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Time's Deadly Arrow: Time and Temporality in Narratives of Immaterial Labor

Abstract

The article investigates the discourse on time and temporality in non-fictional and fictional accounts of paid, white collar labor, or, in the broader terminology of Maurizio Lazzarato, immaterial labor since the last quarter of the twentieth century. More specifically, it brings the critique of neoliberal capitalism by two influential social philosophers, Richard Sennett and Oskar Negt, in dialogue with fictional narratives of white collar labor: Rainer Merkel's novel, *Das Jahr der Wunder* (The Year of Miracles, 2001), W.E. Richartz's *Büroroman* (Office Novel, 1976) and Wilhelm Genazino's *Abschaffel-trilogy* (1977-1979). Sennett and Negt's non-fictional accounts contrast living and working conditions under the current hyper-flexible, neoliberal market economy to an earlier mode of a socially responsible capitalism. The latter is often nostalgically depicted as a golden age of a state-regulated labor market designed to protect the majority of the working population from exploitation and economic hardship. Yet, narratives on the working world published during the 1970s call into question the assumption that state-regulated work hours offer better conditions for lived time and the constitution of subjecthood.

Keywords

immaterial labor, German fiction, non-fictional accounts, time, temporality

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Since the late 1990s, sleep deprived, hurried, disoriented figures have stumbled across the stage, populated feature films and have been the focus in social science as well journalistic accounts of making a living and a life under the auspices of neoliberalism's "dictatorship of efficiency" (Kurbjuweit). The dire tenor of these narratives highlights the ills of our times such as the erosion of face-to-face communication and increasing psychosomatic problems in the workforce. These maladies are usually attributed to the digitally induced culture of speed and immediacy that has profoundly transformed the working world and altered the experience of time and the conditions for the possibility of self- or subjecthood.¹

The following discussion investigates the discourse on time in non-fictional and fictional accounts of paid, white collar labor, or, in the broader terminology of Maurizio Lazzarato, immaterial labor since the last quarter of the twentieth century. Immaterial labor has become the dominant mode of remunerated work in Germany in the age of globalization, in which many blue collar jobs are lost to countries with lower production costs. This material development explains why most of the current nonfiction narratives condemning the pernicious effects of digital culture focus on this tertiary sector of the economy. In addition, the immaterial labor sector is most affected by recent advances in information communication technologies (ICT) (Tomlinson, Brynjolfsson and McAfee). For all their benefits, these devices are cited as a primary cause for the "Entgrenzung der Arbeit" 'delimitation of work hours,' as a 2010 cover story of *Spiegel* magazine characterizes today's erosion of clearly demarcated work and leisure times.² Most such narratives contrast living and working conditions under the current hyper-flexible, neoliberal market economy to an earlier mode of a socially responsible capitalism. The latter is often nostalgically depicted as a golden age of a state-regulated labor market designed to protect the majority of the working population from exploitation and economic hardship. An exploration of narratives of the working world set in the late 1960s through the 1970s calls into question the assumption that state-regulated work times offer better conditions for lived time and the constitution of subjecthood.

My analysis of exemplary narratives of making a living and life under the sway of neoliberalism begins with nonfictional accounts generated in the social sciences. This is not meant to privilege social science narratives as "truthful" portrayals of neoliberalism's 24/7 time regime for which literary narratives are only of illustrative value. Instead, I consider social science accounts to be

Realfiktionen ‘reality fictions’ in Ulrich Bröckling’s sense (35-38). Inflected by Michel Foucault’s theory of the self, Bröckling situates social science accounts in between mimetic representations of empirically observable reality and fiction. This in-between status holds especially true for those social sciences which aim to explain human action and the constitution of the self within the existing social totality. They construct “actors,” “characters” or “figures” such as the *homo oeconomicus* (the economic subject) or the *homo juridicus* (the legal subject) (Hutter and Teubner) in order to elucidate the interaction of the individual subject and the socio-economic system with simultaneous consideration of social-psychological factors. The category of experience, for instance of collective time regimes relevant for this discussion, represents one such factor which both social science and literary texts explore, albeit with different levels of liberty. The fact that social science and other nonfiction accounts have to comply with protocols of veracity, for example, their need to substantiate their narratives’ claims with evidence drawn from empirically verifiable data, remains a difference. Social science accounts and literature nevertheless inform each other and amount to a discursive formation in their communicative goal of making the current moment legible as it unfolds. The representational strategies, such as the use of narrative and figuration for elaborating the status of the self under current conditions of salaried labor, shape the selection of fictional and non-fictional accounts for this discussion. A critical rather than affirmative perspective on hegemonic neoliberal discourse and practices serves as another selection criterion in addition to such narratives’ circulation in the public sphere.

