NOTES ON TOTALITY

IN DEFENCE OF PRETENTIOUS THINKING

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Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event.

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A film by the artist Chris Jordan shows the carcasses of young albatrosses, their stomachs filled with pieces of plastic fed to them by their parents, on the Midway Islands, halfway between the United States and Japan, a few thousand kilometres from the mainland. A newspaper relates the story of a Greek man of 55 who douses himself in gasoline and sets fire to himself in front of a bank in Thessaloniki. And: photographs on the Internet and in the papers show a three-year-old boy, face down in the sand, lying dead in the surf on a beach in Turkey.

What these phenomena have in common is that they are emblematic of the larger problems that torment the world: the plastic soup the size of France in the Pacific, killing millions of fish and birds; the string of economic crises reducing people to poverty and driving them to despair; and of course the refugees from North Africa and the Middle East trying to reach Europe while fleeing violence and destruction. These are dazzling problems for which there are no simple solutions and that in addition can all be traced back to the hegemony of Western capitalism and the preservation of our way of life.

Faced with these problems, we are reminded of a philosophical category that went out of fashion with postmodernism and was duly relegated to the background, i.e. the Hegelian category of 'totality'. Hegel thought that any social phenomenon could only be understood and described correctly through its 'mediation' by the totality (the manner in which the totality is present in each individual part) and, vice versa, that totality could only be understood and described through its individual parts. Later, Neo-Marxist thinkers such as Georg Lukács and Theodor W. Adorno have used this category and transformed it into a critical theory. According to them, social and cultural critics should not only cut back the morbid ideological growth in the garden of capitalism, but also expose the roots of the entire social reality from which each individual part expresses the totality.[2] Not because they themselves are fond of philosophical vistas but because the subject demands it of them.[3]

We do not need to go into a thorough exegesis of Hegel here. We all know from everyday experience what Hegel meant by 'totality'. For example, I realise that with each sip of coffee I take or each piece of chocolate I eat, each piece of clothing I wear, I am an accomplice in exploitation, child labour

and slavery. I know that through my pension fund or my savings account I may be investing in the arms industry. That through my mortgage or credit card debt I am paving the way for the next economic crisis. And that my overall pattern of consumption contributes to pollution – e.g. by adding to the plastic soup mentioned earlier – and global warming. That, as Sheila Sitalsing wrote in one of her columns for the Dutch daily newspaper De Volkskrant, I may send out an incensed tweet about the Spanish company European Security Fencing that produces the razor barbed wire used to close off Europe's borders, but that I am doing so from an iPhone that was produced with resources that are at stake in a bloody neo-colonial conflict in Central Africa.

These and similar experiences, which somewhat informed citizens are struggling with on a daily basis, all converge in the notion of 'totality'. In addition, the concept of totality implies that these problems should not only be regarded as accidental excrescences but are inherently linked to the way we have shaped the world. Inspired by Hegel, Adorno speaks of a 'total guilt connection' (totaler Schuldzusammenhang). In our globalised and mediatized society, no one can wash their hands of anything; no one can claim not to know, or not in some way to contribute to maintaining social wrongs. Adorno has also expressed this in one of his most striking aphorisms: 'Wrong life cannot be lived rightly' (Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen).[4] Living a righteous life, even living at all, is actually impossible in a false, i.e. an immoral and unjust world.

FROM TOTALITY TO NETWORK

Within postmodern cultural theory there has been much aversion to the category of totality. This is best illustrated by what we may call the 'end-ism' of the second half of the twentieth century when, in rapid succession, the end of mankind (Michel Foucault), of ideology (Daniel Bell), of philosophy (Richard Rorty), of 'grand narratives' (Jean-François Lyotard), of history (Francis Fukuyama), of modernity (Gianni Vattimo) and of art (Arthur Danto) were proclaimed. Together with all vistas of the future, the totalising outlook was also banned. The concept of 'totality' was seen as too monolithic, not doing justice to the huge diversity of cultural forms and social relations: totalising thinking equalled totalitarian thinking. It was replaced with the metaphor of the open network.

