

The Haunting Presence of Lost Futures in *The Third Reel* by S.J. Naudé

Bibi Burger

Summary

In Mark Fisher's *Ghosts of My Life*, he describes various small-scale utopian projects dating from the 1960s to the 1980s, including brutalist architecture, squats, industrial music and experimental film. According to Fisher, contemporary popular culture is mainly concerned with reworking these decades (instead of conceiving new utopian or formally experimental projects), partly because the 21st century is still haunted by these trajectories for the future that never realised. Fisher argues that the haunting of these lost utopian projects can be considered as fissures indicating alternatives to the accepting of contemporary capitalism as the only viable social structure. S.J. Naudé's novel, *The Third Reel*, which is set in 1986-1990, references the utopian projects mentioned above. In this article, Fisher's writing is used to read *The Third Reel* as a cultural product haunted by these lost visions of the future and their radical potential. Fisher's theorisation of countercultural utopian projects during the 1980s is also supplemented by a discussion of the potentially radical queer practices of that decade, as represented in *The Third Reel*. The influence of the past on the present is explicitly thematised in the novel through references to Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* and characters' attempts to recover their family histories. These attempts often prove to be complex and serve to vitiate any attempt to interpret the implications of history for the present in simple terms. This article thus speaks to Louise Viljoen's in this issue and although it focuses mainly on Naudé, overlaps in Koos Prinsloo's oeuvre will be signalled.

Opsomming

In *Ghosts of My Life* beskryf Mark Fisher verskeie kleinskaalse utopiese projekte wat dateer uit die 1960s tot die 1980s, insluitend brutalistiese argitektuur, *squats*, industriële musiek en eksperimentele film. Volgens Fisher is hedendaagse populêre kultuur hoofsaaklik gemoed met 'n herwerking van hierdie dekades (in stede daarvan om nuwe utopiese of formalisties eksperimentele projekte te bedink), gedeeltelik omdat hierdie trajekte in die 21ste eeu steeds spook vir 'n toekoms wat nooit gerealiseer het nie. Fisher voer aan dat hierdie "spook" van

verlore utopiese projekte beskou kan word as breuke wat dui op alternatiewe tot die aanvaarding van hedendaagse kapitalisme as die enigste lewensvatbare sosiale struktuur. *Die Derde Spoel* deur S.J. Naudé speel af van 1986 tot 1990 en bevat verwysings na al die bogenoemde utopiese projekte. In hierdie artikel word Fisher se werk gebruik om betoog dat hierdie verlore perspektiewe op die toekoms en hul radikale potensiaal by *Die Derde Spoel* spook. Die radikale potensiaal van die queer praktyke van die 1980s wat in *Die Derde Spoel* uitgebeeld word, word ook bespreek as toevoeging tot Fisher se teoretisering oor daardie dekade. Die invloed van die verlede op die hede word eksplisiet in die roman getematiseer deur middel van verwysings na Walter Benjamin se *Angelus Novus* en karakters se pogings om hulle familiegeskiedenis na te speur. Hierdie pogings word uitgebeeld as ingewikkeld, en dien as waarskuwing dat enige poging om die implikasies van die verlede vir die hede te interpreteer, nooit eenvoudig kan wees nie. Dié artikel kan dus beskou word as in gesprek met Louise Viljoen se artikel in dieselfde uitgawe en alhoewel dit hoofsaaklik op Naude fokus, dui ek soortgelyke temas in Koos Prinsloo se oeuvre aan.

Introduction

In an interview with the Afrikaans literary website LitNet, S.J. Naudé speculates that the vague revolutionary ideas of the characters of his novel, *The Third Reel*, seem naïve and quaint (Meyer 2017). This, according to Naudé (in Meyer 2017), is due to the ways in which contemporary social structures (he specifically mentions the all-encompassing consumer culture and capitalism) has sedimented. In 1986, utopian expectations were still possible; it was still possible to imagine alternative communal structures (Naudé in Meyer 2017). These claims largely correspond to those made by the late British cultural critic, Mark Fisher, in his book, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014). In an earlier work, *Capitalist Realism: Is There no Alternative?* (2009), Fisher uses the term “capitalist realism” to designate the pervasive and affective atmosphere of late capitalism, which, like the “all-encompassing consumerism” mentioned by Naudé, occludes the possibility of even imagining an alternative, with any such attempts dismissed as unrealistic. Like Naudé, Fisher contends that from the 1960s to the 1980s attempts at realising countercultural utopias were still deemed possible. Moreover, these attempts discussed by

Fisher in *Ghosts of My Life* are largely similar to those depicted in Naudé's debut novel, *The Third Reel* (2017): brutalist architecture, squats, industrial music and experimental film.¹

According to Fisher, 21st-century popular culture is not really concerned with conceiving new visions of the future. Instead, it is characterised by a reworking of the past, the popular culture created in the 1960s to the 1980s. This is partly because the utopian visions of the past has been co-opted by capitalism and repackaged for consumption, but also because, according to Fisher, the 21st century is still haunted by these past visions of the future. According to Naudé (in Meyer 2017), the present is not only still impacted by the utopian visions of the past, but also by the "great traumas of the 20th century".² He specifically refers to how the contemporary epoch ("tydvak") has been shaped by traumas such as World War II and the Cold War, and also to how the cities of London and Berlin still bear the scars of these traumas. This aspect of Fisher's work can be used to clarify one of *The Third Reel's* most prominent intertexts: the life and work of philosopher Walter Benjamin. As will be explained in the next section, Benjamin was greatly concerned with "reading" the history of Berlin. Like Fisher, he was interested in investigating the past in terms of its impact on the present and its submerged utopian potential.³

After discussing the references to the work of Benjamin in *The Third Reel* and their philosophical implications, these references is brought into dialogue with Fisher's work. Thereafter the specific countercultural utopian projects represented in *The Third Reel*, namely brutalism, squats, industrial music and experimental film are explored. In addition, queer culture of the 1980s (as represented in *The Third Reel*) is also examined for its oppositional utopian potential, thereby supplementing Fisher's argument. The article ends with a discussion on how the interpretation of history is thematised in *The Third Reel* – namely through the above-mentioned overt references to Benjamin's theory of history, but also the various characters' attempts at recovering their childhood and family histories. These attempts prove to be difficult and only partially successful, and this can be read as a warning

¹ Readers might want to look at Prinsloo's short story, "Portrait of the Artist" for thematic overlaps.

