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Revolt Through Passivity?

Getting High and Staying in with Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Juliane Strätz

This chapter analyzes how Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) subverts the close relationship between late capitalist production and consumption by constructing its protagonist's revolt corporeally through the depiction of the immobile, passive body. By using Melville's "Bartleby" and the discourse on the short story as a framework for the analysis of the novel, it argues that neoliberal narratives of efficiency, productivity, and individual responsibility are not simply opposed by tropes of rest and relaxation. Instead, the novel co-opts techniques that are usually utilized to preserve social reproduction and caricatures them. By overdrawing and estranging U.S. American practices of rest and relaxation and by revealing the intimate entanglements of unconscious states and contemporary cultures of work, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* discloses the dangers and absurdity of late capitalist ideology.

Keywords: late capitalism, labor, sleep, Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Even Sleepers are workers and collaborators on what goes on in the universe.
Heraclitus, *On the Universe*

Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do.
Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*

Capitalist participation has become a 24/7 business. In late modern societies, subjects are not only expected to engage in wage labor, they are also anticipated to consume. As wage labor no longer suffices to establish a successful life, recreational practices as well as activities of consumption, like shopping, going to the gym, and heading to the hottest parties, have become constituent to the construction of the ideal self. Work and “fun” not only increasingly overlap, but the latter acts as an extension of work. Amusement, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno famously noted, “is the prolongation of work under late capitalism” (109).

Otessa Moshfegh’s novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*¹ (2018) criticizes contemporary cultures of work by mobilizing its supposed counter-concept, namely the avoidance of work.² Here, refusal to engage in wage labor, avoidance of tasks, and trivialization of both labor and consumer culture become a “pragmatic form of protest against a teleological understanding of wage labor, against to-do-lists, against time management, altogether against the generalizing [and normalizing] guidebook frenzy, a resistance which takes the intimate connection between the process of value creation and the individually distinct human nature seriously” (Balint et al. 18; my translation). However, neoliberal narratives of efficiency, productivity, flexibility, and self-responsibility are not simply opposed by tropes of rest and relaxation, and the text does not simply portray this dissociation from the impacts of late capitalism as comforting, healing, and liberating. Instead, the novel co-opts techniques usually utilized to preserve social reproduction and caricatures them. By overdrawing and thus estranging American ideas of sleep as restorative

¹ In the following, I will refer to the novel using the abbreviated title *Rest and Relaxation*.

² The term “cultures of work” refers to the notion that late modern ideas of work are shaped by particular behaviors, attitudes, norms, and expectations. These not only permeate public and work life; indeed they are just as effective in the subject’s private life and are therefore experienced as intimate. They are cultures in the plural because even though certain markers may dominate (such as ideas of flexibility, efficiency, and mobility), they still differ in relation to occupation, race, class, gender, sexuality, and corporeality. Just as other forms of cultural belonging, cultures of work constitute a main factor impacting identity construction for late modern subjects.

and of sleep medicine as an additional enabler of consolidated sleep,³ *Rest and Relaxation* not only discloses the dangers and the absurdity of the associated ideology; it also reveals how sleep and relaxation come to be intimately entangled in contemporary cultures of work.

This chapter will analyze how *Rest and Relaxation* criticizes the conflation of production and consumption and the ensuing effects on the individual by constructing the protagonist's revolt corporeally through the depiction of the immobile, passive body. In the novel, the protagonist not only withdraws her healthy, able body from the workforce, but she also attempts to stay away from non-essential activities of consumption and amusement. Conspicuously, her extreme form of passive resistance is reminiscent of another literary character described as a revolutionary pioneer by scholars such as Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri. I will argue that the subversive potential that unfolds alongside the depiction of the eerily immobile body in the novel follows a similar strategy as does the protagonist's resistance in Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853).

The first part of this chapter will examine how *Rest and Relaxation's* strategy to subvert contemporary cultures of work through passivity and immobility resembles a specific subversive strategy called "Bartleby politics," which Žižek has deduced from a close reading of Melville's short story. While Žižek has proclaimed this the most appropriate form of resistance to late capitalist ideology, my analysis will problematize its actual revolutionary potential. I will argue that *Rest and Relaxation* illustrates that this strategy of passivity is insufficient as it remains entangled with notions of privilege and seclusion.

To continue the discussion of the subversive capacity of the immobile body, the second part of this chapter will shift the focus to an analysis of the aesthetic rendering of affects in the novel. Tying in with Sianne Ngai's concept of "Bartlebyan aesthetics," the analysis will zoom in to examine how the novel is still able to provide a critical commentary toward constructions of femininity in contemporary cultures of work—not through the reclusion of the protagonist but rather through her display of emotional negativity and affective equivocality. While the literary rendering of capitalist critique functions along the lines of "Bartleby," the

³ Matthew Wolf-Meyer introduces the term "consolidated sleep" to characterize the implementation and normalization of sleep in the U.S. His book *The Slumbering Masses* provides a history of sleep from Puritans to contemporary sleepers in which he registers that, throughout its history, American idioms of sleep have always been bound to ideas of efficiency and productivity (22).

ending and the consequences of the protagonist's actions deviate from the short story and, in doing so, highlight the limitations of *Bartleby* as a revolutionary messiah.