Even in the 1980s, the network metaphor was still mainly used in a negative sense to describe clandestine and illegitimate forms of collaboration:

criminal networks, drugs networks, arms trading networks, et cetera (the only exception being the 'resistance networks').[5] However, since then and especially since the advent of the Internet, the network metaphor has acquired a much more positive connotation. It was being widely used to describe contemporary society, both in popular use and in philosophical and scientific literature.[6] In the network metaphor traditional forms of 'verticality' (i.e. authority and hierarchy) disintegrate and the world becomes increasingly smaller and 'more flat', in the words of Thomas Friedman. As boundaries become blurred we all become nomads, racing frictionless over the world, faster and faster, effortlessly making connections everywhere (even if only temporary) – at least, according to the idealised image conjured up by the network metaphor.

As may be clear now, and only too evident from the examples of ecological, humanitarian and economic crises mentioned earlier, the notion of the network is of a highly ideological nature: it hides the fact that only part of mankind actually fully benefits from the flexibility and mobility in this 'flat' world. Commodities, tourists and financial products do indeed 'flash' across the globe unhindered, but this is not true of labour migrants and asylum seekers. In the West too, for many people flexibility and mobility mean job insecurity and devaluation of their skills and experience. The network society creates new class differences, also in the economic sense, between those who voluntarily travel the globe for either 'business or pleasure' and those who are either unwillingly confined to their place or forcibly driven from their familiar surroundings. Zygmunt Bauman called them 'tourists' and 'vagabonds', respectively.[7] The contrast between both classes became poignantly clear in the summer of 2015, when, on the same Mediterranean coasts in places such as Lesbos and Bodrum where thousands of tourists enjoy their holiday, also thousands of bodies of drowned 'fortune seekers' were washed up. For those belonging to the latter group the world is anything but a frictionless network, but rather the monolithic 'totality' ominously towering above them and about to crush them any moment, as described by Adorno. However, in the euphemistic metaphor of the network society that threatening aspect of totality is, unjustly, never mentioned.

It is often overlooked that thinkers such as Adorno used the term 'totality' not only in a descriptive sense but also critically and performatively. When Adorno speaks of totality, or of the 'totally administered world', he points to the fact that individuals no longer experience society and its institutions as things in which they themselves participate and for which they are co-

responsible. On the contrary, they see them as alien and hostile. In other words, 'totality' is not just a category of knowledge, but also the expression of an experience, i.e. the experience of powerlessness of individuals in the world in which they live. In *Minima Moralia* (1951) Adorno wrote: 'The whole is the false.'[8] By this he did not mean that the whole, or the totality, was wrong, too vague or too abstract as a category of thinking. On the contrary, in light of the ubiquity of the trading principle, the socio-economic interwovenness of all things, totality is the most real thing, the *ens realissimum*, as it makes everything else abstract and intangible.[9] It is untrue more in a moral sense, insofar as the social totality as such is wrong and is, in Adorno's words, a 'false' totality.[10] That is precisely why we should force ourselves to imagine it, and imagine it differently than it is.

One could argue that especially in a globalised network society the Hegelian and Neo-Marxist notion of 'totality' is more topical than ever. The crises mentioned earlier demonstrate how much the world is a single whole in which everything is interconnected, while at the same time that whole seems to be increasingly out of our grasp. The problem of climate change, as has been conclusively proven, is related to the global proliferation of the Western life style, and the appetite for fossil fuel of that same lifestyle is in turn one of the causes of the violence in the Middle East and the current refugee crisis. Obviously, these matters are far too complex to mention in one and the same breath, let alone connect them in a chain of cause and effect. But that is precisely the point here: the obscurity and complexity of such problems force us time and again to connect social and cultural issues with economic and political ones, and vice versa. This does not mean, by the way, that we can simply adopt the Hegelian terminology. Unlike Hegel and Marx we can no longer think in terms of a 'subject' of history, of one part that represents the whole and that plays, in a manner of speaking, the leading part in the story of history (for Hegel this was the 'spirit'; for Marx the 'proletariat'.) There is no subject of history and that is precisely the big problem that philosophy has been struggling with, especially since Adorno.

