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“On the Very Edge of Fiction”: Risk, Representation, and the Subject of Contemporary Fiction in Ben Lerner’s *10:04*

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While it is generally unwise to judge a book by its cover, the US hardback edition of Ben Lerner’s 2014 novel *10:04* has a particularly interesting story to tell. The dust jacket consists of an aerial photograph of New York City, taken from a helicopter by the Dutch architectural photographer Iwan Baan on the night of October 31, 2012, two days after the storm surge from Hurricane Sandy wiped out electrical power across much of lower Manhattan.¹ The photograph is disconcerting, not only because of its subject matter (lower Manhattan plunged into almost total darkness in the aftermath of a devastating storm), but also because it has been reversed (the buildings on the banks of the West River standing in for their equivalents on the Hudson; a black and empty expanse of water where the Brooklyn Bridge should be; etc.). There is a doubled relationship at work here; the event depicted in the photograph is itself uncanny, the world’s most famous cityscape is made strange by being plunged into darkness, but at the same time, the reversal of the image on the cover of *10:04* compounds that estrangement and — crucially — does so at the level of visual representation. The familiar is rendered unfamiliar and the prospective reader struggles to make sense of the image. If the historical moment depicted in the photograph is uncanny in and of itself, the reversal of the photograph both heightens that sense of estrangement and changes its source by altering the relationship between the photographic representation and the thing being represented. No longer “merely” a photographic document of an historical event — and therefore a “straightforward” figurative representation — the photograph reversed becomes non-figurative and its representational capacities are transformed. As such, if what the cover image offers is a moment of cognitive estrangement for the prospective reader, it also offers a key with which she can unlock the novel’s meaning. While *10:04* does indeed end with a depiction of the events of Hurricane Sandy sometime around the time at which the photograph was taken, rendering it a figurative representation of the novel’s time and place, the cover image does more than merely suggest to the reader what the subject or setting of the novel might be; it also provides a representation of its cognitive framework, one in which, to paraphrase the novel’s epigraph, everything is as it is, just a little different.²

The photograph used on the cover of *10:04*, for example, is not just a more-or-less realist illustration of the novel’s temporal and spatial settings, or a key to the intellectual concerns of its contents, for it appears also as a described representational object within its pages. Five pages from the end of the novel, as the protagonist-narrator, a young author called Ben, and his close friend Alex return to Brooklyn from a storm-sieged Manhattan, he states, “It was getting cold. We saw a bright glow to the east among the dark towers of the Financial District, like the eye-shine of some animal. Later we would learn that it was Goldman Sachs, see

photographs in which one of the few illuminated buildings in the skyline was the investment banking firm, an image I'd use for the cover of my book — not the one I was contracted to write about fraudulence, but the one I've written in its place for you, to you, on the very edge of fiction.”³ There is a great deal of work taking place in this late passage from Lerner's novel: it exemplifies the novel's consistent referencing of real-world visual cultural objects; the description of Baan's photograph anchors the novel's action to the real-world time and place that serve as its setting; and the mention of the photograph's use as the cover image of the book, and the direct address to the reader, suggest the novel's metafictional qualities, and begin to conclude its considerations of lived experience under millennial conditions. As both a paratextual object and the subject of ekphrastic representation, Baan's photograph says much about the complex work that *10:04* performs as it charts the relationships between literary and visual representation, between memory and perception, and between risk and catastrophe — all as they are represented through the thoughts and actions of the novel's young male narrator-protagonist.

In these representations, Lerner's novel suggests that contemporary writers have cast off some of the constraints of the by-now-traditional formal modes of postmodernism and have turned to reinvigorated — but no longer straightforward — modes of realism, informed but not constrained by postmodernism's distrust of realist narrative representation. Of the recent return to realism evident in contemporary American fiction, Madhu Dubey suggests, “given that the material conditions that gave rise to postmodernism still pertain and, if anything, have intensified, the problem that postmodernism posed for the social novel — the challenge of mapping a new form of social totality — cannot be solved on formal grounds, by reviving narrative realism.”⁴ As this essay will show, *10:04* has taken this problem as one of its central concerns and, as such, is exemplary of a recent cycle of novels that attempt to wed postmodern formal considerations to a reinvigorated sense of the value of realism as a mode of literary representation.⁵ This relationship has produced novel-length fictional narratives that seek to maintain the formal complexity of high postmodernism, but with the aim of invigorating — rather than critiquing — the capacity of literature to act as a conduit for communication between writer and reader. For Mitchum Huehls, there has arisen under neoliberalism “a body of contemporary fiction that deploys post-structural concepts to innovate new, more experimental literary forms, all while refusing to turn those concepts against the fictional texts themselves.”⁶ He calls this deployment an “unreal realism...that contribute[s] to the composition rather than the deconstruction of the world.”⁷ Such novels, he suggests, “self-consciously consider and reveal [their] own conditions of possibility.”⁸ Or, as Huehls puts it elsewhere, “contemporary fiction writers are increasingly rejecting critique in favor of a post-normative, post-critical politics.”⁹ And this is certainly the case for *10:04*, a novel that is profoundly concerned with questions of representation and the capacity of literature not only to represent the real world, but also to forge lines of communication between subjects. Highly aware of its own fictionality, *10:04* nevertheless insists that meaningful communication between author and reader is possible.¹⁰