Richard Sennett’s extensive engagement with neoliberalism represents the most striking example of social science as reality fiction. Sennett’s narrative personifies neoliberalism in the figure of the *flexible Mensch* ‘flexible human being.’ The term appears in the title of the German translation of his 1998 book, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, which resonated widely in the German public sphere and within cultural production.³ The other sociologist and social philosopher with significant public resonance, and relevance for this analysis, is Oskar Negt, whose lifelong interests in capitalism’s working conditions and humanity’s plight within it are set forth in his comprehensive *Arbeit und menschliche Würde* (‘Work and Human Dignity,’ 2001). Both Negt and Sennett share a passionate interest in conditions of heteronomous labor and the possibilities for the formation of subjecthood within capitalism. Both also utilize a broad range of cultural narratives, including literary texts, as sources for understanding human experience instead of relying exclusively on empirical data and abstract theorems. Put differently, these two social theorists draw on the collective knowledge and imagination that have historically accumulated in a broad range of cultural narratives. The use of cultural narratives from the Bible to fairy tales and literature is particularly

pronounced in Negt's *Arbeit und menschliche Würde*, in which he puts forth the concept of "Kulturzeit" 'cultural time' (171) for recuperating the complexity of human time that capitalism constantly aims to reduce to a monolithic time regime of economic efficiency.⁴

Two of the fictional accounts of immaterial labor chosen for this exploration of the discourse on capitalist time regimes were published in the 1970s, the decade that has been identified as the beginning of a globalized, neoliberal modernity (Harvey). They are W. E. Richartz's novel *Büroroman* ('Office Novel,' 1976) and Wilhelm Genazino's engagement with immaterial labor in his *Abschaffel*-trilogy (1977-79).⁵ The third text, Rainer Merkel's, *Das Jahr der Wunder* ('The Year of Miracles,' 2001), was one of the first novels dissecting the "brave new world of work" (Beck) that neoliberalism imposed throughout the 1990s in Germany. These three novels maintain a referential relationship to the material reality their narratives explore. All of them are replete with concrete political and cultural references that situate them historically. Reviews noted these novels' referential impetus along with their basis in the authors' experience in the working world their fictions portray. Hence, these literary texts can be subsumed to the category of reality fiction previously outlined.

My analysis proceeds in the following steps. First, it elaborates key aspects of Sennett's influential account of neoliberalism's time regime. The second step in the discussion focuses on Rainer Merkel's 2001 novel, because its fictional depiction of immaterial labor can be read as an illustration of "der flexible Mensch," the "über"-adjusted or permanently adjusting immaterial worker in Sennett's sense, albeit with an even more dire outlook. Thereafter, the discussion turns to the two earlier novels in conjunction with Negt's narrative of neoliberal time regimes to question Sennett's recuperation of a Weberian-style, highly standardized and thus predictable time structure. Did the early, socially more responsible mode of capitalism of highly regulated times off and on the job provide better conditions for the constitution of the self, which neoliberalism has allegedly swept away with its 24/7 digital connectivity?

Time's Arrow Broken: Sennett's Critique of Neoliberalism as the Implosion of Temporality

Writing in the late 1990s about the life stories and experiences of individuals in the contemporary working world, Sennett provides a forceful narrative of the problems associated with the new time regime imposed on every individual by the political economy of neoliberalism. Despite the fact that a drawing of a lonely office worker in the nighttime glow of his computer screen graces the cover of Sennett's English version of his *Corrosion of Character*,

technological advances do not play a significant role in his critique of neoliberalism. Instead, Sennett emphasizes that “the time dimension of the new capitalism, rather than high-tech data transmission, global stock markets, or free trade, . . . most directly affects people’s emotional lives outside of the workplace” (*Corrosion* 25). As he pithily portrays the course of neoliberalism in *Corrosion of Character*: “Time’s arrow is broken; it has no trajectory in a continually reengineered, routine-hating, short term political economy” (98).

Sennett’s assessment encompasses two entwined temporal concepts which sociology and social philosophy distinguish with the terms time and temporality. The term time designates a universal, standardized clock time that divides the day into 24 hours and defines the calendar year as 365 days (Adam 24-29). This rationalization of time has played an important part in the evolution of Occidental modernity. As sociologist Barbara Adam puts it in summarizing Marx: “Time is the medium through which labour is translated into an abstract exchange value: it is fundamental to the exchange between work and money” (26). Hence, remunerated work, whether pegged to the hour as in blue collar wages or to broader units of time such as the month for white collar, salaried employees, means laboring under heteronomous time based on the clock, disconnected from content as well as context. This type of heteronomous time represents “empty time” (Adam 88-90) for the individual whose available life time is nevertheless exhausted in performing dead labor. Consequently, the relationship between the two—time on and off the job—has historically been a site of struggle between employer and employee (Adam 26, Negt 142).

The metaphor of time’s arrow that Sennett employs in his critique of neoliberalism does not refer to pure clock time as the basis for quantitative reasoning, but brings into play another dimension of time. David Couzens Hoy describes this dimension as time “insofar as it manifests itself in human existence” (XIII) or, in other words, as an experiential dimension of time typically subsumed to the term temporality. The term temporality articulates time thus as a “structure of interrelationships, in which past, present, and future cannot be thought apart from one another” (Bryant). Sennett’s account emphatically recounts neoliberalism’s undoing of temporality through its fetishization of rapid organizational change and relentless push for short term results which precludes any long-term perspective. When time’s arrow is broken, the individual can no longer connect the dots of past, present, and future into a coherent narrative necessary for the formation of subjecthood and agency. The lack thereof under neoliberal conditions sets the individual adrift and leaves it bereft of a time frame through which it could gain orientation.

As a result, the hegemonic neoliberal discourse coupled with its material deregulation of work time engenders the flexible individual always ready to bend and bow to the demands of the capitalist market (Sennett, *Corrosion* 46-63).⁶

Against the doctrine of flexibility and permanent change, Sennett's narrative aims to recuperate a positive notion of routine and, in particular, routinized time. Though once valued, routinized work has lost its status since the beginnings of economic theory in the eighteenth century. In support of his account, Sennett cites Adam Smith's routine-hating perspective and Joseph Schumpeter's glorification of creative destruction as essential for a flourishing market economy and underscores that both of these ideas were resurrected by advocates of the neoliberal doctrine since the 1980s (*Corrosion* 33-38).

