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The Aesthetics of Stagnation: Ashley McKenzie's Werewolf and the Separated Society

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Separated from his product, man himself produces all the details of his world with ever increasing power, and thus finds himself ever more separated from his world. The more his life is now his product, the more he is separated from his life.

—Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle

The development of large-scale industry expresses itself, finally, in the extrusion of workers from the factory—deindustrialisation. Beyond the factory gates, workers find themselves wandering in an immense infrastructure, that of modern life, which reflects back to them not their growing power, but rather, their impotence. They see not a world of their making, but rather a runaway world, a world beyond their control, perhaps beyond anyone's control.

—Endnotes, "A History of Separation"

Ashley McKenzie's bleak and beautiful film Werewolf (2016) would appear to tell a story about opioid addiction.¹ The film's protagonists, Vanessa (Bhreagh MacNeil) and Blaise (Andrew Gillis), are both recovering addicts on a methadone treatment program, frequenting pharmacies for their medicine and conversing with government bureaucrats and clinic doctors about their

¹ Ashley McKenzie, Werewolf, prod. Nelson MacDonald (New Waterford: Grassfire Films, 2016).

progress and mental health. And yet McKenzie's feature debut avoids the tragic excess of conventional junkie movies. As she says in an interview, "I talked to different people in the methadone program, but I'm not trying to make some sort of exposé."² There are no thrilling scenes of the characters getting high, stealing, or performing sex work, as one might typically expect to find in a film about drug addiction. In fact, Werewolf is hardly a story at all, at least not in the generic sense of a conventionally defined narrative arc. And while the departure from linear narrative has long been an avant-garde mainstay, the film's recursive structure and oblique close-ups suggest a suffocating constriction instead of some sense of freedom from the dictates of a commercial film industry that we might associate with earlier avant-garde cinema like the French nouvelle vague. This is because Werewolf, as I hope to show, is first and foremost a cinematic meditation on precarity as a social experience of economic stagnation, one that attends to the gendered forms precarity assumes in an era of deindustrialization.

Werewolf dwells in the everyday reality of recovery and its banal routines, but the opioid epidemic—which has spread throughout both rural and deindustrialized regions across North America—appears in the film not as the primary cause of the characters' suffering, but as just another symptom of their precarity. Viewers might be forgiven for not recognizing the film's setting in present-day Cape Breton, an island in the Atlantic Canadian province of Nova Scotia that was once a hub of industrial activity. While Cape Breton Island has come to be known for its natural beauty through the promotional work of its tourism industry in an attempt to fill the considerable gap left by the flight of manufacture and extractive trades, Werewolf captures the hardscrabble existence of life in the postindustrial region in its depiction of two homeless addicts scraping by with a rusty lawnmower in the former mining town of New Waterford. United in

² Stephen Cooke, "McKenzie's Feature Debut *Werewolf* Shows Struggle of Young Cape Bretoners," LocalXpress.ca, 17 September 2016.

their isolation, Blaise and Nessa (as she's known) seem to have little left to do but wander the blasted wastelands of capitalist ruin, mowing lawns and killing time between methadone doses, until the tensions of the couple-form push them apart. Drawing out the consequences of economic stagnation for the aesthetics of cinematic realism, this essay explores the relationships between precarity and deindustrialization in McKenzie's film through a Marxian account of the figure of separation.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

In the conclusion to Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Fredric Jameson writes: "Marx's fundamental figure for social development and dynamics (a figure that runs through the Grundrisse, connecting the 1844 manuscripts in an unbroken line to Capital itself) . . . is the fundamental notion of separation (as when Marx describes the production of the proletariat in terms of their separation from the means of production—i.e., enclosure, the exclusion of the peasants from their land). There has not yet, I think, been a Marxism based on this particular figure."³ Jameson refers here to the process of proletarianization whereby the peasantry become formally "free" to sell their labor through their forcible release from serfdom. Marx describes this state of affairs as the "separation of labour, capital and landed property" in the 1844 manuscripts, and as "the separation of free labour from the objective conditions of its realization" in the Grundrisse, and argues in Capital that such separation "is clearly the result of a past historical development, the product of many economic revolutions, of the extinction of a whole series of older formations of social production."⁴ This process of separation, then—that

³ Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 398-399.

⁴ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," trans. Martin Milligan, in The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 71; Karl Marx, Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy, trans. Martin Nicolaus

which deprives workers of the means of subsistence and renders them dependent on wage labor for their survival—establishes the historical specificity of the modern proletariat and constitutes its functional distinction from that of earlier exploited classes. From this, everything follows. The drive to extract ever more surplus value from the labor process spurs the development of the productive forces and a rising demand for labor, leading to a growing concentration of workers, increased productive capacity, and rising output rates. But at certain point in the historical unfolding of capitalist social development this dynamic shifts, and workers are expelled from the production process en masse while productivity tapers off and output declines. The outcome of these developments is the total realization of the separated society.

Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle stands as a conspicuous exception to the general absence in Marxist theory of a sustained investigation into the figure of separation that Jameson identifies. According to Debord, "Separation is the alpha and the omega of the spectacle."⁵ The spectacle reduces lived experience to mere representation, isolating individuals only to reunite them through the mediation of images. While Society of the Spectacle might appear to depart from Marx's understanding of separation, Debord in fact posits the dominance of spectacle in terms of a lost unity that follows from the universal realization of the capitalist class relation.⁶ In the opening chapter, "Separation Perfected," Debord writes, "The success of the economic system of separation is the proletarianization of the world."⁷ Modern industrialization rendered increasing numbers of people dependent on the wage, but it also enabled the mass accumulation

(London: Penguin, 1993), 471; Karl Marx, Capital, vol. 1, A Critique of Political Economy, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 273.

⁵ Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle (Detroit: Black & Red, 1977), §25.

