

Mark Fisher

“A social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude”: Popular Culture’s Interrupted Accelerationist Dreams

We live in a moment of profound cultural deceleration. The first two decades of the current century have so far been marked by an extraordinary sense of inertia, repetition, and retrospection, uncannily in keeping with the prophetic analyses of postmodern culture that Fredric Jameson began to develop in the 1980s. Tune the radio to the station playing the most contemporary music, and you will not encounter anything that you couldn’t have heard in the 1990s. Jameson’s claim that postmodernism was the cultural logic of late capitalism now stands as an ominous portent of the (non)future of capitalist cultural production: both politically and aesthetically, it seems that we can now only expect more of the same, forever.

At least for the moment, it seems that the financial crisis of 2008 has strengthened the power of capital. The austerity programs implemented with such rapidity in the wake of the financial crisis have seen an intensification – rather than a disappearance or dilution – of neoliberalism. The crisis may have deprived neoliberalism of its legitimacy, but that has only served to show that, in the lack of any effective counterforce, capitalist power can now proceed without the need for legitimacy: neoliberal ideas are like the litany of a religion whose social power has outlived the believers’ capacity for faith. Neoliberalism is dead, but it carries on. The outbursts of militancy in 2011 have done little to disrupt the widespread sense that the only changes will be for the worse.



Women packaging the Beatles’ album *Rubber Soul* at the Hayes Vinyl Factory, England. A number of Beatles vinyls bore the sentence “Manufactured in Hayes.”

As a way into what might be at stake in the concept of aesthetic accelerationism, it might be worth contrasting the dominant mood of our times with the affective tone of an earlier period. In her 1979 essay “The Family: Love It or Leave It,” the late music and cultural critic Ellen Willis noted that the counterculture’s desire to replace the family with a system of collective child-

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THE ALIEN CRITIC

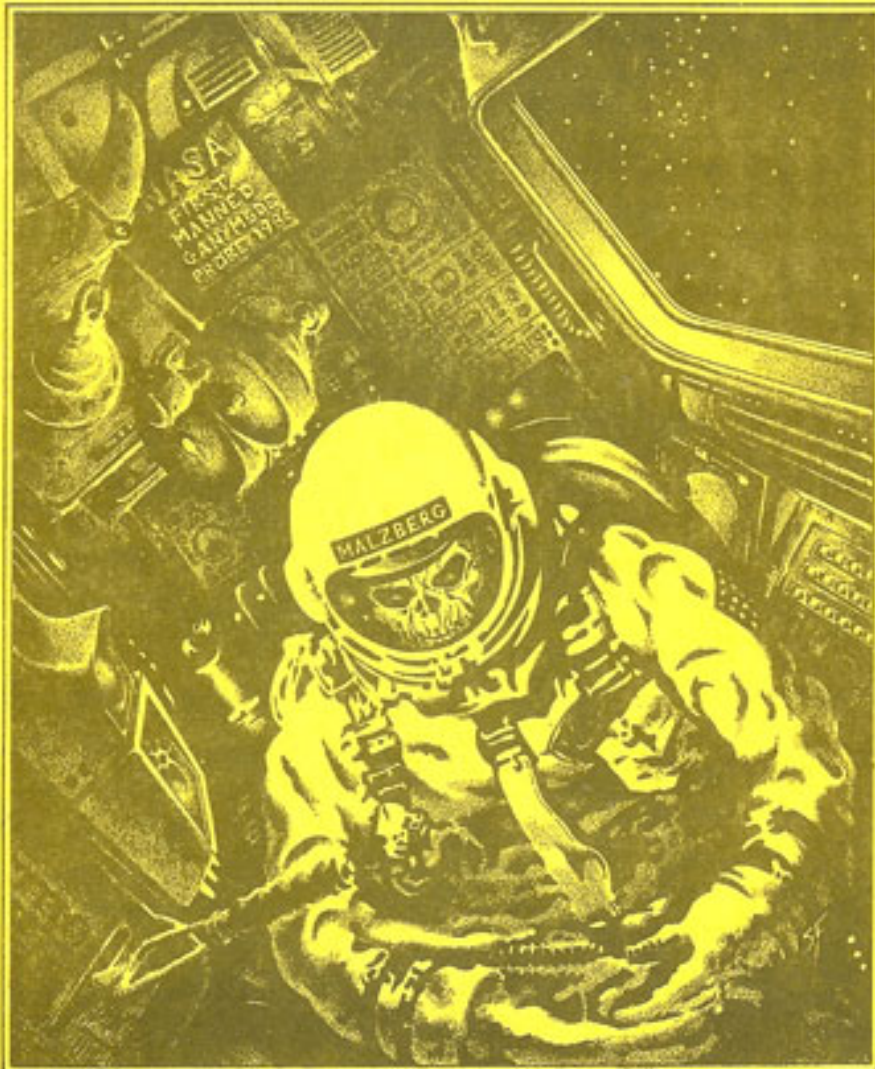
an informal science fiction
& fantasy journal