In his second engagement with neoliberalism, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (2006), his critique of neoliberal work time regimes continues by mobilizing Max Weber's theory of Occidental modernity and the rationalization of time it elaborates. The time regime of Weberian modernity rests on meticulously standardized and synchronized military time and clear structures of command, both of which were transferred into private economic enterprises in the form of bureaucracy. Sennett, however, looks at a shorter period within the long historical trajectory of Occidental modernity and its rationalization of time. His focus is on the capitalist market economy that evolved in the wake of World War II over a period of thirty years, when capitalism functioned quite well in terms of economic growth, strong labor protections and an expansive social safety net. He calls this mode of capitalism preceding the neoliberal regime "social capitalism" that still operated according to temporality rather than empty clock time. This time regime looked to the long term, i.e. respected the need for a clear trajectory of time and operated incrementally.

Sennett emphasizes that in the workplace of the social capitalism of old, the individual's life time was embedded in temporality articulated in a predictable succession of career stages and life cycle. For Sennett, the linear trajectory of time allowed the individuals living under its regime to think of their own lives along this trajectory and, therefore, to connect their past experiences with the present in order to project their life narrative into the future. According to Sennett's comparison of social versus neoliberal capitalism, the routinized and regulated time that the Weberian notion of rationalization and bureaucracy encompasses provides the bedrock for the constitution of subjecthood and, by extension, of the possibility for agency.

This idyllic depiction of an earlier stage of social capitalism stands in sharp contrast with the current neoliberal regime marked by a lack of patience and surfeit of flexibility. It is no wonder then that the era of social capitalism takes on a nostalgic glow in Sennett's narrative. This glow shines through most clearly in Sennett's engagement with the metaphor Weber chose to express his own concerns about bureaucratic capitalism, namely the *stahlharte Gehäuse* 'encasement that is hard as steel', or popularly though problematically translated as the 'iron cage,' in which the individual can become entrapped. Sennett defends

the rigid structures of bureaucracy even if it means accepting strictly routinized time in the individual's work life, for such a temporal structure can become a valid way of life. Philologically situating the term *Gehäuse* 'encasement' in its semantic field of house and home, Sennett argues instead that routine can also provide "a psychological home" (Sennett, *Culture* 32).

Running on Neoliberalism's Time: Rainer Merkel's *Das Jahr der Wunder* (2001)

Published at the millennial turn, Rainer Merkel's *Das Jahr der Wunder* was one of the first novels on the brave new world of work and presents in many ways a fictional illustration of Sennett's narrative of making a living and a life under neoliberal working conditions. The novel is set in a public relations company during the go-go 1990s. As such, the novel affords the reader a look into a portion of the creative sector of the economy that derives its profits exclusively from immaterial labor. The protagonist has been tasked with creating a digital PR campaign for a bank, an enterprise that also belongs to the immaterial segment of the economy. Specifically, the client is a *Bausparkasse* 'savings and loans bank.' This branch of the banking industry specializes in long-term savings plans designed to eventually accumulate enough capital to purchase or construct a home, which remains a hallmark of professional success for the German middle class. Yet, by the mid-1990s, permanent employment contracts necessary to take advantage of this banking product were rapidly dwindling even in the tertiary sector of immaterial labor. With this choice of product for the PR campaign, the novel implicitly raises the question of whether labor can still provide the German workforce with a home—both in a literal sense and a figurative sense of feeling at home in the world—as the basis for the constitution of subjecthood.

The narrator-protagonist of *Das Jahr der Wunder*, Christian Schlier, is in his mid- to late twenties and highly educated. He was admitted to medical school, but despite this initial success, abandons his career in medicine after failing a decisive test. The novel presents the protagonist's failure due not to lacking intelligence but poor time management. Schlier admits that he had been wasting time sitting in the sun with his girlfriend Sonja rather than studying for the crucial medical exam and that his passion lies elsewhere. While driving a taxi to earn a living, Schlier begins to write. It is his creative activity, the writing of his *Notizbücher* 'notebooks' that lands him the job with the PR company, but also situates the protagonist within the tradition of a long list of authors from Georg Christoph Lichtenberg and Kurt Tucholsky to George Bernard Shaw and most obviously Doris Lessing who used notebooks for their creative writing.⁷ Schlier's biography thus resembles those nonlinear career trajectories hailed as an example of the liberating potential of neoliberalism's individualized and flexible world of immaterial labor. Neoliberalism privileges the individual's potential rather than

specific educational or professional certifications that traditionally had been the hallmark of West Germany's highly stratified educational apparatus, but that is increasingly viewed as anachronistic because of its rigidity.

Time management, timing, and remembering past times are recurring motifs in the novel, which, interestingly, is narrated in the present tense. The protagonist acknowledges repeatedly that he has been and still is "leichtsinnig" 'reckless' (29, 36, 89) with his most valuable resource, namely time. The novel tells the tale of his socialization into the delimitation of work time under neoliberal conditions. As the novel's minimal plot progresses, the narrator-protagonist concludes that it is a "natürliche Entwicklung, dass ich jetzt auch am Wochenende arbeite" (116) 'natural development that I am working on the weekends now as well.' Though computers are referenced in the novel, it does not present digitally enabled 24/7 connectivity as the main reason for the delimitation of work hours. Instead, the novel explores the protagonist's self-subjugation to neoliberalism's all-consuming time regime in a twofold manner. The narrative reflects on the material changes in employment conditions ushered in by the neoliberal reengineering of the work place, on the one hand. On the other hand, the novel elucidates how the deceptive neoliberal discourse prevalent within the PR agency preys on the protagonist's desire for an experience of community, a place he belongs—a home.