Slumbering Resistance in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Rest and Relaxation describes the journey of an unnamed female protagonist in her pursuit of a more content life. Her unconventional approach to attaining this happiness is based on her conviction that after spending a year in hibernation, she will be “renewed, reborn a whole new person, every one of [her] cells regenerated enough times that the old cells [are] just distant, foggy memories” (Moshfegh 51). Staying in her apartment becomes her preferred mode of rejuvenation because it enables her to distance herself from all the negative influences in her life: her “bullshit job” (Graeber) as a desk clerk in a New York art gallery,⁴ the memory of her deceased parents, her superficial friendships and romantic relationships. At the same time, it allows her to withdraw from most activities of consumption and capitalist participation. Aware of the difficulties that a year of rest and relaxation holds for a young and healthy person, she consults a psychiatrist who recklessly provides her with medication to treat her simulated insomnia. The novel accompanies the narrator-protagonist on her journey throughout this significant year. In doing so, it offers critical commentary on contemporary cultures of work by installing the passive, immobile, and anesthetized body as a signifier of revolt.

To get an initial sense of the protagonist's approach to revolt and the originality of her tactics, it is revealing to examine her reflections on the nature of her past rebellious behavior:

I could have acted out if I'd wanted to. I could have dyed my hair purple, flunked out of high school, starved myself, pierced my nose, slutted around, what have you. I saw other teenagers doing that, but I didn't have the energy to go to so much trouble. I did crave attention, but I refused to humiliate myself by asking for it. I'd be punished if I showed signs of suffering. I knew. So I was good. I did all the right things. I rebelled in silent ways, with my thoughts. (Moshfegh 65)

⁴ David Graeber has introduced the concept of bullshit jobs as “a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case” (3). Even though these jobs hold a certain market value, they do not implicate a social value.

Although this excerpt is a reflection on the protagonist's teenage years, it also outlines the dominant form of resistance in the novel and alludes to the motives behind her actions. In this way, the comment that she "didn't have the energy to go to so much trouble" not only echoes the profound insecurity of a teenage girl, it also mirrors a more universal inability to respond to and deal with the boundless requirements confronting subjects in the world of 24/7 capitalism. In a society in which everything seems to be possible—and where most individuals are expected to seize any opportunity that presents itself—it is no surprise that subjects become overwhelmed and ultimately exhausted. In contrast to the stereotypical responses of other young adults, the protagonist acknowledges that doing "all the right things" became her form of resistance and of "rebell[ing] in silent ways."

In the novel, sleep, as a state that situates the individual outside the realm of full control but that also supposedly leaves them passive, immobile, and vulnerable, becomes the chosen subversive instrument. As such, the trope of sleep bears a dual function in the construction of critique in the novel: firstly, it simultaneously serves as a metaphor for the exhaustion and fatigue induced by late modern life and becomes itself a potent cultural metaphor of biocapitalism and neoliberal politics (Williams xi); secondly, sleep is constructed as a form of resistance that effectively reveals the hidden, destructive nature of neoliberal ideology. As there is much literature on social acceleration and its effects on late modern life, this chapter is more interested in investigating the subversive potential of *Rest and Relaxation*'s construction of passive resistance through the sleeping, passive, and immobile body.

Soon after the publication of the novel,⁵ several literary critics acknowledged the resemblance between *Rest and Relaxation* and "Bartleby." These writers observe that the protagonist's voluntary withdrawal resonates with Bartleby's passivity. Melville portrays the passive resistance and downfall of Bartleby, a copyist who refuses to comply with his employer's demands. The story, which has since entered the wider cultural vocabulary, addresses the potency, alienation, and helplessness of the individual office worker in the "administered world"

⁵ Lucy Scholes notes, for example, that "the narrator is more Bartleby than Sleeping Beauty," Lincoln Michel comments that she "fade[s] away from life" in a comparable fashion, and Alexandra Kleeman writes that the narrator's "final gesture, transforming herself into a piece of half-living art, echoes the odd and combative passivity of [...] Bartleby." While these pieces of literary criticism notice that the novel echoes motives that can be found in "Bartleby," they do not provide further analyses or explanations beyond these short observations.

of capitalism (cf. Adorno) in the 19th century. Most of the critics' fascination stems from the "absoluteness of the refusal" (Hardt and Negri 203) wrapped up in Bartleby's formulaic statement "I prefer not to." It is striking that most of these analyzes attempt to rationalize Bartleby's behavior, to bestow significance on his (in)actions, and to decipher who Bartleby might be. In doing so, some critics have "co-opted" the text and appropriated the extraordinary protagonist to fit their agenda.⁶

Žižek's Bartleby politics, a form of protest against capitalism he views as best exemplified by Melville's fictional character, is not only of special concern for this analysis; indeed it is the most detailed analysis of passive resistance to emerge from the interpretation of the short story (Gullestad 405). He directly connects to Hardt and Negri, who claim in *Empire* that "the refusal of work and authority, or really the refusal of voluntary servitude, is the beginning of liberatory politics" (204). For Žižek, however, this refusal transcends the mere preparatory stage of an alternative order: "it is the very source and background of this order, its permanent foundation" (*The Parallax View* 382). Hence, Bartleby represents the subversive adversary of an advanced capitalism, an "arche" that gives body to the movement (ibid.).