In this essay I argue that, in its descriptions of the workings of a system rendered all but invisible — and therefore all but indescribable — by the high-tech informational technologies that enable it, Lerner's novel makes visible the social and technological structures of contemporary neoliberalism while also charting the increasingly tight interconnections between the risk cultures of contemporary finance capital, the era of global terrorism and of the

superstorm, and contemporary forms of citizenship and subjectivity. Disparate though these various facts of contemporary life may seem, they are all connected in their positioning of the subject in a position of precarity or potential threat. Bad weather, global terrorism, and finance are all risks to be borne by the contemporary subject.¹¹ As such, they thematize one of the core components of neoliberalism, which — as Mark Fisher has suggested — requires that the subject “develop a capacity to respond to unforeseen events [and] to live in conditions of total instability, or ‘precarity’” (34). For Fisher, as for others, this precarity is felt most acutely in relationship to time. As he suggests, “the old disciplinary segmentation of time is breaking down. The carceral regime of discipline is being eroded by the technologies of control, with their systems of perpetual consumption and continuous development” (23). Under what Fisher calls the “increased cybernetization of the working environment” (33), the subject is unable to “synthesize time into any coherent narrative” (24). Or, as Richard Sennett has it, “the militarization of social time is coming apart” (24). For many, this “coming apart” structures much of contemporary life. As Benjamin Kunkel puts it in *Utopia or Bust*, “global capitalism or neoliberalism under US hegemony...has inflicted economic insecurity and ecological anxiety on the young in particular” (19). Attending to these conditions, I argue, *10:04* produces a narrative of the present that foregrounds the powerful matrix of risk, fear, and insecurity that have come to dominate much contemporary lived experience in the United States, and of neoliberal subject formation more generally.

In David Harvey’s formulation, “neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (2). Speaking on the relationship between citizenship and the state, Eva Cherniavsky suggests, “neoliberalism [is] a specific resolution to the duplicity of the modern nation-state, constituted in the double imperative to advance the public good and to secure private property in its myriad and proliferating forms. Neoliberalism abdicates the former imperative in favor of the latter, and in so doing frees the state from the compulsion to realize a national-popular interest that it can claim to uphold” (17). Neoliberalism’s greatest trick has been its ability to cast that abdication as a form of common good in which any individual’s failure to capitalize on it is precisely that: individual. “It has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory,” Harvey observes, “to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstruction of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally, but most particularly in the main financial centres of global capitalism” (119). Or, as he puts it in *The Enigma of Capital*, neoliberalism “refers to a class project that coalesced in the crisis of the 1970s. Masked by a lot of rhetoric about individual freedom, liberty, personal responsibility and the virtues of privatization, the free market and free trade, it legitimized draconian policies designed to restore and consolidate capitalist class power” (10). Furthermore, Harvey points out, “Redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistent feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project” (16).

If, as Harvey explains, “the neoliberal project is to disembed capital from [social and political] constraints” (11), one of the primary means through which that disembedding has taken place is through the recasting of the individual as a thoroughly financialized subject, on the

one hand, and the absolute normalization of neoliberalism's dominant discursive modes. For Harvey, "neoliberalism has... become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (3). The neoliberal subject is produced through a process of internalization in which, as Peter Fleming has it, "character," "personality," and "emotional infrastructure" became the means by which "everyday people act like capitalist enterprises in most facets of their lives" (5). For Randy Martin, moreover, "how individuals come to think about themselves, take stock of how they are doing and what they have accomplished, and how they know themselves to be moving forward through the measured paces of finance, yields a particular subjectivity" (9). As such, and as Harvey suggests, "neoliberalization has meant, in short, the financialization of everything" (33). In what follows, then, I read Lerner's novel as an examination of the pressure placed on the subject (and in this case particularly the male subject) under neoliberal conditions. Narrated in the first person, *10:04* uses the representational techniques (the tropes, forms, and structural conventions) of contemporary realist fiction; of thinly veiled autobiography, or autofiction; and of metafiction to make sense of the sorts of neoliberal social, capital, and political formations that I have outlined. *10:04*, I argue, is a millennial novel.¹² It is, in other words, an exemplary work of neoliberal realism, highly attuned to the postmodern formal concerns of the previous era but heavily invested in literature's capacity to represent contemporary lived experience.

"Some Impossible Mirror": Ekphrastic Representation

"The relationship between representation and reality under capitalism has always been problematic." David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*

If the cover photograph, as discussed, is exemplary of Lerner's treatment of visual culture in *10:04*, it is by no means unique. Visual representation is a vital aspect of the novel's meaning-making apparatus. Including Baan's photograph, the novel contains 13 different illustrations, ranging from paintings and photographs to film stills and postage stamps. Each of these illustrations serves to supplement or to develop an idea made in the novel, and, like Baan's photograph, many of them are also described objects in the narrative. Moreover, in addition to these illustrations and the attendant descriptions of them in the text, *10:04* contains many other references to the visual arts that are central to its meaning-making apparatus. A rough count yields references to over thirty discrete works of art, visual objects, or named artists in the novel's pages — ranging from Jules Bastien-Lepage and Donald Judd to Pablo Picasso and Jeff Koons; from Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* to Carl Theodor Dryer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* — a number of which get sustained and repeated attention in its pages. At the same time, the novel contains references to a wide range of poets and novelists — Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, William Bronk, Franz Kafka, John Keats, Geoffrey O'Brien, and Walt Whitman, to name but a few. *10:04* is saturated with cultural intertexts and derives a great deal of its meaning from the description, analysis, and critique of them; epistemological knowledge is derived from engagement with visual and literary culture — and this is the case both for the novel's characters and for its readers. At the same time, knowledge is also a question of ontological engagement, and the novel is concerned with the relationship between representation and being.

One early example illustrates the interconnected relationship between the novel's ontological and epistemological registers. In it, Lerner compares French artist Jules Bastien-Lepage's oil painting *Joan of Arc* (1879) to the Hollywood blockbuster *Back to the Future* (1985). Both painting and film are significant cultural touchstones in the novel and appear within it repeatedly; as such, they reward sustained attention.¹³ The first reference is to Bastien-Lepage's painting. Describing a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with his friend Alex, the narrator states, "that day we were standing before Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc* — Alex looks a little like this version of her — and she said, apropos of nothing: 'I'm thirty-six and single.'"¹⁴ At this point, the painting is already performing important work. It provides a location and a focal point for the reader, who can place the characters before the painting in the museum, a real-world location. As such, it suggests not only the real world outside of the fictional world of the novel, but also a cultural milieu into which the characters can be placed. "We often visited [the Met] weekday afternoons," the narrator tells the reader, "since Alex was unemployed and I, a writer."¹⁵ But the painting also substitutes for narrative description. The reader can find a copy of the painting on the Internet (for example) and see who "Alex looks a little like." As such, the painting explicitly stands in for narrative description. This use of Bastien-Lepage's painting is doubly significant because the narrator repeatedly states his refusal to describe faces. Therefore, the painting performs representational work that the narrator (and, by extension, the author) refuses or rejects. It is a real-world intertextual supplement performing a task that literary narrative is deemed inadequate to execute.