² My translation.

³ Here, too, we see a similar obsession in Prinsloo's oeuvre when he includes letters of his grandfather, for example, as a way to navigate the present and his own subversive life, as well as the new trajectory of South Africa.

that any attempt to interpret history can only ever be tentative. Nonetheless, I conclude (tentatively) that the utopian projects portrayed in *The Third Reel* explore ways of identifying fissures in 21st-century capitalist realism.

Angelus Novus: The Angel of History

The Third Reel contains both direct and indirect references to the life and work of Jewish-German philosopher, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). The novel is structured around the search for the three reels of *Berliner Chronik*, a fictional film based on Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*. As the title indicates, this book consists of autobiographical sketches of Benjamin's childhood in Berlin around 1900. In *The Third Reel*, a fictionalised version of Benjamin sends a manuscript of the book to *Berliner Chronik's* director, Ariel Schnur (73).⁴

Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert is not a conventional linear autobiography, but is, rather, based around objects and instances that evoke memories, which are described with the aim of conveying an experience, rather than creating a narrative. In this sense, it relates to one of the main themes of *The Third Reel*: an exploration of childhood experience and its relationship with an adult's life. I use the term "relationship", rather than "influence on" to link with Benjamin's non-determinist, non-linear view of history, which is explained in the following paragraphs.

Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert is, like Benjamin's other work written in the 1930s (Osborne & Charles 2015), related to his ambitious *Das Passagen-werk* (translated into English as *The Arcades Project*). The aim of this (ultimately incomplete) project is to explore, through a history of the 19th century, the structure of the capitalism of Benjamin's own time (Osborne & Charles 2015). Osborne and Charles (2015) summarise the project's aim as an attempt to identify "glimpse[s]" within the "present, via the past, of a utopian political future that would bring history to an end". This end of history can, according to Benjamin, be either

⁴ In the rest of this article, page numbers without further information refer to: Naudé, S.J. 2017. *The Third Reel*. Cape Town: Umuzi.

destructive (if fascism triumphs) or emancipatory (if the communist project succeeds) (Osborne & Charles 2015).

Benjamin is critical of the idea of historical progress; as a heterodoxical Marxist, he suggests that conceiving of a communist utopia as a historical inevitability cannot motivate people to strive to realise it (Osborne & Charles 2015). Rather, he aims to recover “revolutionary moments in the occurrence of history” by identifying “vivid images torn from their ‘natural’ or ‘original’ context” and exploring their significance for the present and future (Jennings 2006: 12). Benjamin’s most influential and succinct summary of his conception of history can be found in the last completed work before his death in 1940, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” (often translated as “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, but translated by Dennis Redmond as “On the Concept of History”):

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair [*verweilen*: a reference to Goethe’s *Faust* – Redmond], to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.

Benjamin here challenges the idea that progress can transcend history. He claims that so-called “progress”, or the development from barbarism to civility, is always a violent process. The quote on Benjamin’s gravestone that is also the motto of *The Third Reel*, is also from “On the Concept of History”: “There is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” Civilization is, in this conception, not the opposite of barbarity, but rather the product of it even as it is the producer thereof due to the violence committed in the name of progress.

Apart from this motto, *The Third Reel* contains various implicit references to Benjamin's Angel of History. The most explicit reference can be found in the thoughts of the novel's protagonist, Etienne, when he plays a gig with his band, Stunde Null, "It is then that he gets closest to exorcising [his lover] Axel, to pulling Axel's shiny blade from his side. To letting his father's face dissolve into the noise, and his mother's. To diminishing the sun of his continent of origin" (241). The illusory nature of this conviction that he is successfully transcending his past, is implied by the vision that Etienne has during these moments, "of an angel dragging its wings backwards through a city, and the rubble that remains – shattered gargoyles, the marble limbs of statues, the shards of fountains" (241). This angel clearly resembles Benjamin's Angel of History and the implication is that, while Etienne might be caught up in the storm he thinks of as Progress, he will be forced to face the "rubble" created by his own attempts to move forward. In the following chapters he is, indeed, forced to confront the complicated relationships of his past: with Axel, his father, his mother and with South Africa, his country of origin.

The Third Reel largely deals with the attempts by Etienne to escape these relationships and his past in general. As a 22-year old, he flees apartheid South Africa to avoid military conscription. He first goes to London, where he meets various lovers, including Axel, a West German nurse and artist who has a profound effect on his life. Etienne starts studying film and is particularly inspired by a course on lost European films. Axel uses this course as an opportunity to introduce Etienne to *Berliner Chronik*. Axel's grandmother, Irmgard, worked as production assistant on the film and kept a diary of the production process. She also, Axel eventually reveals, separated the three reels of the film and left them with different people, in an attempt to protect this film (made by Jewish artists and crew) from the Nazis. Etienne is immediately intrigued and sets out to find the three reels. After Axel disappears, having received a mysterious telegraph about his mother (it is later revealed that she committed suicide), Etienne successfully applies for a study exchange program in East Berlin. While in East Berlin he occasionally travels to West Berlin (as an exchange student he has special privileges) in an attempt to find Axel. He also continues to search for the reels of *Berliner Chronik* in parts of the East German film archives to which he does not have lawful access. This rouses suspicion and Etienne flees to West Berlin, where he becomes the percussionist in the industrial rock band, Stunde Null.

