

Diedrich Diederichsen

## *Living in the Loop*

*She's leaving home, bye-bye.<sup>1</sup>*

I received the following e-mail from the Oberhausen Short Film Festival yesterday: *Between May 5-8, the lounge of the Oberhausen Short Film Festival will host the "Space for Projection," presenting the second edition of the project loop pool, with video loops produced by international artists, VJs, and directors. DJs and musicians will compose a live soundtrack to the loop program in the festival lounge.*

But where I've just come from, a loop is something else entirely.

Over the past few months, I've been living in the shrinking city of Saint Louis, Missouri, a city with a growing crime rate, despite its dwindling population. The city's neglected ghettos are adjacent to the most luxurious mansions, reachable only by private roads. This is not some new type of gated community, but good old segregation—easily identified by grand art deco fences. In one area, in a unique show of the strength of gentrification, a restaurant owner has transformed three dilapidated blocks into a subculture shopping mile, including radical-Left-gender-theoretical-political bookshops, various boutiques, two music stores selling second-hand vinyl and CDs, Thai restaurants, sports bars, and an art house cinema. He personally ran an oversized sports bar named Blueberry Hill, where an eighty-year-old Chuck Berry performed "Maybellene," "Johnny B. Goode," and "Roll Over Beethoven" once a month. To cheer up the dishonoured city there was also a Hollywood Boulevard-like Walk of Fame, with stars embedded in its pavement bearing the names and birth years of local celebrities. Next to William S. Burroughs were Ike and Tina Turner, Tennessee Williams, and renowned individuals from the world of American sports. These three blocks of Delmar Avenue were known as "the Loop," something I failed to understand until I discovered that behind the shops is a narrow street, an alleyway where one can turn around to cruise back down the boulevard again without

ever exiting this circle of relative safety—to the ghettos or the gated mansion blocks.

Downtown Chicago is also called "the Loop," after the elevated tramlines that encircle it. And Berlin has the S-Bahn Ring, dating back to even before the Wall divided the city. In the late 1950s, the young Tony Conrad practically lived in the Berlin ring-train in order to save money on rent. Shortly thereafter, he discovered Minimal music, but he's not the only artist to learn from the loop in the last fifty years. Today, Bernhard Lang, with his complex simple composition-cycle *Differenz und Wiederholung* (*Difference and Repetition*) is the leading representative of the loop principle. The boom of so-called non-linear narrative in contemporary cinema (Tarantino, Gondry, Kaufman, González Iñárritu, Tykwer) began with the story of loops as prison houses of temporality, as in *Groundhog Day*. Gregory Whitehead's "Walking the Circle" in volume three of *documenta 12 Magazine*, elucidates his philosophico-therapeutic program of going in circles.

The opposite of a circle, or of cruising, is getting ahead. When I was growing up, the idea of advancing had positive connotations for both escapism and conformism—the two mutually antagonistic perspectives on life marking the early seventies.

First, conformism: to get ahead in life was one of the major ambitions of postwar West Germans. There were two versions of this conformism; the first form concerned the family and the desire to give your children a better future than the one you once had. In the second version, this desire to get ahead was projected onto one's own life. Getting ahead was the common denominator; it was in some sense ultimately about social climbing. There were so many stories about the first to attend university, the first to establish financial independence, and even the first to graduate from high school. The so-called Fordist compromise—the historic agreement between capital and labour also encompassed the promise of flexible social hierarchies. The ascent should be possible for anyone with a sense of discipline. This promise was initially taken at face value, and people enthusiastically believed in it. That the toil may not be worth the effort or that the social climb may

be more difficult than expected was an experience yet to be had.

Getting ahead presumes two different things—on the one hand, that one has yet to arrive at the top and that there still is room up there, and, on the other hand, that the road to the top is not only open but also scenic. When it comes to getting ahead, the collective imaginary of the period was largely marked by automobiles and the autobahn, by the free flow of free citizens, which explains why the most prevalent metaphor summarizing the recent despondency in German politics is “reform congestion” (*Reformstau*).