But the painting is also used to set up one of the novel's primary concerns: the relationship between visual representation, human perception, and ontological being. After this opening description of the painting, the narrator describes a conversation the friends have while standing in front of the painting, in which Alex tells him that she wishes to have a child and proposes that he become a sperm donor for her. What follows next, however, is not further detail of that conversation (or any sense of the narrator's response to this request), but a paragraph-length description of Bastien-Lepage's painting. Because of its complexity, and its importance both to the novel and to my understanding of it, I will provide it in full:

Three translucent angels hover in the top left of the painting. They have just summoned Joan, who has been working at a loom in her parents' garden, to rescue France. One angel holds her head in her hands. Joan *appears* to stagger toward the viewer, reaching her left arm out, *maybe* for support, in the swoon of being called. Instead of grasping branches or leaves, her hand, which is carefully positioned in the sight line of one of the other angels, *seems* to dissolve. The museum placard says that Bastien-Lepage was attacked for his failure to reconcile the ethereality of the angels with the realism of the future saint's body, but that "failure" is what makes it one of my favorite paintings. It's *as if* the tension between the metaphysical and physical worlds, between two orders of temporality, produces a glitch in the pictorial matrix; the background swallows her fingers. Standing there that afternoon with Alex, I was reminded of the photograph Marty carries in *Back to the Future*, crucial movie of my youth: as Marty's time-travelling disrupts the prehistory of his family, he and his siblings begin to fade from the snapshot. Only here it's a presence, not an absence, that eats away at her hand: she's *being pulled into the future*.¹⁶

This is a rich and complex paragraph, but it can be divided into three clearly-distinguishable epistemological registers: a straightforward description of the painting ("her hand... is

carefully positioned in the sight line of one of the other angels”); an analysis of it by the narrator (“it’s *as if* the tension between the metaphysical and physical worlds, between two orders of temporality, produces a glitch in the pictorial matrix”); and, finally, a comparison of it to another visual cultural artifact (“I was reminded of the photograph Marty carries in *Back to the Future*”). This progression from comprehension, to analysis, to comparative analysis is both commonplace and part and parcel of epistemological understanding, but it is important to observe just how much even the seemingly straightforward description offered here is already an interpretive act. As they do throughout the novel, interpretive phrases such as “appears,” “seems,” “as if,” and “maybe” dominate. *10:04* is a novel about the relationship between how things seem and how they are. But even this observation is complicated further by the fact that the paragraph offers at least three different interpretive registers: that of the narrator-protagonist, that of the museum (via the description of the informational placard), and that of the painter’s contemporaries (again, via the placard). These three different registers locate interpretation both in time (then and now) and in space (real and fictional).

One hundred and sixty pages after this first description, the novel returns to its analysis of the interrelationship between *Joan of Arc* and *Back to the Future*, this time in the form of a long free-verse poem, composed while the protagonist is resident at the Chinati Foundation, a real-life writer’s and artist’s retreat in Marfa, Texas. Quoted piecemeal throughout the novel’s fourth section, which depicts the narrator’s residency at Chinati, the poem re-describes much of its narrative content and returns to many of its key intellectual questions.

While the description of the painting given in the poem closely resembles the one provided in prose at the start of the novel and discussed in this text, it is not precisely the same, and the differences between the two are highly significant. The poem chooses not to name the film, as it does in the first description, and makes new claims about the relationship between representation and the medium. For example, in the poem’s description of Joan’s hand, which was described in the first instance as ‘dissolving’ and “produc[ing] a glitch in the pictorial matrix,” the loss of straightforward representational realism denotes a shift from epistemological to ontological meaning, thereby developing and refining the earlier interpretation:

But from our perspective it’s precisely
where the hand ceases to signify a hand
and is paint, no longer appears to be warm
or capable, that it reaches the material
present, becomes realer than sculpture because
tentative: she is surfacing too quickly.¹⁷

No longer “warm or capable,” the hand has shifted from a realist representation of the human body to the representation of another order of materiality. The “glitch in the pictorial matrix” produces a temporal shift into the “material present” in which meaning shifts from an epistemological to an ontological understanding of subjectivity. What is emphasized is not the thing being depicted (a human body) but the medium (paint). This is a temporal shift produced by a failure of genre. What fails the painting is its realism and, for both Bastien-Lepage’s contemporaries and the narrator looking at the painting over 100 years later, realism is not a fixed condition, but a historically contingent set of genre conventions.

As it does throughout the novel, the materiality of the specific medium gains significance as the representational capacities of genre wane. As Bastien-Lepage's contemporaries bemoan his inability to stick to generic conventions — to reconcile the spiritual with the actual — the narrator of the novel applauds the painting's materiality. This waning or confusion of genre specificity is evident in the description of the painting given in the poem, in which the first-person speaker states “her hand, / in what for me is the crucial passage, partially / dissolves.”¹⁸ The description of the painting in the poem describes it as if it were a piece of prose: paintings do not have “passages,” but novels do. Moreover, this second description of *Joan of Arc* and *Back to the Future* operates recursively. Because it is offered towards the close of the novel, it exists not only as a repetition of the previous description, but also in light of all that comes in between. The full meaning and significance of the first instance becomes clear following the second, and only in hindsight.

