

Capitalism as Creative Destruction

The Representation of the Economic Crisis in Hito Steyerl's *In Free Fall*

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Opening with an image of a Boeing airliner falling to the ground, Hito Steyerl's video *In Free Fall* (2010) is action-packed, supercharged, and visually enthralling. Steyerl's work presents re-edited footage from Hollywood disaster movies portraying an airliner about to crash over a nondescript suburban town. In this fast-paced montage a stunned pilot stares at the message 'system failure' flashing in the cockpit instrument panel while emergency oxygen masks drop down over the passengers' heads; the fuselage splits apart and objects inside the cabin start whirling around. This scene is, according to Steyerl, a metaphor for the mayhem generated by the 2008 banking crisis, which saw global financial institutions previously thought to be rock solid collapse in the space of few days. In *In Free Fall*, contemporary capitalism emerges as a precarious world, rife with destruction.

Steyerl's video significantly differs from documentaries produced in the aftermath of the crisis in that the work does not embrace a straightforward and detached didactic approach. Unlike, say, Charles Ferguson's *Inside Job* (2010), or Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), *In Free Fall* shuns the use of animated graphs and statistics explaining the obscure and fraudulent mechanisms of the financial economy.¹ Instead, it mimics the spectacular quality of consumer culture – which has been discussed by Fredric Jameson – by presenting the audience with a nerve-racking combination of theatrical performances, lively animations, clips of airliner explosions and snippets from television science programmes about recycling.² This act of mimicry demands attention: is Steyerl's work an elegy to the possibility of critical distance under the conditions of financial capitalism? Indeed, the image of the falling airliner that forms the centre of Steyerl's essay recalls the apocalyptic metaphors used by Jean Baudrillard in the early 1990s to describe the 'vanishing of history' that he saw as a central feature of postmodernity. For Baudrillard, the increasing speed

1. For analysis of these documentaries see Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano, 'Filming the Crisis: A Survey', *Film Quarterly*, vol 65, no 1, autumn 2011, pp 39–51.

2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991



In Free Fall, 2010, single channel video HD, thirty-two minutes, © Hito Steyerl, courtesy the artist

of technological progress and capitalistic exchange had caused an irreversible transformation of the ways in which we experience time. As he explains:

Various plausible hypotheses may be advanced to explain this vanishing of history. Canetti's expression 'all mankind suddenly left reality' irresistibly evokes the idea of that escape velocity a body requires to free itself from the gravitational field of a star or planet. Staying with this image, one might suppose that the acceleration of modernity, of technology, events and media, of all exchanges – economic, political and sexual – has propelled us to 'escape velocity', with the result that we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real and of history. We are 'liberated' in every sense of the term, so liberated that we have taken leave of a certain space-time, passed beyond a certain horizon in which the real is possible because gravitation is still strong enough for things to be reflected and thus in some way to endure and have some consequence.³

We are more and more distanced from reality and consequently become less and less capable of actively shaping our historical condition. Baudrillard describes contemporary capitalism as a world without the possibility of end. His theories invoke 'a kind of *descendental* surrealism' in which the world is 'not so much heightened by the fusion of the realms of real and surreal, consciousness and dream, as neutralized by its absence of past and future and of any kind of dreaming'.⁴ More significantly, Baudrillard's writings forestall the possibility that a critical or artistic practice might counter the dangerous effects of the vanishing of history. 'We are, then, unable to dream of a past or future state of things', he concludes:

Things are in a state which is literally definitive – neither finished, nor infinite, nor definite, but de-definitive that is, deprived of its end. Now, the feeling which goes with a definitive state . . . is melancholic.⁵

3. Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, Chris Turner, trans, Polity, Cambridge, 1994

4. Nicholas Zurbrugg, '“Apocalyptic”? “Negative”? “Pessimistic”? Baudrillard, Virilio, and Technoculture', in Zurbrugg, *Critical Vices: The Myths of Postmodern Theory*, G + B Arts International, Amsterdam, 2000, p 141