The novel depicts the flexible employment conditions of neoliberalism, which Negt critically summarizes as follows: "In der Regel geht die 'aufgabenorientierte Arbeitszeit' zu Lasten der Lebenszeit und führt zu Verlängerung und Intensivierung des Arbeitszeitkontingents, verbunden mit einer Verschiebung von kollektiven Lösungen zu individuellen" (165) 'As a rule, project-based work time arrangements come at the expense of lived time and result in the elongation and intensification of overall working hours in conjunction with a transferal of collective solutions to individual ones.' Rejecting hourly wage agreements as an "anachronistic principle" (Merkel 59), the PR agency operates on such project-based employment and pay. The novel's protagonist starts to work for the company without any contractual agreement as to the length of time or compensation for his labor. Even when he has finally negotiated pay for his work several weeks into his job, it becomes apparent that Schlier is only a temporary employee. The open timeline of project-based employment undercuts the protagonist's ability to project a future and decreases his income (182-95). As the project goes on longer than expected, Schlier does the math and realizes that his net income declines, since the project-based compensation he had negotiated remains the same. Notwithstanding this brief moment of critical consciousness, the narrator-protagonist's overall perspective is one of naïve awe of the PR agency's environment.

The novel challenges the notion that accelerated time represents the linchpin of neoliberalism's destructive power. Initially, the novel presents the atmosphere at the PR agency as one of serene calm and patience without any looming deadlines. The protagonist's "mentors" (supervisors) encourage him to take his time with the project. Not speed, but quality of the product seems to matter. Yet the novel reveals the protagonist's initial impression to be faulty. Like all other service industries, the PR agency is at the beck and call of the client, and even more so as a startup in need of fast success. The client, a savings and loan bank, suddenly postpones the meeting for the presentation of the PR campaign. Yet the protagonist and the other team members experience this extension of the timeline not with relief, as one might expect, since the project has not shaped up well, but instead as a disaster. They are filled with panic and anxiety, which they transfer onto others. The protagonist and his entire team believe that someone at the PR agency is trying to sabotage their project.

The fragmentation of time, which Sennett and Negt identify as a key characteristic of neoliberalism's erosion of temporality, resurfaces in *Das Jahr der Wunder* forcefully in terms of a systematic disorientation of the individual through work. It is the moment when work on the project grinds to a halt that the narrator-protagonist articulates his disorientation. "Als hätten wir die ganze Zeit auf etwas hingearbeitet, das sich nun gar nicht als Ziel, sondern als ungewisse Zukunft erweist, als etwas in Bewegung Befindliches, eine Zukunft, die sich vor unseren Augen immer wieder verschiebt" (168) 'As if we had worked the entire time towards something which turned out to be not a goal at all but an uncertain future, something constantly moving, a future which changes in front of our eyes over and over again.' The narrator-protagonist's assessment of his and his teammates' situation resembles Sennett's critique of neoliberalism's assault on temporality: "In the flexible, fragmented present it may seem possible only to create coherent narratives about what has been, and no longer possible to create predictive narratives about what will be" (Sennett, *Corrosion* 135). In contrast to Sennett, the moment of professional anxiety in Merkel's novel does not, however, translate into any further reflection or awareness of the intrinsic problem of the neoliberal time regime nor any possibility to apprehend the past on the part of the protagonist. The novel articulates thus an even more skeptical stance regarding the possibility for experiencing time as temporality under neoliberal conditions. The novel's play with cultural references to time and temporality at crucial moments in the narrative as well as its ending is particularly instructive for elaborating this subtle critical stance of *Das Jahr der Wunder*.

Textual references to time and temporality range from high to popular culture, and function as representational devices to create an ironic distance for the reader from the immediacy of the narrator-protagonist's perspective. At a crucial moment, an experienced PR person named Gundula is pulled in to save

Schlier's PR project because his creative concept leaves the rest of the team confused and unable to transform his ideas into compelling images. In acknowledging the time pressure, Gundula asks for the title of the book by the famous physicist, "der im Rollstuhl sitzt und mit einer Computerstimme spricht" (137) 'the one who sits in a wheelchair and speaks with a computer generated voice,' referencing Stephen Hawking's hugely popular *A Brief History of Time* (1996). Someone responds with the title of the paradigmatic literary investigation into the experience of time in modernity, Marcel Proust's multi-volume novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* translated as either *In Search of Lost Time* or *Remembrance of Things Past*. This is certainly an understandable slip, since Gundula made clear that they all need to make up now for lost time on the project in order to meet the again looming presentation deadline. On a figurative level, the confusion of these two books is rich in meaning. One of these books is a history of time (and the universe) as concepts in physics, which (like Sennett's narrative) employs the metaphor of time's arrow (Hawking 147-59), and the other, a literary inquiry into the personal experience of time and temporality. Hence, Merkel's novel proposes that temporality on a human scale has been lost and the past as history, i.e. an integrated experience, has now been eroded by the fast-paced, unrelenting universal clock time of neoliberalism.