Etienne attempts to move “past” (24) the “rubble” of his personal history by immersing himself in the music and in attempting to recover the history of *Berliner Chronik*, and, therefore, indirectly, Benjamin’s childhood, as well as Axel’s childhood and family history. As Axel phrases it: “I knew how urgent your need was to exchange your childhood for something else” (314). Such urgency intermingled with apathy is evident in Koos Prinsloo’s story, “Drome is ook wonde”, when a character says: “Liewe Vriend, mild paranoia is a characteristic Post-Modern feeling” (233). In other words, while the urgency to exchange childhood for something else might be driven – at least in part – by a utopian ideal, a certain amount of paranoia remains buried in the act of exchange. As we see in Naudé’s novel, Etienne not only attempts to exchange his childhood for others’ histories, but also to move past it by getting involved in various countercultural utopian projects. The rejection of his past is thus a rejection of the future his father had planned out for him: a wife, children and a job that can contribute to the success of apartheid South Africa (16-18). Instead of this large-scale utopian project, Etienne chooses to become involved with oppositional projects with smaller scale utopian potentialities. The nature of these projects and their potential will be discussed shortly, but first I will speculate as to why a 21st-century South African novel is preoccupied with rummaging through the historical “rubble” of utopian projects from the 1980s. To aid this speculation I return, at the end of the article, to the way in which the striving for (and failure of) the recovery of lost history is thematised in *The Third Reel*.

Lost Futures

In her contribution to this issue, Louise Viljoen (2019) speculates that S.J. Naudé perhaps decided to set *The Third Reel* in the 1980s, because this was

a period in which the ‘future’ still lay ahead, a period in which one could still fight for freedom from fascist regimes, a period in which the hope for a new start had not yet been contaminated by the events that followed the euphoria of the early 1990s.

This speculation can be supported by claims made by Naudé. Naudé (interviewed by Meyer 2017) says that in the late 1980s it seemed possible that the world could be radically changed

– the Berlin Wall fell, for example, and Apartheid was coming to an end in South Africa. Countercultural and subcultural attempts at realising utopias had not yet been co-opted by consumer capitalism to the degree that it is now (Naudé in Meyer 2017).

These claims are reminiscent of the arguments of Mark Fisher. Fisher contends that 21st century popular culture (including music, films and television series) is fascinated with the 1960s to the 1980s because this was an era in which popular culture was conceiving and attempting to realise various utopias. Popular culture was therefore oriented towards the future, whereas it is now, according to him, focussed primarily on reworking the past (Fisher 2014: loc. 183). Elsewhere, Fisher (2018: 1127) contends that much of this reworking is an attempt to render the radical potentialities of the past harmless by commodifying it. The reworking of the past in contemporary popular culture can however also be attributed to a sincere fascination with the unrealised imagined futures conceived from the 1960s to the 1980s, the unrealised aspect of which lead to what Fisher (2014: loc. 159) calls (after Italian Marxist activist and theorist, Franco “Bifo” Berardi) “the slow cancellation of the future”. Because these attempts at reimagining the future failed (to a smaller or larger extent), the belief in progress or linear development, underlying such ideologies as “the Hegel-Marxist mythology of *Aufhebung* and founding of the new totality of Communism; the bourgeois mythology of a linear development of welfare and democracy; the technocratic mythology of the all-encompassing power of scientific knowledge; and so on”, dwindled and consequently “the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion” (Berardi, quoted in Fisher 2014: loc. 183).

According to Fisher (2014: loc. 189) the current fascination with past visions of the future not only takes place on the level of subject or theme, but is also “a formal nostalgia”. He refers to Frederic Jameson’s theories on the “nostalgia mode”, which he understands as “a consequence of a retreat from the modernist challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience” (Fisher 2014: loc. 238). Fisher contends that popular culture created during the 1960s to the 1980s was influenced by the modernist experiments of so-called “high culture” which attempted to create innovative artistic forms. In contrast, the currently *du jour* “retro” pop culture “offers the quick and easy promise of a minimal variation on an already familiar satisfaction” (Fisher 2014: loc. 285). Fisher therefore speculates that

the formal modernist experimentation of the examples of popular culture he discusses (such as brutalist architecture, postpunk music and experimental film) also extend utopian thinking – a belief that artistic progress is possible and desirable. With the end of belief in the possibility of a socialist utopia (at least in the British context in which Fisher writes), “neoliberal capitalism has [also] gradually but systematically deprived artists of the resources to produce the new” (Fisher 2014: loc. 285). In cities such as London and New York that used to be the hubs of countercultural popular culture, rents have sky rocketed, the political will to build social housing has diminished and illegal squats and communes have largely been destroyed (Fisher 2014: loc. 291). With these developments, artists no longer have the resources (time, energy, housing) to create work outside of neoliberal capitalism.

