Anthropos 55 (1): 59–76 | ISSN 0587-5161 | E-ISSN 2630-4082

Nirvana is a Waking Nightmare

Primož Krašovec
University of Ljubljana
primoz.krasovec@ff.uni-lj.si

Abstract. The connection between capitalism and depression, which has already been established and documented in recent critical social and cultural theory, can be developed further. In existing literature, depression is seen as an affective disengagement from capitalist imperatives when capitalism's colonisation of the psychic and affective space reaches a critical point. Our main original contribution to the further development of this theory would be that, firstly, since depression is a disengagement from capitalism, capitalism no longer determines it, which means it can develop in other ways; and, secondly, that this further development of depression under capitalism is, at least in some respect, similar to Buddhist spiritual practices, especially its characteristic *non-attachment.* In the first section of the article we frame capital's indifference to materiality as a specific form of *non-attachment* on both the objective and subjective side of capitalism. On its subjective side this non-attachment can be either compensated by a new attachment to *non-attachment* or it can lead to depression, which involves a further *non-attachment.* In the second and third section we explore two modes of such complete depressive *non-attachment:* the first is a violent form of depression that strikes outwards at society, although in a non-attached and impersonal way; the second is a suicidal form of depression that aims to exit the social world to which all attachment is severed. In the fourth section we present a sort of a prequel and a historical alternative to Western capitalist depressive *non-attachment,* a mid-twentieth century Japanese Buddhist *non-attachment,* which is still violent and suicidal, but not as a reaction to an already developed capitalism, rather as an attempt of a preventive measure against it, which was subsequently met with a nuclear solution.

Key Words: Buddhism, *non-attachment,* depression, violence, suicide, nuclear solution

Nirvana je dnevna mora

Povzetek. Povezavo med kapitalizmom in depresijo, ki jo je nedavna kritična družbena in kulturna teorija že zaznala ter opisala, je mogoče

https://doi.org/10.26493/2630-4082.55.59-76

še razširiti. V obstoječi literaturi depresija nastopa kot afektiven umik od kapitalističnih imperativov, do katerega pride, ko je dosežena kritična točka kapitalistične kolonizacije psihičnega in afektivnega prostora. Naš glavni izvirni prispevek k nadaljnjemu razvoju te teorije bi bil, da, prvič, ker je depresija umik iz kapitalizma, je kapitalizem ne določa več, kar pomeni, da se lahko razvija na drugačne načine; in, drugič, da je ta nadaljnji razvoj depresije v kapitalizmu, vsaj v nekaterih vidikih, podoben budističnim duhovnim praksam, še posebej zanje značilni nenavezanosti. V prvem razdelku članka za kapital značilno indiferentnost do materialnosti označimo kot posebno obliko nenavezanosti, ki velja za tako objektivno kot subjektivno stran kapitalizma. Na njegovi subjektivni strani je mogoče to nenavezanost nadomestiti z novo navezanostjo na nenavezanost, lahko pa vodi v depresijo, kar pomeni poglobitev nenavezanosti. V drugem in tretjem razdelku raziskujemo dve obliki takšne popolne depresivne nenavezanosti: prva je nasilna oblika depresije, ki je usmerjena navzven, proti družbi, a na nenavezen in neoseben način; medtem ko je druga samomorilska oblika depresije, ki poskuša izstopiti iz socialnega sveta, s katerim je pretrgala vse vezi. V četrtem razdelku predstavimo neke vrsto predzgodbo in hkrati zgodovinsko alternativo zahodni depresivni nenavezanosti – japonsko budistično nenavezanost iz sredine 20. stoletja, ki je ravno tako nasilna in samomorilska, a ne kot reakcija na že vzpostavljeni kapitalizem, temveč kot poskus njegove preprečitve, ki pa jo je onemogočila jedrska rešitev.

Ključne besede: budizem, nenavezanost, depresija, nasilje, samomor, jedrska rešitev

Capitalism, *Non-Attachment* and Depression

Contrary to its common critiques, capitalism is not excessively materialistic but, if anything, excessively spiritual in its complete disdain towards material things and materiality as such. Even at the most elementary level of its structure – if we understand it as Marx's basic formula M–M' – there is something spiritual about capitalism. This spirituality is expressed in a neglect of the material dimension of the economy. In order for free exchange of commodities to take place, there has to be a real abstraction (Sohn-Rethel 2021)[1] from their material properties, since different commodities have nothing in common on the material level. Capitalism becomes possible only when commodities express their value in money, this

[1] An abstraction that takes place in reality as opposed to mental abstractions that take place in thought.

unusual abstract-concrete thing (Heinrich 2006), which is material, but its materiality has no bearing on its function as an expression of value (it makes no difference whether money is made out of metal, paper or numbers on a computer screen). Money represents a material embodiment of capital's indifference towards materiality. Although it is true that capitalism is all about the money, this fact does not support an intuitive critique of capitalism as too materialistic. Rather, capitalism is all about the money precisely because material things do not matter.