The reference to Proust's novel about memory and the experience of the past gains additional significance in light of the novel's narrative strategy of telling about the protagonist's first year on the job in the present tense. The novel foregrounds remembering in its opening scene. As the narrator-protagonist approaches the office suite of the PR agency, he is preoccupied with brief flashes of memory involving his high school friend Titus who was already working at the PR agency where he introduced the protagonist. He remembers that Titus gave him the shirt he is wearing, and also recalls a trip they took together to Vienna in 1988 in order to attend a performance of Philip Glass's *1000 Air Planes on a Roof*. This musical melodrama interrogates the status of human temporality and ultimately denies that it can still be maintained under current conditions. Its sole character struggles with his memories of encounters with extraterrestrials. Such figures are typically featured in science fiction narratives, which is the paradigmatic genre oriented towards the future.⁸ In the end, however, Glass's musical melodrama contains a message for its lonely character, who is struggling to generate a coherent narrative from these encounters: "It is better to forget, it is pointless to remember." The narrator-protagonist of *Das Jahr der Wunder* takes this advice to heart in an even more pointed fashion. He lets go of the past by dissociating himself from former acquaintances and cuts off the relationship with his girlfriend who had failed the crucial medical test with him. The protagonist's behavior thus resembles what Sennett has identified as a key characteristic or mental behavior for success under neoliberal working conditions, namely to let go

of the past in order to process failure efficiently, to just move on (*Corrosion* 78-90).

The novel questions, however, whether this letting go of the past can be achieved as easily as the message in Philip Glass's sci-fi opera proposes. Tidbits of memory continue to flash before the protagonist's inner eye throughout the novel, but he cannot apprehend them in any temporal framework. They come and go at random like the involuntary memory portrayed in Proust's novel but without Schlier being able to process them into any sustained narrative in Sennett's sense. The last scene of the novel proposes what losing this experience of temporality might mean for the hyper-flexible immaterial worker. Schlier is getting ready for his newly developed exercise regime of running several miles before going to work. While his mind produces random memories about his previous menial job in a chemical factory, he also becomes anxious that he is wasting time right now because these memories are preventing him from starting to run. It becomes apparent that his mental disorientation and correlating physical paralysis spring from the fact that it is not clear to Schlier whether his PR campaign for the savings and loans bank was a failure or a success.

After a year of working at the PR agency, the narrator-protagonist is as disoriented as in the opening scene on the way to his job interview, in which the term "Orientierungsvermögen" (7) 'the ability to gain orientation' features prominently. He nevertheless jogs off into the dark void of dawn without any clear path to follow, precisely because temporality has been undone by neoliberalism with respect to past and future. What is left for this immaterial worker, the novel suggests with sad irony, is to keep on running on neoliberalism's clock indefinitely without any orientation until his life time is exhausted. Merkel's dark but also humorous fictional negotiation of neoliberal working conditions confirms Sennett's position that time's arrow is broken by neoliberalism's regime of 24/7. The question remains whether Sennett's attempt to recuperate the long-term perspective and highly regulated time regimes of social capitalism indeed offers a plausible, and more attractive, alternative. Were immaterial workers like Schlier able to find a home at work, or did they at least have time to create a home for themselves when off the job, in the golden age of social capitalism? The next section explores this issue through the lens of two fictional accounts set in the world of immaterial labor in the 1970s in conjunction with Negt's nonfiction account of the current neoliberal regime.

The Deadly Arrow of Social Capitalism's Routinized Time: W. E. Richartz's *Büroroman*

W. E. Richartz's novel *Büroroman*, published in 1976, was mostly forgotten until the 1990s when neoliberal reengineering had reached the office

floor with full force. As most critics point out, Richartz's career path rendered him well qualified to engage with the theme of office work and, thereby, emphasize the mimetic relationship between life and literature in his work. After studying chemistry, he became a high-level salaried employee at a major pharmaceutical company in Frankfurt for most of his adult life (Herms). As the title announces, *Büroroman* depicts life on the office floor, and more specifically, a day of three employees working in office 1028 in a large industrial company called "DRAMAG." This telling acronym refracts the material history of the 1970s and offers an ironic lens onto both office 1028 and the general transformation of office work in West German society of the time. The acronym itself stands for "Deutsche Regler und Armaturen AG" 'German Safety Valves and Thermostats Inc.' One might thus assume that this major publicly traded company actually manufactures the products (safety valves and thermostats necessary to regulate automated systems) referenced in its name. However, just as the name of the corporation has collapsed into the acronym, so actual production has largely disappeared from the company's premises. DRAMAG no longer engages in large-scale manufacturing in the Federal Republic, but instead makes the bulk of its profits domestically distributing commodities produced all over the world, including China.

On the whole and in contrast to the company's name, the tone of the novel is not drama, but rather quiet tragedy. Of the three employees in office 1028, one, a scrivener-like character, Mr. Kuhlwein, dies unnoticed at his desk; another, Mrs. Klatt, suffers a disabling diabetic collapse in her office chair; and a third much younger employee escapes the debilitating office work for an uncertain future elsewhere. The minimal narrative arc of *Büroroman* loosely follows an eight-hour work day. It opens with a domestic morning scene featuring haste, in which an anonymous protagonist is swept up by the morning rush hour characteristic of metropolitan areas—here Frankfurt, which had by the 1970s become the financial center of West Germany. "Fix, fix, das muss hier fix gehn" (8) 'Move it, move it; things need to be done quickly' proclaims *Büroroman*, since speed, or in other words, efficiency for which time is the ultimate measure, is of the essence in Occidental modernity.