Everyone wanted to move forward, and now the loop is the central formal modus operandi of cultural production, not only in Oberhausen, not only in the black boxes of various biennials, not only in the microstructures of music, or in the discursive and metadiscursive object. The loop is not the mere opposite of meaningful history, nor is it simply the eternal return. The latter implies a process that once it began, it would not return to its starting point, but unfortunately it does exactly that: returning to the beginning every time, like a bad infinity. The friends and enemies of a philosophy of history have long wrestled over this. But the loop knows no process, it has never promised to go anywhere. One can hop on board at any moment without missing anything and disembark before anything might be missed. The loop is a space in time—but more on this later.

Now for the runaway variety of getting ahead. A recent edition of the Berlin Film Festival celebrated European cinema of the 1960s. Before the well-known features, shorts were shown, which included the earliest work of the Oberhausen generation of New German Cinema, whose filmmakers later became prominent directors in their own right. Interestingly, the Munich directors, such as Klaus Lemke, already wished to be glamorous and adventurous: film was supposed to be larger than life and engage with gangsters and Acapulco. Whereas Hamburg directors, like Marquard Bohm, for example, already preferred the laconic charm of mitigated crankiness of the Poodle Club<sup>2</sup> sense of humour (e.g., Helmut Herbst and Marquard Bohm's *Na und [So What?]*, Federal Republic of Germany, 1966). There's something uncanny

and telluric about this unrelenting persistence of regional culture over all these decades far beyond any easy loops or meticulous sense of progress.

Documentary films were also screened. Peter Fleischmann's *Herbst der Gammeler* (*Autumn of the Penniless*, FRG, 1967) features long-haired kids of the 1960s, temporary outcasts and non-integrated adolescents whose chief occupation was simply travelling free of charge. Much like the juvenile wayfarers who appeared much later, having become socially acceptable, their objective was to travel as far as possible for as little as possible. All conversations hinged on the same questions: Where and in which of the European hotspots—Berlin, Paris, Rome, Ibiza—could one kip somewhere cheaply or free of charge? What are the cops like over there? What's up with the parties? Some of the teenagers had run away, some from so-called broken homes. Others had apparently taken a break from their otherwise bourgeois lifestyles, developing proto-political yet non-verbalized ideas in opposition to the pressure to get ahead. Whenever they were expected to explain more explicitly where and how an alternative life might be found, how it might be organized, what its content might be, the journey itself would be emphasized: the idea of travelling without knowing where to, for how long, nor, most importantly, why. Only thereafter will we know why we wanted to know. The absence of a goal or reason guarantees the absence of instrumental thinking, which, in turn, is the precondition for the right trip. A couple of years later, Bernward Vesper would write *Die Reise* (*The Journey*), and after the posthumous appearance of this autobiographical novel in 1977, everyone attested to the ways in which it captured the well-known “experience of a generation.” There are countless books, films, and songs everywhere in the world, simply called “The Trip”: Kim Fowley, Roger Corman, the Electric Flag.<sup>3</sup>

A few years earlier another documentary addressed the realities of professionally getting ahead: Ula Stöckl's *Haben Sie Abitur?* (*Did You Finish School?*), FRG, 1965) focused mainly on one night school in Stuttgart where young workers could spend their evenings studying for the German *Abitur* examinations. These students,

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who had nine to five jobs, attended classes daily starting at six p.m. in order to prepare for said exams. Besides the daily hours in class, there was of course homework and reading. And forget the weekends! In light of this unrestrained zeal for getting ahead, leisure as leisure, for the sake of recuperation or what us Marxists call reproduction, was frowned upon, as laziness. You could at least make an effort to get somewhere.

The candidates in question—almost exclusively men—each gave different reasons for engaging in such drudgery. By going through the university entrance exams and perhaps some subsequent training, some saw a chance for promotion from their current positions within their companies, which, in typical Fordist fashion, supported the further education of their employees. Other candidates had fulfilled certain conditions and were being rewarded for their diligence and dedication; others yet were simply responding to a moral imperative to education; and in one very interesting case, a man enrolled in the program all because of an ambitious wife.