⁶ Perhaps Jameson would file Debord's work under concepts such as reification, alienation, or commodification, which he lists as similar but distinct figures in Marxian thought, and which are of course central to the philosophy of Debord and the Situationist International.

⁷ Debord, Society of the Spectacle, §26.

of capital, such that society in the postwar period confronted existence as a matter not of scarcity but abundance. Although Debord was critical of traditional Marxism's affirmation of labor, he nevertheless saw the seeds of a new society in the productive capacity of factory machinery and the growing power of the working class.⁸ What he could not have foreseen was that "the extension of capitalist social relations gave birth not to the collective worker, but rather to the separated society."⁹ This latter point forms the crux of the essay "A History of Separation" by the Endnotes discussion group, which situates the rise and fall of the workers' movement against the backdrop of the development of the productive forces and the long transition to full proletarianization over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While the Endnotes group

⁸ According to Debord, liberation would not come about solely through the development of the productive forces, but would require that the workers councils take control of and fundamentally reorganize production themselves. Debord writes, "Thus the present 'liberation from labor,' the increase of leisure, is in no way a liberation within labor, nor a liberation from the world shaped by this labor. None of the activity lost in labor can be regained in the submission to its result" (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, §27). For Debord and the Situationist International, who drew heavily on the bohemian avant-garde, the possibility of the self-abolition of the proletariat depends upon both the rising power of the working class and technological developments in capitalist production. As the Endnotes group argues in the introduction to their inaugural issue, Preliminary Materials for a Balance Sheet of the Twentieth Century, the Situationists collapsed the conflict between the liberation of labor and its abolition "into an immediate contradictory unity, transposing the opposition between means and ends into one between form and content." This tension appears as a contradiction internal to their practice between their call to end work and their investment in workers' councils as the means through which to realize the self-abolition of the proletariat. Endnotes writes, "On the one hand the content of the revolution was to involve a radical questioning of work itself (and not merely its organization), with the goal of overcoming the separation between work and leisure; yet on the other hand the form of this revolution was to be workers taking over their workplaces and running them democratically." The Situationist International thus represents the contradictory logic of a transitional moment, promoting the self-abolition of the proletariat by means of workers' councils that will become obsolete with the capitalist restructuring following the 1973 Recession. See Endnotes, "Bring Out Your Dead," Endnotes 1 (2008), 7.

⁹ Endnotes, "A History of Separation: The Rise and Fall of the Workers' Movement, 1883-1982," Endnotes 4 (2015): 161-162.

acknowledges Debord's contribution to a theory of capitalist separation, their approach takes as its point of departure the declining demand for labor after 1973.¹⁰

Most Marxian accounts of this moment of transition tell a story of capitalist expansion from the factory into previously separate or semi-autonomous spheres of social life, referencing the shift to a post-Fordist mode of production, the financialization of everyday life, or the closure of the world market through neoliberal globalization.¹¹ But as Robert Brenner notes, "Between 1973 and the present, economic performance in the US, Western Europe, and Japan has, by every standard macroeconomic indicator, deteriorated, business cycle by business cycle, decade by decade."¹² Following Brenner, this essay proposes that the present moment in the capitalist core is defined by pervasive economic decline, or what is known in macroeconomic theory as secular stagnation, a term economists use to refer to the persistence of negligible growth rates beyond normal cycles. A decade after the Great Recession, mainstream economists such as Lawrence Summers and Robert Gordon have begun to argue that the era of economic growth is over. In their search for a model adequate to this new reality, they have turned to the concept of

¹⁰ They write, "For all its inadequacies, Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle intuited at least this sad reality: the extension of capitalist social relations was reflected in the increasing separation of workers from one another, even as they became increasingly dependent on one another for their survival." See Endnotes, "A History of Separation," 162.

¹¹ Studies of the relationship between capital and culture typically make use of these periodizing frameworks. See, for example, Jonathan Beller, The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006); Leigh Claire La Berge, Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015); Rachael Greenwald Smith, Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹² Robert Brenner, "What Is Good for Goldman Sachs Is Good for America: The Origins of the Current Crisis," Prologue to the Spanish edition of Brenner's The Economics of Global Turbulence (La economía de la turbulencia global, trans. Juan Mari Madariaga [Madrid: Akal, 2009]). Available online in English-language typescript, 6.
<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/cstch/papers/BrennerCrisisTodayOctober2009.pdf>

secular stagnation.¹³ The economist Alvin Hansen, a student of John Maynard Keynes who broke with the teachings of his mentor, originally proposed the macroeconomic theory of secular (or long-term) stagnation during the Great Depression to account for persistent negligible economic growth.¹⁴ In Hansen's view, the world economy was at risk of slipping into a permanent state of low growth and high unemployment in which any attempt at recovery would prove futile.

Largely forgotten during the postwar boom, economists have recently revived this “macroeconomic heresy” to explain the unusually weak performance of the American economy since the 2008 financial crisis.¹⁵ In order to adequately grasp the contours of the crisis-ridden present, however, we have to reach a little further back than 2008, to the crisis of 1973 and its aftermath.¹⁶

In what follows, I outline two leading theories of this pivotal shift in 1973—Brenner's account of the long downturn and Arrighi's model of hegemonic cycles—and the subsequent period of economic stagnation and hegemonic unraveling, drawing on the Marxian critique of value to distinguish the present downturn from previous periods of hegemonic transition. I then

¹³ See Lawrence Summers, “The Age of Secular Stagnation: What It Is and What to Do About It,” Foreign Affairs, February 15, 2016; Gordon, Robert J. Gordon, The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living since the Civil War (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Alvin H. Hansen, “Economic Progress and Declining Population Growth,” The American Economic Review 29, no. 1 (1939): 1-15.