5. Baudrillard, op cit, p 120

At first glance, *In Free Fall*'s imagery of falling and catastrophe seems to chime with Baudrillard's apocalyptic rhetoric, but the tone of Steyerl's video is far from melancholic; in fact, one detects an unmistakable humour in the work, a tongue-in-cheek intonation that brings levity to its voice and which distances it from Baudrillard's hallucinatory gloom. Consider the opening sequence, which in my view exemplifies the particular inflection of the essay as a whole: found footage depicting airliner crashes is accompanied by the riveting and light-hearted song *Sax and Violins* by the Talking Heads (released in 1991); the song's energetic rhythm and humorous play with words ('Sax and Violins' instead of 'Sex and Violence') shifts the tone of the representation from tragedy to burlesque. In addition, most of the 'actors' appearing in Steyerl's work seem intentionally poor fits for their parts. For instance, the artist's performance as a flight attendant is improbable and unrealistic. Taking the 2008 financial meltdown as its subject matter might lead us to expect a more sober tone, but instead the video sometimes resembles slapstick comedy. At one point, Steyerl superimposes a shot of an approaching demolition truck onto a shot of herself reading the script. The vast claw of the truck seems to manoeuvre towards Steyerl's head. While it opens its jaws and prepares to turn her into scrap, she carries on reading, indifferent to the impending threat.

We might classify Steyerl's (often self-targeting) irony as bathos, or the ludicrous descent from the elevated to the commonplace or from the sublime to the low and the trivial.⁶ According to cultural historian Keston Sutherland, the emergence of bathos in English literature in the seventeenth century is indicative of a growing mistrust in language that is, in turn, symptomatic of the rapid expansion of the financial economy.⁷ This is because bathos ultimately reflects the notion that there is a profound disconnection between language and truth – a notion evoked by the arbitrariness of financial instruments and the uncertain fluctuations of currency values.⁸ The sudden shifts and hyperbolic excesses of bathos demonstrate that language is as precarious and deceptive as the financial markets. 'Bathos', Sutherland remarked, 'entered the language during massive financial upheaval. We are now at the crest of that history, the mythic triumph of liberalization.'⁹ In light of Sutherland's theory, Steyerl's bathos can be seen as an ironic commentary on how global capitalism has deeply penetrated every realm of culture and representation. Yet her humour is not easy to pin down. Is it the absurdist gesture of proposing an aesthetic of error and nonsense as the only possible critical strategy left for artists? Is it a kind of flippancy, a mere capitulation to the fact that art is without real political consequence? If it becomes clear that it is difficult to consider *In Free Fall* as an ordinary 'documentary' about the crisis of capitalism, then what ends does its bathos serve?

CAPITALISM AND SCHIZOPHRENIA

The appropriation of commercial visual culture is a trademark of Steyerl's oeuvre. Her highly entertaining videos or photographic installations display imagery drawn from B-movies or downloaded from eBay (see for instance *The War According to eBay*, 2010), while her soundtracks

6. The term bathos is originally attributed to Alexander Pope's 1727 satirical work *Peri Bathous*. See Pope, *Martinus Scriblerus's Peri Bathous, or: the Art of Sinking in Poetry*, Oneworld Classics, Richmond, 2009.

7. Keston Sutherland, 'The Trade in Bathos', *Jacket* 15, 2001, no page numbering

8. 'Bathos is the deliberate misuse of language in deliberate vitiation of our relation to truth.' Sutherland, op cit, no page numbering

9. Ibid

10. Another example is Steyerl's *Film Journal No. 1: An Artist's Impression* (2007). The thirty-minute video narrates the trauma of the Bosnian War through action-packed scenes taken from 1950s Yugoslavian popular cinema. On this work see Paolo Magagnoli, 'Documentary Fictions: New Concepts of Truth and Representation in the Works of Anri Sala and Hito Steyerl', *Object* 12, January 2010, pp 41–59.
11. Farocki's *A Day in the Life of the Consumer* (1993) could be considered as one precedent of Steyerl's work. This gleeful and chaotic collage of advertising films is informed by an offbeat humour that recalls that of Steyerl.
12. Pablo Lafuente, 'For a Populist Cinema: On Hito Steyerl's *November* and *Lovely Andrea*', *Afterall* 19, autumn/winter 2008
13. In a tentative survey of these films, Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano have argued that mainstream cinema tended to reduce the 2008 financial crisis to an inevitable personal catastrophe. In so doing, they claim, film-makers ended up overshadowing the systemic and political responsibilities for the crisis. Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano, 'Filming the Crisis: A Survey', *Film Quarterly*, vol 65, no 1, pp 39–51.
14. Sergei Tretyakov, 'The Biography of the Object', *October* 118, autumn 2006, pp 57–62
15. Devin Fore, introduction to Tretyakov, 'The Biography of the Object', *October* 118, autumn 2006, p 58