Such spirituality of capitalism at the level of its basic structure also has effects at the level of everyday life in capitalism, which is also becoming increasingly spiritual. Our relation to things we consume is structurally similar to Buddhist *non-attachment* as a renunciation of grasping for things, which are ultimately fleeting and impermanent and attachment to them can therefore only bring suffering (Davis 2014). While Buddhist *non-attachment* does not stop at indifference towards material things and is instead crucial for the development of *non-attachment* towards one's intellect and ego and ultimately, the overcoming of the self, its starting stage is nevertheless very similar to attitudes towards materiality on both the side of capital and the side of human subjects of capitalism. Not allowing oneself to become attached to things is crucial to consumption in a situation of planned obsolescence and rapidly shifting trends and fashions. To avoid suffering that necessarily follows from attachment, today's consumer has to learn to treat commodities as always already obsolete. Even if/when it does not use Buddhist spiritual techniques, capitalism spontaneously develops its own Buddhist-like techniques of *non-attachment* as emotional and psychic survival techniques – an example would be the 'impermanence mindset' as a specific view of the phenomenal world that improves market-focused dynamic capability in a turbulent business world (Tian, Au, and Tse 2020). Capitalism is a realised exoteric (in a sense that it does not lead to any deeper spiritual transformation, but instils certain basic techniques and attitudes) Buddhism. Capitalism's indifference towards materiality automatically compels us to develop *some* form of *non-attachment*.

There is, however, more to capitalist Buddhism than adjustment to capital's indifference towards materiality since the subjective dimension of capitalist spirituality does not stop at consumer behaviour and corporate mindset, but overflows to other areas. In the shadows of corporate motivational workshops, mission statements and team building weekends there is also a dark, cold spiritual development with a potential for vi-

olence. Well-adjusted, corporate capitalist spirituality tends to develop a passion for constant change, uncertainty and new challenges. By doing so, it replaces the defunct attachment to things with an emotional attachment to impermanence (attachment to *non-attachment*) and can thus avoid the psychic and emotional dangers related to total *non-attachment*. However, outside of corporate control there are also runaway spiritual processes that do not merely replace one object of attachment with another, but instead take *non-attachment* further. This further development of *non-attachment* will be the focus of this article, with objective and subjective spiritual tendencies of capitalism providing the necessary context against which our exploration of further *non-attachment* will proceed. That is, the topic of this research is not the surface level capitalist consumerist or corporate *non-attachment* as such, but a deeper, darker *non-attachment* that follows in its wake.

When exploring psychic tendencies of twenty-first century capitalism, Fisher (2009, 31) also notes the importance of 'impermanence mindset' when he compares *Heat* (Mann 1995) with the old-fashioned 70s gangster movies. In *Heat,* criminals are, as opposed to *The Godfather* (Coppola 1972), no longer bound by customs, family, codes of honour or baroque hierarchies – the main character has a made up, generic name, no history and no attachment to anything. Like contemporary corporations, he develops a compensatory attachment to his *non-attachment,* a certain pride in his ruthlessness. Both gangsters as well as Wall Street figures of the late 90s and twenty-first century popular culture share the same cynical attitude and disdain towards old-fashioned attachments to people and things; however, their cynicism is not the opposite of the positive psychology-inspired corporate mantras, but rather just another iteration of the same logic of attachment to *non-attachment.*

At the objective level, capitalism has always had a bipolar structure (alternating periods of investment manias[2] and economic depressions). In the twenty-first century, however, this bipolar structure also redoubles itself at the subjective level (Fisher 2009, 35). At the level of individual psyche, the manic pole means a passionate affirmation of capital's *non-attachment* to materiality, while the depressive pole results from the human psyche's inability to keep up, resulting in burnouts and emotional emergency shutdowns. While such cases of individual bipolar disorders

[2] In psychology, mania designates acute abnormally elevated emotional, energy and activity levels.

not only exist but are on the rise, there is more to depression in twenty-first century capitalism than depressive episodes that are derivative of subjective manias. Or, while such cases do not differ significantly from depression that existed before and independently of capitalism (characterised by passivity, numbness and social withdrawal), there is also a whole another dimension of depression – 'an awakening to a senseless world' (Berardi 2009, 118) – at a distance from attachment-to-*non-attachment* capitalist manias. Depression itself has many neurological and psychological definitions, but the one we will stick to sees depression as 'zero affect' (Fisher 2014, 104), a total emotional emptying out. 'Depression is not sadness, not even a state of mind, it is a (neuro)philosophical (dis)position' (Fisher 2014, 106).