In one of his stories, the Dutch novelist Gerard Reve describes how a visiting elderly communist blames all kinds of problems on imperialism, to which the writer sarcastically remarks: 'Imperialism, well, well. Can I have its address and phone number?'[11] Condescending as this may be, it does hit the nail on the head: there are no contact details for contemporary global capitalism, there is no one we can call to account. There is no Darth Vader, Lex Luthor, James Moriarty or other mastermind that we can beat to right

what is wrong. The cockpit is empty, as Joris Luyendijk observes in *Dit kan niet waar zijn* [This cannot be true] (2015), his bestseller about the financial world. It is precisely this confusion and uncontrollability of social reality that should fill us with dread and wake us up.

At the same time, this perspective endorses the ideology of neoliberalism, which claims not to be an ideology at all. After all, neoliberalism too argues that there is no one at the wheel (nor should there be), that the market is mankind's 'natural' condition for which there is no reasonable alternative. Presenting neoliberalism as a form of 'technocracy' or some sort of automatic tendency of the system, obscures the fact that deliberate political choices in favour of this system are indeed made, and out of well-understood class interests. The ideological smokescreens that are produced to obscure this fact make it increasingly difficult to determine those interests, however. In his book *Capitalist Realism* (2009) the philosopher Mark Fisher calls this the 'negative atheology' of contemporary capitalism, which resembles, if anything, the work of Franz Kafka. The castle in the eponymous novel or the Supreme Court in *The Trial* may have become inaccessible, but they are nevertheless real and exert influence. In Fisher's words: '... the centre is missing, but we cannot stop searching for it or positing it. It is not that there is nothing there – it is that what is there is not capable of exercising responsibility'.[12] Instead of saying that everyone is responsible for the crises mentioned earlier, it is more accurate to say that no one takes responsibility and that that is exactly the problem.

THE PRIVATISATION OF POLITICS

Needled by the ideology of the 'participation society' we tend to turn to ourselves in looking for the solutions to the world's problems. Are we ruining the climate? Then buy unsprayed fruit at a farmer's market, compensate the CO_2 emission of your holiday flight by having trees planted in the Caucasus, or engage in car sharing. Want to sidestep the next economic crisis? Then switch to a green and sustainable bank, invest in gold, or go live in a yurt. Want to help a refugee? Collect blankets, donate your mouldy cuddly toy, organise your own benefit concert, marathon or cupcake baking contest, or, as a last resort, take a refugee home.

No matter how well-intended and often even idealistic such efforts are, the individualisation or privatisation of the world's problems also has a drawback. The idea that a better environment starts with yourself can easily turn into the belief that these structural social problems are the result

of personal failure. An example of such erring is the myth of the 'money-grabbing bankers' – the greedy psychopaths addicted to gambling, cocaine and adrenalin – who supposedly are responsible for the economic crisis. Of course, individuals or individual companies that deliberately enrich themselves at the cost of others must be called to account, but that can never be the whole story. It is not enough to point to money-grabbing bankers, because this sheds insufficient light on the fact that their behaviour and presumed character flaws are being structurally rewarded, while alternative characteristics – such as a long-term view and attention to sustainability – are punished by the system. Our moralistic view distracts our attention from the things that are wrong at the system level, i.e. what stimuli incite individuals to action.[13] The shortcomings of the ethical look at such problems is exactly what Adorno wanted to express in his above-mentioned aphorism about the impossibility of leading a righteous life amidst falsehood.