¹⁵ Roger E. Backhouse and Mauro Boianovsky, “Secular Stagnation: The History of a Macroeconomic Heresy,” The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought 23, no. 6 (2016): 946-970. For further discussion of secular stagnation in current mainstream economic discourse, see Satyajit Das, The Age of Stagnation: Why Perpetual Growth Is Unattainable and the Global Economy Is in Peril (Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books, 2016) and Mohamed A. El-Erian, The Only Game in Town: Central Banks, Instability, and Avoiding the Next Collapse (New York: Random House, 2016).

¹⁶ To be clear, precarity and separation have always been fundamental features of capitalism. The distinction I wish to draw here is between an expansive form of capitalism able to integrate vast populations into its system of accumulation, and one that, since 1973, has been forced to expel increasing numbers of people due to dwindling rates of accumulation and growth.

turn to discuss Werewolf, tracing the logic of separation through the film's engagement with deindustrialization, precarity, and gender. Although popular cinema can be thought of as a spectacular commodity, Werewolf distinguishes itself from spectacle by virtue of its status as an experimental film. When thinking about the temporality of spectacle, Debord certainly had in mind the mass culture of a popular cinema and its "pseudo-cyclical" movement between labor-time and leisure-time.¹⁷ Yet in an era in which the distinction between work and non-work has all but disappeared, avant-garde cinema has deliberately refashioned the temporal rhythms of filmic representation in order to critique not only the commodified images of the modern culture industry, but also the fantasies of historical continuity and reproductive futurity that underpin narrative representation as such. Cinema is never merely spectacle, but is always also an aesthetic form, and at its best it participates in experiments in sensorial perception that open a window onto the obscured structures propping up the surfaces of reality. For Nicolas Bourriaud, "realist describes works that lift the ideological veils which apparatuses of power drape over the mechanism of expulsion and its refuse."¹⁸ Werewolf is a case in point, depicting a kind of fractured present in which the impasse generated by a stagnant economy is at once social, historical, political, and narratological. Instead of offering ways out of our perpetual present, however, Werewolf ruminates on the experience of being "stuck" so as to better understand what binds us to the contemporary moment. In doing so, McKenzie's film offers a poignant example of what I call the aesthetics of stagnation.

The Onset of Stagnation

¹⁷ Debord, Society of the Spectacle, §151.

¹⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, The Exform, trans. Erik Butler (New York: Verso, 2016), x.

The 1973 recession marked the decisive point at which an already sputtering global economy abruptly lurched into a process of large-scale restructuring. This shift signaled the beginning of the end for American hegemony and its organization of the capitalist world-system, ushering in a protracted period of economic stagnation and contraction in the West. For Brenner, this moment witnessed the “transition from long boom to long downturn.”¹⁹ In the wake of the 1973 oil shock and the collapse of the Bretton Woods Agreement in 1973 (and following the Nixon Shock of 1971), the 1973 stock market crash made evident at the economic level what the Fall of Saigon in 1975 would subsequently demonstrate at the level of geopolitics: the postwar economic order was unraveling, and the American century was in a profound state of crisis. After World War II, the leading capitalist economies enjoyed what Giovanni Arrighi describes as “a worldwide virtuous circle of high profits, high investments and increasing productivity.”²⁰ But as Brenner argues, between 1965 and 1973, as output rates in Germany and Japan caught up with those of the US, what had been previously “a symbiosis, if a highly conflictual and unstable one, of leader and followers, of early and later developers, and of hegemon and hegemonized” became a zero-sum game of cutthroat competition.²¹ Global profit rates plummeted. The response of the governments and industry leaders of the advanced capitalist countries to the steep fall in profitability across major sectors of the economy only exacerbated the crisis, plunging the global economy into extended decline.

In Arrighi’s account of this decline in American hegemony, he turns to Fernand Braudel’s theory of the “long century” to model what he calls “systemic cycles of

¹⁹ Robert Brenner, The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005 (New York: Verso, 2006), 267.

²⁰ Giovanni Arrighi, “The Social and Political Economy of Global Turbulence,” New Left Review 20 (2003): 11.

²¹ Robert Brenner, The Boom and the Bubble: The US in the World Economy (New York: Verso, 2002), 15.

accumulation.”²² He identifies four cycles, each tied geopolitically to a global hegemon, and each divided into three phases held in sway, in turn, by the logics of mercantile, industrial, and financial capital. Pinpointing 1973 as the signal crisis of the US cycle of accumulation, Arrighi argues that the financialization of the capitalist world-system in the post-1973 period reflects a recurrent pattern that spans the longue durée of capital accumulation, marking the collapse of the Italian, Dutch, and British financial empires in previous “long centuries.” For Arrighi, deindustrialization and financialization are two sides of the same coin: “When escalating competition reduces the availability of relatively empty, profitable niches in the commodity markets, the leading capitalist organizations have one last refuge, to which they can retreat and shift competitive pressures onto others. This final refuge is the money market.”²³ And in the post-1973 period, to be sure, staggering profits have accrued in the US-centered financial sector, while profit rates in manufacture have suffered a dramatic decline.²⁴ In Arrighi’s model, this financial bubble cannot rescue an ailing hegemon, which at the end of each cycle must inevitably give way to its successor. In Braudel’s seasonal formulation, “it [is] a sign of autumn.”²⁵ What distinguishes the present moment of American decline, I contend, is that there appears to be no

²² Giovanni Arrighi, The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times (New York: Verso, 2010), 6.

²³ Arrighi, “The Social and Political Economy of Global Turbulence,” 51.

²⁴ Arrighi writes, “Confronted with heightened international competition (especially in trade-intensive sectors like manufacturing), higher-cost incumbent firms responded to falling returns by diverting a growing proportion of their incoming cash flows from investment in fixed capital and commodities to liquidity and accumulation through financial channels” (“The Social and Political Economy of Global Turbulence,” 49). For an account of the growing share of US GDP that finance comes to occupy in the late twentieth century, see Greta R. Krippner, “The Financialization of the American Economy,” Socio-Economic Review 3 (2005): 173-208.