The film's interviews with the wives and girlfriends provided a remarkable, disturbingly unappealing, and even somewhat twisted image. Almost all of these women made a rather worldly, realistic, and modern—one might say, emancipated—impression. Nearly all of them candidly professed expectations of their partners attaining additional qualification. But not only did they never question the division of roles, they actively defended it during their interviews, even though they obviously would have been very well equipped to play a role in their men's world themselves, a world for which they were making such thorough and meticulous plans. They'd studied longer and were much better educated than their mothers, and, very often, than their partners—but there was no social model within which they would have been able to apply the knowledge and the attitudes they'd acquired in school and in training. Their vigour and their acquired cosmopolitanism were channelled into the careers of their partners. The study of art history and the charitable duties the upper middle classes reserved for their educated daughters were not available as compensation to these women for assuming

a traditional female role. Instead of adopting a completely different—"female"—function, these daughters of the petite bourgeoisie, who often had the degree qualifying them to enroll in university programs or professional training, rolled up their shirtsleeves, and, thanks to their comparable skills, became active participants in their partners' careers. Trained for a career but barred from a career path, they were proxies in the house of man—buddies of their own men more than anything else.

One of these women, colder and more severe in tone than the rest, demanded that her fiancé bend over backwards. Her concerns were not about his professional career, but far more, as she put it, about his "intellectual level." She'd given up on both a good education and career options on his account, and in return she wanted conversations about literature and other highbrow matters. Things were less than perfect in that department, a fact he confirmed with a bitter smirk. Unsuccessful couples do provide terrifyingly contoured insight into social reality.

The woman had so successfully interiorized petit bourgeois values of culture and education that she thought already beyond the ideology of social advancement in that she had reached the bourgeois point of articulating intellectual abilities and deeper spiritual fulfillments as goals, which a prosperous life must offer. This example of marital fervour for social betterment is in fact historically precocious. She talks to her fiancé in 1960 like his future hippie daughter—possibly aged fourteen in 1975—might one day speak to him. The projection of the promise of professional progress or social advancement onto one's partner is especially grotesque when concerning matters of intellectual development, which is normally seen as an individual pursuit. The classic, bourgeois ideal of a lifelong path of intellectual refinement is tied to the idea that the beneficiary of the said refinement and the one who seeks to attain it are the same person. Seldom is female oppression better described than by the woman who desires intellectual development and expects her husband to pursue it for her. This educationally disposed and, of course, intolerable wife of a man who works so hard and so speedily is a persistent *topos* of film history, especially of the 1970s. Aesthete wives



dragging their husbands to the theatre are displayed as culture-obsessed she-beasts with castrating furor, like the inspector's wife in Hitchcock's *Frenzy* forcing healthy British men to appreciate abstract painting and French cooking.

Men attend night school while their wives devise their professions. Children instead do not wish to move forward professionally but by means of travelling and in their own individual lives. In *Donald Has Secrets* (*Donald hat Geheimnisse* is the German title of Carl Barks's 1966 story originally titled *The Beauty Business*), drawn and written in the period we're talking about, Daisy Duck, along with Huey, Dewey, and Louie, takes to spying on Donald because he's always tied up in the evenings and rumour has it that he's attending night school. Daisy hopes he's studying interior design, like her friend's boyfriend, and in one of her thought bubbles there appears a modernist estate à la *Mon Oncle* that includes a man with a rugged crewcut and thick-rimmed glasses. The children point to a passing sanitation truck, jolting Daisy out of her daydream, to make a callous remark, "Or he's studying to be a garbage truck guy—these boys really make a lotta dough." I'll return to the surprise punch line, unveiling what Donald eventually becomes and why he kept his studies a secret, later.