How perversely such an internalisation of a social problem can turn out is demonstrated by the Dutch SBS6 television programme *Geld maakt gelukkig* [money is everything]. In this show, that has been running since 2014, three candidates with financial problems court the favours of the audience. One by one they tell their story: they need money for medication that is no longer covered by their health insurance, they need to adapt their house for their handicapped child, or they have for some reason or other ended up in debts that now weigh heavily upon them. Each candidate needs a certain amount of money, somewhere between €1,000 and €10,000. After having listened to three heart-breaking stories, the hundred people in the audience are asked to divide €10,000 among the three candidates and they are advised in this by the 'social lawyer' (as he is called on the SBS website) Prem Radhakishun and a 'budget coach'. Following the broadcast the viewers at home can also donate money through the website. The show very much brings to mind BNN's *Grote Donorshow* [Big Donor Show], with the significant difference that that turned out to be a hoax. As in that show, in which a terminally ill woman could choose from three candidates to donate her kidney to after she had died, here human misery is perversely exploited and turned into entertainment. Of course such exploitation and transformation is almost as old as television itself, as is evident from the legendary *Open Het Dorp* [Open The Village] show from 1962, in which popular TV presenter Mies Bouwman in a 23-hour marathon broadcast raised money for a 'village' with special facilities for physically handicapped people. These days, commercial TV stations present such emo-TV shows about the socially less fortunate by the dozen, making money from the financial crisis

with successful shows such as *Effe geen cent te makken* [temporarily flat broke] and *Dubbeltje op z'n kant* [penny-pinching time].

Still, one feels that a line has been crossed here. Perhaps this is mostly because of the contest format, which in the case of the Big Donor Show led to fierce reactions and even to questions in Parliament (not though in the case of the SBS6 show). The 'candidates' must do their best to bring their story as convincingly as they can. According to the website, they 'go to extremes to win the favour of the audience'. In other words: the more pathetic the candidate, the more money they get and also, the more the audience, the panel and the viewers at home can congratulate themselves on making their fellow man happy. Because of course the candidates are happy with what they receive and if asked they would probably have no moral or political objection to the show whatsoever. They got help, didn't they? Candidates happy, viewers happy, TV manager happy, so what's the problem?

The problem lies, first of all, in how poverty is portrayed. The candidates are 'pitiful' people that have to rely on our sympathy. This not only makes us feel morally superior as we are helping a fellow man, but also much happier about our own financial situation. It is slightly reminiscent of the anecdote by Dickens about the man who hired a homeless person to walk in the snow in his garden so that he himself could enjoy the warmth and cosiness of the fire inside even more. But one shouldn't have to depend on the pity and benevolence of one's neighbours for help and support. Also those who express themselves poorly, or are right bastards, ill-mannered or otherwise socially handicapped, or simply refuse to be in an SBS show (because they, for instance, find it a degrading spectacle) are entitled to help when they find themselves in dire straits. This is exactly why social care in Western Europe has become increasingly institutionalised in the course of the twentieth century, resulting in the welfare state as we know it. Now that that is being dismantled, the people who can't make ends meet have once again become dependent on the sympathy of the public.

This brings us to the second problem, one that far transcends this SBS show, which is only a symptom of it. For ten years now, there has been a worrisome shift from solidarity to charity in the Netherlands. In 2006 the PvdA (the Dutch labour party) had a successful election campaign that included an appeal to make food banks redundant. Its leader Wouter Bos called them 'an embarrassing symbol' of the growing poverty in the Netherlands. After all, living above the poverty line was a matter of justice, not of charity. Since then, and especially because of the financial crisis, the number of people who depend on charity has only risen.[14] If the PvdA felt that

food banks were already embarrassing, then what about these TV shows? Even more than food banks they contribute to poverty being regarded as 'normal'. Thanks to these programmes, poverty even becomes a form of entertainment in which we can give free rein to our charity, instead of it being something that is to be fought structurally and through politics. The SBS website says: 'Geld maakt gelukkig aims to initiative a positive movement in which all people in the Netherlands take care of each other.' The programme therefore fits perfectly within the strategy of depoliticising poverty under the guise of the 'participation society'.

In 1891, Oscar Wilde wrote his essay 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', in which he mercilessly tore the ideologists of charity to shreds:

> They try to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor. [Note: SBS appears to aim at combining both goals. TL] But this is not a solution: it is an aggravation of the difficulty. The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible.

Of course poverty in the Netherlands has by far not reached the level of the nineteenth century (although according to Thomas Piketty's sensational book we are heading in that direction). Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that poverty is a political problem, not to be left in the hands of well-meaning civil initiatives, as the participation society's ideology prescribes, let alone in those of a TV programme.