²⁵ Fernand Braudel, Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century, vol. 3, The Perspective of the World (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 246.

new cycle of accumulation on the horizon, no ascending hegemon that might inaugurate a renewed expansion of the capitalist economy on a global scale.²⁶

In their focus on inter-capitalist competition, the analyses offered by Brenner and Arrighi—as illuminating as they are in tracing the contours of the post-World War II period—operate at the level of price, and therefore cannot fully account for the historical specificity of the current conjuncture, which is marked fundamentally by a crisis of value.²⁷ “Competition executes the inner laws of capital,” Marx writes, “but it does not invent them. It realizes them.”²⁸ Here, Marx suggests we can discern, in the motion of intercapitalist competition, a trace of the operations of capital’s secular tendencies. But the underlying process driving this motion—what Marx calls valorization—remains, in the final instance, obscured. Marx’s critique of value offers three distinct moments of insight into the arc of accumulation. First, the capitalist form of value, as an actually existing abstraction, form-determines the labor process and its reproduction at the

²⁶ A series of candidates have vied for the position—first Japan, then China, and then the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South-Africa) in a sort of multinodal hegemony—only to fail under the weight of global overcapacity and an already high organic composition of capital. For a critique of the notion that industrial development in the BRICS is ushering in a new cycle of material growth in the global economy that might pave the way for a renewed workerism and a revitalized party-form, see Joshua Clover and Aaron Benanav, “Can Dialectics Break BRICS?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no. 4 (2014): 743-759.

²⁷ For a critique of Brenner and Arrighi (as well as David Harvey) on these very grounds, see Moishe Postone, “Theorizing the Contemporary World: Robert Brenner, Giovanni Arrighi, David Harvey,” *Political Economy and Global Capitalism: The 21st Century, Present and Future*, ed. Rob Albritton, Bob Jessop, Richard Westra (London: Anthem Press, 2010), 7-24.

²⁸ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 752. See also vol. 1 of *Capital*, where Marx writes, “While it is not our intention here to consider the way in which the immanent laws of capitalist production manifest themselves in the external movements of individual capitals, assert themselves as the coercive laws of competition, and therefore enter into the consciousness of the individual capitalist as the motives which drive him forward, this much is clear: a scientific analysis of competition is possible only if we can grasp the inner nature of capital, just as the apparent motions of the heavenly bodies are intelligible only to someone who is acquainted with their real motions, which are not perceptible to the senses” (1: 433).

level of the social whole.²⁹ Next, in its drive to self-expansion, capital reorganizes the labor process to increase productivity via technological ratcheting.³⁰ Finally, through the rationalization of the labor process, capital erodes the very source of value, expelling increasing numbers of workers from the production process and thereby slipping inexorably into crisis. When capital reaches this level of density, the affirmation of labor—the traditional Marxist project of its liberation and socialization—becomes impossible. Labor cannot represent an opposition to capital or be the agent of its overcoming in an era of deindustrialization, not simply because it is always already an alienated form of human activity but because it no longer occupies a structural position within the class relation from which to assert itself as an antagonist.

This is the autumnal logic of seasonal torpor for a labor movement in terminal decline. As the Endnotes group argues, the development of the productive forces has not concentrated workers into a compact mass but separated them from each other:

The mistake of the theorists of the labour movement was as follows. They often described capitalist social relations in terms of a foundational fracturing: the separation of peasants from the land generated a propertyless proletariat. However, the class relation is not only established through a foundational fracturing; it also confirms that fracturing in every

²⁹ The idea that value “form-determines” the labor process derives from Marx’s writings on the capitalist value-form. In Theories of Surplus Value, Marx uses the German term Formbestimmtheit (“form-determination” or “determination of form”) to describe the process by which money or commodities become forms of value for capital. See Karl Marx, Theorien über den Mehrwert, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: J.H.W. Dietz Nachf, 1910), 531.

³⁰ This is what Marx calls real subsumption, which names the reorganization of the labor process towards the production of relative surplus value. See Karl Marx, ‘Results of the Direct Production Process,’ Marx-Engels Collected Works, vol. 34 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1994).

moment. Capitalism realises the fracturing of social existence as the “unity-in-separation” of market society, an interdependence of everyone on everyone else, which nevertheless reduces individuals to isolated atoms, facing off against one another in market competition.³¹

Both Brenner and Arrighi equate the present moment of economic and hegemonic decline with the Gilded Age, insofar as the capitalist class also launched an assault on the working classes at the end of the nineteenth century.³² During the period that marked the transition from British to US hegemony, however, the industrial proletariat was expanding in size and increasing in concentration—a process of mass integration and expansion that would accelerate over much of the twentieth century—whereas in the post-1973 period the proletariat has been defined by expulsion and fragmentation. As Aaron Benanav argues, “Since 1973, rising precarity has been associated not only with the decline of the welfare state, but also with a slowdown in capital accumulation, a rise in unemployment, and a decline in the availability of industrial jobs, all of which mark off the present from the Gilded Age past.”³³ This distinction helps explain why Arrighi’s model has been unable to account for the absence of new cycle of accumulation, but also allows for a better account of the post-1973 period, in which the shift from boom to downturn that Brenner narrates accompanies a secular decline in capital accumulation and thus a falling demand for labor. Rising precarity in the post-1973 period therefore reflects the declining

³¹ Endnotes, “A History of Separation,” 180.

³² See Brenner, “What Is Good for Goldman Sachs,” 23; and Arrighi, “The Social and Political Economy of Global Turbulence,” 26.