The rushing rhythm of Richartz's language in the opening passage is quickly superseded by the monotony and boredom at work. The sudden shift in tone serves to highlight the slow tedium of the eight-hour office day depicted in the subsequent chapter, tellingly entitled "Schneckenstunden" 'Time Crawls.' The motif of the clock, i.e. looking at the clock and also of asking for the time of the day frequently, drives home the point that the employees experience their eight-to-five work day as excessively long and utterly dull, as meaningless and empty (Heimburger 87). Hence, the officemates are all poised to flee their deadening work as quickly as possible once the various time pieces with which they

surround themselves jump to 5:00 pm, the official end of the work day. Yet as regulated as Kuhlwein's and Klatt's work time might be, the novel portrays time spent on the job as reaching far beyond its eight-hour temporal confines deep into the characters' life time. The novel confirms Negt's argument that work time never leaves enough time and energy for *Lebenszeit* 'life time,' even in an age when 24/7 connectivity by computer and cell phone, which are the principle ICT devices cited in current narratives of neoliberalism, was not an issue.⁹

Mrs. Klatt's confession that she cannot do much more than watch television when she is off work is also reminiscent of Siegfried Kracauer's observation in the early twentieth century that office work is after all draining and—coupled with the accelerated pace in modernity—colonizes the time for living by degrading the mental state of the immaterial worker to one capable only of *Zerstreuung* 'distraction' after the working day is done. By the 1970s, distraction comes into the home in the form of an earlier technology, namely television. The novel references two popular television shows of the 1970s: Robert Lemke's *Was bin ich?* ('What's My Line?') and Wim Thoelke's *Der grosse Preis* ('Grand Prize'). It is especially the latter that represents an interesting example of how this fictional narrative of immaterial labor registers changing time regimes as they unfold.

Time, more precisely response time, is a constitutive element of most quiz shows, which typically have a clock prominently displayed and ticking away as the contestants pick their brains for the right answers. This was also the case in Thoelke's *Der Grosse Preis*. Trivial information primarily culled from the fields of history and geography comprised the bulk of the knowledge necessary to compete in *Der Grosse Preis*, which was modeled on the US quiz show *Jeopardy*. Questions on natural science or technology were conspicuously absent from this show despite the rapid technological transformation since the 1970s and the accompanying societal changes to the Information Age and Knowledge Society of the 1990s. Thoelke's *Der Grosse Preis* thus stands for the deceptive interpellation of the white collar employee into a bourgeois ideal of *Bildung*, defined as a self-paced, intellectual and process of forming a young person's character through a multitude of experiences. Now, however, *Bildung* is reduced to trivial factoids after technological-economic transformations have debased the currency of this body of knowledge. More importantly, and this is also outlined in Sennett's work, there is no time left for *Bildung*.

In his *Corrosion of Character*, Sennett aims to revitalize the German concept of *Bildung* and emphasizes that work is a central experience in the formation of an individual's character. Sennett therefore rejects the rushed nature of educational time in neoliberalism with its credo of constant change and risk taking. The quiz show represents a paradigmatic example of the interpellation of the working population into a mental attitude akin to risk taking, which

Schumpeter theorized as a quality inherent to the successful entrepreneur but not required of the working masses. However, this becomes the prerequisite for employability in the neoliberal regime (Sennett, *Corrosion* 80). Thielke's *Der Grosse Preis* is not just based on trivial knowledge but on the contestants' willingness to take risks. The reward is, after all, hard cash, but how "grand" the prize will be depends on how much risk contestants assume, that is, how often they reach for the category of most difficult questions that promises the highest reward but also carries the most risk of losing it all.

By critically reflecting on the effect of routinized time in its perhaps best material manifestation in permanent jobs with full benefits, Richartz's novel contradicts any nostalgia for the labor conditions in the large-scale economic organizations of the socially responsible capitalism that often surfaces in critiques of neoliberalism. With respect to technological innovation, Richartz's novel raises the specter of machine power replacing human labor power for good, even on the office floor. After the bodies of the two long-term employees Mrs. Klatt and Mr. Kuhlwein have been hauled away from their office, the narrative voice reveals that the data processing that the two manually and cognitively performed on a daily basis has been done much more efficiently by EDV (the acronym used for electronic data processing in German) for a couple of years already.

Social capitalism, to use Sennett's term for the full-fledged welfare state with legal job security as it emerged after World War II, certainly protected these two older employees from unemployment as their skills and labor became obsolete. Yet the novel also demonstrates that technological innovation was not deployed in the service of freeing up these employees' time that might have been better spent on other life pursuits. Instead, the labor Mrs. Klatt and Mr. Kuhlwein performed so diligently day after day was empty labor, dead and deadly time. Richartz's narrative of working conditions in social capitalism shows the limitation of Sennett's attempt to mount a critique of the current neoliberal time regime by recuperating a Weberian-style, highly standardized and predictable social capitalism of yore. Sennett's comparative narrative remains reformist rather than calling the structures of domination inherent to capitalism radically into question, which is the hallmark of Negt's engagement with the current neoliberal regime.

Oskar Negt's descriptive assessment of neoliberalism's time regime of flexibility agrees in large parts with that of Sennett, whose monograph, *Corrosion of Character*, Negt cites (190). Negt's *Arbeit und menschliche Würde*, however, foregrounds the concept of structural domination and takes as its point of departure the working population at large, the collective rather than the life stories of individuals. Arguing from a Marxist perspective, Negt's account casts the implementation of neoliberalism's flexible work time regimes in terms of the struggle between labor and capital.