are often composed of cheesy pop songs and cheap electronic sound effects. Consider, for example, her film *November* (2004), in which she relates the story of her friend Andrea, a member of the Kurdish movement of independence, through found-footage clips from Russ Meyer's *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965); or *Lovely Andrea* (2007), a fast-paced video essay that recounts Steyerl's quest to locate a bondage picture of herself taken when she was a student in Japan, accompanied by the soundtrack of popular songs by the likes of Depeche Mode, Pet Shop Boys, Donna Summer and The Spinners.¹⁰ Steyerl's interest in commercial cinema has led some critics to compare her video essays with the 1970s experimental work of radical film-makers such as Jean Luc Godard, Jean Pierre Gorin and Harun Farocki.¹¹ However, as Pablo Lafuente has pointed out, a deeper ambivalence distinguishes Steyerl's approach to popular culture from its avant-garde precedents: in her videos, commodity culture appears more as a tool of resistance and struggle than as the expression of the culture industry and its role in the reproduction of the social conditions of exploitation.¹²

In Free Fall is a thirty-minute single-channel video divided into three chapters, entitled respectively: 'After the Crash', 'Before the Crash' and 'Crash'. It departs from mainstream cinematic representations of the crisis in so far as the video does not indulge in the kind of pathos of the personal and the familial typical of European and American films about this event.¹³ The plot is not centred on the figure of an individual hero, beset by economic difficulties. In contrast, Steyerl follows in the steps of Sergei Tretyakov's 'biography of the object'.¹⁴ This was a slogan coined in 1929 by the Russian avant-garde writer for a new revolutionary literary form that would have been opposed to the idealism of the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel. As Devin Fore observes, Tretyakov's method 'was not just a matter of enthroning objects at the centre of the novel where the hero once was'; rather, it was about taking 'the points of intensity concentrated by the novel's intrigue in the hero's emotional biography and distribut[ing] them among a plurality of actants over the entire work'.¹⁵ Steyerl's video recalls Tretyakov's method in that it is structured upon numerous tangled narrative threads that coalesce around the figure of an object, a Boeing airliner.

The work begins with shots of a junkyard in the Mojave desert. Carcasses of passenger airliners lie on the ground while the owner of the place, a bearded man in a wheelchair called Mike Potter, explains that airlines tend to abandon their aircraft during periods of economic downturn as it becomes unprofitable to fly them. However, the life of these airliners does not end there. Surprisingly, profit is made out of the scrap: the discarded carcasses are sold to Chinese companies that recycle the aluminium in the aircraft in order to manufacture DVDs. Money is also made by renting the objects to the Hollywood industry. In fact, the concluding scene of the famous blockbuster movie *Speed* (Jan de Bont, 1994) was shot in Potter's airliner graveyard. This scene – replayed over and over in the video – portrays the collision of an abandoned Boeing with a moving bus on tarmac.

Steyerl then interviews her cameraman, Kevan Jenson. A freelance worker for the Hollywood industry, Jenson has found it harder and harder to find a job since the financial crisis of 2008. He explains that because of the crisis his house was repossessed. The proliferation of

digital technologies further aggravated Jenson's difficult financial conditions. Digital software enabled the spread of film piracy and consequently decreased the revenues of the Hollywood studios, which in turn squeezed labour and led to the sacking of many freelancers like Jenson. His story is juxtaposed with the tale of aviation pioneer Howard Hughes. Hughes, who acquired and expanded Trans World Airlines (TWA), began his career as a Hollywood film producer and director. His most expensive and famous production, *Hell's Angels* (1930), narrates the aerial adventures of English and German pilots during the First World War. The film caused controversy for the accidental deaths of several pilots and for its inflated budget. Steyerl shows us a clip from the film, portraying an aeroplane crashing into the ground. Finally, the video follows the story of how the Boeing airliners owned by Hughes's airline became a key weapon for the Israeli military forces in the 1970s. This narrative is told by an 'expert', played by actor Imri Kahn, who relates that a batch of TWA airliners was bought by the Israeli government in the late 1960 and used for various military operations such as the famous Operation Entebbe in 1976.¹⁶ Meanwhile, clips from various hijacking films inspired by this actual event appear on screen. One of these is *Operation Thunderbolt* (Menahem Golan, 1977) starring the charismatic Klaus Kinski and the gorgeous Sybil Danning as German radical terrorists. In one particularly amusing scene, Kinski extracts a grenade from a bottle of champagne and proceeds to hijack the plane. The video then shows Steyerl and Kahn dressed up as a flight attendants and performing a seatbelt safety demonstration. Instead of belts and oxygen masks, they hold DVDs in their hands in front of a backdrop of windmills superimposed onto a blue screen. *In Free Fall* concludes with a freeze-frame shot of a parachutist falling from a plane against a clear, blue sky.

