“Surviving Globalization”: Experiment and World-Historical Imagination in Rana Dasgupta’s Solo

Sharae Deckard

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Abstract:
This essay investigates Rana Dasgupta’s Solo as an exemplar of world-mapping fiction which takes the system of global capitalism as its horizon. I argue that Solo invites “world-literary” criticism informed by world-systems and world-ecology perspectives because its operative totality is world-history rather than the nation and its aesthetics self-consciously take up the formal problem of representation of global scales. The essay considers experimental writing in the context of structural narrative innovations, demonstrating how Solo’s diptych structure renovates the forms of the historical novel and the Zeitroman in order to represent the rise and fall of successive cycles of accumulation in the world-ecology. I contend that the text’s answer to Dasgupta’s question of how to “survive globalization” is to manifest a counter-history of capitalist modernity that restores history to the neoliberal present, from the perspective of countries in the former Soviet and Ottoman empires. I conclude by exploring how the generic divide between the realist and oneiric halves of the novel negotiates the problem of futurity, attempting to conjure a totalizing retrospect by “dreaming” the future.

Keywords: Rana Dasgupta, Solo, Tokyo Cancelled, world-literary criticism, world-systems, world-ecology, world-historical novel, neoliberalism, post-Soviet Europe
“Though the two objects did by no means completely correspond, yet this impartial inadequacy but served to tinge the similitude not less with the vividness than the disorder of a dream.” Herman Melville, *The Tartarus of Maids* (86)

“I ask to be read twice, in parts and as a whole.” Robert Musil (cited in Spice 19)

“I tell you: no one is writing the real novels of our age. ... Writers have a lot of work to do.” Rana Dasgupta, *Solo* (315)

In his seminal essay on the global commodification of magical realism, Michael Denning argues that “like ‘world music,’ the ‘world novel’ is a category to be distrusted; if it genuinely points to the transformed geography of the novel, it is also a marketing device that flattens distinct regional and linguistic traditions into a single cosmopolitan ‘world beat,’ with magical realism serving as the aesthetic of globalization, often as empty and contrived a signifier as the modernism and socialist realism it supplanted” (Denning 51). Fittingly, Rana Dasgupta’s *Solo*, a 21st-century novel which experiments with literary form in the attempt to narrate a world-historical account of the global expansion of capitalism, also explicitly incorporates a plotline exploring the appropriation of rural traditions of Bulgarian folk music for the mass manufacture of “world music” as a synecdoche for the cultural and economic forms of globalization accelerating after the integration of postcommunist economies into free market capitalism.

In contrast to the homogenized “world novels” which Denning identifies as products of cultural globalization, this essay will investigate *Solo* as an exemplar of fiction whose world-mapping takes the system of global capitalism as its horizon. I argue that *Solo* invites “world-literary” criticism because its “operative totality”
(Tutek) is world-history rather than the nation, and because its experimental aesthetics take up the formal problem of representation of global scales, while remaining critically conscious of the problems of commodification and autonomy concomitant with the production of any global artwork. I derive the term "world-literary" from recent criticism which reads "literature of the capitalist world-system" through an aggregate of world-systems and world-ecological methods. Similarly, I use the term "world-historical novel" to designate fictions which represent different phases of the capitalist world-system’s evolution. This is not to suggest, of course, that such novels programmatically reproduce the categories of world-systems theory, but rather, that their imagination of time and space on a world-scale and their aesthetic mediation of the sensoriums corresponding to the dialectic of world power and world accumulation can be productively interpreted through such categories.

This essay will demonstrate how the novel’s diptych structure reinvents the form of the world-historical novel and the Zeitroman to negotiate different scales of time and space, while representing the ecological revolutions underlying the rise and fall of successive cycles of accumulation in the world-ecology. It examines the significance of the novel’s setting in post-Soviet Europe, arguing that text’s answer to the question of how to “survive globalization,” as Dasgupta poses it in one of his essays, is to manifest a counter-history of capitalist modernity that restores history to the neoliberal present, from the perspective of countries subjected to neoliberal peripheralization. It concludes by exploring how the generic divide between the two halves of the novel wrestles with the problem of futurity and historicity, attempting to conjure a totalizing retrospect by switching from a realist to an oneiric mode that ‘dreams’ the future. I will begin by framing the trajectory of Dasgupta’s own conceptualization of experimentation and globalization, arguing that each of his books seeks a new form through which to imagine and represent the geoculture corresponding to global capitalism.