THE SHAPE OF SCIENCE FICTION TO COME
BY FREDERIK POHL

NOISE LEVEL
BY JOHN BRUNNER

UP AGAINST THE WALL, ROGER ZELAZNY
AN INTERVIEW

Number Seven



Cover of *The Alien Critic* # 7, Nov 1973. Cover artist: Steven Fabian.

rearing would have entailed “a social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude.”¹ It’s very difficult, in our deflated times, to re-create the counterculture’s confidence that such a “social and psychic revolution” could not only happen, but was already in the process of unfolding. Like many of her generation, Willis’s life was shaped by first being swept up by these hopes, then seeing them gradually wither as the forces of reaction regained control of history. There’s probably no better account of the Sixties counterculture’s retreat from Promethean ambition into self-destruction, resignation, and pragmatism than Willis’s collection of essays *Beginning To See The Light*. The Sixties counterculture might now have been reduced to a series of “iconic” – overfamiliar, endlessly circulated, dehistoricized – aesthetic relics, stripped of political content, but Willis’s work stands as a painful reminder of leftist failure. As Willis makes clear in her introduction to *Beginning To See The Light*, she frequently found herself at odds with what she experienced as the authoritarianism and statism of mainstream socialism. While the music she listened to spoke of freedom, socialism seemed to be about centralization and state control. The story of how the counterculture was co-opted by the neoliberal Right is now a familiar one, but the other side of this narrative is the Left’s incapacity to transform itself in the face of the new forms of desire to which the counterculture gave voice.

The idea that the “Sixties led to neoliberalism” is complicated by the emphasis on the challenge to the family. For it then becomes clear that the Right did not absorb countercultural currents and energies without remainder. The conversion of countercultural rebellion into consumer capitalist pleasures necessarily misses the counterculture’s ambition to do away with the institutions of bourgeois society: an ambition which, from the perspective of the new “realism” that the Right has successfully imposed, looks naive and hopeless.

The counterculture’s politics were anticapitalist, Willis argues, but this did not entail a straightforward rejection of everything produced in the capitalist field. Certainly, pleasure and individualism were important to what Willis characterizes as her “quarrel with the left,”² yet the desire to do away with the family could not be construed in these terms alone; it was inevitably also a matter of new and unprecedented forms of collective (but non-statist) organization. Willis’s “polemic against standard leftist notions about advanced capitalism” rejected as at best only half-true the ideas “that the consumer economy makes us slave to commodities, that the function of the

mass media is to manipulate our fantasies, so we will equate fulfilment with buying the system’s commodities.”³ Popular culture – and music culture in particular – was a terrain of struggle rather than a dominion of capital. The relationship between aesthetic forms and politics was unstable and inchoate – culture didn’t just “express” already existing political positions, it also anticipated a politics-to-come (which was also, too often, a politics that never actually arrived).