The note of dissatisfaction most often felt by those who—like myself—suffered through circumstances that were not exactly repressive, but rather, boring, is expressed in the phrase *Das bringt mich nicht weiter* (That doesn't get me anywhere). To teachers, parents, and clerics who prodded us with matters that meant nothing to us, we replied: "It doesn't get me anywhere." Teenagers are proud of the individuation results they have already harvested.

Any offer of getting ahead has to be measured against the state of development the teenage self has already achieved. This self knows two things: I am what I am to the extent that I have developed and moved on, as opposed to remaining the one I already was, the one the others validated as such. But also, unfortunately, only if I am validated can I take the necessary steps, and to do so I must

somehow remain a recognizable, reliable type, both within the family and among my peers. A compromise is often found in the idea that one can move forward and go through radical experiences but accumulate these in a manner that allows one to become what one has always been and should always remain. At this point, support is usually provided by pop songs and books by Hermann Hesse.

We accumulate experiences like capital on our journeys in order to examine how well we fared in the process; we take pictures of both ourselves and the scenario, and if we find any likeness or aesthetic suitability in them we put these pictures in the photo albums of our minds or stick them in our mental baggage, integrating these images into our repertoire of passive individuality. Later, as we proceed to study and specialize, we reach back to some of these passive life experiences and transform them into active *Welthabe*, into the active elements and gestures that constitute us. We move onward and forward, we get ahead.

Even the trademark whine of the spoiled rotten—"Been there. Done that."—bemoans a lack of forward movement, but this particular form of narcissism comes historically later and is no longer interested in producing a deep and unmistakable self as the ultimate point of reference in a traditionally bourgeois sense of the term, a self by which the success of each experience must be measured in use value. What we see here is a consumerist ego that is always already complete, precisely because as a consumer it can see the use value of an experience only in the currency of its exchange value. It can sarcastically decree what are seemingly hard criteria for the quality of experiences: "I've been here already; This experience is no longer a rarified one and is, therefore, worthless; What's in it for me?" The incommensurable "I" that appears in the world view of bourgeois idealism is no longer needed here.

The fact that middle class growth and wanderlust was nothing new in the 1960s and '70s does not mean that each historical occurrence of this restlessness merely rehashes the spirit of certain classic novels of the bourgeoisie. *Anton Reiser* (*Anton Traveler*) and *Wilhelm Meister* (*Wilhelm Master*), for example, whose very titles name

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both route and destination, and in doing so, the customary congruence of the two. At least the early bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century still had to confront the fact that its subjectivity was not the only possible one, as its representatives were surrounded by, in terms of systems theory, an "environment" of the bourgeoisie, actors and wayfarers, the weird and the subaltern on the one hand, and, on the other, landowners, aristocrats, and ladies of the nobility. They experienced their own class as something problematic and lacking; to decide against it was ultimately just as feasible as opting for it. This raised the stakes and value of a decision in favour of the bourgeoisie, legitimating it as a free choice. By the end of the novel, one knew what one was doing. And the reader knew it, too.

The finest part of the journey is the moment of departure. Its official goal in the bourgeois tradition of self-development is to acquire an understanding of the need to become a citizen. This must unfold in a manner that appears to be free of any preordained sequence of experiences, even if in reality that sequence is of course highly didactic in nature. The moment preceding this forcibly-acquired insight in the necessity of becoming a member of the bourgeoisie is a moment beyond constraint, that moment of leaving home, often as a result of force. At the beginning of bourgeois subjectivity lies the farewell to bourgeois subjectivity. This implies that one has already acquired a bourgeois subjectivity before delightedly discarding it for the first time. There was never a moment of innocence preceding the insight or—more critically—the bourgeois conditioning. On the contrary, a mark of this conditioning is the propagation of an illusory initial innocence, during which the advantages and disadvantages of various ways of living are prudently weighed.