While the connection between capitalist acceleration and the rise of depression has been well documented (Fisher 2014; Fox 2009; Berardi 2009; Han 2017) and consists in showing that depression is triggered when the individual psyche is no longer able to keep up with the speed and intensity of capitalism, there is another side to depression that existing analyses overlook. Namely, while the onset of depression can be determined by capitalism, the very nature of depression (as emotional and affective shutdown) puts an end to this determination once depression sets in. This also means that depression can develop in ways that cannot be directly traced back to capital(ism) and allow for further development of *non-attachment.*

Our main thesis would be that capitalist structural indifference towards materiality has two immediate subjective effects: one is a *non-attachment* in the form of manic consumerist and corporate mindsets, which are immediately compensated for by new attachment to *non-attachment* (for example, consumers not being attached to any particular items, but to passionately keeping up with ever changing trends and fashions; and already mentioned corporate mindsets celebrating impermanence as a new thing to be attached to in equally passionate affirmation), and the other is depression as an affective disconnection from capitalist circuits. As opposed to mania, depression escapes capitalist determination and the cycle of compensatory attachments and can thus develop more complete forms of *non-attachment* which may include violence and suicide.

These new forms of depression are developed by following the logic of *non-attachment* further than safe compensatory attachment to *non-attachment.* While compensatory attachments preserve the individual's emotional integrity (or even accelerate it into mania), continuous shed-

ding of attachments in depression leaves one with zero attachments, which also means zero emotional investments. One thus arrives at depression not through sadness, but through emotional emptying out and in such cases depression is not an extremely negative emotional state, but a psychic state without any emotions. Relations to the social world, however, still remain; they are just devoid of any emotional charge. A result of such *non-attachment* that extends from things to social relations is depressive realism (Alloy and Abramson 1988), a nightmarish awakening into a *samsara*[3] that remains exactly as it is, only without the illusions caused by emotional attachments. The social world appears as meaningless. Meanings that we attach to it and to which we in turn get attached to are revealed as arbitrary and shallow coping mechanisms.

Where there were once motivation, goals, expectations and joy in new experiences or, alternately, sadness, disappointments and anxieties, there are now just senseless, ghastly social and psychic automatisms. Depressive realism means coming to terms with and affirming the total indifference of the world, which was always already there, although masked by illusions, caused by emotional attachments. Awakening changes nothing, *nirvana*[4] is identical to *samsara* (Nāgārjuna 1995, 331). Depressive realism also marks a decisive shift in social subjectivity within capitalism. While the epistemological value of traditional Buddhism consisted of showing that beyond the illusion of permanence there are in reality just endless interdependent and relational becomings (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1993, 219–229), today it is capitalism itself that destroys any illusion of permanence. Consequently, capitalist subjectivity is no longer trapped in the illusion of permanence and is instead coping with impermanence and the related loss of any consistent meaning.

This process is at the same time a cultural mutation in a sense that popular culture that involves depressive realism is not its passive 'reflection', but precisely a site (or one of the sites) in which it is enacted and articulated. The use of examples from popular culture in what follows is inspired by a long line of thinkers like Fisher (2009), Berardi (2021), Parisi (2019) and Deleuze and Guattari (1986), that treat popular culture not as a representation of a social reality but instead as a different form of thinking (visual or literary) that can compound and inspire social and cultural theory.

[3] A Buddhist term for a phenomenal world.

[4] A Buddhist term for enlightenment.

Depression, *Non-Attachment* and Violence

In cinema perhaps no one captures the atmosphere of depressive dark awakening better than Nicolas Winding Refn in his two recent TV series, *Too Old to Die Young* (Winding Refn and Brubaker 2019) and *Copenhagen Cowboy* (Winding Refn 2023). Miu, the main character of the second, is a human good luck charm from the Balkans, stranded in Copenhagen after being sold into slavery at the age of seven. She rarely speaks, but is not withdrawn – she is present and intensely aware yet without any emotional responses. She moves through her captive house as in a nightmarish script, does as she is told without urgency but also without hesitation, going through the motions of social choreographies in a state of functional, 'walking' depression. She is neither passively resigned nor actively engaged. Her blank facial expression, coupled with an intense stare, remains the same regardless of what is happening around her. After realising that her captive house also holds several severely abused sex workers, Miu laconically exclaims: 'It is a cold world.' She is not exactly passive although she might appear so from the perspective of the non-depressed, where being passive is synonymous with 'just following the script' or 'going through the motions'. Miu certainly does that, but from the perspective of depressive realism everyone does – and things like intentions are merely illusions, caused by emotional over-investment in the world.