What is particularly interesting about Žižek's approach is that passivity not only "represents a negation of the explicit demands of power, but [that it is] also a refusal to partake in acts of resistance/transgression" (Bryar 3). This adds a particularly neoliberal dimension to his observation as it incorporates the notion that protest and criticism are ingrained in "the new spirit of capitalism."⁷

Better to do nothing than to engage in localized acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly [...]. The threat today is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to 'be active,' to 'participate,' to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, 'do something,' [...] and the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from all this. Those in power often prefer even a 'critical' participation, a dialogue,

⁶ This concern has been brought forth by many scholars, mostly literary scholars, attacking different prevalent misreadings and co-optations of the short story. They accuse many of the philosophical (for example, Deleuze's "Bartleby; or, The Formula" and Agamben's Bartleby chapter in *Potentialities*) and political readings (for example, Hardt and Negri's reading in *Empire* and the use of the story in the Occupy Wall Street movement) of losing sight of the particularities of the text (e.g., Cooke; Edelman; Bojesen and Allen).

⁷ Here, I refer to Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's concept of the "new spirit of capitalism," which they define as "the ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism" (8) and which thus outlines the same phenomenon. While their eponymous book (1999) has been highly influential, it is not quoted in Žižek's *The Parallax View* (2006).

to silence—just to engage us in a ‘dialogue,’ to make sure our ominous passivity is broken. (Žižek, *The Parallax View* 334)

Hence, neoliberal ideology is designed to keep people occupied, creating a system of engagement because all activities, even activities of revolt, eventually reinforce the system.⁸ Not only can revolts not exist outside of power structures, but acts of resistance come to reinforce these very power relations. In contemporary capitalism, this correlation is further enhanced as people are “libidinally invested” in resistance; people are caught in a “vicious cycle of *jouissance*” (Žižek, *The Parallax View* 69, 116). Žižek explains that individuals enjoy acts of transgression because the resulting pleasure is deeply ingrained in capitalist ideology.⁹ Because of this observation, *Bartleby* serves as an ideal model of effective neoliberal revolt: his subversion is not based on transgression but rather on overconformity, a behavior that is not anticipated. While acts of “inherent transgression” are innate to neoliberalism (Žižek, “Transgression” 3),¹⁰ the system is undermined once someone begins to take its rules and commands too seriously.¹¹ These subversive tactics, which Žižek calls *politics of overconformity*, function to expose the true, ideological nature of our practices. These “acts of overconformity expose the law in its full idiocy, the impossibility of sticking to it, this pushing us to the brink of anomy: the horrifying void of lawlessness” (Krips 314). Similarly, literature can function as an act of overconformity that discloses the paradoxes

⁸ Michel Foucault makes a similar observation when he notes: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault 95).

⁹ Žižek elaborates: “The dialectic of Law and its transgression does not reside only in the fact that Law itself solicits its own transgression, that it generates the desire for its own violation; our obedience to the Law itself is not ‘natural,’ spontaneous, but always already mediated by the (repression of the) desire to transgress it” (Žižek, *The Parallax View* 90). It should further be noted here that the term “law” remains sparsely defined in Žižek’s explanations. Henry Krips summarizes it as a “three-level network of interlocking local rules and tactics” (307). It can hence refer to a broad variety of rules and behavioral guidelines such as actual laws, traditions, cultural practices, ideology, and the symbolic order.

¹⁰ Žižek notes that small acts of transgression function as a balance because by allowing individuals to break the rules, they will ultimately become more subservient to the general cause and system (*The Parallax View* 90).

¹¹ This is also observable in “*Bartleby*” when the scrivener outperforms at his job and his employer’s reaction reflects the perception of this behavior as abnormal: “I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically” (Melville 10).

inherent to contemporary cultures of work and, in doing so, might introduce doubt in readers.

Overconformity only marks a first step in Bartleby politics, and it is followed by a *politics of subtraction* (cf. Vighi 135 ff.), “a political agent’s sacrifice of the very cause for which he sacrifices everything else in his life” (Krips 309). This stage is mostly characterized by a sacrifice of all behaviors that elicit enjoyment. Consequently, the final, third stage is defined by passivity and the ensuing effects. Žižek concludes that passivity is the only form of behavior toward late modern structures of power that cannot be subsumed under capitalist ideology.

Applying Žižek’s theory to *Rest and Relaxation*, it might not be self-evident how the sleeping body becomes a site of rebellion, or how withdrawing from capitalist participation and spending a year in hibernation can be considered an act of overconformity to the law. It might be argued that this behavior represents quite the opposite of what the subject is expected to do. However, I argue that the protagonist takes the late modern command to prepare the body for capitalist participation, namely for work and consumption, to an extreme.