Music culture’s role as one of the engines of cultural acceleration from the late ‘50s through to 2000 had to do with its capacity to synthesize diverse cultural energies, tropes, and forms, as much as any specific feature of music itself. From the late ‘50s onward, music culture became the zone where drugs, new technologies, (science) fictions, and social movements could combine to produce dreamings – suggestive glimmers of worlds radically different from the actually existing social order. (The rise of the Right’s “realism” entailed not only the destruction of particular kinds of dreaming, but the very suppression of the dreaming function of popular culture itself.) For a moment, a space of autonomy opened up, right in the heart of commercial music, for musicians to explore and experiment. In this period, popular music culture was defined by a tension between the (usually) incompatible desires and imperatives of artists, audiences, and capital. Commodification was not the point at which this tension would always and inevitably be resolved in favour of capital; rather, commodities could themselves be the means by which rebellious currents could propagate: “The mass media helped to spread rebellion, and the system obligingly marketed products that encouraged it, for the simple reason that there was money to be made from rebels who were also consumers. On one level the sixties revolt was an impressive illustration of Lenin’s remark that the capitalist will sell you the rope to hang him with.”⁴ This now looks rather quaintly optimistic, since, as we all know, it wasn’t the capitalist who ended up hanged. The marketing of rebellion became more about the triumph of marketing than of rebellion. The neoliberal Right’s coup consisted in individualizing the desires that the counterculture had opened up, then laying claim to the new libidinal terrain. The rise of the new Right was premised on the repudiation of the idea that life, work, and reproduction could be *collectively* transformed – now, capital would be the only agent of transformation. But the retreat of any serious challenge to the family is a reminder that the mood of reaction that has grown since the 1980s was not only about the restoration of some narrowly defined economic

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power: it was also about the return – at the level of ideology, if not necessarily of empirical fact – of social and cultural institutions that it had seemed possible to eliminate in the 1960s.

In her 1979 essay, Willis insists that the return of familialism was central to the rise of the new Right, which was just about to be confirmed in grand style with the election of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK. “If there is one cultural trend that has defined the seventies,” Willis wrote, “it is the aggressive resurgence of family chauvinism.”⁵ For Willis, perhaps the most disturbing signs of this new conservatism was the embrace of the family by elements of the Left,⁶ a trend reinforced by the tendency for former adherents of the counterculture (including herself) to (re)turn to the family out of mixture of exhaustion and defeatism. “I’ve fought, I’ve paid my dues, I’m tired of being marginal. I want in!”⁷ Impatience – the desire for a sudden, total, and irrevocable change, for the end of the family within a generation – gave way to a bitter resignation when that (inevitably) failed to happen.

Here we can turn to the vexed question of accelerationism. I want to situate accelerationism not as some heretical form of Marxism, but as an attempt to converge with, intensify, and politicize the most challenging and exploratory dimensions of popular culture. Willis’s desire for “a social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude” and her “quarrel with the left” over desire and freedom can provide a different way into thinking what is at stake in this much misunderstood concept. A certain, perhaps now dominant, take on accelerationism has it that the position amounts to a cheerleading for the intensification of any capitalist process whatsoever, particularly the “worst,” in the hope that this will bring the system to a point of terminal crisis. (One example of this would be the idea that voting for Reagan and Thatcher in the ‘80s was the most effective revolutionary strategy, since their policies would supposedly lead to insurrection). This formulation, however, is question-begging in that it assumes what accelerationism rejects – the idea that everything produced “under” capitalism fully belongs to capitalism. By contrast, accelerationism maintains that there are desires and processes which capitalism gives rise to and feeds upon, but which it cannot contain; and it is the acceleration of *these* processes that will push capitalism beyond its limits. Accelerationism is also the conviction that the world desired by the Left is *post*-capitalist – that there is no possibility of a return to a pre-capitalist world and that there is no serious desire to return to such a world, even if we could.



Ellen Willis reading “No More Fun and Games,” a *Journal of Female Liberation*. Courtesy of the Ellen Willis’ family.