In light of the tendency referred to elsewhere[15] as 'the great flight inwards' we need to think bigger and therefore more critical. A better environment starts with the totality. This of course does not mean that we should blame 'totality' for every loose stone in the pavement. The notion of totality means that the type of problems mentioned earlier – ecological, economic and humanitarian crises – are not temporary excrescences or excesses in a system that is otherwise okay, but that they have been part of that system from the very beginning (or, in Hegelian terms: the negation of the concept is already part of the concept). The fact that the critic then has no ready-made solution for such problems does not detract from the validity of such a perspective. The often-heard remark 'do not complain if you can't come up with an alternative' is both an overly simple and false way of censoring critical thinking. Perhaps realising that there is no solution as yet is better than providing a fake solution or only fighting symptoms – which only perpetuates the problems – or some form of pseudo-activity that conceals

the true causes. By continuing to acknowledge the problem as a problem we at least commit ourselves to finding structural solutions.

TALL STORIES

In postmodernism the totalising view is regarded with fear and suspicion: after all, the Grand Narratives of Christianity, Marxism and fascism have all led to totalitarian violence as they tried to force society into one uniform mould. Within cultural philosophy this aversion to the all-encompassing view has led to the advent of 'short' stories, in which notions of production, class and ideology had to make way for those of gender, ethnicity and identity politics. Because of this, critique of the system of capitalism – the original impulse of critical theory – was pushed into the background, not in the least because notions such as identity politics and 'philosophy of difference' are in no way contrary to and in many ways even perfectly compatible with current 'cultural' capitalism, in which people obtain their identity through networking and consuming. As capitalism increasingly became the only remaining frame of reference, and in that sense became totalitarian, it rendered philosophy toothless and harmless.

The ambition to 'apprehend one's time in thought', Hegel's definition of philosophy, seems to have been buried along with the Grand Narratives. Contemporary society, we are told time and again, is far too diverse and complex for one single narrative. According to Jürgen Habermas, the 'new complexity' (*neue Unübersichtlichkeit*) heralded the end of the age of 'master thinkers' who act as ushers and supreme judges. From now on, philosophy would have to be content with the role of 'interpreter', mediating between specialised scientific disciplines and the public domain, and between those disciplines themselves. Who would dare to say today, with Hegel, that philosophy should concern itself with such a thing as 'totality'? And yet it is this very complexity that forces us to look at all the phenomena in relation to each other – 'mediated' by each other, in Hegelian terms. It is precisely the globalised world of hypermobility, communication and international trade that prohibits us to think modestly. Even if the bird's eye view of traditional philosophy has become ontologically or epistemologically impossible, it is still politically necessary.[16] As we shy away from using big words such as 'totality' or 'capitalism', let alone 'revolution', it is the macro processes that overwhelm us and take away our control over our own lives.

Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) was perhaps one of the last attempts at a grand-scale Marxist cultural cri-

tique. Jameson's central argument is that postmodernism is not just an artistic or theoretical school, but the ideology of a certain capitalist mode of production. Following the Belgian economist Ernest Mandel, he calls this 'late capitalism', its characteristics being international markets, flexible multinationals and finance. The details of Jameson's theory are less relevant here than his methodology. His starting point is Marx' notorious 'base-superstructure model': the idea that the ideological 'superstructure' of a society (i.e. politics, religion, culture, et cetera) is determined by the material and socio-economic 'base' (i.e. technology and class relations). According to Jameson, superstructure and base must not be understood in the 'architectural' sense, as a building that is supported by a foundation; rather, the superstructure is a table top that, although it is supported by the legs, also provides stability to those legs.

Jameson was heavily criticised for his 'totalising' outlook; for using Marx' obsolete model he was accused of economic reductionism and having no eye for the diversity of culture. He had foreseen this criticism, as is apparent from the epilogue to his book. The 'taboo on' or even the 'war against' totality is a pre-eminently postmodern phenomenon that once more affirms the a-historical and individualistic nature of late capitalism. According to Jameson we should go right against this and hold onto the notion of totality, even if it is an impossible concept. Even more so: as a 'failed' concept it may now even be more useful then in its heyday, when Hegel used it.[17] In other words, we should not read works such as Jameson's *Postmodernism…* as a cultural history of 'how it really was', but rather as an attempt to throw a radically different light on certain cultural phenomena by relating them to each other in a new narrative and describing them in terms that may seem inapt or even improper at first glance. As Adorno already said about psychoanalysis, in cultural philosophy too only the exaggeration is true.