This argument is indicative of one of the most problematic aspects of Fisher’s argument. His claims are valid in terms of the specific forms of (mostly European) popular culture he discusses, but he phrases them as universally valid. A thorough discussion of post-apartheid South African (popular) culture and the ways in which it does and does not confirm Fisher’s hypothesis, is outside of the scope of this article. I will only refer to two objections that are related to S.J. Naudé and my discussion of *The Third Reel*. At the February Lectures conference of 2018, held at the University of South Africa, Louise Viljoen presented an earlier version of “Afrikaans literature in / and the World Republic of Letters: the case of Koos Prinsloo and S.J. Naudé”. Afterwards, an audience member described her claim that the 1980s were “a period in which the ‘future’ still lay ahead” as a romanticised view of this time that is only true for white South Africans. To the extent that this view of the 1980s corresponds to Fisher’s argument, the audience member’s critique can be used to problematise his claims. While some South Africans might, like the contemporary artists that Fisher discusses, feel nostalgic for the struggles of the 1980s and for the realisation of liberatory utopias (and for a time before this realisation proved more complicated),⁵ for many others post-apartheid South Africa (no matter how flawed) is a definite improvement on apartheid South Africa of the

⁵ See, for example, *Native Nostalgia* by Jacob Dlamini. While outside of the scope of this article, reading Dlamini’s musings on roughly the same period (the 1970s to the 1990s) alongside Fisher’s could lead to valuable insights into the similarities and differences in how these periods are viewed in 21st-century South Africa and England.

1980s.⁶ While the euphoria of the 1990s has faded in South Africa and the utopian ideal of the “Rainbow Nation” has been criticised in South African public discourse in the last few years, the Fallist protests accompanying this critique are still grounded on sincere countercultural utopianism, rather than a cynical repackaging of past rebellion for capitalist consumption.⁷

The manner in which 21st-century South African popular culture does not equate to the reconfiguring of elements of pop culture from the 1960 to the 1980s, is explored by S.J. Naudé in some of the short stories in his collection *The Alphabet of Birds* (originally published in Afrikaans in 2011, English translation 2014). Ondien, the protagonist of “VNLS”, explains that the historical influences that shape her band’s sound go back much further than the 1960s. While they are influenced by more recent musical trends such as “Nigerian soul layered over London electro-pop, influences of ragga. A little funk and hip-hop” (Naudé 2014: loc. 2003), Ondien is also inspired by mbaqanga from the 1760s (Naudé 2014: loc. 2008). The name of her band, “Victorian Native Ladies’ Society”, started as “ironic allusion” (Naudé 2014: loc. 1951). It is, however, not as ironic as originally intended, since relationships in the band and the ways in which they are perceived are still directly impacted by Victorian colonial history. While being fictional, The Victorian Native Ladies’ Society has real-world equivalents and “VNLS” illustrates some of the ways in which the influence of different forms of artistic and political history on contemporary South African popular culture can therefore not be compared to the British scenario that Fisher describes.

In contrast, *The Third Reel* is largely set in England and Germany⁸ in the 1980s and it is noteworthy that the novel engages with the same examples of utopian popular culture that

⁶ Fisher does say that struggles against racism and hetero(sexism) have made advances in the past three decades, but he calls for an acknowledgement of the ways in which “neoliberalism has corroded the social democratic infrastructure which allowed increased working class participation in cultural production. The disarticulation of class from race, gender and sexuality has in fact been central to the success of the neoliberal project – making it seem, grotesquely, as if neoliberalism were in some way a precondition of the gains made in anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-heterosexual struggles” (Fisher 2014: loc. 452-458).

⁷ See, for example, *Breaking a Rainbow, Building a Nation* by Rekgotsofetse Chikane.

⁸ Shryane (2011: 175), quoting Blixa Bargeld (of the band Einstürzende Neubauten and later Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds) describes West Berlin in the years around 1975-1985 in similar terms as Fisher does London, emphasising the “excessive cultural experimentation” of these years made possible by the low cost of subsistence living.

Fisher discusses. The novel's representation of these examples means that Fisher's theorisation remains useful in analysing the novel, despite its limitations for interpreting work created in a different (including a South African) context. In the rest of this article, I will discuss the representation of the above-mentioned forms of popular culture in *The Third Reel* and the ways they indicate utopian striving (according to Fisher). Apart from these examples, the utopian potential of queerness in the 1980s, as represented in *The Third Reel*, is discussed.

The Utopianism of Popular Modernism

As mentioned earlier, Etienne flees South Africa in 1986 to escape the apartheid government's military conscription. While Apartheid is, from a contemporary vantage point, considered a dystopia rather than a utopia, it does represent the attempts of a specific group to create a large-scale utopia, although not an inclusive one (see Malisa & McAnuff-Gumbs 2015: 308). Both the apartheid state Etienne flees and the DDR (Deutsche Demokratische Republik) where he lives and studies, are (along with colonialism and nationalist socialism) examples of the 20th-century totalitarian utopias which eventually led to a general distrust of utopian thought and experiments (Claeys 2010: 107; Vieira 2010: 18). Along with the distrust of large utopian projects, attempts at smaller, oppositional utopias (such as socialist, feminist or ecological communes) were made (Sargisson 2003: 54). It is these countercultural utopian projects that are discussed by Fisher and represented in *The Third Reel*.

The first example of Fisher's popular modernism that Etienne encounters in London is brutalist architecture. Etienne is introduced to this architecture style by Aodhan, a lover who squats in a 1960s social housing block next door to the squat Etienne lives in when first arriving in London (28). Fisher (2014: loc. 2714) hints at one of the ways in which brutalism can be considered utopian, when he laments (without referring to brutalism specifically) the gentrification of London: "So many dreams of collectivity have died in neoliberal London. A new kind of human being was supposed to live here, but that all had to be cleared away so that the restoration could begin." Even if he is not referring to the "new kind of human being" envisioned by brutalist architects, it is true that their visions had ethical and social dimensions. As Mould (2017: 702) explains, brutalism was conceived as an architectural style appropriate to post-World War Two austerity and welfare states – buildings designed to serve inhabitants'

basic needs without the wasting of any money on frivolity or decoration. Some brutalist architects also saw their buildings as not foisting any design elements on inhabitants, but rather as a “bare structure [...] ready for dressing by the art of inhabitation” (Van den Heuvel, quoted in Mould 2017: 704).