The accelerationist gambit depends on a certain understanding of capitalism, best articulated by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (a text which, not coincidentally, emerged in the wake of the counterculture). In *Anti-Oedipus*’s famous formulation, capitalism is defined by its tendency to decode/deterritorialize at the same time as it recodes/reterritorializes. On the one hand, capitalism dismantles all existing social and cultural structures, norms, and models of the sacred; on the other, it revives any number of apparently atavistic formations (tribal identities, religions, dynastic power ...):

The social axiomatic of modern societies is caught between two poles, and is constantly oscillating from one pole to the other ... [T]hese societies are caught between the Urstaat that they would like to resuscitate as an overcoding and reterritorializing unity, and the unfettered flows that carry them toward an absolute threshold. They recode with all their might, with world-wide dictatorship, local dictators, and an all-powerful police, while

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decoding – or allowing the decoding of – the fluent quantities of their capital and their populations. They are torn in two directions: archaism and futurism, nearchaism and ex-futurism, paranoia and schizophrenia.⁸

This description uncannily captures the way that capitalist culture has developed since the 1970s, with amoral neoliberal deregulation pursuing a project to desacralize and commodify without limits, supplemented by an explicitly moralizing neoconservatism which seeks to revive and shore up older traditions and institutions. On the level of propositional content, these futurisms and nearchaisms contradict one another, but so what?

The death of a social machine has never been heralded by a disharmony or a dysfunction; on the contrary, social machines make a habit of feeding on the contradictions they give rise to, on the crises they provoke, on the anxieties they engender, and on the infernal operations they regenerate. Capitalism has learned this, and has ceased doubting itself, while even socialists have abandoned belief in

the possibility of capitalism's natural death by attrition. No one has ever died from contradictions.⁹

If capitalism is *defined* as the tension between deterritorialization and reterritorialization, then it follows that one way (perhaps the only way) of surpassing capitalism would be to remove the reterritorializing shock absorbers. Hence the notorious passage in *Anti-Oedipus*, which might serve as the epigraph for accelerationism:

So what is the solution? Which is the revolutionary path? ... But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one? – To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist “economic solution”? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet de-territorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to “accelerate

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Margret Thatcher supporting pro-market campaigners in Parliament Square, on the eve of polling for the common market referendum, 1975. Photo: A/P.

the process,” as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet.¹⁰

The passage is teasingly enigmatic – what do Deleuze and Guattari mean by associating “the movement of the market” with “decoding and deterritorialization”? Unfortunately, they do not elaborate, which has made it is easy for orthodox Marxists to situate this passage as a classic example of how '68 led to neoliberal hegemony – one more left-wing capitulation to the logic of the new Right. This reading has been facilitated by the take-up of this passage in the 1990s for explicitly anti-Marxist ends by Nick Land.¹¹ But what if we read this section of *Anti-Oedipus* not as a recanting of Marxism, but as a new model for what Marxism could be? Is it possible that what Deleuze and Guattari were outlining here was the kind of politics that Ellen Willis was calling for: a politics that was hostile to capital, but alive to desire; a politics that rejected all forms of the old world in favor of a “new earth”; a politics, that is, which demanded “a social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude”?

One point of convergence between Willis and Deleuze and Guattari was their shared belief that the family was at the heart of the politics of reaction. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is perhaps the family, more than any other institution, that is the principal agency of capitalist reterritorialization: the family as a transcendental structure (“mummy-daddy-me”) provisionally secures identity amidst and against capital's deliquescent tendencies, its propensity to melt down all preexisting certainties. It's for just this reason, no doubt, that some leftists reach for the family as an antidote to, and escape from, capitalist meltdown – but this is to miss the way that capitalism relies upon the reterritorializing function of the family.¹²

It's no accident that Margaret Thatcher's infamous claim that “there is no such thing as society, only individuals” had to be supplemented by “... and their families.” It is also significant that in Deleuze and Guattari, just as in other anti-psychiatric theorists such as R. D. Laing and David Cooper, the attack on the family was twinned with an attack on dominant forms of psychiatry and psychotherapy. Deleuze and Guattari's critique of psychoanalysis is based on the way that it cuts off the individual from the wider social field, privatizing the origins of distress into the Oedipal “theatre” of family relations. They argue that psychoanalysis, rather than analyzing the way that capitalism performs this psychic privatization, merely repeats it. It's notable, too, that anti-psychiatric struggles have receded just as surely as have struggles over the

family: in order for the new Right's reality system to be naturalized, it was necessary for these struggles, inextricable from the counterculture, to be not only defeated but effectively disappeared.