The novel's descriptions and interpretations of objects of visual representation are supplemented with illustrations that perform equally important work. Immediately following the first description of Bastien-Lepage's painting discussed above, for example, the novel's first two illustrations appear: one, captioned “the presence of the future,” is a detail of Joan of Arc's hand from the painting; the other, captioned “the absence of the future,” is a still from *Back to the Future* (although not, interestingly, of the photograph described in the text, but of Marty watching as his hand loses its corporeal, material solidity).¹⁹ Because they follow directly from the novel's narrative description of the painting and of the film, these illustrations provide the reader with visual evidence of the claims that the narrator is making about them and ground the discussion of them in the real world. As such, they are exemplary; they prove the veracity of the claims that the narrator is making about them. But these illustrations are also evidentiary of the narrator's claims about time and of the world outside the novel in which those claims are being made; they are, in this regard, illustrative and referential. They speak to the world of the novel and the world of the reader; they are a bridge between the fictional and the real worlds, but they also call into question the capacity of literature to represent the world of the real. Like every single image included in the pages of *10:04*, they speak most clearly to the subject of representation and perception. While the novel itself suggests the necessity for new forms of narrative representation to suit current conditions, the illustrations included in its pages further trouble the relationship between representation, perception, and the world, and suggest the problematic status of literary narrative under millennial conditions.

“A Kind of Palimpsestic Plagiarism:” Fraudulent Authority

“Most of my youth went by during the end of history, which has itself now come to an end.”
Benjamin Kunkel, *Utopia or Bust*

Just as *10:04* uses ekphrastic representation and the inclusion of illustrations to negotiate the relationship between ontological and epistemological registers of subjectivity and to interrogate the representational capacities of literary and visual genres alike, it also devotes considerable attention to questions of fraudulence and authority. Examples of plagiarism and of the willful ignoring of “facts” abound and are essential to the novel's representation of culture under millennial conditions. The novel understands various registers of representation — visual, literary, political — to be profoundly interconnected, such that questions of authorship are disturbed by

the saturation of information that has become a signal feature of contemporary lived experience. That saturation is evident in *10:04* in a number of ways, but occurs most clearly in the novel's representation of facts that have long been known, but have been commonly disavowed, and in its discussion of real-world examples of plagiarism and fraudulence. It is also a key component of the precarious relationship between protagonist and author that troubles the novel.

The clearest and most sustained example of the novel's engagement with the precarious status of facts in the real world is that of the brontosaurus. In an early subsection of the novel, which follows immediately on from the prose description of Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc* already discussed, the narrator describes an after-school project about the brontosaurus that he is working on with Roberto, a young Hispanic student at a Brooklyn elementary school where the narrator's friend teaches. The brontosaurus, the narrator informs the reader, is a dinosaur that never existed. As such, it is one of a number of examples from the novel (the former planet Pluto being another) in which 'facts' from the narrator's childhood are revealed to have been false. Of the brontosaurus, the narrator states, "in the nineteenth century a paleontologist put the skull of a camarasaurus on an apatosaurus skeleton and believed he'd discovered a new species, so that one of the two iconic dinosaurs of my youth [the other presumably being the tyrannosaurus rex] turns out not to have existed, a revision that, along with the demotion of Pluto from planet to plutoid, retrospectively struck hard at my childhood worldview, my remembered sense of both galactic space and geological time."²⁰

This unmooring of facts from their evidentiary base is a consistent feature of the novel and illustrates its representation of millennial subjectivity battered by an overabundance of information, on the one hand, and the loss of a previous sense of certainty, on the other. As any and all information becomes seemingly just a Google search away, the narrator begins to lose a firm sense of the solidity of being that, as I will discuss shortly, is related to questions of corporeal determinacy. The brontosaurus dinosaur is a fake, created by the comingling of the fossilized remains of two different species, thereby raising questions about the status both of factual evidence and of expertise. The brontosaurus exists because of an error created by an expert who, in his haste to best a rival, misread the geological evidence available to him. However, there is a further relationship being highlighted here in which the revelation that purported "facts" turn out to have been anything but is set against the all-but-willful refusal of many to "remember" that shift in status. As the narrator points out in the pages of Roberto's report on the event, which is entitled "To the Future" and is included towards the end of the novel, while scientists discovered the fact that the brontosaurus was a "fake" in 1903, "most people didn't know about their new discovery [and] thought that the brontosaurus still existed because museums kept using the name on their labels — and because the brontosaurus was really, really popular!" So popular, in fact, that the United States Postal Service went so far as to produce a brontosaurus stamp in 1989.²¹ As such, the narrator positions the continued existence of the brontosaurus as a lie perpetuated by experts (in the form of museum labels), the public (who love them), and the government (who perpetuate the purported lie of their existence on releases) alike. As this example makes clear, facts in *10:04* are shown to be contingent, open to interpretation, and — in the era of Google — under a constant process of revision.²²

In a further example of the rejection of known factual information, the narrator repeatedly refers to pigeons as "stout-bodied passerines" before confessing later on that "I just Googled pigeon and learned that they aren't true passerines" but are *Columbidae*, the name by which he refers to them on subsequent occasions.²³ As with the example of the brontosaurus, the awkward phrase

“stout-bodied passerine” is insisted upon even after the narrator learns of his taxonomical error, thereby rendering the truth subordinate to other competing imperatives. Moreover, this insistence on using the incorrect term emphasizes the ambiguous genre status of the novel itself. While the narrator uses the correct name after admitting to his Google search, he does not go back and revise the earlier pages of the manuscript upon making the discovery. Further, because the fictional novel that the narrator is writing is also the actual novel that the reader is holding in her hands, the narrator’s refusal to correct the error is also a decision made by the novelist that has the effect of highlighting the troubled relationship between facts and fiction. As the fictional first-person narrator does not revise his fictional manuscript to correct an error, the actual author places that decision on display; the novel becomes a novel about the writing of a novel, thereby placing it in an unusual temporality — a perpetual state of becoming. As such, the conscious misnaming of pigeons in the novel constitutes a further example of Lerner’s desire not to call into question the status of facts per se but to interrogate how — and to what effect — we reorganize the world, and to underscore the tenuous hold fictional narrative has on representation, in which all that can be accurately represented is the act of representation itself.