A focal point in Negt's narratives is collective bargaining, for example by the metal workers' union in the early 1980s to reduce the work week to 35 hours. Negt views the union-led struggle for a reduction of the work week as not simply an attempt to address rising unemployment, but as having a more comprehensive goal. It was meant to initiate an alternative political economy that would utilize recent scientific-technological advances to drastically reduce work time for the sake of more lived and life time. According to Negt, this was a realistic demand thanks to the technological innovation that had attained the highest level of productivity in the history of capitalism (369). Contrary to Negt's vision of technology's potential for liberating human life time, however, the statistical data he cites show an upward trajectory of working hours for German employees since the 1980s. He attributes this upswing in hours on the job to corporate Germany's aggressive push for the "flexibilization" (read deregulation) of work hours, purportedly to meet global competition. Negt elucidates this corporate strategy as being aimed at eroding the collective experience of work time in order to strengthen corporations' grip on their workers (154).

Drawing on Michel Foucault, Negt maintains that the exercise of domination first and foremost rests on the "Detailorganisation von Raum- und Zeiteilen, die den einzelnen Menschen in seiner Lebenswelt wie in ein Korsett einspannen" (143) 'control over any detail of time and space which encases the life world as if in a tight corset.' *Zerfaserung* 'defibration,' a term he chooses to capture the thrust of the corporate temporal strategy pursued under the euphemism individualization of work hours, is quite similar to Sennett's notion of corrosion as a slow, incremental fragmentation of time, which has a disorienting effect on the individual. The ultimate goal of capital is the same as it always was: to subjugate the human being's finite life to the logic of capital and its market (172). One example of the corporate strategies that Negt's and Sennett's accounts discuss is particularly relevant with respect to exercising control over immaterial labor, namely *Gleitzeit* 'flexitime.'

Negt argues that the majority of employees performing immaterial labor, particularly office workers, experience their work time as Richartz depicted it in his *Büroroman* as a "stumpfsinnige Addition von gleichbleibenden Zeittakten, von Minuten, Stunden, Tagen, Jahren, welche den Arbeitstag bisher wesentlich prägte und die häufig genau dazu führten, leere Zeit totzuschlagen" (176) 'dull accumulation of always the same time rhythms measured in minutes, hours, days, years which primarily structured the work day to date and frequently resulted in just killing empty time.' Flexitime, which abandons the rigid eight-to-five work day for the sake of more individual work time management, appears to give the same type of work a more dynamic structure by adjusting the "Arbeitstag den Rhythmen des Lebenstages" (176) 'work day to the actual rhythms of lived time.' Yet, as will be discussed in the analysis of an episode in the third novel of

Genazino's *Abschaffel-trilogy*, flexitime's promise of more employee control over time was fraud from the beginning.

Like Richartz's *Büroroman*, Genazino's *Abschaffel* trilogy (published from 1977 to 1979) is set in Frankfurt am Main and the eponymous protagonist performs immaterial labor. *Abschaffel* represents another white collar worker performing administrative labor for a shipping company that has fully implemented technical rationalization. The "IBM-Schreibautomat"—a highly sophisticated automatic typewriter which incorporated elements of early computer technology that was just about to be set up at Richartz's DRAMAG—is now on everyone's desk and *Abschaffel* routinely works with it. The narrative tone has also shifted, as the ironic but still empathetic perspective in Richartz's office novel has been replaced in the *Abschaffel* trilogy with the eponymous protagonist's clear-eyed cynicism.

The shipping company where *Abschaffel* works introduces flexitime in a mode that is still more limited than the full-fledged *Entgrenzung der Arbeitszeit* or delimitation of time thrust upon the working population twenty years later, bemoaned in Sennett's narrative as well as in the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* in 2010 and depicted in the previously discussed millennial novel *Das Jahr der Wunder*. In the *Abschaffel* trilogy, flexitime means that employees are no longer required to report for work at a specific time every morning or work exactly eight hours every day. Instead, they are allowed to structure their work time according to their personal needs, as long as they fulfill their contractual work time. The novel portrays the employees embracing the corporate plan to implement flexitime enthusiastically (207-08). Yet as the *Abschaffel* trilogy astutely points out through its protagonist, the new flexible work time regime does not reduce the total number of hours each individual has to perform each month. In other words, flexitime too is a time regime that does not alter the overall structure of the employment relationship (Genazino 214).

The implementation of this superficially flexible time regime brings, however, another type of time piece, the punch clock, from the factory to *Abschaffel*'s office floor. The novel thus presents flexitime as just another tool in management's arsenal of control at the moment when it was widely implemented in West Germany. "Die Gleitzeit war plötzlich nichts anderes als ein minutengenaues Kontrollinstrument geworden. Das Glück des kurzen Verschwindens war technisch nicht mehr möglich. Ein Gefühl des Betrogenseins machte sich in der Firma breit" (281) 'flexitime was suddenly nothing more than a precise instrument of control counting every minute. The bliss of vanishing for a moment was no longer possible due to technology. A feeling of being betrayed permeated the company.' As Sennett observes twenty years later: "If flexitime is an employee's reward, it also puts the employee into the institution's intimate grip" (*Corrosion* 58).