Fisher’s (2014: loc. 395) claim that brutalism is an example of UK popular modernism could also refer to the ways in which these architects try to defy the laws of physics. In coining the word “utopia” Thomas More, was, after all, playing on both the Greek word *eu-topia* (“good place”) and *ou-topia* (“no place”) (Hetherington 2003: viii). Brutalist architect’s designs are therefore utopian in the sense that they are proving human ingenuity by building the seemingly impossible. Aodhan tells Etienne about “cities so heavy that they push the earth out of its orbit” (30) and sings the praises of concrete: “the material is refusing. [...] It is repudiating everything. Cities in the sky. [...] Hanging clusters. Suspended over nothing. Staircases and walkways to nowhere The material as god (31)]”.

The intentions of many brutalist architects might have been broadly humanist and politically progressive, but in the intervening years the absence of decorative aspects and the emphasis on functionality has meant that brutalism has come to be considered dehumanising (Mould 2017: 702). Brutalist architecture’s “modernist confidence in the ability of a central state to implement large-scale social transformation” (Brink 2012: 2) and its employment by socialist states have contributed to an association of brutalism with totalitarianism. Nils, Etienne’s housemate in East Berlin, also associates the East German government’s replacement of older buildings with grey new structures with a totalitarian attempt to erase history (147). Etienne hears Nils’ opinion just after watching a propaganda film, “a rising paean to the East German housing authorities and their indefatigable dedication to progress” (146), a film that makes him feel like he is back in South Africa in the way it precludes dissent. The utopian ideals of brutalism here manifest as totalitarian dystopia.

Fisher not only considers the projects of brutalist architects utopian, but also those of the squatters who occupied British brutalist council estates in the 1970s to 1980s. The actions of squatters could be considered as a subversion of the totalitarian impulses associated (deservedly or not) with brutalism. The representation of squatters in 1980s London and West

Berlin in *The Third Reel* corresponds with Fisher's view of squats as incubators for experimental art. When Etienne first arrives in London, he moves into an empty room in Bonnington Square, No. 52 (21). In the Square there is no property, "No one making rules, no one in control" (23). This is in stark contrast with the life in South Africa he left behind, where every aspect of his life was controlled by the school, his father and, indirectly, the state. The inhabitants of this utopian squat create experimental art that cannot be exploited for profit: "People build wooden sculptures and set them alight when parties end. Everywhere violins and flutes sound. Bands practise: late punk, British or Irish folk, guys whacking engine parts" (25). Axel also lives in a squat, a dilapidated Georgian house in Bermondsey Street (50). Here he also creates art that is not meant to last and is therefore not easily marketable. Etienne finds, for example, in Axel's studio "a little miniature houses, roofs ripped off" with rotting pigeons in the houses, deliberately meant to rot (69).

Etienne's positive experience of squatting ends when his room in the Square is occupied by a group of Finnish goths. While the Square as a free and communal space does provide the necessary environment for the creation of art, it does not provide security, and Etienne is lucky that the Finns deign to give him his drums. He attempts to find shelter with the other inhabitants of the Square, whom he previously had a convivial relationship with, but they guard their own spaces jealously and he has no recourse to any form of justice – this is just "how it goes" in the squatting community (99). After Axel leaves London for Germany, the Bermondsey squat is also claimed by others: "Anyone felt free to come and party or stay there, whether for a night or weeks on end. At some point the back door disappeared, some window frames were removed" (160). Apart from the threat of occupation by unwanted others, squatters also live with the constant threat of eviction or the demolition of the building they live in (see the reference to protests against demolitions on page 124).

After leaving for Berlin, Etienne does not live in a squat again, but he continues making use of disused urban spaces for the creation of art. His band, Stunde Null, for example, practice in West Berlin in a "dripping factory where something like bombs or helmets or boots was once manufactured" (162). Their main influence is the West-Berlin experimental rock band Einstürzende Neubauten (161), whose name means "Collapsing Newbuildings", with "collapsing" as an adjective rather than a verb (Shryane 2011: 172). Shryane (2011: 173)

discusses various possible interpretations of the band's name. Most relevant for my interpretation of *The Third Reel* is that she links it to the squatter scene of which Einstürzende Neubauten formed part and their opposition to the demolition of buildings they were occupying. She also connects the band's name to the sounds they produced by using a wide range of instruments, including self-made ones, which involves "the literal beating, shaking, scraping, burning of structures" (Shryane 2011: 173). Through their principle of *hor mit schmerzen* (which Shryane [2011: 173] translates as "painful listening") they also attempted to collapse listeners' ideas of what popular music is and can do (Shryane 2011: 172).⁹

In this way Einstürzende Neubauten's music can be considered an example of the postpunk music which Fisher (2014: loc. 395) claims (along with, *inter alia*, brutalism) proved that popular culture need not be populist, but could challenge aesthetic conventions in the same way that other modernist art does. Like Einstürzende Neubauten (Shryane 2011: 174), *The Third Reel's* Stunde Null creates music that incorporates spaces and found objects in their performances. As already mentioned, their studio is an abandoned factory. While Etienne eventually has his drums shipped from London, the band also uses "improvised" instruments, "Pipes, an oil drum. Iron rods that look like sections of a train track. Parts of a lorry or locomotive engine" (161). The band's name, "Stunde Null", refers to midnight on 8 May 1945 and efforts to establish a new Germany after the end of the Second World War. Like "Einstürzende Neubauten", their name is an indication of their intention to destroy conventions and start anew, to make "music that no one has ever heard before" (162).