This is precisely one of the key realisations of the dark awakening – in samsara, nothing changes if emotional attachments are removed, we are still going through exactly the same motions in exactly the same way. With or without emotional attachments we are always already social automatons. There is, however, another form of social action that only becomes possible within the cold world of depression, and that is violence. By this we of course do not mean that every violent action is depressive – far from it – and neither that every depression will necessarily turn violent, rather that violence is one of the few ways in which a detached, disillusioned depressive can reengage with the world and that depressive violence is one of the new (as well as very dark and disturbing) modes of (a)social violence in the twenty-first century. As opposed to 'ordinary' violence, though, depressive violence is driven by neither passion nor calculation but comes from a place of zero affect and *non-attachment*. Berardi notes something similar in his discussion of the contemporary school shooters: for example, Seung-Hui Cho, responsible for the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, was diagnosed with a major depressive dis-

order and experienced severe affective paralysis and dissociation (Berardi 2015, 75).

Miu fits the profile of dissociated depressive killer perfectly. During the series she encounters many situations in which she exercises violence and she carries it all out in the same impassioned, yet intense way. There is not a trace of pre-mediation, intention or retroactive rationalisation[5] or anything else resembling emotional involvement, yet Miu's killings are also neither psychopathic random nor compulsive actions. Violence unleashed by Miu seems shocking, excessive and irrational precisely because it is so impersonal and follows a logic that is alien to the common social world. It is a logic of the war machine: 'The martial arts do not adhere to a *code* [...] but follow *ways* [...]'. Martial arts always involve 'learning to [...] undo oneself [...], the undoing of the subject' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 400, emphasis added). Depressive realism is also a *way* of undoing oneself and of undoing the subject, which is another feature that it shares with Buddhism. Its violence thus necessarily runs against the grain of the social and counter to its ordinary, domesticated and predictable forms of violence.

Once the ego-oriented subject is undone by emotional disinvestment, what remains is not a catatonic passivity – perhaps the most misleading prejudice of ego-oriented psychology is that it precludes any possibility of subjectivity and thus social action beyond the ego by equating the ego with subjectivity as such (Nishitani 1982, 14–18) – but a different, egoless, impersonal form of subjectivity. The new subjectivity is empty but not in a sense that emptiness[6] replaces the ego as the grounding of subjectivity and functions in the same way that ego did before, but in a sense of a fundamental subjective destitution, followed by a restitution not on a different grounding, but as a formation of empty subjectivity, subjectivity that is not external to action (as its source) but identical with it and groundless.[7]

Such subjectivity is analogous to the alien, senseless becoming of cap-

[5] In psychology rationalisation designates a retroactive just-so justification for our actions, whose real determination is unconscious and therefore inaccessible to conscious reflection and supervision.

[6] In Buddhism emptiness designates the absence of any positive, firm or sound basis for the self and is thus a part of the realisation that the self is an illusion as well as its practical overcoming.

[7] In Buddhism groundlessness designates a process of uncertain and ever-shifting becoming.

ital. They are both aimless (or rather, their aim merges with and becomes inseparable from the process) and impersonal, with the difference being that capital engages in endless and boundless production, indifferent to the social code, while depressive violence engages in violence, equally indifferent to the social code. Or, a new, depressive realist capitalist subjectivity is empty in the same way capital is, with the difference being only that capital discards any outside purposes that would confer any meanings to its process, while depressive realist subjectivity discards the ego as a meaning making device. Both objective and subjective dimensions of the capitalist process are becoming Buddhist in the same movement.

In another Winding Refn masterwork, *Too Old to Die Young,* the main character Martin is, similarly to Miu, a functional depressive. His psychic interiority is as empty of inherent validation sources as the outside world is empty of inherent meaning. He barely speaks and his face is devoid of emotional expression, but not in a sense of a catatonic retreat; it is rather a non-expression of impersonal awareness. *Too Old to Die Young* is also placed in a cold world and is as dark and violent as *Copenhagen Cowboy.* Martin gets entangled in extremely disturbing and violent events from the very start but the most transformative event in the series is his encounter with Diana, a secretive para-Buddhist guru. Under her influence Martin transforms into a karmic weapon, a vigilante killing automaton with the grace and innocence of Kleist's (2022, 268) marionettes that never 'strike an attitude'. Unlike the usual cinema vigilantes, he gets no satisfaction from those acts and bears no resentment towards the dysfunctional social system that enables the monsters that he kills. Ultimately, he also meets his end by torture and dismemberment at the hands of the Mexican drug cartel he offended with the same indifference as everything else. In depressive realism 'the borders between one's body and the surrounding universe are blurred, and so is the difference between killing and being killed' (Berardi 2015, 56).