I. Experiment and Geocultural Imagination
Although Solo was awarded the Commonwealth Literature prize, Dasgupta’s writing does not fit neatly into postcolonial frameworks. Born in the U.K., he worked as a marketing consultant before moving to Delhi to become a writer, reversing the diasporic trajectory of writers such as Rushdie. A prolific essayist and interviewee, he openly theorizes his own aesthetics and politics. Dasgupta describes his first book, Tokyo Cancelled, as searching for a form that could encompass the imagined community not only of the nation, but of the globe, thus representing the “culture of globalization” that corresponds to the “mechanical infrastructure of globalization” (Colbert). This literary experiment in registering what Immanuel Wallerstein calls “geoculture” (93) is motivated by Dasgupta’s conviction of a contemporary struggle to conceive of capitalism as a totality of relations: “We [inhabit] this integrated economic and political system, which we [are] unable to imagine as an entity. We [are] unable to imagine how all its parts and all its peoples might co-exist” (Colbert).

In his essay “Surviving Globalization,” Dasgupta explores this crisis of imagination at length. He criticizes neoliberal teleology for presenting the total integration of the market as the end of historical change: “When the twentieth century began, there was history. Capitalists and Socialists alike believed that time unfolded with moral purpose, leading human society through periodic crises into inevitable improvement. By the end of the same century, there was globalization” (“Surviving”). For Dasgupta, neoliberal capitalism appears as a “vast and violent system that tolerate[s] no alternatives,” and he argues that only an “earnest attempt to grasp the realities of the global condition” can break the sense of paralysis surrounding the “vastly expanded field of globalization” (“Surviving”). He poses literary world-mapping as a political and aesthetic project, integral not only to the comprehension of globalization, but to the imagination of an alternative system of the world which might replace it. This project demands not only “new systems of thought that would accept the planet as a single intellectual horizon,” but also cultural innovations: “new art forms and new sensibilities to outdo the scale and dynamism of economics, and to make the global market seem comprehensible and quaint” (“Surviving”). Elsewhere, he argues that literary imagination of the world,
both as it is, and as it could be, demands experimental aesthetics which risk the “fear of failure” (Colbert).

As Timothy Brennan suggests, form and aesthetics are not matters of mere ornamentation, but rather enable the work of thinking itself: “Truth has a form. [...] In the Hegelian sense...truth is an active exchange, the ‘making’ of a concept adequate to its object. [...] The material basis of society is brought into view by the conceptual, in a process of intellectual synthesis that is the work of the writing itself” (80). The problems of conceptualizing the material basis of global capitalism and of conceiving its alternative are intimately linked to the making of forms through which to express these concepts. As Richard Lea puts it, “For Dasgupta, finding the form that will suit his subject is the fundamental creative effort in his writing” (Lea). However, the aesthetics of Dasgupta’s novels do not evoke the “qualities of shock and affront, iconoclasm and difficulty,” which are frequently associated with experimental writing (Bray, Gibbons and McHale 1). They are dedicated not so much to innovation, as renovation of literary form, novelistic experiments conducted in a spirit of imaginative renewal. This variety of experimentalism is characterized by structural rather than linguistic innovation, and could be said to be quasi-scientific, in the sense that it is dedicated to extending the boundaries of knowledge and artistic praxis by rejecting ossified forms of old traditions and values (Bray, Gibbons and McHale 1).

Before turning to close analysis of Solo, I will explore the evolution of Dasgupta’s form, contrasting the ways in his first and second novels negotiate the particular challenges of temporal and planetary scale which representation of the capitalist world-system poses for fiction. Dasgupta’s first novel, Tokyo Cancelled (2005), adapts the narrative structure of the story-cycle into a “novel-in-parts,” a form intended to capture totality-in-motion. In Tokyo, as I have argued elsewhere, settings across an array of world cities enable the aesthetic registration of uneven global development, representing the local impacts of abstract economic processes as ecogothic transformations (Deckard 177). John Friedmann’s “The World City Hypothesis” (Figure 1) argues that world city formation offers a useful model through which to map the geographical striation that characterizes spatialized
production in the world-system. Major centers for the concentration of wealth, world cities clearly dramatize spatial and class polarization between cores and peripheries. Headquarters of transnational corporations and political superstructures are concentrated in core cities, while production is outsourced to related semi-peripheries.

Figure 1: John Friedmann’s “The World City Hypothesis,” (Friedmann 71).

