas that establishes pervasive and long-lasting motivations in its devotees. As such, it provides a narrative from which people derive ethics, morality, and a preferred lifestyle with many highly organized behaviors that are centered on money as the object of the cult, which is precisely what Benjamin refers to when he posits that capitalism's structure is indeed cultic. As in many other religions, the mundane is transformed into the supernatural. In "Cathedral Station," money has taken the place of God, who has "sich in unsere Hände gegeben und sich zur Ware gemacht, auf dass wir ihn besitzen können und seinen Segen empfangen" ("Bahnhofskathedrale" 41) 'is become a commodity, that we may possess Him and receive His blessing' ("Cathedral Station" 40). Consequently, all utilitarian practices of capitalism, such as capital investment and speculation, stock manipulations, and the buying and selling of commodities, have the ceremonial dynamics of religious practices. In the realm where money is all-powerful, seemingly worldly transactions such as supply and demand have become a

communion. The capitalist system, like any religious cult, appears to work because its devotees seek answers only within the particular worldview's ontology. Its entire narrative bears the aura of fact to its believers. Consequently, all motivations derived from it seem altogether realistic.

The second aspect of the cult-like structure of capitalism is, according to Benjamin, its permanence. Capitalism is "the celebration of a cult *sans rêve et sans merci* [without dream or mercy]. There are no 'weekdays'" (Benjamin 288). In "Cathedral Station," every moment of every character's life resembles a Sunday during holy mass. The constant worship serves the glorification of money that "wird immer weitergehen. Sie hört niemals auf. . . . Alles wird bleiben, wie es ist!" (36) 'will go on forever—it never stops. . . . Everything will stay just the way it is' (35). Benjamin's idea of permanence, as far as capitalism as religion is concerned, depends, I would argue, on the future being absorbed into the present as a supposedly knowable and controllable sphere. The source of all wealth, his preacher explains, "kommt aus dem zukünftigen Profit seiner selbst! Sein eigener zukünftiger Nutzen ist es, den wir jetzt schon genießen! Je mehr da ist, desto größer ist der zukünftige Profit, und je größer der zukünftige Profit, desto mehr ist wiederum jetzt da" (41-42) 'derives from the future return on itself! Its own future profit is what we now enjoy. The greater our present wealth, the greater the future return, and the greater the future return, the greater our present wealth' (41). The all-powerful cash reproduces itself in perpetuity. Like any God, it is its own origin and its own justification.

The third and final religious and cultic aspect of capitalism is its guilt-producing character. Benjamin clearly saw the capitalist religion as the first example of a cult that is not expiatory. There is a "vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief," and the cult's purpose and strategy is "not to atone for this guilt but to make it universal, to hammer it into the conscious mind" (Benjamin 288). Ende picks up on what Benjamin has called the "demonic ambiguity" of the German word "Schuld," which can mean debt or guilt (Benjamin 290). The preacher proclaims, "So sind wir unsere eigenen Gläubiger und unsere eigenen Schuldner in Ewigkeit, und wir vergeben uns unsere Schulden, Amen!" ("Bahnhofskathedrale" 42) 'We are our own creditors and debtors in perpetuity, and we forgive ourselves our debts. Amen!' ("Cathedral Station" 40-41). Ende's answer to Benjamin's puzzlement is universal culpability that also, absurdly, becomes universal innocence through an incredible twist: "Wo alle sich an allen bereichern, da werden am Ende alle reich! Und wo alle auf Kosten aller reich werden, da zahlt keiner die Kosten! Wunder aller Wunder!" (41) 'In a world where all enrich themselves at the expense of others, all become rich and none counts the cost. Ah, miracle of miracles!' (40). Herein lies the crucial point that the author has sought to make visible all along. If wealth is understood only in terms of money, if economic growth is the supposed reason that justifies all

means, we will, as the people in this story, be left with little more than money, which we can neither eat nor live in. Unlike the ending of *Momo*, where a compromise is reached between people's needs and the workings of capitalism, Ende finds no solution to the mystery of money in "Cathedral Station." He captures his scathing critique of capitalism in one small narrative element: at the transit station there is a child's coffin, overflowing with money. It is perhaps the brutal metaphor for an economic system that has reached its ontological and existential limits, one voiced by an agent of the Timesavings Bank in *Momo*: "Menschen ... sind längst überflüssig. Sie haben die Welt soweit gebracht, dass für ihresgleichen kein Platz mehr ist. Wir werden die Welt beherrschen!" (228) 'People? ... *People* have been obsolete for years. They've made the world a place where there's no room left for their own kind. *We* shall rule the world' (192-93). There are no answers or new beginnings when the fireman exits Cathedral station. The loudspeaker finishes the countdown to zero.