Steyerl does not linger over the painful effects of the economic crash. Instead, she portrays the crisis as a process that disrupts conventional boundaries between reality and fiction. All the interviewees relate the

16. Operation Entebbe was a mission carried out by the Israel Defense Forces at Entebbe airport on 4 July 1976. The mission's aim was the liberation of ninety-eight Jewish and Israeli hostages held captive in an Air France aeroplane hijacked a week earlier by members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. All the hijackers, three hostages and forty-five Ugandan soldiers were killed during the operation.



In Free Fall, 2010, single channel video HD, thirty-two minutes, © Hito Steyerl, courtesy the artist

experience of the crash as a sudden descent into the unreal. Retired pilot Mike Potter exclaims, addressing the abandoned airliners: 'And I said to myself, is this for real? These planes are all ghosts.' Similarly, Jenson describes his stupor when his house was repossessed during the crisis: 'I felt like the captain of a plane and I was unable to land it. It is a little amazing... this descent from something that felt so real into another place.' Steyerl's montage elicits a similar sense of bewilderment. The testimonies of Potter and Jenson are interspersed with clips from Hollywood movies. The explosion sequence from *Speed* is replayed, slowed down and reversed several times. The 1970s history of terrorist hijacking is presented through the overdramatized form of movies such as *Operation Thunderbolt*. Documentary and fictional images are constantly jumbled up so that the crash, and by extension the economic crisis, is transformed into an oneiric and hallucinatory experience in which the boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, have collapsed.¹⁷

The effect recalls the condition of schizophrenia as described by Jameson in his theory of postmodernism. Borrowing from Lacan, Jameson defines the schizophrenic experience as one in which 'isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers... fail to link up into a coherent sequence', whereby the world appears 'with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious and oppressive charge of affect, glowing with hallucinatory energy'.¹⁸ Importantly, Jameson associates the attributes of schizophrenia with late capitalism since, he argues, mass culture of the late twentieth century simulates schizoid experience. Writing in the 1980s at the time of the rise of MTV, Jameson alludes to the fragmented and rapid montage of music clips, movie trailers, and television advertisements. Steyerl's work, with its fast-paced editing, resembles this form. The interviews are frequently chopped so that *In Free Fall* ultimately looks more like a long movie trailer than a finished work. In light of Jameson's theory, then, the video can be said to express and perhaps even exacerbate the schizophrenic conditions of late-capitalist culture.

Yet the video also reconfigures these conditions in less pathological terms. In fact, the soundtrack, composed of melodic pop tunes such as Nancy Sinatra's *My Beautiful Balloon*, puts the viewer in such a light-hearted mood that the figure of the airliner crash becomes less a synonym for a schizophrenic disconnection from reality than an expression of pleasurable weightlessness and even exhilaration. As she explains, the experience of falling and, by extension, the collapse of the financial system, should be viewed as a process of liberation that is capable of opening new horizons.

While falling, people may sense themselves as being things, while things may sense that they are people. Traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered. Any sense of balance is disrupted. Perspectives are twisted and multiplied. New types of visuality arise.¹⁹

Therefore, if Steyerl's work simulates schizophrenic disorder, it also reinvents it and invests it with generative and revolutionary potential. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari long ago suggested that the only possible way out from capitalism is, indeed, to exploit and exacerbate its 'schizophrenic' logic.²⁰

17. This kaleidoscopic montage of documentary and fictional footage is typical of the artist's film style. See T J Demos, 'Traveling Images: Hito Steyerl', *Artforum*, vol 46, no 10, summer 2008, pp 408–413, p 473; and Magagnoli, *op cit*, pp 41–59.

18. Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Hal Foster, ed, *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto, London, 1985, p 120

19. Hito Steyerl, 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective', *e-flux* 4, 2011, no 24, p 8

20. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R Lane, trans, Athlone, London, 1983

According to Deleuze and Guattari, schizophrenia and capitalism are related categories in that capitalism should be considered as a profoundly irrational social system. As they claim, the apparent rigour of economic sciences cloaks the profound delirium at the heart of this historical formation. Against the Weberian line of thought that sees modernity as a process of relentless de-enchantment, Deleuze and Guattari argue that unconscious and irrational desires should be seen as constitutive and propulsive elements of capitalism. As they remarked, ‘the true history is the history of desire’.²¹ But what is the desire driving capitalism? This system is animated by the urge to disrupt social codes and barriers, and thrives on the destruction of previous technologies, economies and configurations of power. Capitalism dismantles all existing social and cultural structures, norms, and models of the sacred.

But in every respect, capitalism has a very particular character: its lines of flight are not just difficulties that arise, they are the conditions of its own operation. It is constituted by a generalized decoding of all flux, fluctuations of wealth, fluctuations of work, fluctuations of language, fluctuations of art, etc. It ligatures the points of escape and leaps forward. It expands its own boundaries endlessly and finds itself having to seal new leaks at every limit. It does not resolve any of its fundamental problems; it cannot even foresee the monetary increase in a country over a single year. It never stops crossing its own limits, which keep reappearing farther away. It puts itself in alarming situations with regard to its own production, its social life, its demographics, its borders with the developing world, its internal regions, etc. Its gaps are everywhere, forever giving rise to the displaced limits of capitalism.²²

According to the philosophers, there is something intrinsically creative in the capitalistic obsession with production and the accumulation of wealth. If capitalism is a repressive system, it is because the bourgeoisie has historically been able to manipulate, control and channel the social energies underpinning this economy to suit its own interests. But what is the relation between capitalism and schizophrenia? Like capitalism, schizophrenia is systematically attracted to chaos. It is a pathology that is characterized, according to Deleuze and Guattari, by the irresistible need to cross epistemological and normative boundaries. ‘The schizophrenic’, they remarked, ‘is a person who, for whatever reason, has been touched off by a desiring flow which threatens the social order’.²³ Indeed, they wrote:

... schizophrenia is the exterior limit of capitalism itself or the conclusion of its deepest tendency ... but that capitalism only functions on condition that it inhibit this tendency, or that it push back or displace this limit.²⁴

Having said that, the implications of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory are significant in respect of the notion of a critically engaged art. According to their hypothesis, a revolutionary art should not rely on a systematic and dispassionate ideology critique. As one cannot completely resolve the drives of the unconscious – they argue – one can never completely demystify the irrational desires that drive individuals under capitalism and constitute their myths and beliefs. The sphere of the economic and the sphere of the imaginary cannot ultimately be disentangled. Therefore, according to Deleuze and Guattari, ideology critique is ultimately a futile

21. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, ‘Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium’, David L Sweet, Jarred Becker, and Taylor Adkins, trans, in Silvere Lotringer, ed, *Chaosophy: Texts and Interviews 1972–1977*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2009, p 36

22. *Ibid*, p 47

23. *Ibid*, p 152

24. Deleuze and Guattari, *op cit*, p 246



This plane took part in the famous rescue operation at Entebbe airport in 1976,

In *Free Fall*, 2010, single channel video HD, thirty-two minutes, © Hito Steyerl, courtesy the artist

endeavour; a more fruitful approach would be to seize on the schizophrenic impulses of capital, to exacerbate its energies and direct them for revolutionary purposes:

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 deterritorialized 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 the process', as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet.²⁵

In *Free Fall*, Steyerl seems to embrace Deleuze and Guattari's project. She appropriates spectacular clips from commodified culture as if they were a reservoir of untapped energies. Her fast-paced and delirious montage suggests that capitalism, with its tendency towards cycles of boom and bust, is a contingent and fragile order and that its inherent flux can escape the control of the elites.²⁶ In Steyerl's video this notion of a 'capitalist excess' is conveyed not only through the image of the airliner falling but through a variety of other techniques. Consider, for instance, the way in which the film-maker uses the blue screen. This device is not deployed to reduce the visibility of the technological apparatus, as in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Rather, the blue screen foregrounds the fluid and constructed quality of the *mise en scène*. Moreover, throughout the video, there is an emphasis on the dynamics of movement: Steyerl's editing selects action-packed shots of airliners and machines frantically moving. The moments of stillness are extremely rare: most of the scenes have been filmed through panning or zooming shots. At some point even the steady-cam used to record the airliner graveyard appears precarious: Jensen is accidentally hit by the demolition