In his most recent book, Capital, Dasgupta has suggested that the world cities of industrializing powers such as India and China, with their characteristic polarities of wealth, uneven infrastructures, and sense of vertiginous acceleration, capture 21st-century modernity more vividly than the metropoles of slowing economies in North America, Western Europe, and Japan. This is consonant with arguments from world-systems theorists that the rise of East Asian capital heralds a world-historical “recentring of the capitalist world system and a realignment of global power relations away from a Western-centred world towards a multipolar capitalism” (Parisot 1161-2). Tokyo’s multi-nodal structure provides a formal compromise to the problems of geographical scale and totality, using the world city formation to intimate the contours of the changing world-system through a focus on multiple centers of power. The challenge of temporal scale—that of representing simultaneous processes across multiple locations—is negotiated by containing the frame narration
within a single night, each of travelers “paused” within the airport by an blizzard. Their tales are confined within the contemporaneous, even as the times of the individual stories contract and expand as necessary to their individual plotlines.

However, the form of Dasgupta’s second novel, Solo (2009), moving between primary settings in Bulgaria, Georgia, Germany, and the U.S., inverts this approach to global space-time, emphasizing the longue durée over the contemporary. Instead of concentrating on the contemporary globalized world, Dasgupta’s second novel extends its temporal scope backwards, excavating the long 20th-century in search of the origins of the present. Written during the American bombing of Baghdad, the novel is world-historical in thrust, motivated by Dasgupta’s frustrated attempt to generate a counter-history of capitalist modernity that repudiates the American and British imperial perspective that “the 20th century was a great time, all the right people won, and things just got better and better, and people made more money, they became more mobile, technology got better, life got better” (Colbert). Solo’s focus on post-Soviet Europe is strategic to this oppositional history of modernity, since as Neil Lazarus describes, “the full implications of the fact that liberation from ‘actually existing’ socialism has been liberation into the world-system of ‘actually existing’ capitalism are now having to be confronted” (Lazarus 121). In Solo, the incorporation of the post-Soviet countries into a deeply uneven world market, prone to contraction and dominated by American hegemony, is not narrated as a triumphal completion of capitalist liberal democracy. Instead, it is portrayed as a breaking apart and diminution of lifeworlds, as the social provisions and benefits of the post-Soviet states are stripped away and their populaces laid bare to structural unemployment. For the disabled protagonist of Solo, the postcommunist transition literally poses the question of how to “survive” globalization.

If Tokyo’s formal solution to the problem of imagining the global condition is to map the present, Solo’s is to map the trajectory of how the neoliberal present came into being, an act of anamnesis that seeks to make a repressed history reappear. The novel’s formal approach retains the principle of the whole-in-parts, but rather than a series of thirteen fragments, it takes the structure of a diptych, splitting into parallel halves. The “First Movement: ‘Life’” employs free indirect discourse to unspool the
memories of Ulrich, a blind, centenarian chemist living alone in an apartment block in postcommunist Sofia. Ulrich shares his unusual Germanic name with the main character of Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*, set in 1913 Vienna, a modernist *Zeitroman* reflecting the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Like Musil’s ambivalent protagonist, who feels lacking in consistency, Ulrich is a man with “no instinct for politics,” alienated from his time, unable to “tell what kind of world he was in” (162). Bulgaria’s 20th-century was characterized by historical turbulence and accelerated social transitions, undergoing the breakup of the Ottoman empire, the violence of two world wars in which it was occupied by both sides, a fascist coup, an abortive nationalist movement, a Communist takeover, and finally, swift neoliberalization. Having endured every phase of this tumultuous history, Ulrich feels deprived of lasting social unities through which to orient himself, unable to comprehend or articulate his reality.

Dense in detail and exposition, epic in historical sweep yet restrained in tone, the style of the first movement corresponds to Ulrich’s description of his consciousness as “concussed” (7). It aims to replicate the tone of Eastern European writers such as Musil, whose experience of peripheral modernity is registered in a register of speech described by Dasgupta as “lacking in self-mockery,” suffused with ideological urgency and “an unironic conviction” in the experimental capacity of novel form (Lea). As Nicholas Spice observes, Musil composed *Man* in the dark interregnum between the world wars as an attempt to restore critical historicity to an unthinking age: “It has always been a contemporary novel developed out of the past,” [Musil] wrote; and “if I should be reproached with going in for too much reflection, then ... today there is too little reflection’” (Spice 19). As such, *Man* could be considered a modernist literary antecedent to *Solo’s* own political commitment to world-historical imagination as a route to understanding the present.