The first traces of circularity emerge here: the loop already begins to twist and curve back on itself. Much later, the middle classes will take to looking at themselves and recognize this circularity as their fate, or as the sign of a life of failure. They will then ponder whether everyone is condemned to such a loop. After which—disappointed by the world and disillusioned by their own grandiose invention of the dialectic of departure

and return—they will declare this circularity a law of nature and history and development an impossibility, as if the said laws of nature demanded that the entire world be condemned to a bourgeois way of thinking and living and to bearing its disappointments along with it. In the end, they will discover the loop to be a critical account of bourgeois individuation or—later on—to be a template for a different kind of life, and the loop will be affirmed as the conclusion of a concrete, definitive negation of bourgeois development as a career. This, too, was already beginning in the nineteenth century.

Things that in due course can go very well (or at least tragically awry) in Goethe are already more difficult when it comes to Büchner. Instead of narrating a colourful departure from the world of the bourgeoisie in the first person, Büchner tells the story of another poet, roughly a century older than himself—Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz. Lenz belongs to the dramatists of the Sturm und Drang (literally "Storm and Urge") school, an enthusiastically restive culture of restlessness. In Sturm und Drang, departure is a genre in itself. According to the mythology of this genre, however, the storm can never constitute anything other than a passing phase, and one must gradually overcome the respective urge (*Drang*) of a specific moment and move on. Thus, for example, years after *Goetz von Berlichingen*, Goethe could still write *Iphigenie*—the most urgeless and stormless work ever written in the German language. But Lenz never wrote anything else, and with the eventual clouding of his mind and disposition, he arguably became the first embodiment of the lunatic poet in the German-speaking world. A later and most prominent example thereof was Hölderlin—the one most important German-speaking precursor to all the cultures of upheaval and "getting ahead" of the global postwar underground.

Büchner tried to write a novella about the poet Lenz himself, without referring to his work, a psycho-grammatic profile of a poet who was a refugee and wanderer by profession, and of the paths he took. The text became a kind of anti-Goethe, perhaps because it remained a fragment. A paradigmatic story of non-advancement—first as a survey of a certain human condition and then

as a sort of suggestion for something other than development, something other than becoming mature and socially competent, an infantile happiness of pure departure, of that which constitutes the movement of the schizophrenic in *Anti-Oedipus*: to get away, to get away, to get away.

So Lenz gets away and takes off. But taking leave always implies a destination, a romantic one that is open-ended and unreachable. In the German Romantic tradition, the metaphor for this is the forest. (There was once a German translation of an American science fiction novel with the title *Das Wort für Welt ist Wald* or *The Word for World is Forest*.) So Lenz winds up in the woods. He strays. He comes across a small village and sees a girl. His moods change abruptly. Suddenly he is in a very happy and downright metaphysical mood, then in total despair, and, before long, physically broken. Just as I, despite my disenchantments in general and my disenchantment with the railway in particular, only need to be placed in a night train, no matter where it's going nor how prosaic the journey might be, to be automatically overcome with a joyful sensation of agency and departure—that is what happens to Lenz when he enters the forest. Unfortunately, his journeys either lead him in circles or to villages he's visited before, which repeatedly drive him to desperation. Lenz winds up with Father Oberlin, whose family takes care of him, and things become a little more discursive. There is talk of Lenz's father. A nightmare. Only with brute force can one defend oneself against the repressive patriarch who drives young literary sons into the wilderness. He who does not wish to resort to such treatment must refuse maturity, cancel adulthood, and flee. The return, whether as homecoming or as regression, is impossible, leaving only one option: the loop.

In the 1950s, Guy Debord summed up his agenda with the formula: "At night we go in circles to be consumed by fire." The sane, if devastated, arrivals depicted in the classic novels offered a stark contrast to the fateful being-driven-across-the-world of their descendants. The latter discovered at some point that if they gave in to aimless drifting, they'd simply go in circles. The classics also moved in circles, but in large and dialectical ones, whereas the bohemians, the beatniks, and

Debord's drinking buddies turned pirouettes. Whoever wants to flee without destination lands in a loop. All you can hope to do is to beautifully follow its circles.