Sleep holds an important, contested, and ambiguous role in late modernity. It is exceedingly subject to biopolitical control and management by businesses and governments alike, and its consolidation is deeply rooted in a neoliberal ideology. It is not surprising that in a society in which being wired awake is the desired state, sleep occupies a special role. Sleep represents the foundation of productive, efficient laboring bodies and at the same times creates a market of its own. Hence, sleep is closely interrelated with our waking lives. The governance of sleeping bodies has arguably become the basis of social order in late capitalism.

The normalization of sleep, in line with neoliberal principles such as productivity, efficiency, and individual responsibility, has created a spatiotemporal regime governing individual behavior. Feeling obliged to align their sleep routine with the norm, subjects often “struggle with a body that is either shutting down before we want it or not shutting down when we want it to” (Williams 93). The discrepancy between the normalized expectation of sleep as controllable and people’s deviating embodied experience has furthermore provided space for a market—and the introduction of further mechanisms of control, such as sleep medicine—to the realm of sleep. While ideal U.S. American sleep has always been connected to Protestant narratives of efficiency and productivity as well as capitalist ideology, the medicalization of sleep has further reinforced the link between sleeping bodies and capitalism. As such, the government

of sleep is directed at creating the very bodies society desires: bodies that are recuperated, alert, awake, efficient, productive, and subordinate.

This basic idea also resonates in *Rest and Relaxation*; the protagonist takes the demand to prepare for social participation very seriously. After all, she justifies her hibernation project with the perception that the preparation for a purposeful life (according to a neoliberal logic) in her case requires a year of restoration, a restoration that the narrator oftentimes equates with complete renewal: “I was growing less and less attached to life. If I kept going, I thought, I’d disappear completely, then reappear in some new form” (Moshfegh 84). While the novel clearly indicates the absurdity of the narrator-protagonist’s endeavor, this attempt at the same time reiterates the misery of the protagonist’s life: her upbringing with an absent father and a depressed, drug and alcohol-dependent mother, her failed interpersonal relationships, and her bullshit job as a desk clerk in an art gallery in New York.

Sequences in which the narrator remembers her job are particularly apt at showcasing how the trope of sleep functions as a form of subversion and capitalist critique in the novel. The job description alone illustrates that she, a university graduate in the field of art history, considers the job non-essential, unfulfilling, unchallenging, degrading, and alienating:

Natasha had cast me as the jaded underling and for the most part, the little effort I put into the job was enough. I was fashion candy. Hip decor. I was the bitch who sat behind a desk and ignored you when you walked into the gallery, a pouty knockout wearing indecipherably cool avantgarde outfits. I was told to play dumb if anyone asked a question. (Moshfegh 36–37)

This description reveals the protagonist’s repulsion for her work. It echoes feelings of being undervalued and subjected to highly gendered treatment. The form of devaluation she experiences is based on the fact that she is a woman, a role she struggles with in general.¹²

In the descriptions of her resistance at her workplace and toward her work, it becomes clear that the novel plays with the Žižekian argument that it is precisely the practice of not indulging in sin or participating in active acts of rebellion but instead conforming to the law that can ultimately reveal the absurdity of neoliberal ideology and contemporary, normalized work practices. Becoming increasingly uninvolved and

¹² Frustrated that she is solely valued based on her looks, she notes: “Being pretty only kept me trapped in a world that valued looks above all else” (Moshfegh 35). By revealing the limitations that beautiful women such as the protagonist encounter, *Rest and Relaxation* reflects on the general social role of women, the physical appearance of women, and its repercussions on job opportunities and careers.

indifferent, the protagonist refuses to make any effort, dress up, or be fully attentive. Her work routine is marked by a profound fatigue that causes her to nap during her lunch breaks in an attempt to make full use of the restoration time that the breaks provide. Here, sleep becomes a release, a respite liberating the character from daily requirements and expectations:

At work, I took hour-long naps in the supply closet [...]. I went straight into nothingness. I was neither scared nor elated in that space. I had no visions. I had no ideas. [...] There was no work to do, nothing I had to counteract or compensate for because there was nothing at all. And yet I was aware of the nothingness. I was awake in the sleep, somehow. I felt good. Almost happy. But coming out of that sleep was excruciating. [...] I was always still me. Sometimes I woke up with my face wet with tears. (Moshfegh 39–40)

Sleep is here introduced as a form of release and refuge for the suffering individual. It becomes “a merciful chance to escape the treadmill of your own subjectivity” (Fuller 19). In the novel, it not only helps the character to distance herself from work and to restore her energy but also becomes a performative act of revolt, a form of rebellion that turns passivity into an act of active resistance, disclosing not only the ultimate toll of her bullshit job, but also its absurdity. While the novel borders on the absurd (as does “Bartleby”), it still eerily resonates with a realist mode of writing that reflects on contemporary cultures of work. After all, the protagonist does what she is expected to do: being a “bitch” (36), “a pouty knockout,” “indecipherably cool,” and “playing dumb” (37). It becomes clear that this behavior can in fact be considered a form of overconformity when her boss fails to problematize her behavior because she “seemed fine,” instead giving her “most grief [...] about ordering the wrong pens” (40). The criticism raised against late modern work is reinforced through the parallels between the unconscious state of slumber and the barely conscious state that characterizes her work life:

And when I was awake, I wasn’t fully so, but in a kind of murk, a dim state between the real and the dream. I got sloppy and lazy at work, grayer, emptier, less there. This pleased me, but having to do things became very problematic. When people spoke, I had to repeat what they’d said in my mind before understanding it. (Moshfegh 41)

The novel repeatedly posits that sleep itself can often be a more conscious act than being awake and simply functioning, akin to a hamster on a wheel.