In its first movement, *Solo’s* narration shares Musil’s narrative tendency towards logical concision rather than affect, contouring Ulrich’s scientistic consciousness in rational, precise language, which becomes sensuous only when describing his creative excitement at scientific discovery. The text is interpolated by the itemized lists Ulrich makes “to give him a sense that he is in command of his
experiences,” to “feel that he is real” (41). These lists attempt to reassemble the fragments of his staggered memory, to re-tell the dis-membered history of a nation in the throes of periodic crisis. Names of historical corporations, empires, banks, scientists, and politicians pepper his items: Ulrich meets Einstein, is in awe of the IG Farben chemical cartel, survives the purges of Georgi Dimitrov. Yet he remains apolitical, unable or unwilling to intercede in the course of events, even after his best friend, Boris, a socialist, is assassinated during the fascist coup, and his mother incarcerated in a Soviet labor camp for dissidents. Instead, he withdraws into the traumatized solipsism of the survivor. Ulrich seems confined to the observer role characteristic of the historical novel, the unheroic protagonist whose subjective experience combines the formal interlocking of historical and existential registers (Anderson 9). The political content of the novel is focalized through the commitments of his relations, rather than his own. His actions do not catalyze change as do those of the historical individuals glimpsed on the margins of the plot. Instead, he stands as witness to the “tragic collision between historically distinct times and characteristic social forms—what Block would…call Ungleichzeitigkeit” (Anderson 4).

Yet the second half of the novel, “Second Movement: ‘Daydreams,’” diverges sharply from this model, taking place entirely in Ulrich’s lucid dream-world, as he sits alone in his decrepit apartment. His elaborate daydreams rework motifs and events from his own life into a melancholy fable of Bulgaria and Georgia’s postcommunist transition. Having lost his son to America in his real life, Ulrich constructs a dream-future for his imagined son—named Boris for the dead friend of his youth—in which Boris moves to New York and becomes a virtuosic violinist and star of the world music scene. The register in the second movement is lyrically-heightened and permeated by fabulist episodes, in contrast to the dry, matter-of-fact register of the first, and narrative restraint is supplanted by a pace more reminiscent of a thriller in the sections describing the rise of Georgian oligarchs and mafiosos. Where Tokyo’s formal compromise with temporality entailed a bifurcation of genres between the realist frame narrative and the travelers’ gothic tales, Solo’s division of genre in the diptych follows the logic of inverse similitude, exchanging the quasi-historical realism of the first movement for the fabulist dream-world of the second.
This bifurcated structure mirrors the historical rift between pre- and post-Communist modernity, visualizing the seemingly unreality and weightlessness of the neoliberal present, while also dividing its content between a focus on science in the first movement and a focus on art in the second, a formal meditation on the fragmentation of knowledge in capitalist modernity. It reinvents the world-historical novel by grafting it together with an irrealist Zeitroman, the backward gaze of historical fiction conjoined with the forward-peering tale of the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism. As I will demonstrate in the next section, Solo follows systemic cycles of accumulation from fixed points in space, revealing the social configurations underpinning the rise of hegemonic complexes, and the ways in which the socio-ecological relations of what Jason W. Moore calls the “capitalist world-ecology” are locally embodied and experienced.

II. World-History as World-Ecology

Moore offers a “unified theory of capital accumulation and the production of nature” (126) that builds on Giovanni Arrighi’s theorization of the correlation between systemic cycles of expanding and contracting capital accumulation and the axes of geopolitical rivalry and inter-capitalist competition. Arrighi argues that successive complexes of hegemonic state-capital emerge through and are sustained by organizational revolutions that propel material expansion and provide a competitive edge in economic and politico-military power through the innovation of new forms of business organization, world leadership, technology, and social structure (Arrighi 1). He identifies four systemic cycles of accumulation over the longue durée of capitalism, named after hegemonic state-capitalist alliances: Iberian-Genoese, Dutch, British, and American (Arrighi 5-6; see Figure 2). The beginning of each new cycle, which Arrighi designates as ‘spring,’ is characterized by new phases of material expansion and rising returns to capital in the ‘real’ economy. Once material expansions encounter new competitors from outside the hegemonic center, profit-making opportunities within the productive circuit (M-C-M+) begin to falter. As the cycle enters ‘autumn,’ capitalists respond to declining profit by reallocating capital
from production to finance (M-M+), inaugurating financial expansions. When the capacity of hegemonic centers to sustain their level of accumulation declines, their power erodes, and emerging rivals replace them in the next long century.