The novel’s engagement with the cultural relevance of facts and with the representational capacities of literature are brought together in an extended discussion of the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster of 1986 (the year after the release of *Back to the Future*), in which the topic of literary plagiarism comes to the fore. As with the example of *Joan of Arc* and *Back to the Future* that has just been analyzed, the novel’s discussion of the *Challenger* disaster takes place in an extended fashion in two different sections of the novel, and to similar effect. Five pages after the illustrations from the painting and film are provided, and immediately following the discussion of the brontosaurus, the first example occurs. In it, the narrator describes walking down a deserted hallway in Roberto’s school and experiencing the sensation of being transported in memory back to his own time as a young student. In the description of his elementary school classroom that follows, the narrator references the disastrous *Challenger* space shuttle mission of 1986 when he highlights the “letters addressed to Christa McAuliffe in exaggerated cursive, wishing her luck on the *Challenger* mission, which was only a couple of months in the future.”²⁴ Nothing else is said about the *Challenger* mission in the narrative at this point, or about the disaster that struck moments after liftoff. As such, it exists in the narrative merely as an example at this stage, a possible foreshadowing of a disaster to come, and its relationship to the subject matter of the novel is not clear.

However, the next paragraph of the novel consists of an unattributed excerpt, given in italics, from Ronald Reagan’s speech to the nation on the evening of January 28, 1986, the day of the disaster: “*And I want to say something to the schoolchildren of America who were watching the live coverage of the shuttle’s takeoff. I know it is hard to understand, but sometimes painful things like this happen. It’s all part of the process of exploration and discovery. It’s all part of taking a chance and expanding man’s horizons. The future doesn’t belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave. The Challenger crew was pulling us into the future, and we’ll continue to follow them.*”²⁵ While the quote is provided without context or attribution, included at this point is the novel’s third illustration, which bisects the paragraph: a photograph of Christa McAuliffe in training, captioned “*pulling us into the future.*”²⁶ While the link is not made explicit at this point, a direct relationship is being produced here between McAuliffe and Joan of Arc. The direct quote from Reagan’s speech that is used for this caption also is the source for the earlier claim that the protagonist makes about Bastien-

Lepage's Joan, who is described by the narrator as being "pulled into the future."²⁷ The *Challenger* disaster and Reagan's address are foundational to the understanding being developed in the novel of the relationship between history, memory, and representation, but it is significant that the reader is not provided at this stage with either the source of the quote from Reagan's speech or a fuller context for the inclusion of the photograph of McAuliffe. Unless the reader recognizes these words as lines from Reagan's speech from a context or source outside of the novel, it is not yet available to her as a quote, and she does not have the fuller context through which to interpret or understand either quote or photograph. Likewise, the photograph of McAuliffe serves merely as a visual reminder of the time-space being described, offering a set of visual markers to time and place (hairstyle, spacesuit, and shuttle interior), with no reference made to McAuliffe's own imminent future. That direct link is not provided until Lerner returns to the subject of the *Challenger* disaster some 100 pages later, and the various interrelations that Lerner is developing are fully developed.

In a speech that the narrator gives at Columbia University, he describes "the fiction about the origins of [his] writing," which he dates to hearing Reagan's televised speech in 1986. "Like most Americans who were alive at that time," the narrator begins, "I have a clear memory of watching the space shuttle *Challenger* disintegrate seventy-three seconds into flight." He then goes on to recall to his audience the general excitement about the *Challenger* mission, and then asks for a show of hands to see who in the audience remembers "watching the *Challenger* disaster live."²⁸ After the majority of the people in the room raise their hands, he goes on to explain that, while the shuttle's launch was broadcast live on a number of channels (including the nascent CNN) and shown in a number of school classrooms, all of the major networks cut away from live broadcast before disaster struck and that what people remember as the witnessing of an event unfolding "live" on television was actually in most cases a misremembering of something that they actually saw on replay, either minutes or hours later. What many people did watch live on television, the narrator points out, was Reagan's address to the nation broadcast live later that evening.

This engagement with the relationship of memory to event is evidence of one of the novel's key concerns: the shifting status of events in an era of live television broadcasting. As the narrator puts it, the *Challenger* disaster is "consistently noted as the dawning of our era of live disasters and simulcast wars: O.J. Simpson fleeing in the white Bronco, the towers collapsing, etc."²⁹ That so many of his peers remember, as he does, watching the events unfold live in front of their eyes, suggests a profound transformation in the status of witnessing. Not only are events "witnessed" on television rather than live, but they are also remembered retrospectively. "Unless you were watching CNN or were in one of the special classrooms," the narrator points out, "you didn't witness it in the present tense," but are the unwitting holder of what he refers to slightly later as the "false memory of a moving image."³⁰ In an era of live broadcasting (that might be anything but), the narrator suggests, memory is prone to temporal collapse. As such, the truth of an event is contingent and open to revision, not only in the face of the fallibility of memory but also in the transformed nature of the event itself, which no longer exists (if it ever did) in an unmediated status. Such questions of origin and authenticity also pertain to the speech's literary and linguistic qualities, which are shown to be equally powerful but just as tenuous.