As explained earlier, when he is playing with Stunde Null, Etienne thinks he can escape his own history and start from scratch, but this escape is only temporary and he cannot forever ignore the rubble of his personal history (241). Immediately after the gig where he feels Axel, his family and Africa dissolving and he has a vision of the Angel of History, he has a dream of his mother: "He finds her in a burnt-out car under a desolate bridge. She has been kept hostage for a long time. He is startled by her appearance. She is just skin and bone, like a prisoner" (241). When he is eventually reunited with Axel, his former lover is similarly

⁹ Similarly, Koos Prinsloo's writing – especially considering the political climate during the 1980s in South Africa – can be viewed as an impulse to destroy conventions and craft a literature that cuts against the grain.

emaciated. He had, in fact, been imprisoned, after attacking his father. In prison, Axel was branded and tattooed himself. He also became addicted to drugs and, while Etienne does not initially know this, he is HIV-positive. Etienne hoped that Stunde Null would enable him to leave both Axel and his mother behind, but in the third part of the novel (“Laboratory”) he acknowledges them and becomes a carer towards both. The utopian promise of Stunde Null’s music can only ever be short lived – Etienne is haunted by his past and cannot escape it.

The last example of Fisher’s popular modernism that I will be discussing in this article is experimental film. Aodhan, who introduced Etienne to brutalism, also introduces him to European experimental cinema. The first film he shows Etienne is Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Зеркало* (*The Mirror*) (1975), an autobiographical film with a nonlinear narrative: “Chains of images from a child’s perspective roll over the screen” (37). In this way, it resembles the fictional *Berliner Chronik*, which is based on Benjamin’s similarly nonlinear sketches. Etienne’s appreciation of *The Mirror* foreshadows his later obsessive search for the three reels of *Berliner Chronik*.

Soon after watching *The Mirror*, Etienne sees *Сталкер* [*Stalker*] (1979), also directed by Tarkovsky (40). The plot of the film is summarised in The Third Reel as follows: “Three characters travel together through a forbidden zone where the rules of physics have been suspended. Their destination is a mysterious room where desires become reality” (40). Fisher (2014: loc. 2254) also refers to *Stalker* specifically:

the – beautifully, painfully – dilated moment in Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* where the camera lingers over talismanic objects that were once saturated with meaning, but are now saturated only with water is for me the most moving scene in cinema. It is as if we are seeing the urgencies of our lives through the eyes of an Alien-God.

He finds a “feeling of grace” in the way in which sentimental objects are shown here as part of the rubble-heap of history. Slavoj Žižek (in *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, directed by Sophie Fiennes) agrees that *Stalker* is fascinated by images conveying the material “density” of the passage of time. He interprets the wornness of the *Stalker*’s face as another example of such an object acting as one of the “markers of time”. In his discussion of the

representation of sentimental objects reduced to rubble by the passing of time, Fisher never refers to Walter Benjamin. His argument that the way in which the viewer of *Stalker* is shown these objects of the past, in an overgrown postapocalyptic landscape, allows for a “radical distancing”, can, however, be brought into dialogue with Benjamin’s fascination with objects from the past – the rubble that cannot be left behind by progress.

Other aspects of *Stalker* also resonate thematically with *The Third Reel*. Le Fanu (2017) interprets the characters of *Stalker*’s breakthrough to the zone, through a military protected border, as symbolising a fantasy of escape from the Soviet regime. Etienne’s fascination with the film can perhaps be explained in the way this breakthrough also reflects his own recent escape from apartheid South Africa. The breakthrough in the film also foreshadows Etienne’s own later escape from communist East Berlin. The reason for the characters’ expedition to and through the zone, namely to find a room in which anyone’s “truest desires” are fulfilled, also reflects Etienne’s reasons for escaping South Africa and his attraction to various utopian projects – a quest for happiness and a meaningful life.

A form of countercultural utopianism that figures in *The Third Reel*, but which is not discussed by Fisher, is 1980s queer culture. Naudé (in Meyer 2017) associates “queerness, in the sense of a particular type of oppositional attitude, rather than just sexual orientation”¹⁰ with the countercultural utopian projects of the 1980s that has since begun to fade. This association saturates *The Third Reel* in the way that all Etienne’s utopian strivings are related to his (queer) rejection of the heteronormative (re)productive future planned out for him by his father.

The link between Etienne’s embracing of countercultural utopian projects and his queerness is made explicit through references to *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* (1933) by Wilhelm Reich. Etienne reads this book as part of his research on the context in which *Berliner Chronik* was created and he summarises the book’s thesis as follows, “The family is a miniature state; once you are habituated to it, the true state has you in its claws forever...” (72). Etienne is

¹⁰ My translation.

taken by this theory and in his case the family and the “true” state is also literally linked by the fact that his father was a deputy minister of agriculture and had political ambitions (17).

Wilhelm Reich (1993: 29) argues that fascism utilises sexual repression to make citizens docile. Etienne’s rejection of his father’s conception of what personal and national progress entails, and his embrace of non-procreative sexuality can be understood in terms of Reich’s theory that “the patriarchal marriage and family” serves as the foundation of national growth in capitalist terms (Reich 1993: 29). In this way, Etienne’s rejection of the future planned out for him (and his attraction to countercultural utopian projects) can also be understood in terms of a specifically queer rejection of the *status quo*. In this sense, the queer culture depicted in *The Third Reel* can be contrasted with LGBTQ culture today, which can arguably be characterised as homonormative.¹¹

Jack Halberstam¹² (2008: 152) criticises Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani, influential theorists who espouse an anti-assimilationist and anti-social (and, I would argue, anti-homonormative) version of queerness, for only drawing examples of their anti-social queerness from the established canon of Euro-American literature and film. Halberstam (2008: 152) suggests a broader archive of figures associated with opposition to reproductive futurism (and associated nationalism). According to him, “[t]he anti-social archive must also be an archive of alternatives” and therefore not only valorise a specific way of being anti-socially queer (2008: 153). It should also embrace cooperation with other ways of opposing global capitalism and “define queerness as a mode of crafting alternatives with others” (Halberstam 2008: 154). As examples he mentions the “colonial rage” of the writer Jamaica Kincaid, the violent feminism of Valerie Solanas and the performance art (“revolutionary statement[s] of pure opposition”) of Yoko Ono and Marina Abramowicz (2008: 140-150).