This impression is further enhanced by the juxtaposition of the narrator and her best friend, Reva, who occupies an important role in the composition of the narrative as well as in the construction of critique because she functions simultaneously as the epitome of the ordinary young woman and as an incarnation of the superego. In this way, the novel takes Žižek's argument that Bartleby politics unfold in relation to the superego literally. Not only does Reva attempt to lead her life according to neoliberal expectations but she is furthermore "an expert at conflating canned advice with any excuse for drinking to oblivion" (Moshfegh 15). She consistently provides self-help tips for a better life without being happy or content in her life, either. It is crucial to note that her pieces of advice tend to focus on maximizing pleasure and enjoyment. This feature is reminiscent of what Žižek describes as the late modern "superego imperative to enjoy" (*The Parallax View* 310). In contrast to previous forms of interpellation, which instructed subjects to contain their basic desires, the late modern superego directs the individual to indulge: "the superego aspect of today's 'nonrepressive' hedonism (the constant provocation to which we are exposed, enjoining us to go right to the end, and explore all modes of jouissance) resides in the way permitted jouissance necessarily turns into obligatory jouissance" (Žižek, *The Parallax View* 310). As consumption and various forms of enjoyment are rendered obligatory, free time activities become a form of labor, extending working hours and shifting mandatory work to the private sphere. Hence, Žižek argues that any form of revolt must include resistance to neoliberal enjoyment. Sleep represents an appropriate metaphor for revolt in late modernity: it isolates the individual by withdrawing them from social interaction, largely offers an escape from consumption, and bypasses many sanctioned forms of enjoyment.

In contrast to Žižek's idealistic celebration of passivity, *Rest and Relaxation*, however, not only presents this form of revolt as a feasible option, but also reveals the difficulties of escaping late modern jouissance. While withdrawing from work is not much of a problem, the protagonist finds it much more difficult to avoid consumption and enjoyment. The fact that various forms of consumption are deeply and subconsciously ingrained in the late modern subject is revealed by her somnambulant behavior: "The carefree tranquility of sleep gave way to a startling subliminal rebellion—I began to do things while I was unconscious" (Moshfegh 85). In her sleep, she goes shopping, drinks and eats fast food, and engages in online sex, among other things. Unable to consciously control her actions, the protagonist begins to give in to her unconscious

desires, which seem to be oriented toward the late modern imperative to enjoy.

Finally, another form of consumption, which is closely tied to sleep, is defamiliarized in the novel: the (ab)use of sleep medication.¹³ Here I want to point toward the relationship between the medicalization of sleep and deviant bodies, which Laurent de Sutter describes as follows:

Rather than as the opening of the age of anaesthesia, perhaps it would be better to speak of the opening of the age of anexcitation—the age of the ablation of individuals' animation principle, transforming them into simple bodies, subject to examination and manipulation. [An] anaesthetized body is a body that causes no bother—a body that at last coincides with itself, which is to say with what is expected of it in the context of its operability, its capacity for being operated on. (109)

Medicalization offers the opportunity to set bodies at rest, stopping them from causing social upheaval. Sleep medicine can be used to both align deviant, “dysfunctional” bodies and further sedate the “normal” body, thus integrating it into the system. The fact that the protagonist herself decides to make use of this system, which can be leveraged against supposedly deviant bodies, reveals her ability to undermine the law through playing by its rules. She subverts the system by instrumentalizing its own methods of subjection. On the other hand, however, the abuse of sleep medicine in the text also illustrates the heavy reliance of the protagonist's chosen form of revolt on the neoliberal structures it otherwise defies.

The Role of Privilege in the Construction of Critique

Thus far, I have analyzed how sleep and the resting body are employed as a site of subversion in *Rest and Relaxation*. Even though her body in turn revolts against the withdrawal from capitalist participation as is expressed in her somnambulant behavior and in her growing addiction to sleep medication, the protagonist is relatively successful in resisting any non-essential participation. While she thus achieves what Žižek has claimed to be the only appropriate form of late modern revolt, the novel helps to uncover the shortcomings of Bartleby politics, which is in part

¹³ This topic plays a very prominent role in the text and its rendering, especially featuring Dr. Tuttle as the caricature of the reckless physician, would afford a longer discussion, which I unfortunately cannot provide in this chapter.

rooted in the privileged subject position of the insurgent and in the limited potential of passive resistance.