*Die Soldaten* (*The Soldiers*), one of Lenz's more pugnacious dramas, became the initial outline for one of the most aggressive and desperate operas of the postwar era, by Bernd Alois Zimmerman. Zimmerman became famous as the composer who coined the slightly mysterious and mystical formula of "the spherical shape of time" (*Kugelgestalt der Zeit*). According to this idea, deriving from philosophies of time and music, musical experience should be divorced from the mere experience of a moment in time. The latter renders the passing of an already performed section of a musical work irrelevant and its future indeterminate. Instead, past and future should be realized and experienced in the immediate presence of musical experience. This is a little different from the positions of Adorno and other modernists in the field of new music who, far from giving up on temporality, wanted relationships between all musical parameters to be addressed in terms of time. The opposition between lived and measured time was the secret undercurrent of all kinds of aesthetic debates around 1960. Adorno did not wish to see this opposition (falsely) reconciled; Zimmerman, on the other hand, appears to have wanted some kind of resolution between the two perspectives. After all, he did lend this idea the rather interesting name of "the spherical shape of time."

Having liquidated contemporary art and its protagonists within their sphere of influence over several decades, the Germans had no right to speak when it came to artistic matters. Strangely, already in the 1950s, when they kept their mouth shut otherwise, this did not apply to music and its philosophy, and the philosophies of time that arose during this period thereby also functioned as hidden proposals for historical thinking. Could the shape of a sphere be a bashful formal proposal for the disposing of history?

Escapes and loop: for Adorno, jazz was a loop. All he saw was a fugitive return to the fold of the main theme at the end of a solo. In *Die Soldaten*, Zimmerman deployed a jazz combo—not for the first time, but more emphatically and explicitly

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than before. The combo employs a walking bass. To counter Adorno's description of the narrative cycle of jazz, its seemingly castrating pseudo-liberations, always ordering the renegade solo back into the main theme, the walking bass offers a nervous micro-loop, a repetition that lies not in the dismantling of narration, but in the pressing *physis* of the forward step. Jazz emphasizes the physical side of walking, going, leaving without a plan—beyond the successes or disappointments a plan can harbour. In Zimmerman's opera, it is an "Andalusian woman" who dances to jazz.

The loop is not a turning back but a circle, and the trajectory of *Wilhelm Meister* forms a tangent. His route is still associated with the point of departure, the paternal birthplace, while the loop has severed these ties. The price for this rupture is the indefinite postponement of arrival. Usually, noticing you're going in circles implies that you are lost. But many find this quite pleasant. Canadian artist Rodney Graham made this beautifully clear when he built a reading apparatus for Lenz in the early 1980s. Graham noticed that the English and French translations of Lenz both feature an exact repetition, a twofold use of the phrases "into the forest" and "*à la longue de la forêt*" respectively. So he laid out the text between these two points in a manner that fills a particular number of pages and built a machine of sorts that is based on a lectern, thanks to which the reader of the novella, upon reaching the second "into the forest," is taken back—not to the beginning of the story, but to the first "into the forest," meaning that neither the beginning nor the ending of the book remain accessible. So this is not about a loop that leads back home, and/or into regression, but one that forever follows the same trajectories as a runaway or a fugitive schizo. Incidentally, Graham's machine does not work in the German original; here, the two passages, which are rendered identical in translation, read: "*Den Wald hinab*" (down into the forest) and "*Den Wald hinauf*" (up into the forest).

Does the introduction of a third dimension offer hidden clues? Can one run in circles and still experience many an unpredictable thing? After all, things can always go up or down. To go back to the two notions of progress in the 1960s and

'70s, it was never about a straight path, a mathematical axis, projected out into the world from one single point, through one single dimension. All these trajectories lead not only away from somewhere, but also up and down. They tell the stories of reaching high peaks and following crooked paths. In terms of spiritual self-realization, they are stories of perfection and refinement, ranging from cliff scaling to freefall.