Meanwhile it has become cliché to say that the end of the grand narratives has itself become a grand narrative. To escape from this postmodern paradox, cultural philosopher René Boomkens posits that after the grand narratives we should now tell tall stories:

> What are tall stories? Literally, tall story is a story that succeeds in making its subject extra convincing with the aid of certain rhetorical tools. From the position of the listener, it is also a story that, compared to other stories or our own regular experience, sounds almost improbable and carries a hint of exaggeration.[18]

The tall story therefore presents itself more emphatically and more explicitly than the grand narrative as a story, as a construction that in an artificial or even laboured manner brings together a hitherto confusing and incoherent collection of fragments. The tall story thereby questions the obviousness and 'naturalness' of our usual outlook on the world, actually stressing its contingency by strategically presenting an alternative to it.

Boomkens rightly connects his notion of the tall story to the form of the essay. Whereas the grand narrative tried to capture the totality in the form of a system, as Hegel did in his *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (1817), the tall story fits in with the tentative and fragmentary form of the essay. This does not make it any less ambitious than the system, by the way. Every essay is, unlike what the genre's name seems to suggest, a tour de force. By delving deeply into its subject the essay attempts to also open up the world in which that subject originates. The analysis of the tiniest and seemingly most insignificant detail eventually leads to a panoramic view of the whole.[19] Unlike the system thinker or scientist the essayist is not only guided by the current situation in his or her own discipline or related specialisms, but equally by works of art and other cultural products, which often are the prism through which essayists look at society and at their own everyday experience.

This however incurs new problems. Because, isn't cultural critique becoming a most subjective or arbitrary enterprise in this manner? What separates the tall story from pure fiction? For a solution to the problem – or, rather, to circumvent it – we may turn to Slavoj Žižek's notion of the 'parallax view'. According to the accepted definition, a parallax is an optical illusion in which an object seems to be moving while in reality it is the observer who moves (for example, when in a moving train the landscape seems to pass before your eyes). This can easily be used as a metaphor for a method of cultural critique in which our changeable and shifting look presents us with a constantly changing image of the totality. And Žižek gives the notion an additional dialectical twist: in the parallax view the shifting of the object can never be completely subjective, because the various point of reference must already be 'inscribed' in the object itself. Or, the object is never fixed, because the various 'views' are always already part of it. In Žižek's own words: 'Sure, the picture is in my eye, but me, I am also in the picture.'[20]

According to Žižek we should regard Hegel's notion of totality in the same way. That notion does not imply, as its critics allege, that world history

unfolds along ironclad laws and that its outcome is predetermined. This so-called 'teleology' (viewing history in terms of a goal-oriented development), which is so often denounced in Hegel's philosophy, can in fact always only be constructed later and in hindsight.[21] Indeed, here we are not far from the Hegelian thought that Minerva's owl doesn't fly out until dusk, but it should be added that a meaning that is assigned retrospectively is not written in stone, but is always susceptible to change. In the case of the arts this was already said by T.S. Eliot (whom Žižek quotes):

> … what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered;[22]

Following the trail of Jameson, Boomkens and Žižek, the same can be said of the tall story and we can even take it one step further than Eliot: not only does the tall story shed new light on art history, but also on world history. It offers us a current 'parallax' view of totality, allowing us to look at the world with strange eyes and thereby question its obviousness. At the same time it presents a – albeit imaginary – position outside that world, by which it at least opens up the possibility of change, not only of the present, but in retrospect also of the past.

TO CONCLUDE:
DIALECTICAL PESSIMISM AND PRETENTIOUS THINKING

Just as in fairy-tales, the spell can only be broken by calling the evil by its name. 'Universal history must be construed and denied', Adorno wrote in his *Negative Dialektik* (1966).[23] By this he meant that we should see Hegel's totality for what it has in fact always really been: a construction. This implies that we distance ourselves from 'universal history' and take up an artificial position outside of that history, as it were, from where we can criticise it. We could call this the 'cunning' of cultural critique: we can escape destiny only by first constructing one.