In *Rest and Relaxation*, the narrator-protagonist spends considerable time outlining the circumstances that render her project possible: the vast sum of money she inherited from her parents, the unemployment benefits she receives, her access to health care, a psychiatrist and a constant supply of medication, and supportive social contacts. It becomes clear that this protagonist holds a privileged social position: white, able-bodied, young, healthy, upper middle class. Her financial security in particular provides the necessary means for the hibernation project. This context alone shows that she is in a position that not many Americans occupy. While the narrator does not spend much time critically reflecting on her own privilege—this is not a subject of interest as she is solely concerned with herself—there are instances in which she acknowledges her own entitlement. For example, she mentions in a conversation with Ping Xi, an artist friend who designs an art project documenting her hibernation project: “I was born into privilege. [...] I am not going to squander that” (Moshfegh 265). Therefore, the protagonist’s entitlement reveals the limitations of Bartleby politics as a theory of subversion. At its center, it is prefaced on the notion of a privileged subject and thus “neglects and/or disputes the existence of alternative modes of life alongside the violence, subjection, exploitation, and racialization that define the modern human” (Weheliye 1–2). Again, the white body, embodied in the figure of Bartleby or the unnamed protagonist, becomes the symbol of an alternative order, rendering bodies outside of the normalized ideal invisible and impotent.

Rest and Relaxation only critically reflects on the privileged subject position implicitly through its satirical qualities, such as the narrator-protagonist’s unreliability—as highlighted in her use of sarcasm, obscenity, and exaggeration—and through her own constant devaluation of the hibernation project: throughout the story, the protagonist underlines that her project’s purpose is solely self-serving, denying any larger political motivation. This is especially pronounced when Ping Xi co-opts her “quest for a new spirit” (Moshfegh 264) and documents it as an art project, “want[ing] to shock people” (ibid. 262). The protagonist herself becomes a work of art, an object judged by an entitled audience. In contrast to Žižek’s prediction, the audience in the novel does not grasp the revolutionary spirit of the project and treats it as any other commodified piece of art (Moshfegh 283). While Žižek’s and Gilles Deleuze’s famous readings of “Bartleby” implied a kind of revolutionary contagiousness emanating from Bartleby’s eerie refusal and passivity, *Rest and Relaxation* states that the project is not only self-serving; indeed it is

not even attractive to any other minor character in the novel. Thus the subversive capacity of the text, invoked by its metadiscursive observations, is partially negated by the text itself. While this might discount the revolutionary potential of passivity, the defamiliarization of late modern practices of production and consumption remains effective, directing its critical commentary to the reader through the portrayal of the resting body.

Undermining the Affective Regime of Late Capitalism

Up to this point, I have focused on the political dimensions of how passivity constitutes revolt in the novel, however there is another parallel between *Rest and Relaxation* and “Bartleby” that is worth exploring as it also contributes to the subversive potential of the text. Ngai observes that “Bartleby” is a “fiction in which the interpretive problems posed by an American office worker’s *affective* equivocality seem pointedly directed at the *political* equivocality of his unnervingly passive form of dissent” (1). She thus highlights the importance of the character’s display of dysphoric feelings and his emotional negativity to the illegibility of the protagonist and ultimately to the impact of the short story. Bartleby’s protest is only effective because of his affective disposition as it renders him further unintelligible; it contributes to his enigmatic character. Moshfegh’s protagonist is also difficult to read, unlikable, and even annoying. Her unlikability constitutes an important caesura as it breaks with the expectations and norms aligned to a particularly neoliberal construction of femininity. As Iulia Ivana elucidates, it “shed[s] light on the problematic relationship between happiness and likeability” (36) as it engages “in a form of political resistance by refusing to allow [the female character’s] dark emotions to be translated into patriarchal standards” (1). I will add to this that her behavior not only poses a critique on contemporary constructions of the feminine but simultaneously addresses neoliberalism’s affective regime.

While I cannot provide an introduction to affect theory here, I still want to underline that “under capitalism, emotion management becomes a public communicative action, and individuals are requested to adhere to certain rules” (Strätz 137).¹⁴ Affect has become an important means of

¹⁴ In the essay “Subverting Late Capitalist Comfort,” I provide a longer introduction to the relationship between affect and late capitalism and literature’s potential to offer criticism by disturbing the normative affective regime. See also Rachel Greenwald Smith’s book *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, which introduces the useful

social reproduction, and literature such as *Rest and Relaxation* and “Bartleby” can explore new critical perspectives by disrupting this normative affective regime in which positive emotions such as happiness are privileged. Though the reader might relate to the motives of *Rest and Relaxation*’s protagonist, she remains hard to like,¹⁵ difficult to identify with, disruptively unreliable, and her emotional responses often fail to conform to common expectations.

The protagonist’s hibernation project represents an existentialist endeavor. It is at the same time a search for her place in society and a way of distancing herself from social expectations. Surprisingly, she does not react with depression, paralysis, despair, or hopelessness, but assumes a rather pragmatic stance toward her own predicament. Being solely self-concerned, her attitude toward other people and objects culminates in indifference. Ivana remarks that by distancing herself emotionally and by refusing to adhere to affective scripts, the protagonist “manages to disrupt the postfeminist [—and with that neoliberal—] fantasy of ubiquitous happiness not by teaching what it means to assume the role of a stranger or a banished person, but by estranging us from the very happiness of the familiar” (45).