In the subsequent discussion of Reagan's televised address to the nation that was broadcast that evening, the narrator devotes a great deal of attention, not only to the nature of subjective experience in an age of televised disasters, but also to the subject of plagiarism, which is a significant topic in the novel. It is the partial subject matter of "The Golden Vanity," the original

short story from which the full-length novel was developed, and of the novel the protagonist has been contracted to write.³¹ While the narrator suggests that this original subject gets dropped along the way, it is a strong theme throughout the novel. For example, it is a significant subject in the narrator's discussion of Reagan's address to the nation, which serves as his entry point into the possibilities of poetry as a literary genre. As the narrator puts it, "The speech was only four minutes long. And the ending — one of the most famous conclusions of any presidential speech — entered my body as much as my mind: *We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for the journey and waved goodbye and 'slipped the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God'*."³² The narrator describes the effect of this bodily experience in the same terms with which he describes earlier both McAuliffe and Joan of Arc: "the sentence pulled me into the future" and awoke a sense of the capacity of "poetic language to integrate a terrible event and its image back into a framework of meaning."³³

But the conclusion to the speech that so affects the narrator's younger self is not only an example of the power of poetry, but also an example of plagiarism. As the narrator explains, the final lines of the speech — "*'slipped the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God'*" — are neither Reagan's nor those of speechwriter Peggy Noonan, but are taken from a famous poem, "High Flight," written by John Gillespie Magee, a young American pilot who served in the Canadian Air Force during World War II and was killed in a mid-air collision shortly after writing the poem. For the narrator, that Magee's poem was used in Reagan's speech "showed poetry's power to circulate among bodies and temporalities, to transcend the contingencies of its authorship."³⁴ What comes to interest the protagonist most, however, is the fact that Magee's poem is heavily plagiarized from multiple other sources. That the poem turns out to be fraudulent is "beautiful" and "a kind of palimpsestic plagiarism that moves through bodies and time" circulating in the world untethered from any "single origin."³⁵ In this rendering, authorship becomes an obsolete category in which the power of poetic language itself is primary. The facts of any given poem's authorship are irrelevant in a world in which all information exists in a perpetual mode of revision and erasure. As such, authority — whether in the form of a speech that includes unattributed lines from an already plagiarized poem, of an event witnessed out of time, or of a Wikipedia entry with multiple anonymous authors — is placed under erasure in an era of contingency.

"Money Was a Kind of Poetry": Millennial Perceptions

"Weather is no longer a natural fact so much as a political-economic effect." Mark Fisher,
Capitalist Realism

If the novel's engagement with visual forms of cultural representation, such as Baan's photograph and Bastien-Lepage's painting, stage an encounter between cultural artifacts and the referential world, it also signals one of the novel's other major preoccupations: the transformation of human perception and modes of cultural representation under millennial conditions. Throughout the novel, focal events such as superstorms and medical crises reveal the organizing structures of the neoliberal world as they render the perceived world as "*just a little different*" and human perception is transformed. One of the novel's primary engagements is with the question of what forms of culture are best able to represent contemporary conditions. Much is made in the novel of the ways in which contemporary lived experience requires new ways of seeing and representing the world. Mid-way through

the novel's opening section, for example, the narrator describes the experience of shopping for emergency supplies at an upscale Brooklyn grocery store on the eve of Hurricane Irene. After describing the ways in which the coming storm appears to have produced a "common conversation" between all of the residents of the city, the narrator goes on to describe how the approaching storm made him "viscerally aware of both the miracle and insanity of the mundane economy."³⁶ Holding in his hand a jar of instant coffee he has just picked up from the now-almost-empty grocery store shelves, he states, "It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow within it as they were threatened, stirred inside their packaging, lending it a certain aura — the majesty and murderous stupidity of that organization of time and space and fuel and labor becoming visible in the commodity itself now that planes were grounded and the highways were starting to close."³⁷ Such descriptions abound in the novel and the relationship between limit events and human perception is absolutely central to it. What becomes "visible in the commodity itself" here are the social relations that are typically — and necessarily — hidden behind the surface structures of commodity exchange.

This relationship also is manifest in the novel's engagement with the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, which — like the superstorm — is represented in the novel as a limit event. For example, in the passage described earlier, in which the narrator describes the scene of lower Manhattan plunged into darkness by the post-Hurricane Sandy power failure, a direct link is made between superstorm and terrorist attack: "A cab surprised us as we turned onto Park Place, the felt absence of the twin towers now difficult to distinguish from the invisible buildings. I had the sensation that if power were suddenly restored, the towers would be there, swaying a little."³⁸ Likewise, one hundred pages earlier, the narrator describes the "present absence of the towers" he feels while looking across the East River towards Manhattan from a bench in Brooklyn Bridge Park.³⁹ In each of these instances, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center inhabit a position in which their absence exists as a felt presence. The "invisible buildings" of the first example render the Twin Towers "visible" by altering what is called elsewhere in the novel the "pictorial matrix";⁴⁰ the loss of electricity makes the fallen towers visible by rendering the surviving buildings in the skyline invisible, thereby producing a perceptual commensurability between them. The anticipation of the coming storm transforms the narrator's perspective on the world, in one example; the effects of the passing storm transform the skyline of lower Manhattan, in the other. In both cases, presence is produced by absence — either real or imagined — and perception is understood in relation not only to the subjective body, but also to ontological being. As with the example of Joan of Arc's hand, the material presence of objects in the world is manifest as a felt experience by the subjects moving through it.

Such ontological modes of perception are cited repeatedly in the novel as central facts of modern urban living in which the interconnections between advanced capital accumulation and the modes of perpetual and instantaneous contact enabled by contemporary communication technologies have altered the relationship of the subject to the world. As the narrator looks out over Manhattan from Brooklyn and describes the "thrill" he always experiences when he sees the city from afar, he claims, "It was a thrill that only built space produced in me, never the natural world, and only when there was an incommensurability of scale — the human dimension of the windows tiny from such distance combining but not dissolving into the larger architecture of the skyline that was the expression, the material

signature, of a collective person who didn't exist yet, a still-uninhabited second-person plural to whom all the arts, even in their most intimate registers, were nevertheless addressed."⁴¹ This sense of the city as a location that collapses the boundaries between the inside and the outside, between ontological and epistemological modes of being, is mirrored in an earlier description of the transformations produced in the city and its residents by the approach of Hurricane Irene. As the narrator states:

From a million media, most of them handheld, awareness of the storm seeped into the city, entering the architecture and the stout-bodied passerines, inflecting traffic patterns and the "improved sycamores," so called because they're hybridized for urban living. I mean the city was becoming one organism, constituting itself in relation to a threat viewable from space, an aerial sea monster with a single eye around which tentacular rain bands swirled. There were myriad apps to track it, Doppler color-coded to indicate the intensity of precipitation, the same technology they'd utilized to measure the velocity of blood flowing through my arteries.⁴²

In this passage, the novel's preoccupation with questions of millennial subjectivity are clearly visible. As modern technologies provide new knowledge of the body, they also transform its relationship to the external world, thereby collapsing such distinctions. Not only do modern technologies make visible the approaching storm, they also collapse the perceptual differences between the body and the world by rendering commensurate rain and blood. The similarities between the technologies that render the human body known in new ways also alter the subject's relationship to the larger patterns of the weather — what is manifest here is a difference in degree not in kind, a scalar transformation that collapses the distinction between the inside and the outside, the self and the environment, the self and the body.