¹¹ The term “homonormative” can be defined in different ways (see Bolen 2016: 542), but is here used to indicate Lisa Duggan’s influential description of the attempts of an online writers’ group, the Independent Gay Forum, to reconcile homosexuality with neoliberal capitalism. Duggan (2002: 190) argues that this group (she especially refers to the writing of Andrew Sullivan) uses gay marriage as a rhetorical strategy to reject proliferating forms of “the democratic diversity of sexual dissidence” of earlier gay movements, in favour of “domesticated, depoliticised privacy”.

¹² Here writing as Judith Halberstam.

I would like to suggest that in *The Third Reel* the possibilities of such a “crafting [of] alternatives with others” is represented in the way that Etienne’s oppositional enactment of queerness is brought into dialogue with the other forms of oppositional utopian projects he is involved in. His queer rejection of the future planned out for him in South Africa (as part of a heterosexual family unit forming part of the larger nationalist apartheid project) is also an embracing of the countercultural utopianism of other projects. His involvement in squatting communities involves the “dressing” of brutalist welfare estates with “the art of inhabitation” in a collective, anti-capitalist way. Living communally and for free allows for the creation of experimental art – Axel’s visual art and the music of Stunde Null – that does not have to be financially viable and can therefore be confrontational in a way that Fisher describes as similar to modernist art. Halberstam’s argument can therefore be used to argue that the oppositional (and by implication the anti-homonormative) queerness of the 1980s that Naudé mentions and depicts in *The Third Reel* should also be considered as a fissure in capitalist realism, in tangent with the countercultural utopias haunting the present as identified by Fisher.

Deciphering the Past

Etienne not only tries to replace the future planned out for him with a fascination with (architectural, musical, cinematic and sexual) attempts to create new ways of being, but he also tries to replace his own history with quests attempting to recover the history of *Berliner Chronik* and of Axel’s family. Etienne knew from the beginning that Irmgard Fleischer, the production assistant who wrote the production journal of *Berliner Chronik* was Axel’s grandmother (68). Now he travels to Argentina to find out whether she is still alive (333). His quest to find the third reel of *Berliner Chronik* is now intertwined with his attempt to find her, as she is the only person who knows what happened to the third reel (314). The difficulties that Etienne experiences in his attempts to recover this history can be read as a reminder to the reader that the novel’s project (a representation of the years 1986-1990) can also only ever be partly successful.

The difficulty of recovering the past is thematised, *inter alia*, through the motif of characters who have difficulty communicating. When Etienne finds Irmgard in Buenos Aires, he discovers that she seemingly has dementia and is unable to tell him anything, including where to find

the third reel (339). He does find, however, a half-typed letter explaining that the last reel is with Bösel, a man whom Etienne had previously visited, who seemingly also has dementia or is just too confused to give Etienne the reel (209-211). Etienne's own mother was also unable to communicate with him when they were finally reunited. She had brain cancer which "terroris[ed] her sentences" (287). He tries to take her on a trip to retrace her childhood, to the places she grew up in in the then Natal province, but it is unclear whether this is successful (288). Both Etienne, in reuniting with his mother, and his mother, in retracing her past, are unable to get closure about their childhoods.

Now, in Buenos Aires, Etienne is also unable to get closure about Axel's childhood or about the film documenting Walter Benjamin's childhood. Instead, apart from the half-typed letter mentioned above, all he finds is a page on which the blind Irmgard has typed repeatedly, not realising that every day she had been typing on the same piece of paper in the typewriter:

The letters are so densely typed over each other that the ink covers the paper almost entirely, making it bleed into a single stain. Who knows what she might have written here, against what she was railing or agitating, what she was lamenting or mourning? [...] A black scream. History condensed on a page. (341)

A remarkably similar image can be found in Katja Petrowskaja's autobiographical novel *maybe Esther* (2018). *maybe Esther* deals, amongst other topics, with Petrowskaja's attempt to trace her lineage. As Jews in the former Soviet Russia, her family members often disappeared or deliberately lost touch in order not to implicate one another. In pursuing this project, Petrowskaja (2018: 52) reads her grandmother, Rosa's, memoirs. These were written "in great haste". Rosa was losing her sight and

often forgot to move on to a new sheet and wrote several pages' worth on the same piece of paper. One line ran into the next, and another one lay atop earlier writing like waves of sand on the beach, obeying a force of nature, tangled up in the interlaced and interwoven pencil scribbles. Rosa fought off her blindness with her scrawl, lacing together the lines of her world as it slipped away. The darker it grew, the more densely she squeezed her writing onto the pages. Some passages were as inextricably intertwined as matted wool;

the prices of potatoes in the late 1980s knotted together with tales from the war and fleeting encounters.

These texts by blind women are symbols of the difficulty of interpreting and understanding history. Both women have opaque and complicated family histories, and the difficulty of making sense of it is reflected in the denseness of the texts they write.