To this end, the text again employs the juxtaposition between the protagonist and her best friend Reva in order to illustrate the foil the protagonist turns against. Her derogatory comments provide an insight into the social ideas she dismisses: “I had chosen my solitude and purposelessness and Reva had, despite her hard work, simply failed to get what she wanted—no husband, no children, no fabulous career” (14). The fact that Reva’s happiness is constructed against certain achievements in life highlights how the promise of happiness is tied to specific life choices in late modernity. That way, the pursuit for happiness becomes a disciplinary technique “that constructs subjects by orientating them around cultural norms” (Ivana 40). As Ivana notes, these cultural norms directed at millennial women delineate a specifically neoliberal femininity:

Postfeminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the

distinction between personal and impersonal feelings in order to describe the disruptive force of contemporary literary texts.

¹⁵ The question concerning the likeability of characters is often dismissed in academic literary analysis but frequently addressed in literary criticism. Ngai, however, advises the reader to pay attention to this aspect of reader-response as it can provide important insights into the politics of literary texts (Ngai 32).

figure of woman as empowered consumer. Thus, postfeminist culture emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment. (Tasker and Negra 2)

Postfeminist women are ideally expected to juggle career, family, domestic work, and sexual empowerment. As an empowered consumer, her decisions are closely aligned to the neoliberal logic, but with a feminine twist. Just as the novel depicts, this logic is perpetuated and “accumulates affective power” (Ahmed 53) through affective encounters between people but also through media, magazines, films, books, and so on.¹⁶ In contrast to the prototypical Reva, the protagonist represents a “feminist killjoy” as defined by Sara Ahmed: “Feminists might kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising. [...] The feminist killjoy ‘spoils’ the happiness of others [...] because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness” (65). In doing so, the feminist killjoy spreads discomfort by failing to adhere to normative affective scripts.

In *Rest and Relaxation*, while the protagonist’s emotions are not immediately apparent, it becomes clear that they are frequently ill-suited to the given situation. The scene in which Reva tells the protagonist about her mother’s death exemplifies this miscommunication:

“My mom died,” Reva said during a commercial break.

“Shit,” I said. What else could I have said. I pulled the blanket across our laps. [...]

Reva poked me. “Are you awake?”

I pretended I wasn’t. I heard her get up [...]. She left without saying good-bye. I was relieved to be alone again. (109)

By not showing emotions or comforting her best friend—or being unable to do so—she not only breaks with the affective regime but also with the general overidentification of the feminine with the emotional, with the role of the woman as the caretaker. Her display of “ugly feelings,” feelings that are ideologically labeled as negative and which supposedly disturb the social peace (Ngai 11), produces an ironic distance whose defamiliarizing

¹⁶ It needs to be noted here that postfeminism has been described as a white, middle-class narrative that does not integrate evident disparities and intersectional impact factors (cf. Springer 249 ff.). As mentioned above, *Rest and Relaxation* is also a white, middle-class, heteronormative, ableist text. While the novel utters a certain critique on postfeminism, it still entirely neglects to engage in a discourse outside of the privileged world of the characters.

potential in turn carries a critical power. Furthermore, the fact that Reva is not bothered by the constant rejection and miscommunication reveals that their friendship is not based on authentic affection but on economic interests. This is expressed, for example, when the protagonist imagines the end of their friendship: “[Reva would] realize that we had no good reason to be friends and that she would never get what she needed from me. [...] I could really imagine her phrasing. ‘I’ve come to realize that our friendship is no longer serving me’” (Moshfegh 163). By ending, or at least not actively seeking, these profit-oriented relationships, the protagonist also does not submit to an emotional capitalism according to Eva Illouz, “in which emotional life—especially that of the middle classes—follows the logic of economic relations and exchange” (5). Distancing herself from profit-oriented relationships, the protagonist increasingly occupies a space of asociality: “I was growing less and less attached to life. If I kept going, I thought, I’d disappear completely, then reappear in some new form” (Moshfegh 84). This asociality culminates in her decision to get locked into her apartment by Ping Xi, cutting all ties to the outer world.

While it might seem as if the protagonist is unable to control her emotions, I would argue that her emotional distance and inability to respond to feelings represents a coping mechanism. Unwilling to deal with the emotions and traumata that haunt her and frustrated with the profit orientation of friendships, she does not want to speak the language of capitalized emotions and enter neoliberal affective relationships: “And that was exactly what I wanted—my emotions passing like headlights that shine softly through a window, sweep past me, illuminate something vaguely familiar, then fade and leave me in the dark” (Moshfegh 166). Putting herself in a space of asociality thus renders it possible for her to remain unaffected, not “bothered” by emotions caused by a society that has failed to accommodate her needs. Only in this place can she fully concentrate on herself.