Let's briefly return to Donald Duck, who was working on his social ascent at night school. To recap, Daisy had hoped he'd become an interior designer, while Huey, Dewey, and Louie scoffed that he was probably in training to be a trash collector. Instead, Donald becomes... a hairdresser. Daisy cannot suppress her—presumably homophobic—horror. Surely that is no profession for a man. She goes home, feeling "so very ashamed." In the meantime, Donald is moving up in the world. Daisy's girlfriends, of all people, eagerly flock to him, and his reputation as a hairdresser spreads among the ladies of the city, which now bestows yet another discomfort on Daisy. Jealousy. And in the end, Donald is faced with a very special kind of challenge.

For the French rendition of Rodney Graham's Lenz project,<sup>4</sup> his friend, the famous Canadian artist Jeff Wall, wrote an essay in which he linked the Lenz Loop to the usual historico-philosophical concepts: Freud's repetition compulsion, Nietzsche's eternal return, and finally, above all, Hegel's bad infinity. Naturally, these concepts all have a different relationship to the object and subject matter in question: that of moving round in circles, which is regarded either as an anthropological given, resisting the concept of history, or as an ominous psychological pattern, which can be reformed into a more successful form of subjectivity, or as a malfunctioning idea of history and development, which does remain appropriate in essence nonetheless. These concepts do concur with the fact that the loop is, in any case, a negation of progress. But can we take this for granted?

These days, faced with the difficult choice of either adapting one's actions to the circumstances at hand and abandoning any leeway, or adopting

a completely different, revolutionary, and utopian position that has no chance of success whatsoever, it's quite common to invoke the notion of potentiality. One sings the high melody of bare possibility, of the not yet nameable and therefore as yet un-debatable, embryonic, latent, faraway events. From Bloch to Agamben, one can easily find the many respective philosophical figures and arguments in favour of all this. As a category of thought and action, potentiality guarantees the survival of absolute oppositionality. The pragmatic but ugly principle of always rallying to the rescue of whatever is second worst is suspended in the name of some superior third element.

The cult of potentiality, however, is also an ally of the journey and the return-to-the-home. Classic utopian models play with the same dialectical thoughts of departure and return, just like the bourgeois Bildungsroman. One sees the clear resolution to go elsewhere, even the obligation to do so, to turn against oneself and one's father. And after a while, between the antagonistic poles of father and home, the return begins, in the name of finding "the way to oneself." If one wishes to acquire a timely and appropriate form of the old same, one must wish for something entirely different. It is during phases of congestion and roadblock, when alternatives and escapes are unavailable, that devotees of potentiality succeed in administrating these structures. The exercise demands that one fully convince oneself that, at the right moment, one will indeed immediately seize the other and potentially embark on a new journey. Still, the problem that the potential and future departures know no logic other than the classic leave-taking and inevitable homecoming may be far worse than the current state of congestion.

*Get Rid of Yourself* (2003), a film by the New York-based artist collective Bernadette Corporation, combines the altercations of Genoa in 2001 with some fashion shows in New York, and spends a long time wallowing in problems similar to those described in these pages, combined with a voiceover derisively scorning Attac network and its slogan "Another world is possible." Its argument goes somehow like this: "Sure, maybe another world is possible, but actually I don't want another world at all. I want the world we

have and I want to ruin it." In the context of the film, this desire is not meant to invoke ecological catastrophe or the ruining of the planet so much as the destruction of the capitalist order. There is no hint that this will unfold to the benefit of the implementation of another type of order, communism, for example, which one must first strive for, and for which one must accept a logic of the trajectory of development, of necessary sacrifices and intermediary stages. Rather, what we love the most in this world, or, better yet, what captivates us—the commodity—must be both revered and destroyed. The spell of commodities is acknowledged as a key element of today. One cannot escape it through disdainful contempt; one must surrender to it and thereby enable its destruction precisely by recognizing its seductive powers. Having clarified this, the film proceeds to show us the looting of expensive fashion items.