³³ Aaron Benanav, “Precarity Rising,” Viewpoint, June 15, 2015, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/06/15/precarity-rising/>.

possibilities for social reproduction through capital accumulation under prevailing conditions of secular stagnation.

The Separated Society

The protagonists in Werewolf bear all the hallmarks of precarity: financial insecurity, employment scarcity, an inability to plan for the future, a lack of political power, and subjection to state negligence. Excluded from a formal economy in the throes of downturn, Blaise and Nessa scrape together what little money they can, mowing lawns in order to cover their methadone treatments and syphoning gas from parked cars to run a rusty mower on its last legs. Shunned by members of a property-owning class who distrust them around their homes, Blaise and Nessa are separated not only from the world of gainful employment, but also from the everyday life that more financially stable families enjoy, despite the fact that they only want the same “peace of mind” and “security” as anyone else, as Blaise says.³⁴ Early in the film they meet with a state representative to apply for low-income housing, but are told that there are no vacancies and that the waiting list is long. And so they move into an abandoned trailer in the woods, dragging the lawnmower up the steep incline of a long gravel road at the end of each day (see fig. 1). This isolation figures in the film as an epistemological gap separating them from the normative world of capitalist society, which Blaise articulates when he tells a clinic doctor, “You don’t understand how a person like me lives.”³⁵ Blaise and Nessa are also, in large part, deprived of familial networks of support. Later in the film, when Blaise relapses and a friend asks him if

³⁴ McKenzie, Werewolf, 0:13:31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 0:35:42.

he needs to call someone, Blaise tells him, “I don’t have anybody to call.”³⁶ And while Nessa has an aunt who allows them to stay with her temporarily, Blaise and Nessa are for the most part on their own. They have aspirations to escape their situation and move “out west,” presumably to the lucrative oil fields of Alberta, but have little capacity for upward mobility.³⁷ Besides, Nessa cannot transfer her methadone treatment plan out of province until she clears her balance, which at over a hundred and fifty dollars is out of reach without a steady income. Such is life for two homeless addicts in post-industrial Cape Breton.

The stakes of McKenzie’s critical perspective become clearer when we consider the title originally proposed for the film, The Train Whistle Does Not Blow. Infamous for having the highest rates of unemployment and youth outward-migration in Canada, Cape Breton Island was once a booming industrial center during what Arrighi identifies as the British and US cycles of accumulation, particularly in mining and steel production.³⁸ Indeed, the fate of the Atlantic Canadian economy at the end of the twentieth century was inexorably tied to the hegemonic cycles of capital accumulation, and followed a global wave of deindustrialization as the capitalist world-system underwent a sweeping process of financialization after 1973. In the early twentieth century, the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation was the largest employer in Canada. By Friday 13th, 1967—a day that became known locally as “Black Friday”—Hawker Siddeley Canada was struggling to keep afloat and announced it would be closing the Sydney Steel Plant. Both the steel and coal industries continued under government ownership for the rest of the twentieth century, but by the early 1990s, both industries were in trouble again and were

³⁶ Ibid., 0:55:09.

³⁷ Ibid., 00:53:19.

³⁸ For an account of these industries in Cape Breton through the Marxian framework of combined and uneven development, see David Frank, “The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation,” Acadiensis 7, no. 1 (1977): 3-34.

permanently closed by the end of 2001.³⁹ The island also used to be home to a militant labor movement that lives on primarily through its memorialization in observances such as Davis Day, an annual day of remembrance that commemorates the life of William Davis, a striking miner gunned down by police during a rally near New Waterford in 1925.⁴⁰ The final throes of labor militancy saw union members chain themselves to VIA Rail train carriages after the Crown corporation decided to terminate its rail service to Cape Breton in the 1990s, which labor leaders feared would further separate the population from the national economy and sound the death knell for industrial employment on the island.⁴¹

Sure enough, not long after the train whistles fell silent, the Cape Breton Development Corporation that had taken over the mines in 1968 closed its doors for good following the decommissioning of all its mines in 2001, and the company's former headquarters in Glace Bay became a call center.⁴² Service work is now one of the biggest sectors of employment on the island. But deindustrialization has not only led to rising unemployment rates and the growth of service sector work. Vast numbers of young people from Cape Breton Island now work in and

³⁹ For a history of the decline of steel production in Sydney, see Lachlan MacKinnon, "Deindustrialization on the Periphery: An Oral History of Sydney Steel, 1945-2001" (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2016).

⁴⁰ The protest during which Davis was shot was a response to a decision by the mining company, British Empire Steel and Coal Company, to shut off drinking water and electrical power to the town of New Waterford following a series of escalating miners' strikes. At the time, nearly a quarter of Canada's military was in Cape Breton to snuff out labor militancy.

⁴¹ For a detailed study of labor militancy in Cape Breton in the early twentieth century, see Michael Earle, "Radicalism in Decline: Labour and Politics in Industrial Cape Breton, 1930-1950" (PhD diss., Dalhousie University, 1990). For an analysis of the radical politics of the coalminers' union in Nova Scotia in the 1930s, see Michael Earle, "The Coalminers and Their 'Red' Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936," *Labour/Le Travail* 22 (1988): 99-137.