25. Ibid, pp 239–240

26. In an interview Steyerl has referred to this notion of capitalist excess: 'Whilst Capital, for sure, is moving, this doesn't necessarily mean that every movement is fully captured by Capital. Movement... can also constitute a flight from labour or other capital-based relations (of course these evasions are immediately recaptured, but again not fully). Capital is not able to fully come to terms with evasion, resistance, distraction, irritation, sleepiness.' Rosemarie Heather, 'Hito Steyerl Speaks to Rosemarie Heather', 22 September 2010, <http://www.apengine.org/2010/09/hito-steyerl-speaks-to-rosemary-heather/>, accessed May 2013.

27. The image of pristine windmills in the desert that forms the background of Steyerl and Kahn's perfectly synchronized safety-instruction sequence can also be read as the prefiguration of a utopian world. 'The windmills', David Riff observes, 'indicate the possibility for a new stage of post-Fordist rationalization involving smart energy, knowledge production, and other new sources of income for a nicer, softer capitalism with a post-human face'. David Riff, 'Is this for real? A Close Reading of *In Free Fall* by Hito Steyerl', <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0311/riff/en>, February 2011, accessed February 2011.

28. This conception of commodities as reservoir of transformative desires recalls Walter Benjamin's approach to popular culture. See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 1989.

29. The figure of the DVD in *In Free Fall* recalls the uncontrollable and revolutionary excess of capitalism described by Toni Negri in relation to the postmodern city. 'The picture [of the contemporary city]', he writes, 'is one of a circulation of commodities, webs of information, continuous movements, and radical nomadism of labour, and the ferocious exploitation of these dynamics. And yet, the picture is also one of constant and inexhaustible excess, of the biopolitical power of the multitude and of its excess with regard to the structural controlling ability of dominant institutions.' Toni Negri, 'On Rem Koolhaas', *Radical Philosophy* 154, March/April, 2009, p 49.

30. In a way *In Free Fall* echoes the optimistic declarations of German cultural

truck and consequently loses control of the camera. The editing and shooting techniques deployed by Steyerl ultimately suggest that, like the airliner crashing, images too are constantly at risk of collapsing and morphing into something else.

The notion of excess is also symbolized by the figure of the DVD, which, in my view, is central to the understanding of the video. In this sequence we witness the resurrection of the crashed airliners into DVDs on which the video will be recorded. Melted aluminium from the decommissioned airliners is poured into circular moulds using various high-tech machines. An animation depicts a DVD spinning around the Earth, as if the airliner had metamorphosed into it and had resumed flying.²⁷ The soundtrack – sampled from one of Michael Jackson's popular songs – links the diverse images of this fast-paced montage together, crossing each cut and melding them continuously. In the meantime, Steyerl recites this text:

Matter lives on in different forms
 Matter loves on
 Matter lives on in different forms
 (It is so recyclable)
 Matter loves
 Matter lives
 Matter lives on
 Matter continues to exist in different forms

Delivering the vision of kinetic, fluid matter morphing in and out of images, this sequence evokes a world where destruction is generative and where the human subject is ultimately resilient.²⁸ Matter lives on, in spite of the meltdown of the financial market. The sheer exuberance of the DVDs moving, as well as the frenetic action of the machines, energized by the rhythmic pop music, evokes the flow of desire animating capitalism discussed by Deleuze and Guattari. Like the notion of schizophrenia and excess, the mercurial figure of the DVD represents the idea that capitalistic oppression is never definitive and that destruction can generate new lines of flight.²⁹ In this sequence, Steyerl intimates that there is life and creativity in modernity and that there is hope for a better future.

ACCELERATIONIST AESTHETICS OR COGNITIVE MAPPING?