Thorough the series Martin develops and prefects a kind of non-emotional state of neither euphoria neither dysphoria. He is not bound by social codes, and feels no guilt nor fear of repercussions. His violence is impersonal and emotionless without any leftover ego issues and his killings represent a sublime automatism, an alien force that is neither calculating nor psychopathic and neither moralist nor evil. They are pure action in a sense that they are not guided by any expectation or intention but also in a sense of pure, unmediated awareness that is indistin-

guishable from movement (Herrigel 1999, 42–43), an innocence of cold fury.

While meditating out loud on the incoming dark hybrid neo-fascist/neo-woke future – where violence, ignorance and hate will be exalted and narcissism, impulsive indulgence and perversity will be seen as virtues – in the series finale, Diana also foresees an emergence of a new mutation, made possible by the implosion of man in a wash of blood and silence, a mutation that will usher in a new dawn of innocence. Such subjective and cultural mutation, resulting in a new innocence in relation to violence, might already be underway. According to Kleist (2022, 273), original grace and innocence, as exhibited by a fencing bear and dancing marionettes, unburdened by self-conscious intentions and ego-centred reflection, can only be regained not by a regression to a pre-conscious state but by eating from the tree of knowledge again, and current forms of dark Zen might be just that.

To sum up the argument thus far: in this section we have connected depression as *non-attachment,* triggered by but at the same time no longer determined by capitalist indifference to materiality, to a specific mode of violence, which is made possible (but in no way necessary) by depressive *non-attachment.* Such violence is impersonal and asocial and motivated by neither passion nor calculation. Examples of such violence can be found in Winding Refn's cinema and in sociological investigations of contemporary school shooters.

Depression, *Non-Attachment* and Suicide

Development of a new form of (a)social violence is, however, not the only possible way depressive realism can play out. Its violent dimension can also be turned inwards as suicide and its *non-attached* relation to the world can be gentle and compassionate. The best example of the latter in contemporary cinema is perhaps Joachim Trier's seminal *Oslo, August 31* (Trier 2011), which might also be the best twenty-first century cinematic portrayal of depression.

Oslo, August 31 conveys a quite unique sense of depression that means total alienation and detachment from the social world, but does not involve any sadness or resentment and also, unlike *Too Old to die Young* and *Copenhagen Cowboy,* no hostility or violence. *Oslo, August 31*'s main character, Anders, a recovering heroin addict, is a social outcast but not a social failure because he is not striving to reengage. He does not feel wronged by the world nor does he perceive his alienation as an injustice,

he rather just lost his step with the social world and landed outside. His depression is not a result of a sudden tragic, traumatic event, but a non-dramatic adjustment to his social expulsion.

Anders's exit from the social world and disenchantment with it comes by way of his heroin addiction, which lays bare the arbitrariness of social rituals. Contrary to the lives of social strivers, who aim to maximise their human capital in endless positive feedback loops[8] (ever more money, consumption, health, fitness, fashion; ever expanding social circle and social life; ever trendier diets and exercise regimens and so on), experience euphoria (with alternating episodes of burnouts) and suffuse their lives with artificial meanings, the addict's life is reduced to a single compulsion whose meaninglessness is perfectly transparent (James 2013): search for a hit, take a hit, build tolerance, search for a higher dose hit … H–H'.

Although it is more obvious there, capitalism is not structured like an addiction only in the sphere of consumption but also in its primary sphere, that of production. In the sphere of consumption, addiction is subjectively experienced as an irrepressible inner need to, for example, check every social media outlet every few minutes or to buy the latest smartphone or clothing article as soon as it becomes available. In the sphere of production, addiction has a similar structure of compulsion,[9] but is instead experienced as an outside imposition – the pressure of competition forces each individual capital to ceaselessly accrue ever increasing amounts of surplus value (Heinrich 2012, 16). Social rituals, even if they are not economic in the narrow sense, tend to reproduce the originary self-expanding compulsion of capital. What makes drug addiction special is not that it is addictive (popular culture, social media and lifestyle trends can be just as addictive as drugs) but that it is impossible to construct a meaning or a higher purpose around it. Addiction expels the addict out of the social loop not because they are addicted, but because their addiction cannot be imbued with artificial meanings. Drug addiction can be an efficient shortcut to Buddhism that requires no con-

[8] In cybernetics a feedback loop designates a circular process, whereas an output of a previous action serves as an input for the next action within the same process – an example would be surplus value from the previous production cycle serving as an investment in a new production cycle within the same process of capitalist accumulation. A positive feedback loop means increasing outputs, whereas with negative feedback loop outputs remain constant.

[9] In psychology compulsion designates repetitive behaviours that a person feels the urge to repeat over and over as in, for example, obsessive-compulsive disorder.

scious effort since in addiction social illusions tend to drop off by themselves.