We seem to be living in the age of permanent catastrophe. The ecological, economic and humanitarian disasters can really no longer be dismissed as unfavourable side-effects of progress for which clever people will certainly

find a solution any day now. They are the direct effect of 'natural' history, of technological, demographic and economic progress. Today's naive dreamers are not those who say there are alternatives, but rather the politicians who think that we can and should carry on as usual because there just is no alternative and the pragmatic idealists who think we can save the world by eating organically grown carrots. Such optimism is easily translated into conformism.

On the other hand there is an exuberant growth of doom-mongering that claims that everything is irrevocably and inevitably going to hell in a handbasket. For example, in the United States almost one-fifth of the population seems to expect that Judgement Day will occur during their lifetime. After each total eclipse of the sun or passing comet they seem to be slightly disappointed that the world has again not ended. Meanwhile people feast on Hollywood blockbusters in which natural disasters lay waste to our capitals and 'cultural heritage' either by fire or flood. In popular imagination the catastrophe as an object of desire seems to have taken the place of utopias, which still held that position in the nineteenth century. We seem to be witnessing a collective catastrophilia: an insatiable longing for the end of days, in whatever form. What is noticeable in this is that nowadays, in the words of Fredric Jameson, we find it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.[24] All the same, the illustrations in the brochures of Jehovah's Witnesses – in which paradise on Earth after the Last Day is represented as some sort of global neighbourhood barbecue in which not only all races but also all animals may partake – are at least more utopian than the so-called visions of the future of our politicians.

Against the persistent belief in progress and against the fatalistic catastrophilia, cultural critique should train itself in dialectical pessimism. Pessimism, because only the bleakest view of the current state of affairs can lead to revolt, which is after all always born of outrage.[25] However, this pessimism is dialectical because it stems from hope, from the profound conviction that the world could also look differently and that history could have taken another course. As the Flemish cultural philosopher Lieven de Cauter writes in his book *De capsulaire beschaving* [the capsular society] (2004):

> Until now, social commitment came from a profound utopian or idealistic (or even religious, Messianic) optimism. Today, it is perhaps more than ever time to take pessimism and even a (self-)critical pessimism as motto, motive and engine of planetary protest.[26]

Meanwhile, what De Cauter calls 'glocal panic' rules: the defensive reaction to global problems in the form of neo-nationalists movements that feed the illusion that we can solve or at least evade these problems by retiring into our local shell. Ironically, postmodernism has indirectly contributed to this new nationalism by placing a taboo on grand narratives, on the bird's eye views from which one can overlook and criticise the totality. By contrast, a dialecticalpessimistic cultural critique feels compelled to tell tall stories, as the disasters that confront us are of a planetary scale.

In a column in the Dutch weekly De Groene Amsterdammer about the silent demise of the 'academic spring' (the recent rebellions by students and staff at a number of Dutch universities) Professor of Financial Geography Ewald Engelen mentions an employment advertisement for a 'Head of International Strategies and Relations' of the University of Groningen, bearing the motto, in bold letters and of course in English: born leaders reach for infinity. Such bombastic management prose is no longer exclusively used in the corporate world but has long since increasingly been contaminating the public space and its institutions. Faced with this, it seems only fitting that critical thinking, in an act of overidentification, is at least as pretentious as that and strives for nothing less than the by the younger Marx intended 'ruthless critique of all things existing: ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.'[27]