So much more than the story ends at that instant. There is no future left; our time is up. Does this ending attest to "the utter exhaustion of our ability to imagine the future as difference," an inability that, according to Mathias Nilges, signals the full subsumption of culture under neoliberalism (369)? In my opinion, Ende very discerningly combines the content and form of "Cathedral Station" to signal, with unmatched urgency, the unsustainability of neoliberal economics. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that he signals the end of the industrialist utopia, which has, as André Gorz outlines in *Critique of Economic Reason*, informed industrialist societies for the last two hundred years and on which our current financial system is built. Gorz uses the term utopia in its contemporary philosophical sense as the "future on which a civilization bases its projects, establishes its ideal goals and builds its hopes" (9). The industrial utopia, he maintains, promised us that the development of the forces of production and the expansion of the economic sphere would "liberate humanity from scarcity, injustice and misery; that these developments would bestow on humanity the sovereign power to dominate Nature, and with this the sovereign power of self-determination" (9). Work, too, plays an important role in the industrialist utopia as a way to give meaning to life, actualize one's identity, and serve society, that it can become "an autopoietic activity in which the incomparably individual fulfilment of each is recognized—as both right and duty—as serving the emancipation of all" (8). Instead, according to Ende, certain systems of thought are simply dying out (Eppler, Ende, Trächl 31). He outlined the need for positive utopias in order to overcome capitalism's disastrous grip on human life, utopias that can overcome the fear of the unknown (19). Moreover, he asks whether it may be a mistake to view the economy only from an economic perspective. To him, it appeared as though the economy has to be understood as a cultural problem (27). Since the economic system has become completely autonomous, it

is impossible to require it to reflect our values (26). In his opinion, the economy should not reign over other aspects of life but only have a provisional, serving function in order to ensure the material conditions of culture (Beuys, Ende 44). A monetary system is necessary for the creation of culture, he explains, because it is only possible to convert physical achievements into intellectual and cultural ones and vice versa where there is an abstract system of commodity exchange (Kreuzer, Ende, Kanitschneider 19). As an example, Ende offers the idea that he cannot give his gardener a copy of *The Neverending Story* for every single day he is working in Ende's garden. "Ich muss ihn bezahlen" (21) 'I need to pay him,' he concludes. Human time is being transformed into a commodity. In and of itself, this process has no element of exploitation. When time is seen only from an economic perspective, however, human existence shifts dangerously towards becoming a cost within a production process. The needs of capitalism and human needs are diametrically opposed, and their persistent conflict is an opportunity for more qualitative understandings of time that resist the dictates of economic rationality to be efficient and productive in the name of profit.

A starting point to counteract capitalism's destructive colonization of time is, as Ende showed in *Momo*, an alternative experience of time in which work is no longer at the center of life. Shippen calls attention to the "regulative ideal of leisure," which links freedom with a particular understanding of non-instrumental time, akin to Kant's idea of "purposeful purposelessness" (173). She views leisure as a good in itself that resists time as it relates to the internalized disciplinary values of economic rationality. Leisure, she concludes, is the antithesis of economic rationality since the essence of leisure is to have an altogether different experience of time (173). To make leisure possible today would mean to curb, restrict, and examine the intrusions of capitalism, and also to cultivate a cultural understanding that only temporal autonomy and leisure time enable many qualitative experiences that capitalism inhibits. When we, as agents of cultural and societal change, demand and allot sustained amounts of time for self-reflection and self-development, then, perhaps, wealth will finally be defined as the quality of our relationships, and leading a rich life may come to mean rich in experiences that foster personal, rather than material, growth. When people are finally able to determine the use of their time, and thereby its meaning, only then can capitalism's coercive grip be loosened and our time is, once again, our own.

Notes

1. This section of the novel (*Momo* 122-40) remains one of the most beautiful renditions of the origin of time in literature. Momo has been led by a tortoise named Cassiopeia to Professor Hora, who is the keeper of time and who lives on

NEVER LANE, in the NOWHERE HOUSE. Professor Hora shows Momo a pond over which an enormous pendulum swings, causing to appear in the water hour lilies, which are a representation of human time, beautiful, precious, and evanescent, dying as the interval passes. In every person's heart, Professor Hora explains, these flowers grow. The men in gray's cigars are made of stolen and dried lily petals, killing human time, and the men in gray themselves will die if they run out of lilies-cum-cigars.

2. Translation is mine.

3. The concept of "aging money" relates to a financial experiment conducted in Wörgl, Austria, at the height of the 1920s/30s economic depression. The town's mayor, Michael Unterguggenberger, convinced the members of the Wörgl Welfare Committee that slow circulation of money was the main cause of the failing economy. Money as a medium of exchange progressively vanishes out of working people's pockets and accumulates in the coffers of the few who collect interest, but do not return it to the market. Instead of the National Bank currency, the shilling, the population of Wörgl was to circulate "compensation certificates" issued by the city council for work rendered as wages, which the public should then accept at full nominal value. These certificates would depreciate 1% of their total value every month. In trying to avoid devaluation, the population spent the certificates right away, thereby boosting the local economy. It worked so well that the Austrian National Bank ordered the Wörgl community to stop, citing currency monopoly. See also: Michael Unterguggenberger: *The End Results of the Woergl Experiment. Annals of Collective Economy*, (= *Anales de la Economia Colectiva und Annalen der Gemeinwirtschaft*), Bd. 10, Nr. 1, 1934, S. 60–63. Silvio Gesell, *Die natürliche Wirtschaftsordnung durch Freiland und Freigeld*, Les Hauts Geneveys: Selbstverlag, 1916.

4. Translation mine.

5. Translation mine.

6. Translation mine.

7. Translation mine.

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