⁴² Terry Gibbs and Garry Leech have done significant work to tie the decline of the coal industry in Cape Breton to the rise of call centres throughout the postindustrial region of the island. See Terry Gibbs and Garry Leech, *The Failure of Global Capitalism: From Cape Breton to Columbia and Beyond* (Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press, 2009).

around the oil sands project in Alberta.⁴³ Sydney, the largest city on the island, had a population of over 30,000 in the decades following World War II. That number began to drop in the 1970s, and by the turn of the new millennium had declined by a third. The setting of the film thus exhibits all the signs of rustbelt degradation: economic stagnation, population loss, and urban decay. At work here is a kind of “slow death,” a phrase Lauren Berlant, following David Harvey, uses to describe “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence.”⁴⁴ Slow death traverses the border between living and dying such that it becomes difficult to distinguish the two, an experience that “is simultaneously at an extreme and in a zone of ordinariness, where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable.”⁴⁵

Consider the fact that cancer rates in Cape Breton County are significantly higher than the national average.⁴⁶ Or that youth are at increased risk of drug addiction. The opioid epidemic of “hillbilly heroin” that swept across the island in the early years of the new millennium continues to take its toll on communities.⁴⁷ Despite this public health emergency, in 2016 the Canadian Federal government cut funding for the only safe needle exchange program on the

⁴³ For a discussion of labor migration from Cape Breton to the oil sands of Alberta, see Nelson Ferguson, “From Coal Pits to Tar Sands: Labour Migration between an Atlantic Canadian Region and the Athabasca Oil Sands,” Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work and Society 17 and 18 (2011): 106-118.

⁴⁴ Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 95.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁶ Department of Health, “Moving to Address High Cancer Rates in Cape Breton,” Nova Scotia, Canada (provincial government website), April 21, 1999, <https://novascotia.ca/news/release/?id=19990421003>

⁴⁷ Shawna Richer, “‘Hillbilly Heroin’ Hits Cape Breton,” The Globe and Mail, March 10, 2003, <https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/hillbilly-heroin-hits-cape-breton/article4127611/?ref=http://www.theglobeandmail.com&>

island.⁴⁸ The film captures the pervasive slow death of the island, not only through images of boarded-up buildings covered with spray paint and washed-out landscapes of overgrown lawns and unpaved roads, but also in its representation of a state that keeps addicts alive only to manage their deterioration through the methadone treatment program. Blaise and Nessa are the leftovers of an industrial proletariat now lacking a material basis upon which to secure its own social reproduction. In this sense, the film affirms Bourriaud's argument that, in order to be adequate to the contemporary conjuncture, any realist practice in the present must attend to the logics governing the distinctions between productive and unproductive, product and waste, and the included and excluded. "Waste," Bourriaud writes, "refers to what is cast off when something is made. The proletariat—the social class that capital has at its full disposal—is no longer found only in factories. It runs through the whole of the social body and comprises a people of the abandoned."⁴⁹ Living on the fringes of a decaying social order, Blaise and Nessa mock the convention in cultural production that youth embody reproductive futurity and carry in their very presence the promise of a new day. Queer theorist Lee Edelman has argued that kids are the representatives of "reproductive futurism,"⁵⁰ or the ongoing reproduction of the existing social order. But Blaise and Nessa have no future.

Werewolf paints a picture of a world in which the exhaustion of valorization has passed the point of no return and human life has become refuse, or, in Marxian terms, surplus. For Marx, "capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a

⁴⁸ The Ally Centre has since has its funded restored for a year, but will need to secure alternative means to keep the centre running once the funding runs out. See George Mortimer, "Sydney's Ally Centre has Funding Restored for One Year," The Cape Breton Post, November 10, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/ally-centre-sydney-funding-eyking-hiv-needle-1.3843798>

⁴⁹ Bourriaud, The Exform, viii.

⁵⁰ Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition—question of life or death—for the necessary.”⁵¹ Marx calls this process “the general law of capital accumulation,” which charts the general increase in constant over variable capital as it is coded into the most basic movement of capital over time:

The greater social wealth, the functioning of capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productivity of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also develop the labour-power at its disposal. The relative mass of industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.⁵²

Capital works, on the one hand, to create as much available labor power as possible, and, on the other, to steadily decrease the amount of socially necessary labor time, producing a surplus

⁵¹ Marx, Grundrisse, 706.

⁵² Marx, Capital, 1:798.

population that tends toward consolidated pauperism.⁵³ Through the real subsumption of labor, capital reduces the amount of labor time that is socially necessary for production. Decreasing socially necessary labor time through real subsumption entails what Marx calls a “rising organic composition” of capital, which indexes “the progressive decline in the variable capital in relation to the constant capital.”⁵⁴ In other words, capital accumulation proceeds with more hardware and software relative to the number of workers on the job. This process by which labor becomes superfluous does not result in the disappearance of work, but instead in its precarization. Again, Marx is instructive here: “the higher the productivity of labor, the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the condition for their existence.”⁵⁵ Expelled from production, labor is forced to seek the means of its reproduction in the sphere of circulation, greasing the wheels of capital in a bloating service sector.⁵⁶

Offering their lawn mowing services on the black market, Blaise and Nessa exemplify the precarious workers of an informal economy that has taken on new significance in the era of deindustrialization. Mowing lawns is the only work either of them can find for much of the film,

⁵³ For Marx, “Proletarian must be understood to mean, economically speaking, nothing other than ‘wage-labourer,’ the man who produces and valorises ‘capital,’ and is thrown onto the street as soon as he becomes superfluous to the need for valorization.” See Marx, *Capital*, 1:764, fn 1.

⁵⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, *A Critique of Political Economy*, trans D. Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1991), 318.

⁵⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 1:798.