An active addict is, however, too consumed by their habit to develop Buddhist-like *non-attachment* but rather perpetuates an extreme form of attachment (the addiction itself), only absent illusory meanings. *Non-attachment* sets in only if/when they try to quit, like Anders. As the frenetic pace of alternating anxiety when hunting for drugs and the thrill of getting high wear off, what sets in is an unexpected emptiness. While capitalist compulsions set you free from attachment to material things due to capital's characteristic indifference to materiality, that process can be countered by compensatory reattachments to impermanence and ever shifting trends and fashions. Drug addiction is, however, also a form of reattachment, but has no meaning – the raw compulsion of addiction is laid bare. As such, drug addiction sets you free from artificial meanings, attached to compulsions. A successful recovery from drug addiction, on the other hand, sets you free from even the need for drugs and leads, at least in the case of Anders, to *non-attachment*. When first artificial meanings and then compulsions behind them are thrown off there is a perfect stillness as material things are empty, social meanings are empty and social rituals are empty as well. Depressive realism sets in and the world changes irreversibly. Throughout most of the movie Anders looks like he just woke up in a world that is completely closed off for him. *Oslo, August 31* chronicles his last day, which he spends exploring this alien world on his day off from rehab.

Key scenes in the movie all deal with Anders's terminal disconnection from the social world – there is no crack open in the social world for him to come back but there is no intention to go back on his side, either. Rather, he calmly observes the world as if to make sure there are no meanings and attachments left. In perhaps the most powerful scene of the movie, Anders finds himself in a cafe, where he sits alone, motionless and expressionless, while surrounded by the noise of other people's chatter. They gossip, share, enthuse about their vacations and the future, while Anders does not judge them or despair about the shallowness and superficiality of it all (an attitude which would still betray an attachment, although an emotionally negative one, to the world). What the scene conveys is rather a sense of overwhelming compassion in an original Buddhist sense, i.e. not pity as a dismissive attitude that pretends to be humble, but an impersonal, non-attached acceptance of samsara just as it is, without illusions or emotional interference (as in, true compas-

sion becomes possible only when emotional attachments – as ego issues – retreat).

Throughout the movie Anders continues to make rounds of the world he used to know, going through the motions of an unsuccessful job interview, a visit to his old dealer, a house party, already certain of his suicide and wandering around as if already dead – which is a characteristically (Zen) Buddhist stance (Victoria 2006, 473). At the end of the movie, he finds himself partying through night time Oslo, but even this peak experience of careless abandon changes nothing for Anders as he leaves to take one final hit. His detachment is complete, there are no traces of anger at or revenge on society in his suicide, just self-erasure and disappearance.

The difference between the usual and the Buddhist-like depression becomes obvious if we compare *Oslo, August 31* to the novel on which it is (loosely) based, Drieu La Rochelle's *Will o' the Wisp* (1931). In it, the main character, Alain, a heroin addict, similarly traverses the social world to which he no longer belongs and commits suicide at the end, but his relation to the world is full of disappointment and resentment. His attachments remain in place, they just invert their emotional charge and become intensely negative and his final act amounts to making a point and taking revenge on the social milieu which did not love him enough. On the contrary, Anders's suicide is not an emotional statement that affirms the self one last time, it is rather an end point of an impersonal exit from the social world, an exit that does not involve any emotional attachments at all.

To sum up the argument in this section: the new, Buddhist-like depression can (but does not have to) turn violent in two ways, either as outward asocial and impersonal violence, described in the previous section, or as inward violence, manifested as suicide. In the latter case suicide means an exit from the social world that completes a depressive *non-attachment* to it.

Buddhism, *Non-Attachment* and Suicide

In this last section we will develop an argument that is not a direct continuation of our main one, but is still complementary to it – i.e. an exploration of the relations between *non-attachment,* violence and suicide in Eastern Buddhism that was developing in the mid-twentieth century alongside and in opposition to encroaching capitalism. Although it was completely erased from reductive contemporary new age Western appropriations of it, Buddhism, even in its traditional Eastern form and not

only in a depressive realist one described earlier, has always had a dark, violent underside and a special relation to suicide. Meditations on violence and weapons training always had an important role in Japanese Zen Buddhism, where they were not, or at least not exclusively, used instrumentally. Instead, they were an integral part of spiritual practice, whose aim was the fusion of the mind, movement and weapons in the art of archery or swordsmanship (Herrigel 1999) – the subject becomes the weapon as a way of abolishing oneself as a subject.