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1 Benjamin, Walter (1999) The Arcades Projects. Transl. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
2 Thanks to Jan Sietsma for the analogy.
3 For example, Lukács writes: 'Thus the category of mediation is a lever with which to overcome the mere immediacy of the empirical world and as such it is not something (subjectively) foisted on to the objects from outside, it is no value-judgement or 'ought' opposed to their 'is'. It is rather the manifestation of their authentic objective structure.' (Georg Lukács, 1967, History and Class Consciousness: III The Standpoint of the Proletariat, transl. by Rodney Livingstone. London: Merlin Press.
4 Adorno, Theodor W. (1974) Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life. Transl. Edmund Jephcott. London: Verso, p. 39.
5 Boltanski, Luc and Eve Chiapello (2005) The New Spirit of Capitalism. Transl. Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, pp. 141-142.
6 For example Bruno Latour's 'actor-network'-theory, Manuel Castells' 'network society', or Gilles Deleuze's 'rhizomatic network'.
7 Bauman, Zygmunt (1998) Globalization. The Human Consequences. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 77 ff.
8 Adorno (1974) (see note 4), p. 50. This was a reversal of Hegel's famous aphorism: 'Das Wahre ist das Ganze.'
9 Adorno, Theodor W. (1972) Soziologische Schriften, in: Gesammelte Schriften, ed. Rolf Tiedemann assisted by Gretel Adorno, Susan Buck-Morss en Klaus Schultz, vol. 8. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, p. 364.
10 As he also writes in Ästhetische Theorie (1970): 'Denn Wahr ist nur, was nicht in diese Welt paßt' ('True is only that which does not fit in this world'.
11 Reve, Gerard (1999) 'Een eigen huis', in: Verzameld Werk, Deel 3. Amsterdam: L.J. Veen, p. 201.
12 Fisher, Mark (2009) Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative? London: Zero Books, p. 69.
13 See also Luyendijk, Joris (2015) Dit kan niet waar zijn. Onder bankiers. Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Atlas Contact, p. 188. We also find this idea in Marx, who, for good reason, deemed it necessary to not only develop a moral critique of capitalism but also one of the system as such. In Das Kapital he argues that the motives of the individual capitalist are irrelevant; the alleged greed is a function of capital, which could not continue to exist without progressive accumulation. See Marx, Capital, chapter 4.
14 See, for example, Genadebrood. De onstuitbare opmars van de voedselbank (2015) by Peter Verschuren. Verschuren tells how the first Dutch food bank was founded in Rotterdam in 2002. By 2014 there were 157 food banks across the Netherlands, serving tens of thousands of people.
15 Lijster, Thijs, De grote vlucht inwaarts. Essays over cultuur in een onoverzichtelijke wereld [The great flight inwards. Essays on culture in a confusing world], expected in late March 2016 from De Bezige Bij publishers.
16 See also Laermans, Rudi (2001) Ruimten van cultuur. Van de straat over de markt naar het podium. Leuven: Van Halewyck, pp. 156-157.
17 Jameson, Fredric (1991) Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. London: Verso, p. 409.
18 Boomkens, René (1998) Een drempelwereld. Moderne ervaring en stedelijke openbaarheid. Rotterdam: NAi Uitgevers, p. 39.
19 See also what Adorno says in Der Essay als Form (1958): 'The relation to experience – and from it the essay takes as much substance as does traditional theory from its categories – is a relation to all of history; merely individual experience, in which consciousness begins with what is nearest to it, is itself mediated by the all-encompassing experience of historical humanity; the claim that social-historical contents are nevertheless supposed to be only indirectly important compared with the immediate life of the individual is a simple self-delusion of an individualistic society and ideology.' (Adorno, in New German Critique No. 32 (Spring-Summer 1984) p. 158; Transl. Robert Hullot-Kentor).
20 Žižek, Slavoj (2006) The Parallax View. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, p. 17.
21 See also: Žižek, Slavoj (2010) Living in the End Times, London: Verso, p. 197.
22 Eliot, T.S. (1921) 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'
23 Adorno, Theodor W. (1973) Negative Dialectics. Transl. E.B. Ashton. London and New York: Routledge, p. 320.
24 Jameson, Fredric (1994) Seeds of Time. New York: Columbia University Press, p. xii.
25 See also Hessel, Stephane (2011) Neem het niet!, Dutch transl. Hannie Vermeer-Pardoen. Amsterdam: Van Gennep.
26 De Cauter, Lieven (2004) De capsulaire beschaving. Over de stad in het tijdperk van de angst. Rotterdam: NAi Uitgevers, p. 195.
27 Letter to Ruge, September 1843 (Marxists Internet Archive)

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