Abschaffel eventually suffers from job-related “burnout,” a problem that *Spiegel* magazine would discuss in a cover story thirty years later and relate to the digitally induced fast pace and intensity of the 24/7 regime of neoliberalism (*Der Spiegel* #4, 2011). The burnout of the immaterial worker of the 1970s, illustrated by Abschaffel and his counterparts in Richartz’s *Büroroman*, stems, however, from the opposite: too much routinized or empty time on his permanent job. Abschaffel’s psychosomatic disorder manifests itself as an inability to get out of bed one morning due to a partial paralysis of his back. His plight is reminiscent of Kafka’s character Gregor Samsa, but also matches the real life paralysis many of the “burnt out” immaterial workers in *Der Spiegel* report as one of their symptoms. In the still state-regulated regime of permanent jobs of Genazino’s world of immaterial labor, the main character gets paid time off to attend to his psychosomatic problems in a rehabilitation clinic. The reprieve is only temporary and the end of the trilogy finds him still entrapped in the iron cage of modernity that his psychoanalysis has failed to unlock. Instead, the treatment Abschaffel receives for his psychosomatic paralysis merely reveals the flexibility of modern capitalism that employs psychoanalysis to maximize the system’s performance. Freud famously said that the goal of psychoanalysis was to transform neurotic suffering into everyday misery. In the end, Abschaffel is rehabilitated to return to his miserable job to do more time at work.

Conclusion

Sennett’s description of neoliberalism as a “continually reengineered, routine-hating, short term political economy” (*Corrosion* 98), as a framework that substantially altered the conditions for the possibility to experience temporality, is persuasive. It is not, therefore, surprising that his writings resonated strongly in both the public sphere and literary discourse. Yet Sennett’s attempt to recuperate what he depicts as a more benign form of an earlier, socially responsible capitalism based on a Weberian notion of routinized time offered in highly structured bureaucracies was already challenged in earlier fictional narratives depicting the conditions of immaterial labor in the late 1960s and the 1970s. The literary explorations and experiences of immaterial labor offered in the novels by Richartz and Genazino take much of the luster from the golden age of social capitalism. They suggest that even when work time had been reduced to an all-time low in the 1970s, the experience of heteronomous time as monotony on the job erodes whatever clock time has been gained. While recognizing the problem, these literary mediations of life and work under either social capitalism or asocial neoliberalism also do not propose any valid way out. Even if their working stiffes do not all die on the job like in Richartz’s *Büroroman*, the empty time spent on

the job paralyses them in multiple ways, from the diabetic coma of Frau Klatt to Abschaffel's Kafkaesque back problems.

In the end, as Negt's non-fictional narrative elaborates, capital always aims to subjugate as much of the worker's life time to its overarching goal of maintaining its domination. The various time regimes that the previously discussed narratives review, from set work hours to flex time to 24/7 self-exploitation, simply provide the ruling classes with a different set of temporal tools to achieve this goal. Mending the course of time's arrow in order to restore temporality and the complexity of human time would in fact require a thorough reconfiguration of the entire socioeconomic system as Negt argues, and not just a recuperation of a previous, perhaps superficially benign mode of capitalism. Regaining control over time both individually and collectively is at the core of Negt's alternative socioeconomic vision in which technological advances can play an important role because of their liberating potential. More specifically, Negt embraces technology for its ability to emancipate workers from dead labor and empty time for the sake of a fuller life time. In contrast to Sennett's, Negt's narrative of neoliberalism as well as his literary voices show that the good old days were never that good, and it is far from clear that better times lie ahead.

Notes

1. See such non-fictional narratives as: Franco Berardi, John Tomlinson, Jonathan Crary, and with a more positive spin, Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee; for a discussion of fictional narratives: Sabine von Dirke.
2. All translations of German texts are my own if not otherwise indicated.
3. Sennett's regular presence in the German weeklies *Die Zeit* and *Der Spiegel*, and especially his recognition with the *Gerda Henkel Prize* in 2008, provide evidence of his public influence. His acceptance speech, tellingly entitled *How I write: Sociology as Literature*, supports subsuming his non-fictional accounts to the concept of reality fiction. Falk Richter's *Das System. Materialien, Gespräche, Textfassungen* (Theater der Zeit 2013) is an example of the adaptation of Sennett's account of neoliberalism in cultural production, as well as a conversation with Sennett, "Das System sozialer Kommunikation hat auf ganzer Linie versagt" (2010) published on Richter's webpage, <http://www.falkrichter.com/DE/article/56>. See also the film, *Eine flexible Frau* (2010) by Tatjana Turanskyj.

4. The following references can be found in Negt's work: the Bible (170-71), fairy tales (313-14), Kafka (16-17), Goethe (46), and Brecht (219).
5. Abschaffel is the main character in the trilogy originally published under the following titles: *Abschaffel* in 1977, *Die Vernichtung der Sorgen* ('Destruction of Worries') in 1978 and *Falsche Jahre* ('Deceptive Years') in 1979. These works were reissued as a trilogy in one volume in 2002.
6. See also Negt's narrative in the chapter, "Ein Zauberlehrling mit Namen Flexibilität" 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice called Flexibility' 170-78.
7. Notebooks were also advocated in self-management literature dedicated to assisting individuals in maximizing their performance and employability. For a concrete example, see Roger von Oechs, *A Kick in the Seat of the Pants: Using Your Explorer, Artist, Judge, and Warrior to Be More Creative* (1986) translated as *Der kreative Kick. Aktivieren Sie Ihren Forscher, Künstler, Richter und Krieger* (Paderborn: Jungfermann), published in 1994 during the time when Merkel's novel is set.
8. The future is also echoed by another reference to science fiction, namely the popular *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, whose somewhat naïve and incompetent main character, Arthur Philip Dent, is displaced from his home for the sake of speed, that is, an intra-terrestrial freeway. This science fiction satire is, however, more focused on the exploration of space than time.
9. Röggl's novel, *wir schlafen nicht* (2004, *we do not sleep*) features a figure called "die traurige handy-telefonistin" 'the sad cell phone woman' who is introduced early on in the text (16); for non-fictional accounts see Berardi (89) and Crary.

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