Instead of providing viewers with a dry and rational unmasking of the fraudulent mechanisms of financial capital, Steyerl appropriates Hollywood cinema to represent our economy as a system inclined to self-destruction. She suggests that embracing and exacerbating this tendency could lead, paradoxically, to creating an alternative form of social belonging.³⁰ As the artist points out, the figure of the Boeing airliner, which is at the centre of *In Free Fall*, represents less the past than the future. 'The idea [behind *In Free Fall*] is', she declared:

... to follow the object [the Boeing airliner or the DVD] to find out about the reality that creates it. In this case, it might be: follow it into the future, not into its history.³¹

historian Joseph Vogl. The crisis, Vogl remarked enthusiastically, 'is the *epoche* of the financial economy' and a 'stroke of epistemological luck'. If anything, the crisis laid bare the illusory and fraudulent nature of derivatives and credit swaps, extraordinarily intricate legal and financial instruments that project a semblance of order onto an economic system that is in fact governed by chaos. See Joseph Vogl, 'Taming Time: Media of Financialization', Christopher Reid, trans, *Grey Room* 46, winter 2012, p 82; and Vogl, 'Capital and Money are Profane Gods', *The European*, 20 November 2011, <http://www.theeuropean-magazine.com/371-vogl-joseph/370-the-spectre-of-capital>, no page numbering.

31. Steyerl as cited by Francesca Boenzi, 'Do You Speak Spasmoc?', *Mousse Contemporary Art Magazine* 23, March 2010, <http://mousemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=540>, no page numbering
32. Wendy Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', *Boundary 2*, vol 26, no 3, autumn 1999, p 26
33. Like Brown, Jameson has lambasted the Left for its inertia and conservatism. As he pointed out, the Left is 'stuck into a kind of conservatism; saving all the things that capitalism destroys which range from nature to communities, cities, culture and so on [and] just trying to slow down the movement of history'. Aaron Leonard, 'Capitalism, the Infernal Machine: An Interview with Fredric Jameson', *rabble.ca*, 9 February 2012, <http://rabble.ca/books/reviews/2012/02/capitalism-infernal-machine-interview-fredric-jameson>, no page numbering.
34. See Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty'

In doing so, Steyerl avoids the melancholia pervading much post-communist left-wing discourse – a melancholia effectively captured by Wendy Brown's painful analysis in the late 1990s. As she explained:

What emerges 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.³²

Importantly, this penchant for the past risks undermining the success of a radical and progressive politics by relegating the Left to a self-defeating position.³³ Steyerl clearly refuses to occupy this position, suggesting that we should stop looking back into the past for utopian models. In her guarded optimism, the artist extends the philosophical tradition of thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Marshall Berman, who sought to salvage some hope in the future by seeing modernity as a process of transformation that may be beneficial.³⁴ Within this tradition, capitalism is conceptualized as an inevitable condition that should be pragmatically embraced and that itself offers possibilities of resistance. But if Steyerl's approach is informed by a nuanced optimism, the overloaded aesthetics of her video could be considered as a double-edged sword. Her mimicry of commodity culture hints at a 'politics of accelerationism', which has been taken to task by a number of theorists. A term coined by Benjamin Noys, 'accelerationism' designates a philosophical strand of post-1968 radical thought based on the notion that a socialist revolution will be possible only by exacerbating the contradictions inherent in the dominant economic system. Epitomized by Deleuze and Guattari's notion of schizophrenia, 'accelerationism', writes Noys, is 'an exotic variant of the *politique du pire*'; it argues that 'if capitalism generates its own forces of dissolution then the necessity is to radicalize capitalism itself: the worse the better'.³⁵ Having emerged from the ashes of 1960s French radicalism, this political thought has not worn well: indeed, since the times of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, capitalism has actively promoted the radicalization of its own destructive forces, surviving its periodic crises and even taking advantage from them. As Steven Shaviro remarked:

... the problem with accelerationism as a political strategy has to do with the fact that – like it or not – we are all accelerationists now. It has become increasingly clear that crises and contradictions do not lead to the demise of capitalism. Rather, they actually work to promote and advance capitalism, by providing it with its fuel. Crises do not endanger the capitalist order; rather, they are occasions for the dramas of 'creative destruction' by means of which, phoenix-like, capitalism repeatedly renews itself. We are all caught within this loop. And accelerationism in philosophy or political economy offers us, at best, an exacerbated awareness of how we are trapped.³⁶

and 'The Destructive Character', Rodney Livingstone, trans, in Michael W Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, eds, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927–1934, Part 2*, Belknap, Cambridge and London, 1999, pp 731–738 and pp 541–542; and Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts Into Air: the Experience of Modernity*, Verso, London, 1983.

35. Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2010, p 5
36. Steven Shaviro, 'Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption', *e-flux* 46, June 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/>, no page numbering
37. See for instance, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, '#Accelerate', in Joshua Johnson, ed, *Complicity, Agency, and the Politics of Contemporary Ontologies*, Name Publications, New York, 2013. See also the essays collected in *e-flux* 46, June 2013 available at <http://www.e-flux.com/issues/46-june-2013/>, accessed 2 November 2012.
38. For an analysis of these films see Steven Shaviro, *Post-cinematic Affect*, Zero, Winchester, 2010.
39. Shaviro, op cit
40. See Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Illinois, 1988, pp 347–360.
41. Fredric Jameson, 'Interview with Anders Stephanson', in Ian Buchanan, ed, *Jameson on Jameson*:

Shaviro's argument is similar to that of Noys: as a radical politics, accelerationism has failed in that it has put too much hope in the immanent transformation of capitalism. Yet, its programme continues to exert great fascination over contemporary political theorists, critics and even artists.³⁷ In fact, Shaviro argues, an accelerationist aesthetics is emerging in some recent cinematic works; films such as Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor's *Gamer* (2009), or Alex Cox's *I'm a Juvenile Delinquent, Jail Me!* (2004) embrace an accelerationist aesthetic, indulging in the delirious and excessive redeployments of pop culture.³⁸ According to Shaviro, accelerationism in art can only provide viewers with the recognition of our impotence in front of the current socio-economic order. However, unlike accelerationist politics, he remarks, accelerationist aesthetics has the merit of not offering us 'the false hope that piling on the worst that neoliberal capitalism has to offer will somehow help to lead us beyond it'.³⁹ In other words, the criticality of these films lies in the cynical enlightenment they provide.

But can we distinguish between, on the one hand, an accelerationist aesthetics that cynically indulges in the pleasures of nihilism, and, on the other hand, one that prompts critical awareness and some hope in the future? Thinking back to Steyerl's practice in light of Shaviro's reflections, we may conceive the artist's hypertrophic mimicry of commodity culture as another example of accelerationist aesthetics. Nevertheless, Steyerl's accelerationism should be seen less as a gesture of enlightened cynicism than as an attempt at representing the complex reality of late capitalism. Indeed, a pedagogical impulse can be traced throughout *In Free Fall* and, despite its complex narrative structure and visual excess, the video never gives way to total confusion and negativity. For this pedagogical impulse, Steyerl's work recalls the notion of 'cognitive mapping' tentatively sketched out by Jameson.⁴⁰ An art of cognitive mapping – Jameson suggests – would have the task of making viewers aware of their positions within capitalism's global system and it would be an integral part of a socialist politics. Whether Steyerl succeeds or not in representing global capital remains an open question. Yet her focus on the life of the Boeing airliner gives us a sense of the complex constellations of social forces driving capitalism. Importantly, Jameson suggested that cognitive mapping could draw on a homoeopathic use of the strategies, techniques, and elements of consumer culture. 'To undo postmodernism homoeopathically by the methods of postmodernism', he declared, 'to work at dissolving the pastiche by using all the instruments of pastiche itself, to reconquer some genuine historical sense by using the instruments of what I have called substitutes for history'.⁴¹ Steyerl's kaleidoscopic mimicry of popular culture could be seen as instance of just such a homoeopathic method.⁴²

Given the difficulty of finding an outside to capitalism in a world where the boundaries between culture and the economy are increasingly blurred, the project of cognitive mapping is a difficult task and could appear at times absurdist and paranoid. Indeed, there is a hint of paranoia in Steyerl's labyrinthine narrative concoctions: for instance, why link 1970s left-wing terrorism with the 2007 financial crisis? And yet, perhaps paranoia is the inevitable outcome of every attempt at developing

Conversations on Cultural Marxism, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, and London, 2007, p 59

an aesthetic of cognitive mapping countering the reification of consumer culture. As Jameson observed, 'conspiracy is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital'.⁴³

42. This method has a historical precedent in the performances and writings of 1920s Dada artists. By using strategies such as hyperbole or bathos, Dada artists aimed to push the centrifugal and destructive forces of the existing bourgeois order to the point of collapse in the hope that a new social order would emerge. Hal Foster has defined Dada's critical strategy as one of 'mimetic adaptation' or 'mimetic exacerbation'. See Foster, 'Dada Mime', *October* 105, summer 2003, pp 166–176. Another example of this critical strategy can be found in the writings on popular cinema and photography of Siegfried Kracauer. See Kracauer, 'Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces', *New German Critique* 40, winter 1987, pp 91–96, and 'Photography', *Critical Inquiry*, vol 19, no 3, spring, 1993, pp 421–436.

43. Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', op cit, p 356

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