Figure 2. Giovanni Arrighi’s “Long Centuries and Systemic Cycles of Accumulation” (220).

Moore’s insight is that the world-economy should be understood as also a world-ecology, constituted not only through the periodic remaking of class and power relations, but through the remaking of nature/society relations:

World hegemonies did not merely organize resource and food regimes; the hegemonies of historical capitalism were socio-ecological projects. Dutch hegemony emerged through a world-ecological revolution that stretched from Canada to the spice islands of Southeast Asia; British hegemony, through the coal/steampower and plantation revolutions; American hegemony, through oil frontiers and the industrialization of agriculture it enabled (Moore 125).

Systemic cycles of accumulation are founded in organizational revolutions not only of social relations, but of bundles of human and biophysical natures, which Moore
calls ecological regimes. These regimes are dependent on the dialectic of plunder and productivity: the appropriation of nature’s ‘free’ gifts and their transmutation through labor into surplus value. When the commodity frontiers of each successive ecological regime are exhausted and no longer able to produce ecological surpluses, then the conditions of accumulation falter, and ecological revolutions occur. These revolutions comprise “creative responses” to cyclical crisis which produce new technologies and locate new frontiers for appropriation, while intensifying existing extraction. However, each revolution only resolves the exhaustion of the previous regime by reconfiguring its contradictions on a larger scale. Moore suggests that the neoliberal regime which began in the 1970s now faces an epochal crisis of productivity, as the ever-deeper financialization of nature produces diminishing returns.

Solo’s historical perspective could be argued to be world-ecological, in that it focuses less on changing political superstructures that on the productivity revolutions that enable accumulation. It maps the history of the world-system as world-ecology, revealing social projects as ecological projects. The first movement’s sections are named after elements—Magnesium, Carbon, Radium, Barium, and Uranium—whose numbers on the periodic table correspond to Ulrich’s age in different periods, but also offer a shorthand for different ecological revolutions. If, as David Cunningham has argued, the contemporary totalizing novel offers an epic of the system of capital itself (Cunningham 13), then Solo can be read as an epic tracing the constitution and reconstitution of the system through ecological revolutions. Thus, Ulrich’s recollections in the first section—“Magnesium”—commence with the age of steam and steel in the autumn of the long nineteenth century. During the long 19th-century, the “coal-steampower nexus,” together with the reorganization of British imperial and financial power, enabled a double revolution in labor productivity and appropriation of a new expanse of nature. Linked with capital and empire, coal and steam powered railways and machines to radically expand the frontiers of appropriation and thereby secure a radically augmented surplus of inexpensive food, energy, resources, and labor (Moore 128). As a rising competitor, the expansionist German state, backed by German finance, sought to exploit this
productivity revolution to acquire cheap surpluses to fuel its contest for hegemony with Britain. While a more conventional Anglophone novel might approach this period through the history of imperial Britain, the novel instead represents inter-state competition through its articulation in Bulgaria, a semi-peripheral zone which acts as a staging ground for the German pursuit of an alliance with the aging Ottoman Empire.