Isao, the main character of Mishima's late masterpiece *Runaway Horses* (1st edition 1969), the second part in *The Sea of Fertility* series, can be seen as such a sentient and intelligent but non-subjective weapon. Although it has been criticised as the weakest book in the series precisely because of the supposedly weak and shallow characterisation of Isao, who can be seen as too straightforward and one-dimensional (White 1973), a more charitable reading could also interpret Isao as becoming a Buddhist (although he abhors official Buddhism and prefers Shinto) suicide machine by progressively stripping away everything that makes him human (and thus a good character by ordinary standards), that is, precisely his psychic depths, complex motivations, conflicting intentions and emotional entanglements. In contrast to brooding, contemplative Honda, his co-main character, who is prone to reflection, Isao is like a sword in mid-swing, violent and suicidal at the same time, but, however, not depressive. He is rather full of calm resolution and determination that is irreducible to effort-reward calculations and, since the stakes are much higher, transcends any sense of achievement. 'Never seeking power' he 'goes forth to certain death' (Mishima 2000, 205). Power is not sought, but enacted through pure action. His violence is non-instrumental, it aims at nothing outside itself and exhausts itself in the purity of violent action as such, the only innocence remaining in a fallen world. Purity consists precisely in accomplishing nothing, in not being attached to any aims or goals nor tying one's actions to intentions or motivations.

Similarly to Anders in *Oslo, August 31,* Isao wanders through the novel as if already dead, committed to suicide since the very beginning. His relation to the world is anything but gentle and compassionate, though. Isao's *non-attachment* is a result of a powerful aversion. As in Evola's (1996, 79) controversial take on early Buddhism, he exits the world out of disgust and his freedom from attachment is expressed in power, not indifference. The problem with the world is not – as it can be in Christian or watered down Western Buddhist renunciations of the world – that it is

too filled with lust, passions and temptations, but precisely the opposite – it is too bland, passionless and vulgar, so the only relation to the world is a violent, not withdrawn and compassionate, rejection. And since this rejection involves rejecting not just the effects, but also the causes of the corruption of the world, that also means a rejection of attachments, intentions and strivings, thus also transforming the violent relation to the world into an impersonal and empty one. Isao expresses this when he addresses his followers before they set out for their hopeless attempt at a right wing coup: 'You who are left, with no hopes and no expectations whatsoever, are you willing to throw away your lives on an act that probably will amount to nothing at all?' (Mishima 2000, 204–205).

Once his uprising fails, Isao becomes a kamikaze without a target. His suicide, previously inseparable from inflicting deaths upon the enemy, remains certain but becomes separate from the outward oriented violence – his death would not be a suicide by battle, but rather a traditional samurai style secluded one. After being released from prison at the end of the novel, Isao, like an arrow that was merely temporarily diverted rather than put back into a quiver, resolutely carries out his part of the assignment by assassinating a corrupt business leader, but this action is just a prelude to his inevitable suicide. As in the words from a last letter by a young kamikaze 'cherry blossoms glisten as they open and fall' (Inoguchi and Nakajima 1958, 201), Isao's suicide is not an act of desperation or resignation, but an ultimate act of power, a soaring out of the world after a fleeting blink of existence, like when 'the moon appears in the water but does not get wet nor is the water disturbed by the moon' (Dogen 1975, 20). In another of his late works, a meditation on action, power and violence, *Sun and Steel* (1st edition 1968), Mishima wrote about how, during his martial arts training, he 'glimpsed from time to time another sun [...] a sun full of fierce dark flames of feeling, a sun of death that would never burn the skin yet gave forth a still stranger glow' (Mishima 2003, 42). Perhaps it was this strange dark sun that 'soared up and exploded behind his eyelids' (Mishima 2000, 421) at the instant of Isao's suicide.

Both *Runaway Horses* and *Sun and Steel* were written shortly before Mishima's own timely samurai-style suicide – timely in a sense that it just about avoided the onset of capitalist spirituality that ushered forth realised Buddhism and depressive realism as its unintended side effects. Since its introduction in Japan in the sixth century, Zen Buddhism has always been tied to its warrior culture and martial spirit (Adolphson 2007) and influenced them in an important way (Leggett 2003), reaching its

darkest and at the same time terminal point during the Second World War. In a controversial wartime Zen interpretation, abandonment of the ego, demanded of all Japanese soldiers but especially of kamikaze 'special attack units', would be followed by a higher unity with the divine Imperial self (Victoria 2006, 230–304). But while the kamikaze, by extinguishing the instinct of self-preservation as the very root of individual self (Victoria 2006, 260, 285) transformed themselves into living suicide weapons, they were still defeated by an even darker and more monstrous force, the atomic bomb, where extinction is on the side of the machine and chemical reactions and not human self-overcoming. Hiroshima marked the end of the Eastern articulations of the dark Zen, leaving only Western, capitalist depressive realism in its wake.

Notes

'Nirvana is a Waking Nightmare' is an apocryphal saying, attributed to Buddha (Reps 1957, 163). The saying has been slightly altered for poetic purposes.