Like *Bartleby*, the protagonist of the novel is numbed by the experience of “the overwhelming” (McGee 251): 24/7 capitalism, loss and grief, postfeminist expectations, and bullshit jobs. Both characters’ reactions oscillate between irritation and apathy, a behavior that the unnamed protagonist seems to consider consistent with her own experience: “In fact, it was the opposite of suicide. My hibernation was self-preservational. I thought it was going to save my life” (Moshfegh 7). Ngai conceptualizes this affect as *stuplimity*, “a bringing together of what ‘dulls’ and what ‘irritates’ or agitates; of sharp sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue. [S]tuplimity is a tension

that holds opposing affects together” (271). Ngai continues to argue that texts like “Bartleby” often derive their effect from the withholding of emotional release: “[T]he noncathartic feelings in [these texts] could be said to give rise to a noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release [...] and does so as a kind of politics. Such a politics is of a Bartlebyan sort [...]” (9). Thus, their inherent ambivalence “enable[s] them to resist, on the one hand their reduction to mere expressions of class resentment, and on the other, their counter-valorization as therapeutic ‘solutions’ to the problems they highlight and condense” (Ngai 3). Through the construction of an affective body that acts outside of the neoliberal affective regime, *Rest and Relaxation* escapes the system it criticizes and is able to avoid being subsumed by it. The ending of the novel in particular underlines this critical effect.

Over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that the narrator’s recurring insistence on her own affective blankness indexes her affective and emotional vulnerability. Even though the novel dismisses late modern ideas of the good life, it is still driven by hope and a pursuit for happiness, as is clear when she “felt hopeful [and] felt [she] was on [her] way to a great transformation” (Moshfegh 54). The whole narrative is driven by her journey toward a happier and more content life. This she hopes to achieve through a final drastic measure: spending four months in lock-up with the help of the potent fictional drug Infermitterol. While the novel does not provide much information on the time she spends unconscious, brief reports of her waking moments reveal gradual changes. In these scenes, the idea of reawakening is amplified by descriptions of her body that display a more careful, attentive, and gentle perception of her own embodied being: “Over the next month, when I’d wake up, my mind was filled with colors. [M]y waking hours were spent gently, lovingly, growing reaccustomed to a feeling of cozy extravagance. [...] My face lost its edge. I asked for flowers” (Moshfegh 273). Through the descriptions of her body and her sensory impressions, it becomes clear that her attitude toward the world and herself changes significantly. Her “reawakening” unveils a relaxed and restored person: “[...] I came to in a cross-legged seated position on the living room floor. [...] I heard a bird chirp. I was alive” (Moshfegh 276). Ironically, her awakening is marked by images she had dismissed in the past. She suddenly opens up to the world, is able to listen and affect the world, and is willing to be affected in turn. She has, in effect, relearned how to speak the affective language. While her old self was painfully cynical, opinionated, difficult to read, distanced, and emotionally incompetent, this new version is located on

the other end of the spectrum. She is receptive, attentive, open-minded, naïve, and most of all, alive. She has grown to experience the world in its entirety.

The significance and impact of her metamorphosis is underlined in the final scene of the novel, in which Reva is killed as a result of the airplanes crashing into the World Trade Center on 9/11. As Nikolaus Lehner observes, she does not merely become a witness but is actually personally affected by the event (57). The world has truly changed around her after her hibernation; a new era begins. Interestingly though, she does not respond to her friend's death with grief, sadness, or other predictable emotions. Watching footage of a person jumping out of the tower who she assumes is her best friend, the final sentences of the novel read: "[...] I am overcome by awe, not because she looks like Reva, and I think it's her, almost exactly her, or because I'll never see her again, but because she is beautiful. There is a human being diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake" (Moshfegh 289).

Metaphorically, the superego's influence on the protagonist dies alongside Reva. Just like the exposition before her hibernation, the ending foreshadows that the character still occupies the position of an outsider because she has opened herself up to be affected by the world, albeit not according to the neoliberal, late modern logic. After spending her life in a "dim state between the real and the dream" (Moshfegh 41), the protagonist begins the end of the rest of her life "wide awake" (ibid. 289). This is the final message of the novel. In painting a painful, defamiliarized picture of the affective regime of late modernity by revealing how blind participation in practices of neoliberal production and consumption can cause suffering and alienation, the novel challenges the reader to attempt to experience the world unmediated by ideology. While in doing so it also puts forth the idea that the age of irony has ended—a claim frequently raised in contemporary literature focused on negotiating a post-9/11 world—the reader might still find it difficult to interpret the novel as anything but ironic. After all the cynicism and despair that permeate most parts of the novel, it is quite difficult to reconcile both versions of the protagonist and to read the "solution" of the novel as authentic and feasible. While the almost ironic opposition between the cynical woman and the naïve girl in *Rest and Relaxation* can hardly be taken seriously in this context, still it exposes further unexplored tensions, motivating the reader not only to read the text closely but also to wake up and reflect on their own neoliberal existence. In the end, just like in the portrayal of "Bartleby," the absurdity inherent in the depiction of the protagonist carries deep critical potential.

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