We see another example of this difficulty of interpretation in two of Prinsloo's short stories. Thus, there are many instances where characters – and also Prinsloo as a character – try to decipher the historical lines of Apartheid, the war, the disbandment of Apartheid and so on, with the result that views are continually fluctuating. For example, we read in the story "Crack-up" on p. 37:

"Pasop, your background is showing." "Ek belowe jou, van die Calvinisme en die volkskrywer kan 'n mens nooit ontsnap nie."

Yet in another story, "By die skryf van aantekeninge oor 'n reis" we read:

"Die erf lyk na 'n nuwe wêreld, het die jong man gedink." (18)

These two excerpts exemplify the different ways in which history can be interpreted at different times, sometimes by the same person.

According to Walter Benjamin, history is not only an unstoppable process always leaving rubble in its wake: it is also difficult to understand this rubble. As has already been explained, Benjamin is critical of conventional linear interpretations of history that see everything in the past as leading up to, progressing towards, the present. Rather he argues that "vivid images" should be "torn" from where they have thus far been situated within linear history (Jennings 2006: 12), in order to identify their utopian potential. Esther Leslie (2000: 72-73) argues that in *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, Benjamin is doing just this. By writing from a child's perspective, Benjamin is acknowledging the limitations of memory, and he "develops an odd gaze in which the role of memory signals a strategy for replacing historical continuity with

political interpretation” (Leslie 2000: 73). Benjamin makes no claim that his representation is historically accurate, he rather searches for the political implications of his memories such as they are. These political implications mainly lie in the “fissures and fractures” (Leslie 2000: 72) of the Berlin of his childhood, the destructive effects of accelerating capitalism. In this way, Benjamin’s project is comparable with Fisher’s attempts at locating the fissures within capitalist realism.

Like Irmgard’s densely typed text, *The Third Reel* allows no conclusive reading. Keeping this in mind, I will now return to Fisher’s writing and, using this as theoretical framework, provide a tentative political interpretation of the “rubble” of history as it is “torn” from its context and represented in *The Third Reel*. To do this, I will first return to the critique of the audience member at the February Lectures that in describing the 1980s as a time in which countercultural utopianism was still deemed possible, Viljoen is only describing the experience of privileged white people. Fisher is aware that his argument that the popular culture of the 1960s-1980s is characterised by modernist experimentation can be read as a nostalgia for this period: “another white boy whingeing over lost privileges” (Fisher 2014: loc. 430). He argues, however, that comparing the present to the past does not automatically equate to nostalgia (Fisher 2014: loc. 433). He uses Derrida’s term “hauntology”, a pun on “ontology”, to argue that the present is always, inevitably, impacted by the past and future (Fisher 2014: loc. 321). Derrida coined the term to reflect on the ways in which past visions of utopian futures still haunt the present, specifically the “spectres of Marx”. Fisher understands the “haunting” of these past visions of the future as “the agency of the virtual, with the spectre understood as [...] that which acts without physically existing” (Fisher 2014: loc. 334).

Therefore, Fisher argues, his observations about the ways in which popular culture of the 1960s-1980s haunts that of the 21st century is not nostalgia on his part, but rather, the agency of a “virtual trajectory” (the futures envisioned by utopian projects of the 1960s-1980s) that still has agency in the present (Fisher 2014: loc. 395). As mentioned earlier, some (perhaps the majority) of the contemporary reworkings of the popular culture of the past represent attempts to render them harmless to capitalism and, in fact, purchasable. Whatever the conscious intentions of the artists and industries creating these examples of retro pop culture,

they are, however, also impacted (“haunted”) by the agency of the virtual trajectories of the utopian projects of the recent past.

In this haunting, Fisher (2014: loc. 383) locates a fissure in the “closed horizons of capitalist realism”, the potential for “a refusal to adjust to what current conditions call ‘reality’” (2014: loc. 414). Fisher (2014: loc. 464) therefore argues that dwelling on the utopian projects of the past need not involve a resigned nostalgia, but can actually involve (in the Benjaminian terms that Fisher does not employ) a “political interpretation” that involves investigating the past for alternatives to capitalist realism. *The Third Reel*, in constituting a contemporary work of art focussed on the same types of utopian popular modernist projects Fisher investigates, can be considered such an investigation – an exploration of countercultural utopian projects of the recent past as possible alternatives to the present in which the radical aims of these projects (whether aesthetic experimentation, collective living or a refusal of hetero- or homonormative sexuality) seem outside the horizons of reality.

Conclusion

In S.J. Naudé’s *The Third Reel*, various countercultural utopian projects are represented: the attempts of brutalism and squatting to envision new living arrangements, as well as the formal experimentation of industrial music and experimental film. This formal experimentation Mark Fisher calls “popular modernism” and he considers it utopian because it is underpinned by “the modernist challenge of [creating] innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience” (Fisher 2014: loc. 238).

Using Walter Benjamin’s approach to history – tearing historical aspects of the past from where they are usually situated in linear interpretations of history and investigating their utopian potential – the utopian potential of these projects of popular modernism is explored in *The Third Reel*. In this way “historical continuity” is replaced with “political interpretation” (Leslie 2000: 7-73) and alternatives to what Fisher calls capitalist realism (the belief that there is no viable alternative to contemporary capitalism) are identified in the relatively recent past.

The limit to interpretations of history is, however, also a theme of *The Third Reel* and this acts as warning that this interpretation can only be partial. Other interpretations of the history represented in *The Third Reel* are possible. The significance, for example, of the representation of Etienne's caring for his mother and for Axel (also, his vegetable gardening) is not accounted for in this article. The ways in which these representations could either be linked with or be used to dispute with my argument, would make for fertile ground for further research.

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Bibi Burger

University of Pretoria

bibi.burger@up.ac.za