⁵⁶ “This surplus population need not find itself completely ‘outside’ capitalist social relations. Capital may not need these workers, but they still need to work. They are thus forced to offer themselves up for the most abject forms of wage slavery in the form of petty-production and services—identified with informal and often illegal markets of direct exchange arising alongside failures of capitalist production.” This is the logic of precarity and its proliferation, for “in a society based on wage-labour, the reduction of socially-necessary labour-time—which makes goods so abundant—can only express itself in a scarcity of jobs, in a multiplication of forms of precarious employment.” See Aaron Benanav and John Clegg, “Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital,” *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Pendakis, Jeff Diamanti, Nicholas Brown, Josh Robinson and Imre Szeman (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 606, fn 14, 593.

until Nessa manages to get a job selling soft serve at an ice cream parlor. Informal work or service work: these are the options on offer in a stagnant economy. The increase of investment in fixed capital that Marx argues pushes labor out of the production process does not only result in mass unemployment, but also produces a ballooning service sector.⁵⁷ Consider the image of the biscuit grinder at the ice cream parlor (see fig. 2). Metallic and rudimentary, the grinder resembles a scaled-down piece of machinery from an industrial-era factory, yet it appears as part of the minimal fixed capital needed to run a service-based business. What is more, the biscuit grinder in the film requires manual rotation, making it seem out of date at the same time that it reminds us there is little room for automation in the service sector. Indeed, the service sector by definition resists technological innovation and development, which is why it has been the primary site for absorbing surplus labor and why it tends toward low productivity and low wages. But the explosive growth of service work in the wake of deindustrialization also signals the solidification of the separated society. As Endnotes puts it, “Everywhere, the working class is less homogeneous—it is stratified across high- and low-income occupations; its work is more precarious; and it switches jobs more frequently. More and more workers feel like work has no purpose; for more and more are employed in dead-end service jobs, or are unemployed or unemployable.”⁵⁸ The image of the biscuit grinder not only represents capital pulverizing human labor. It also operates as a basic heuristic for the capitalist logic of separation as capital accumulation itself inevitably tends to grind down: the tendential displacement of industrial labor by service work, and the rising precarity that characterizes a post-industrial workforce excluded

⁵⁷ Jason E. Smith, “Nowhere to Go: Automation, Then and Now,” Brooklyn Rail, March 1, 2017. <http://brooklynrail.org/2017/03/field-notes/Nowhere-to-Go>

⁵⁸ Endnotes, “A History of Separation,” 159.

from production, “littered across innumerable shops” and spread among “an endless differentiation of tasks.”⁵⁹

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

The Aesthetics of Stagnation

What happens to avant-garde cinema when capital accumulation comes grinding to a halt? While a comprehensive account of post-1973 avant-garde cinema remains beyond the scope of this essay, it bears mentioning that Werewolf shares certain formal features with other avant-garde films of the period, such as Lizzie Borden’s Born in Flames (1983) and Harmony Korine’s Gummo (1997).⁶⁰ These films participate in an uptake in avant-garde realist techniques among filmmakers since the 1980s that can be understood as part of a turn to realism that accompanies periods of hegemony in crisis, following Jed Esty’s Arrighian argument that “realism wars can be mapped onto tectonic shifts in the history of global Anglophone hegemonies in the modern world system.”⁶¹ Like the “revanchist realism” that Leigh Claire La Berge argues emerged in the 1980s alongside and against “the canonization of postmodernism as an aesthetic mode” seeking to “resuscitate the dominant aesthetic mode that had been used to capture and critique finance capital’s early twentieth-century cultural and economy hegemony, from the gilded age to the Great Depression,”⁶² this cinematic realism refuses the fantasy of reproductive futurity that capitalist realism espouses. But if finance, as La Berge argues, should be understood as “an

⁵⁹ Ibid., 157.

⁶⁰ Born in Flames, dir. by Lizzie Borden (New York: First Run Features, 1983); Gummo, dir. by Harmony Korine (Burbank, CA: First Line Features, 1997).

⁶¹ Jed Esty, “Realism Wars,” Novel: A Forum on Fiction 49.2 (2016): 335.

⁶² La Berge, Scandals and Abstractions, 5-10.

orientation and contestation over futurity,”⁶³ films like Born in Flames and Gummo participate in this contest only to the extent that they reject the conventions of narrative temporality.

Confronting the impasse of capitalist crisis, Born in Flames exhibits a preoccupation with space and place that results from the exhaustion of a developmental narrative arc. In a similar focus on space and place, Gummo ties structural unemployment to generalized decay in the former bastions of industrialism at the end of the long boom. Spatialized narratives, surplus populations, social decay: these are the characteristics of cinematic realism in an age of value in crisis.

Whereas finance promises a future of pure speculation, this avant-garde cinematic realism is one in which the future has been cancelled. This is an example of what I am calling the aesthetics of stagnation, which increasingly defines—but is in no way exclusive to—contemporary avant-garde cinema.

Encoding the logics and affects of stagnation at the level of aesthetic form, Werewolf suggests that contemporary forms of precarity in the deindustrialized West are tied to a crisis of reproductive futurity that follows from the persistence of economic decline. Minimalist dialogue, an often stationary camera, scenes shot at close vantage: life in the diegetic world of the film has been pared down. Shot almost entirely in close-ups, the camera restricts the viewer’s perception to the claustrophobic universe of the two leads. Generating a mood of apprehension that stubbornly lingers without ever amounting to any sort of rupture, Werewolf favors an affective space somewhere between reservation and suffocating constriction. The film opens with a shot of a piece of old fishing rope, affixed as a clothesline between a tree and a rusted-out trailer, and with the sounds of birds chirping. The rope sits taut for a moment before it is pulled in by the shaking hands of a young junkie wearing a hospital bracelet, who we will later learn is Blaise. In

⁶³ Ibid., 12.

the next shot, the camera cuts to a pair of bare feet gently swaying in the breeze, the rope creaking. Opening with Blaise's suicide, Werewolf offers no way forward—his fate is sealed from the beginning. At the end of the film, we return to the opening moment, the timeline of events having caught up with its inevitable outcome. The film affirms this recursive narrative structure in the cyclical regularity of the methadone treatment program, producing an overwhelming sensation of inescapable misery. While such a cyclical narrative arc might otherwise suggest a form of liberation from the strictures of cinematic tradition, in this case the weight of history bears down on the form, a consequence of the foreclosure that the grinding-down of capital accumulation portends. That is, the departure from linearity signals the exhaustion of a progressively developing modernity and its accompanying narrative *telos*, recasting confinement in terms of an impasse in historical time. In other words, Blaise was always already dead.