Ulrich describes Bulgaria’s annexation into the sphere of German cultural and economic influence as a kind of organic reconstitution of the urban environment; the city of Sofia is reconstructed in the image of Berlin, rising up out of a “swampy void” (10). Looking back on his childhood, Ulrich is perplexed by the rapidity through which animal forms of transportation are supplanted by the coal-steampower nexus: “After the centuries of coexistence, humans turned away from horses and embraced machines. But he does not remember seeing how the surplus of horses was carried off” (82). Ulrich’s father, a railway engineer for the new express line from Berlin to Baghdad, works for Philipp Holzmann, the contractor overseeing Deutsche Bank’s investments in the Ottoman Empire. In his utopian conception, the express is a “philosophical” harbinger of technological progress and global mastery: “in the ecstasy of his reverie, he hovered above the cartoon face of the planet, now wrapped in twin lines of steel, and given over, finally, to science and understanding” (10). The railway is a method of time-space compression, which far from a twentieth century invention, has been integral to capital from its origins, founded in the epistemic reconstitution of time as linear and space as flat (Moore 110). Ulrich’s father embodies the affective euphoria of creative destruction, the intoxicating innovation and expanded acquisition of knowledge which the great modernization project seems to promise. However, this worldly promise is twinned with inter-state competition for resource monopoly: the German attempt to access Iraqi oil, circumvent British territorial control of India and the Middle East and strengthen proximity to its African colonies. Ulrich’s father is devastated when the transcontinental line is blown up by the British during the Great War, plunged into anomie which blights his relations with his family and stands in for the traumatic erosion of Sofia’s cosmopolitan position in the former Ottoman empire.
The second section, “Carbon,” follows Ulrich’s training as a chemist in post-WWI Berlin. He is full of awe at what he presciently perceives to be a world-historical revolution in chemical engineering, part of the electricity-chemistry-internal combustion nexus: “German scientists made a philosophical leap that would change history. They rejected the idea that life is a unique and mystical essence, with different qualities from everything else in the universe. They reasoned instead that living things were only chemical machines, and they speculated that with enough research, chemical laboratories could emulate life itself. German scientists also wanted to see whether chemical laboratories could make materials that were usually found only in nature” (41). The ability to synthesize chemicals and manufacture fertilizers through nitrogen fixing seems to provide a technocratic solution to the problem of global agriculture in a “world…running out of natural nitrogen deposits” (42). It heralds the transition from the coal-steam nexus to “fossil capitalism” in the age of “cheap food” and “cheap energy”: a petro-modernity founded on petroleum-based industrial agriculture and manufacturing, and characterized by American hegemony. Just as the coal-steampower nexus shifted from horizontal appropriation to vertical mining of the coal seam, the production of synthetic rubber and fuel extends the vertical appropriation of nature, manipulating biophysical materials on the molecular level.

Like his namesake from Musil, Ulrich has no patience with mathematical theory, preferring the practical experiments of the laboratory, crying out to his lover, Clara Blum, “I want to make stuff…I didn’t come to study mathematics. I want to make plastic!” (47). He is transfixed by Staudinger’s discovery of polymers, which remakes the very idea of nature: “This new area of innovation transformed the human environment. Until that era, every human being had lived among the same surfaces: wood, stone, iron, paper, glass. Now there emerged a host of extraterrestrial substances that produced bodily sensations that no one had ever experienced before” (41-3). Ulrich’s intellectual delight powerfully captures the degree to which the transformation of nature is inextricable from transformation of the social, a simultaneous revolution in the human sensorium. If ecological revolutions are “creative responses” to the exhaustion of previous socio-ecological relations, then
cultural forms could be understood as integral to the creative process, necessary to
the stabilization of new subjectivities and to the very conception and imagination of
organizational revolutions.

Like his father before him, Ulrich is transfixed by the utopian prospects of a
new regime in nature-society, attuned to the sensuous creativity of the moment, but
blind to the violence which underlies it. The industrial production “of which Ulrich
wished to be a part” (43) not only entails an intensified subordination of nature’s
diversity and a proliferation of new commodity frontiers dependent on enormous
energy surpluses, but is dialectically related to inter-state competition. After the loss
of its empire in WWI, Germany is deprived of “access to essential raw materials,”
and struggles to compete with Britain, “which could take all the Malayan rubber it
wanted, and Middle Eastern oil”(42). The ‘creativity’ of German monopoly capital in
the advent of the WWII is fundamentally linked to the need to overcome territorial
barriers to appropriation and unleash new opportunities for accumulation:
“Germany’s chemical firms—BASF, Bayer, Agfa, Hoechst, Casella and the rest—
were consolidated into a vast chemical cartel, I.G. Farben, whose objective was to
produce chemical versions of these lacking natural resources”(42). Because his
philosophy of chemistry as creation remains detached from political or economic
value, Ulrich is unable to comprehend his friend Boris’s insistence on its geopolitical
consequences: “I said it was the science of life, and he said it brought only death.
Now I see that our views were simply two halves of the same thing” (111). The
fundamental reorganization of life enabled by the chemistry revolution
simultaneously creates the conditions for industrial genocide. The German chemical
cartels produce miraculous methods of transforming oil into food and plastic, but
they also manufacture weapons for the war machine. IG Farben produces Zyklon B
for the Nazi gas chambers; the Monowitz camp uses Jewish slave labor to produce
synthetic rubber and liquid fuels; prisoners are subjected to pharmaceutical
experiments by Bayer. If the synthetics revolution seems to herald a new lifeworld, it
delivers deathworlds via the unholy nexus of fascist ideology and capitalist
competition. When Ulrich is summoned home to Sofia on the eve of WWII, he leaves
behind his Jewish lover, an abandonment which haunts him for the rest of his life. A
scientist in her own right, Clara stands as signifier in the text of Ulrich’s flawed political comprehension and tragic failure to act, the trace of a dead future, a possibility foreclosed. His studies interrupted by Bulgaria’s occupation, Ulrich forsakes his chemistry degree and is forced into a life of bookkeeping.