It's worth pausing here to reflect on how far the Left is from confidently advocating the kind of revolution for which Deleuze and Guattari and Ellen Willis had hoped. Wendy Brown's analysis of “left melancholy” at the end of the 1990s still painfully (and embarrassingly) captures the libidinal and ideological impasses in which the Left too often finds itself caught. Brown describes what is in effect an anti-accelerationist Left: a Left which, lacking any forward momentum or guiding vision of its own, is reduced to incompetently defending the relics of older compromise formations (social democracy, the New Deal) or deriving a tepid jouissance from its very failure to overcome capitalism. This is a Left which, very far from being on the side of the unimaginable and the unprecedented, takes refuge in the familiar and the traditional. “What emerges,” Brown writes,

is a Left that operates without either a deep and radical critique of the status quo or a compelling alternative to the existing order of things. But perhaps even more troubling, it is a Left that has become more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness, a Left that is most at home dwelling not in hopefulness but in its own marginality and failure, a Left that is thus caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing.¹³

It was just this leftist tendency towards conservatism, retrenchment, and nostalgia that allowed Nick Land to bait the '90s Left with *Anti-Oedipus*, arguing that capital's “creative destruction” was far more revolutionary than anything the Left was now capable of projecting.

This persistent melancholy has no doubt contributed to the Left's failure to seize the initiative after the financial crisis of 2008. The crisis and its aftermath have so far vindicated Deleuze and Guattari's view that “social machines make a habit of feeding on ... the crises they provoke.” The continuing dominance of capital might have as much to do with the failure of popular culture to generate new dreamings as it has to do with the inertial quality of official political positions and strategies. Where the leading edge popular culture of the twentieth century allowed all kinds of experimental rehearsals of what Hardt and Negri call the

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“monstrous, violent, and traumatic ... revolutionary process of the abolition of identity,”¹⁴ the cultural resources for these kind of dismantlings of the self are now somewhat denuded. Michael Hardt has argued that “the positive content of communism, which corresponds to the abolition of private property, is the autonomous production of humanity – a new seeing, a new hearing, a new thinking, a new loving.”¹⁵ The kind of reconstruction of subjectivity and of cognitive categories that post-capitalism will entail is an aesthetic project as much as something that can be delivered by any kind of parliamentary and statist agent alone. Hardt refers to Foucault’s discussion of Marx’s phrase “man produces man.” The program that Foucault outlines in his gloss on this phrase is one that culture must recover if there is to be any hope of achieving the “social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude” which popular culture once dreamt of:

The problem is not to recover our “lost” identity, to free our imprisoned nature, our deepest truth; but instead, the problem is to move towards something radically Other. The center, then, seems still to be found in Marx’s phrase: man produces man ... For me, what must be produced is not man identical to himself, exactly as nature would have designed him or according to his essence; on the contrary, we must produce something that doesn’t yet exist and about which we cannot know how and what it will be.¹⁶

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1
Ellen Willis, *Beginning To See The Light: Sex, Hope and Rock-and-Roll* (Hannover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 158.

2
Ibid., xvi.

3
Ibid.

4
Ibid.

5
Ibid., 150.

6
“On the left, family chauvinism often takes the form of nostalgic declarations that the family, with its admitted faults, has been vitiated by modern capitalism, which is much worse (at least the family is based on personal relations rather than soulless cash, etc., etc.)” Ibid., 152.

7
Ibid., 161.

8
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1983), 260.

9
Ibid., 150.

10
Ibid., 239–40

11
See “Meltdown,” in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011).

12
The left-wing temptation to oppose the family to capital is nicely circumvented by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s claim that the family, alongside the nation and the corporation, is a corrupted form of the commons. “For many people, in fact, the family is the principal if not exclusive site of collective social experience, cooperative labor arrangements, caring, and intimacy. It stands on the foundation of the common but at the same time corrupts it by imposing a series of hierarchies, restrictions, exclusions, and distortions.” Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009), 160.

13
Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” *Boundary 2* 26:3 (1999): 19–27.

14
Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 339.

15
Hardt, “The Common in Communism,” in eds. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, *The*

Idea of Communism (New York: Verso, 2010), 141.

16
Michel Foucault, *Remarks On Marx* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 121.

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