The film's realism might thus be understood as a contemporary variant of what was known in the mid-twentieth century as "kitchen-sink realism" or "kitchen-sink drama," updated for the era of deindustrialization. Kitchen-sink realism was part of the British New Wave, a cultural movement that emerged in the early postwar years in the United Kingdom alongside the more renowned nouvelle vague in France, which centered on the domestic life of working-class Britons. The moniker derives from an expressionist painting of a kitchen sink by John Bratby, an artist whose work took everyday objects like trash cans and toilets as its subject matter.⁶⁴ As a term, kitchen-sink realism was used by critics to describe theater, visual art, literature, television, and film that portrayed "angry young men" disillusioned with modern society in the harsh style

⁶⁴ John A. Walker, "Kitchen Sink School," Glossary of Art, Architecture and Design since 1945, 3rd ed. (Boston: G.K. Hall, 2002), 374.

of social realism.⁶⁵ Typically set in industrial areas of Northern England, kitchen-sink realism regularly featured shots of cramped rentals and grimy pubs, and addressed social and political issues of the day such as homelessness and racism. Although the legacy of kitchen-sink realism survives in the UK in the films of Mike Leigh and Ken Loach, it tends to find its popular expression in British soap operas like Coronation Street and EastEnders.⁶⁶ But McKenzie's indie film also shares many of the conventions of the genre: a realist representation of individuals from the poorer classes and their everyday lives, disaffected protagonists at odds with the modern world, and a keen awareness of the pressing social and political issues at stake in contemporary society. Rather than concentrate on the everyday lives of an industrial working class, however, Werewolf brings the genre up to date, to wallow in the dregs of unemployment that punctuate a post-industrial landscape. But the film distinguishes itself, as well, in its choice of protagonists. Instead of primarily focusing on men, Werewolf examines the gender politics of the couple form in an age of deindustrialization, emphasizing that it is Nessa who bears the brunt of a shared precarity through the feminized work of crisis management.

The film pays also particular attention to the way the couple-form becomes a refuge from the insecurity and unemployment that mark a stagnant economy, especially for those who lack access to familial wealth. Blaise's machismo, for example—which is expressed in how much space he takes up and tracked by his aggression and tendency to dominate the dialogue—can be read as a desperate attempt on the part of unemployed men to restore masculinity to its former place of privileged access to social security in the “Golden Age” of the Fordist family wage. The

⁶⁵ For an overview of the Angry Young Men movement of film and theatre directors, see Colin Wilson, The Angry Years: The Rise and Fall of the Angry Young Men (London: Robson Books, 2007).

⁶⁶ Tony Warren, Coronation Street (Manchester, UK: Granada Television, 1960-); Tony Holland and Julia Smith, EastEnders (London: The British Broadcasting Corporation, 1985-).

film reproduces this gendered unevenness in the framing of shots in which Blaise fills the screen while Nessa stands off to the side or behind him. Despite consistently sidelining Nessa, however, Blaise also effectively casts her as his caretaker, manipulating her into enabling his patterns of behaviour. In a suggestive scene, he hides in her hair: she is his shield, which is to say he instrumentalizes her so as to protect himself from the world (see fig. 3). Although both Blaise and Nessa admit to having suicidal thoughts in their meetings with clinic doctors, she feels responsible for keeping him alive, while he appears quite happy to use her for his own benefit. When their lawnmower breaks down, he even suggests half jokingly that she will “have to suck somebody’s dick” in order to pay for their next methadone dosage.⁶⁷ The film thus implies that the couple-form is no refuge at all, but only supports the characters’ mutual decline. It might appear that, in order to escape this fate, Nessa must break free of the couple form, and in the end she does just that. But even after she leaves Blaise, she still has no real freedom: her job at the ice cream parlor merely provides enough money to maintain her methadone treatment program, and the final shot of her hunched over at work prefigures her shouldering the burden of his suicide.

[Insert Figure 3 Here]

More might be said about the representation of gendered precarity in Werewolf, but it will have to suffice for the moment to conclude with the observation that gender appears in the film as yet another instance of separation. While it may have seemed for a time that all non-class identities—including gender—would dissolve in the homogenous mass of semi-skilled factory workers, deindustrialization has meant that, if anything, the gendered division of labor has become even more entrenched. As the Endnotes group writes, “The workers’ movement rested

⁶⁷ McKenzie, Werewolf, 00:22:02.

on a vision of the future that turned out to be a dream. In the second half of the twentieth century workers awoke from this dream to discover that all that was supposed to bring them together had actually separated them.”⁶⁸ In the wretched lives of Blaise and Nessa, we see the consequences of deindustrialization for a labor movement that staked its claim on the future on the assumption that capitalist development creates a society of abundance and necessitates the growth of a working class increasing in both strength and number. In this sense, the film is not about class politics, but their absence: an image of a proletarian class in the throes of decomposition. Werewolf reminds us that anti-capitalist politics today needs to confront the historical distance between the working class and the proletariat, a gulf that widens daily as the demand for labor continues to decline and the figure of the waged worker recedes from its place on the world stage. In the meantime, the millions who live in the separated society will continue to burn out, butting up against the barriers of a stagnant economy.

Captions:

Image 1: Blaise and Nessa drag their rusty lawnmower up a long gravel drive at the end of the day. Ashley McKenzie, *Werewolf* (2016).

Image 2: Blaise hides under Nessa’s hair. Ashley McKenzie, *Werewolf* (2016).

Image 3: The biscuit grinder in the ice cream parlor. Ashley McKenzie, *Werewolf* (2016).

⁶⁸ Endnotes, “A History of Separation,” 159-160.