This collapse is negotiated most fully in the novel's examination of contemporary culture's capacity to represent the present. As the millennial subject navigates a world transformed across all scales, new pressures are placed on the modes and genres of artistic and cultural expression through which such changes might be represented. In one such example, the narrator's sometimes girlfriend, Alena, who is an artist, cuts a deal with a major insurance company to stage an exhibition of damaged art that has been removed from the market because it has deemed beyond repair (or because the cost of restoration would be prohibitive), and which has become the property of the insurance company following settlement.⁴³ As the first visitor to the "Institute for Totaled Art," the narrator is struck by the ways in which a photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson, "had transitioned from being a repository of immense financial value to being declared of zero value without undergoing what was to me any perceptible material transformation — it was the same only totally different."⁴⁴ This transformation has nothing to do with art, per se, and everything to do with commerce. The narrator describes how, while it is common to encounter "material things that seemed to have taken on a kind of magical power as a result of a monetizable signature [...] it was incredibly rare [...] to encounter an object liberated from that logic."⁴⁵ He continues, "I felt a fullness indistinguishable from being emptied as I held a work from which the exchange value had been abstracted, an object that was otherwise unchanged."⁴⁶ As with the jar of instant coffee described earlier (and mentioned here also in relation to this abstraction of exchange value — "I remembered the jar of instant coffee the night of the storm"), what is transformed is human perception.⁴⁷ Nothing perceptible has changed in

the inherent qualities of the photograph, but its relationship to other objects, to the market, and therefore to the human subject, has been transformed.

As the link between the transformed art object and the jar of instant coffee makes clear, the subject of artistic representation is frequently tied to the risk and insecurity of millennial conditions in the novel. Alena's own art, for example, consists of the creation of paintings that she has "deftly aged" making them "appear like painting[s] from the past."⁴⁸ This process not only destabilizes temporal logics, it also produces a direct relationship between art and catastrophe. As the narrator states, while some of Alena's paintings "appeared compellingly unchanged, others seemed as if they'd been recovered from the rubble of MOMA after an attack or had been defrosted from a future ice age."⁴⁹ As elsewhere, acts of terrorism and "natural disasters" are linked through the subject of artistic representation and human perception. Likewise, the art on display in the Institute for Totaled Art evokes the relationship between art and catastrophe, and imagines a temporal shift in which it becomes the ideal representational form of a weather-related dystopic near future. "So many of the paintings had sustained water damage," the narrator states, "that I felt as though I'd been transported into a not-so-distant future where New York was largely submerged, where you could look down from an unkempt High Line and see these paintings floating down Tenth Avenue."⁵⁰ Later in the novel, the narrator states that, while in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy "scores of Chelsea galleries had been inundated and soon the insurers would be welcoming the newly totaled art into their vast warehouses" (230), "Alena's work wasn't on a ground floor, I remembered; besides, she strategically damaged her paintings in advance; they were storm-proof."⁵¹ By "storm-proof[ing]" her paintings, Alena places them in a different relationship to the logics of the market than those described above: already intentionally and perceptibly damaged, they are isolated from risk. Alena's weathered paintings are both representations of the ontological insecurities incurred by risk and, in their status as objects of commodity exchange, isolated from it. Already "damaged," they are insulated from the effects of further damage. As such, they are exemplary art objects for the millennial conditions of risk and insecurity that the novel describes.

Existing on the "very edge of fiction," *10:04* is both an attempt to think about what modes and genres of culture can best reflect the lived experience of the early years of the new millennium and an example of them. The novel uses its multiple references to other works of literature, to painting, to photography, and to cinema, as a way of working through the capacity of art to produce knowledge, on the one hand, and to situate the thinking subject in the world, on the other. In an era of profound anxiety, the novel suggests, culture is vital not only because it offers a retreat from the world, but also because it affords the subject the opportunity to think about the world. If, in Fredric Jameson's well-known formulations, modernism was "a kind of cancelled realism" and postmodernism the "cultural logic of late capitalism," novels such as *10:04* suggest a new cultural logic is beginning to take hold, one in which the extraordinary complexities of the neoliberal global financial order require the formal tools of postmodernism.⁵² These tools are deployed, however, not to point out the futility of attempting to represent the real, but in order to allow an in-any-way-realistic fictional account of contemporary conditions. If, to quote from *Back to the Future*, the novel's favorite intertext, "where we're going, we don't need roads," we will certainly (*10:04* makes clear) need a culture attuned not only to its own representational limits, but also to those of a world transformed in both scale and time by the informational and

communicational technologies that make contemporary neoliberal forms of global finance capital possible.

Notes

¹ Ben Lerner, *10:04* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014). The photograph was also used as the cover of *New York* magazine's commemorative issue. <https://nymag.com/nymag/letters/hurricane-sandy-editors-letter-2012-11/>.

² The epigraph, parts of which are also cited repeatedly in the novel's narrative, where it is attributed to Walter Benjamin, contains the line "everything will be as it is now, just a little different." See, for example, 19, 21, 25, 133, and 156. It is significant, moreover, that the possible readings of the photograph that I discuss here become available only if the reader recognizes that the reversal has taken place (for it is something that can be easily missed by the casual viewer). Which begs the question — and it is one that the novel repeatedly asks — has anyone noticed?

³ Lerner, *10:04*, 236–237.