References

Adolphson, Mikael. 2007. *The Teeth and Claws of the Buddha: Monastic Warriors and Sohei in Japanese History.* Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

Alloy, Lauren, and Lyn Yvonne Abramson. 1988. 'Depressive Realism.' In *Cognitive Processes in Depression,* edited by Lauren Alloy, 223–265. New York: Guilford.

Berardi, Franco 'Bifo'. 2009. *Precarious Rhapsody.* Translated by Arianna Bove et al. London: Minor Compositions.

———. 2015. *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide.* Translated by Félix Guattari. London: Verso.

———. 2021. *The Third Unconscious.* London: Verso.

Coppola, Francis Ford, dir. 1972. *The Godfather.* Paramount Pictures. 2 hrs., 55 min.

Davis, Leesa S. 2014. 'Mindfulness, Non-Attachment and Other Buddhist Virtues.' In *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics,* edited by Stan van Hooft, 306–317. Durham: Acumen.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1986. *Kafka.* Translated by Dana Polan. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Dogen, Zenji. 1975. *Shobogenzo: The Eye and Treasury of the True Law.* Translated by Kōsen Nishiyama and John Stevens. Tokyo: Daihokkaikaku.

Drieu La Rochelle, Pierre. 1931. *Le feu follet.* Paris: Gallimard.

Evola, Julius. 1996. *The Doctrine of Awakening: The Attainment of Self-Mastery According to the Earliest Buddhist Texts.* Translated by H. E. Musson. Rochester, NY: Inner Traditions.

Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* London: Zero Books.

———. 2014. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures.* London: Zero Books.

Fox, Dominic. 2009. *Cold World: The Aesthetics of Dejection and the Politics of Militant Dysphoria*. London: Zero Books.

Han, Byung-Chul. 2017. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power.* Translated by Erik Butler. London: Verso.

Heinrich, Michael. 2006. 'A Thing with Transcendental Qualities.' MRonline, November 3. https://mronline.org/2006/11/03/a-thing-with-transcendental-qualities-money-as-a-social-relationship-in-capitalism/.

———. 2012. *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Marx's Capital.* Translated by Alexander Locascio. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Herrigel, Eugen. 1999. *Zen in the Art of Archery.* Translated by Richard Francis Carrington Hull. London: Vintage.

Inoguchi, Rikihei, and Tadashi Nakajima. 1958. *The Divine Wind: Japan's Kamikaze Force in World War II.* Translated by Roger Pineau. Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute.

James, Arran. 2013. 'To Cultivate an Active Suicidality.' *Synthetic Zero,* July 19. https://syntheticzero.net/2013/07/19/to-cultivate-an-active-suicidality-possibility-and-suicide.

Kleist, Heinrich von. 2022. *Selected Prose.* Translated by David Constantine. New York: Achipelago Books.

Leggett, Trevor. 2003. *Samurai Zen.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Mann, Michael, dir. 1995. *Heat.* Warner Bros. 2 hrs., 50 min.

Mishima, Yukio. 2000. *Runaway Horses.* Translated by Michael Gallager. New ed. London: Vintage.

———. 2003. *Sun and Steel.* Translated by John Bester. Tokyo: Kodansha.

Nāgārjuna. 1995. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way.* Translation and commentary by Jay L. Garfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nishitani, Keiji. 1982. *Religion and Nothingness.* Translated by Jan Van Bragt. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Parisi, Luciana. 2019. 'Xeno-Patterning.' *Angelaki* 24 (1): 81–97.

Reps, Paul. 1957. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones.* London: Penguin.

Sohn-Rethel, Alfred. 2021. *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology.* Translated by Martin Sohn-Rethel. Leiden: Brill.

Tian, Vane Ing, Alan Au, and Alan Tse. 2020. 'Impermanence Mindset and Market-Focused Dynamic Capability.' *Journal of International Consumer Marketing* 33 (1): 84–97.

Trier, Joachim, dir. 2011. *Oslo, August 31st.* Nordisk Film Distribusjon. 1 hr., 35 min.

Varela, Francisco, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. 1993. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience.* Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Victoria, Brian Daizen. 2006. *Zen at War.* 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

White, Edmund. 1973. 'Too Good to be True, at Least Too Good to be Interesting.' *New York Times,* June 24. https://www.nytimes.com/1973/06/24/archives/runaway-horses-by-yukio-mishima-translated-from-the-japanese-by.html.

Winding Refn, Nicholas, creator. 2023. *Copenhagen Cowboy.* byNWR.

Winding Refn, Nicholas, in Ed Brubaker, creators. 2019. *Too Old to Die Young.* Space Rocket Picrow.