The next sections, “Radium” and “Barium,” describe Bulgaria’s radical reorganization under Soviet Communism, as the semi-periphery is subordinated to a new core, Moscow, and the state is violently integrated into the centralized command economy, ruthlessly leap-frogging stages of modernization. If the previous chapter explored the coincidence of fascist political organization and scientific innovation in the course of capitalist competition between hegemonic complexes, these chapters interrogate the organizational revolution underpinning Soviet hegemony during the cold war era. The atomic regime undergirding Soviet industrial modernity was reliant on the appropriation of cheap uranium, fossil fuels, minerals, and industrialized food from the dominated territories incorporated into the Soviet empire (Josephson 2005, 5). While the Soviet production of nature distributed ecological surpluses according to socialist ideology, it shared with capitalist production an instrumentalist episteme of nature as a static source of inputs without limits or value until transformed by human technology. Competing for its survival against Euro-American capitalist cores, the U.S.S.R. strove for self-sufficiency, but remained enmeshed in the global accumulation regime of the capitalist world-ecology, vulnerable to crises of underproduction and overproduction. Driven by the pressure to ‘catch-up,’ Stalinist industrialization attempted to convert the whole of Soviet nature into a machine. Like the capitalist First World, which appropriated the cheap surpluses of its peripheries and transformed the Global South into a factory farm in order to sustain Fordist manufacture, the U.S.S.R.’s modernization relied on intensive extraction from its peripheries, reorganizing entire ecosystems in order to convert them to monocultural production within the centralized command economy.

In Solo, Party official Ilya Popov pontificates that industrial modernization will transcend the ‘backwardness’ of peasant culture: “It has been decided at the highest levels: Bulgaria will be the chemical engine of the socialist countries. We
have ore, we have rivers, we have land and good climate. We have workers who will
soon forget cattle and crude village dances and fill their minds with modern things’’
(93). Sofia is transformed by a “grind of great machines” (134), as forests are cleared,
“scientific housing” towers rise out of swamp, “white and repeating endlessly in the
sky” (134) and a new mode of “communal living” fundamentally changes the texture
of life (134). While Bulgarian folk culture is repressed, its factories are subjected to
Five Year Plans insistent on accelerated outputs, without acknowledging the human
and biophysical limits to production. Ulrich is caught up in the forced
industrialization of the chemical state, commanded to oversee a barium chloride
factory. He is horrified by the contradiction between his dream of the factory as a site
of meaningful experiment, where laborers might perform a “rhapsody of
chemicals…a scientific spectacle of mystery and delight” (143) and between the
absurd reality of a “fatal” (142) system of rationalization and bureaucratization. In
order to buy materials and increase efficiency to Moscow’s demands, the factory is
forced to sell black market exports to the capitalist west, forging its numbers to
maintain the fiction of ever-increasing productivity, even as its pollution accelerates.

In a lyrical passage, Ulrich bears witness to the imminent collapse of the
Soviet ecological regime as its commodity frontiers encounter irreversible limits to
appropriation, succumbing to irradiation, toxification, and biomagnification as
Bulgaria becomes a “chemical disaster”: “The rivers ran with mercury and lead and
hummed with radioactivity. Fishing had dried up on the Black Sea coast, and every
year more field and forests were lost. The Kremikovtzi steelworks and the Bykhovo
uranium mine flooded Sofia with lead, sulphur dioxide, hydrogen sulphide, ethanol
and mercury. […]Arsenic flowed straight into the Pirdopska River, and dead fish
piled up downstream in enormous stinking bunches” (159-160). Both human nature
and extra-human nature are marked by the fundamental crisis of nature/society:
“Nylon stockings melted on contact with the air. Bulgarian sheep had miscarriages
and died, and the cows went mad. Children were born with cancers and
deformities” (160). This crisis is not only biophysical, but constituted in human
subjectivity, so that Ulrich imagines his blood as embodying the chemical regime:
“Like all his compatriots, [he] had become chemical himself, his blood a solution of cadmium, lead, zinc, and copper” (160).