⁴ Madhu Dubey, "Post-Postmodern Realism?" *Twentieth Century Literature* 57:3–4 (Fall/Winter 2011): 369.

⁵ Further examples of the cycle include Teju Cole, *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2011); Teddy Wayne, *Kapitoil* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010); Joshua Ferris, *The Unnamed* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010); John Haskell, *American Purgatorio* (New York, Picador, 2009); Benjamin Kunkel, *Indecision* (New York: Random House, 2005).

⁶ Mitchum Huehls, "The Post-Theory Theory Novel," *Contemporary Literature* 56:2 (Summer 2015): 283.

⁷ Huehls, "The Post-Theory Theory Novel," 283.

⁸ Huehls, "The Post-Theory Theory Novel," 285.

⁹ Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Literature in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford and New York: 2016), 10.

¹⁰ For more on what has been called the post-postmodern turn in contemporary US fiction, see Jeffrey Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). See also the two special issues of *Twentieth Century Literature*: Andrew Hoberek, "Introduction: After Postmodernism," *Twentieth Century Literature* 53:3 (Fall 2007): 233–47; and Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden, "Introduction: Postmodernism, Then," *Twentieth Century Literature* 57:3–4 (Fall/Winter 2011): 291–308.

¹¹ Peter Fleming, likewise, makes the connection when he points out the frequency with which the financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the resulting global recession were likened in the media to a tsunami. He goes on to suggest that the two actual tsunamis that bookend the crisis, in 2004 and 2011, grounded the metaphor with real-life and up-close footage recorded on mobile phones and other handheld devices (1).

¹² I use the term millennial here not to name a generation, but to produce a rough periodization. While the conditions described in Lerner's novel can be traced back, as the leading theorists of neoliberalism do, to the 1970s, the post-9/11 decade — which has been marked by crises of various sorts — has produced particular cultural forms, of which *10:04* is a key example.

¹³ It is from *Back to the Future* that the novel gets its title; 10:04 is the time displayed on the stopped clock in the clock tower that Marty uses to return to the present in Zemeckis' film, a clip of which is included in Christian Marclay's art installation *The Clock* (2010), which is discussed in the film (50–4, 141).

¹⁴ Lerner, *10:04*, 8.

¹⁵ Lerner, *10:04*, 7.

¹⁶ Lerner, *10:04*, 9. My emphasis.

¹⁷ Lerner, *10:04*, 176.

¹⁸ Lerner, *10:04*, 175.

¹⁹ Lerner, *10:04*, 10.

²⁰ Lerner, *10:04*, 11.

²¹ Lerner, *10:04*, 227.

²² In a further development that would seem to prove the point, a scientific paper published in 2015, the same year as Lerner's novel, argues for the accuracy of the name brontosaurus. See Charles Choi, "The *Brontosaurus* Is Back," *Scientific American* April 7, 2015. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-brontosaurus-is-back1/>.

²³ Lerner, *10:04*, 17, 94, 213, 234.

²⁴ Lerner, *10:04*, 15.

²⁵ Lerner, *10:04*, 15–16.

²⁶ Lerner, *10:04*, 16.

²⁷ Lerner, *10:04*, 9.

²⁸ Lerner, *10:04*, 110.

²⁹ Lerner, *10:04*, 110.

³⁰ Lerner, *10:04*, 111, 115.

³¹ “The Golden Vanity” was published originally in the *New Yorker* (June 18, 2012) and is included complete and largely unaltered as the second section of the novel. The single difference between the two versions is not textual but visual: it is the inclusion in the novel of a photograph of the surface of Mars, which resembles a human face, and which is used to illustrate the condition *pareidolia*, a phenomenon where “the brain arranges random stimuli into a significant image or sound” (69). The photograph is described in the text as “one of those standard textbook images used to illustrate” the phenomenon (69). While these words appear in the short story, the photograph does not.

³² Lerner, *10:04*, 112.

³³ Lerner, *10:04*, 111.

³⁴ Lerner, *10:04*, 113.

³⁵ Lerner, *10:04*, 114.

³⁶ Lerner, *10:04*, 17, 19.

³⁷ Lerner, *10:04*, 19.

³⁸ Lerner, *10:04*, 237.

³⁹ Lerner, *10:04*, 108.

⁴⁰ Lerner, *10:04*, 9.

⁴¹ Lerner, *10:04*, 108.

⁴² Lerner, *10:04*, 17.

⁴³ Like much else in the novel that is drawn from real-world sources, the Institute for Totaled Art is modeled on a real-world corollary, the Salvage Art Institute set up by the Polish-born artist Elka Krajewska. Lerner discusses the SAI in “Damage Control: The Modern Art World’s Tyranny of Price,” in *Harper’s Magazine* (December 2013). The discussion of the SAI is clearly the source for much of the description of the narrator’s response to its fictional counterpart, which replicates some of its language. The article also contains the quote from Walter Benjamin that Lerner uses as the epigraph to *10:04* (see n2). See also <http://salvageartinstitute.org/>.

⁴⁴ Lerner, *10:04*, 133.

⁴⁵ Lerner, *10:04*, 133.

⁴⁶ Lerner, *10:04*, 133–134.

⁴⁷ Lerner, *10:04*, 133.

⁴⁸ Lerner, *10:04*, 27.

⁴⁹ Lerner, *10:04*, 27. The plot of Donna Tartt’s novel *The Goldfinch* also turns on a fictional terrorist attack at an art gallery (the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York). For more on the relationship between art and terror see my “‘Anticipating the Fall’: Art, Memory, and Historical Reclamation in Colum McCann’s, ‘Let the Great World Spin,’” in *9/11: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*, ed. Catherine Morley, *Bloomsbury Academic* (2016) and “September 11 as Heist,” *Journal of American Studies*, 44:4 (November 2011).

⁵⁰ Lerner, *10:04*, 132.

⁵¹ Lerner, *10:04*, 230.

⁵² Fredric Jameson, “Culture and Finance Capital.” *Critical Inquiry* 24:1 (Autumn 1997): 261.