Talking about the commodity, we refer here to the promise of immediacy and instant gratification and its denial of journey and sacrifice. It is often assumed that utopia is already hidden within the commodity as some misshapen dream, that some enchanted and transfixed better future already exists right here in the world, and not merely at the other end of a long journey or rainbow. What's new in Bernadette Corporation's approach is its refusal to respond by attacking our commodity-producing society, its structures and laws, and its decision to attack the empirical, concrete commodities themselves instead. In its infantile and anti-developmental spirit of sheer willpower, it is about as magical—but perhaps also as interesting—as the 1967 attempt of poets and musicians like Allen Ginsberg and the Fugs who, in an effort to end the Vietnam war, tried to dispel the evil spirits and demons from the Pentagon with the help of shamanic rituals.

This is an act also of non-departure, of staying put and moving in circles, preferable to the illusion of new beginnings, which is informed by the regular shopping spree, the circular activity par excellence: it is an eternal promise of a fresh start, which never claims to lead to a concrete utopia, but merely to recurring withdrawal symptoms following the consumption, something one already anticipates without fail. The ultimate moment of

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the commodity is the moment between purchase and consumption. The product has been bought, but not yet consumed—potentiality! Robert Crumb captured it in its entirety with a horde of identical, dull-eyed men streaming out of the subway, all of whom have the same thought bubble featuring the same stereotypical image of a naked female torso, all staring sadly at the ground. Only one of the men smiles (there's a porn magazine tucked in his bag). High above in the upper edge of the comic book pages, a godlike alter ego of Crumb's comes to comment: "Look at him, the poor thing! But he's happy." The use of the magazine will leave him depressed, a depression that will accompany him until he buys the next. But in that moment between the purchase and the expected disappointment he is happy.

Does this structure necessarily bring forth only the false happiness of this poor wanker? Haven't we come to know—not least through Minimalism and techno—that what we hear in a loop is never the same? Thanks to its supple and reliable consistency, our micro-changes suddenly become larger, and the world around the loop begins to grow. Time and again we see ourselves under the same conditions, looking slightly different every time. Again and again, Lenz runs into Father Oberlin, over and over he succumbs to a flash of insight and sees himself in a new light—after which he screams and cries or is actually happy. As for those Situationists who ran in nighttime circles during the early 1950s, it was in this sense that they would have liked to turn back the clock on their own lives, and on history and progress, too.

Commodity, circularity, craving. Are those who use drugs or commodities really turning in similar circles as Lenz? It is not the process of the loop's repetition that is disappointing, for it always successfully leads back to a starting point. I experience the same thing at least twice. By virtue of being objectively the same, it's an opportunity to observe the changes in my subjective experience, to experience change as a second order observer—a change that is not limited to linear progression. There are two sides to Daft Punk's "One More Time!" and the happy "Again!" of both Teletubbies and *Mainzelmännchen*<sup>5</sup>: one, to ask whether anything is still available, and to affirm that it is,

and then, to enjoy becoming something different as a result of the fact that the environment remains stable, be it Lenz's forest or the beat.

Naturally, this amounts to an evasion or denial of the wrong kind of work and development, but also the good work on the world, the negation of the way things stand. One clings to the relative happiness of being oneself quite distinctly, but without becoming a patriarch. It is a seemingly utopian thought; to become limitless without having to overcome anything, a takeover without a show of force. *Change the World Without Taking Power* (2002), the title of John Holloway's book, articulates the paradoxical leftist underground sensation, or dream, of changing the world. This idea seems to be based on the feeling that the world changes when I myself change (without intervening in the world, that is, without working because that is always negating). The reason the loop became such a successful rhetorical trope in the effort to describe, narrate, and even organize experiences is that it harbours possibilities ranging from regression to self-reflection without ever becoming arbitrary: a conspicuous constellation that subsumes ever more (sub)cultural territory, organizing very different things that would have otherwise been mere narrative. And no one really trusts narrative anymore.

#### About the Author

Diedrich Diederichsen is a Berlin-based critic of art, pop music, theatre, and politics. He is currently Professor for Theory, Practice, and Communication of Contemporary Art at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, and was formerly editor at the music magazines *Sounds* and *Spex*.

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Notes begin on page 105.