The conclusion of the first movement, “Uranium,” enters the age of Ekoglasnost. Confronted by mounting human and biophysical resistance, the Soviet regime ossifies and crumbles: “The old factories churned, but the shops were empty, and even a child could see that the eternal system was only propped up with contraband and rust” (159-60). After perestroika, far from achieving environmental reforms to remediate the crisis, Bulgaria is subjected to the application of neoliberal economic policies, unleashing a vertiginous period of financial speculation and accumulation by dispossession. Instead of the outsourcing experienced by post-Fordist capitalist cores in the neoliberal period, the semi-peripheral state experiences whole-sale dismantling of its heavy industries. As the formal economy is hollowed out, an informal economy burgeons with new frontiers in oil, narcotics, securitization, and human trafficking: “The United Nations cut off supplies to Milosevic’s Serbia, and gleeful thick-necked Bulgarian toughs stepped in to supply the food and oil, becoming billionaires overnight. […] Heroin poured in from Afghanistan. Criminal syndicates selected the best-looking Bulgarian girls to work in brothels in Dubai” (161). The “opening” of the economy unleashes a violent frenzy of privatization, while state institutions are asset-stripped by former party members and ex-security forces turned mafia: “It was amazing how fast the old order was swept away. […] They said, Now we are capitalist! But all Ulrich could see was criminality raised to a principle. Murderers and thieves took over and called themselves businessmen” (161).

At the global scale, instead of liberal democracy, the neoliberal transition brings a new round of inter-state competition for energy monopoly in Asia and Middle-east. Far from experiencing Bulgaria’s entry into a globalized world of mass commodity consumption as a euphoric release from Soviet austerity, Ulrich endures neoliberalization as a global proliferation of war, “The Americans bombed Baghdad, which his father had tried to link harmoniously to Europe with his Berlin-Baghdad railway line. People said, Now our country is open! But even if it had been possible for Ulrich to journey to the places of his life, they all seemed to be in flames” (161-2). His
own lifeworld contracts, plunging him into poverty and trapping him in a decaying
apartment block, unable to travel or work: “Ulrich’s life had become minimal. He
rarely left his tiny apartment and he had little to do” (164). Feeling as if the
“substance” of his days “has entirely escaped” (166), he is no longer able to measure
his existence by what he make, but only by his waste, an emblem of the
dematerialization of the wider economy: “He produced nothing at all. He spent
some time every day making lists of the things he threw out. He listed toothpaste
tubes, exhausted pens, and sachets of coffee, and he found there some signature of
his remaining significance” (164).

As Solo approaches the contemporary period of neoliberal capitalism, it
encounters a new representational challenge. Arrighi argues that in ‘autumn’ of
every systemic cycle, overemphasis on financial speculation rather than the
production of commodities in core hegemons leads to the collapse of the current
cycle and the rise of a new one, inaugurated through new forms of plunder in
peripheries. This coupling of the most abstracted form of fictitious capital with the
most extreme forms of violence presents a double challenge to representation, as
Dasgupta suggests: “[When] immense suffering and poverty combine with amazing
levels of financial accumulation, reality seems beyond our grasp; beyond our ability
to describe it” (Lea). Michael Niblett has argued that when socio-ecological unities
are destroyed in the course of ecological revolutions, the unified referents required
by “realist” representation disappear, and realist modes of literature are more likely
to be disrupted by “irrealist” aesthetics (Niblett 17-20). Accordingly, at the
conclusion of “Uranium,” Ulrich expresses an epistemological crisis, lamenting that
he is living in a “flimsier” (153) era, an “aftertimes, whose rules he did not
understand” (164), and wishing that he had not lived through so many transitions,
for “the human frame could not hold up if the world was destroyed too many times
and made again” (164). In response to the disintegration of his social reality, he
immerses himself in a conscious transformation of memory into dreams. In a cocoon
of blindness, his mind “generates its own material” (166), creating an edifice of
“private fictions” which sustain him “from one day to the next, even as the world
itself has become nonsense” (167). These are not merely escapist wish-fulfilments,
but rather a kind of lifework: “The greatest portion of his spirit might have been poured into this creation. But it is not a despairing conclusion. His daydreams were a life’s endeavour of sorts, and now, when everything else is cast off, they are still at hand” (168).

The strict realism of the first movement is supplanted by a more oneiric register in the second, a conjoining of genres which partially mirrors the conjoined sides of spilled blood and evanescent credit characteristic of the ascendancy of finance capital and the rush of primitive accumulation in the neoliberalization of the post-Soviet countries. Ulrich’s dream-life is an experiment in conjuring the proper form to narrate the seeming unreality unleashed by eastern Europe’s transition into capitalism, with its dizzying destruction of social formations and precipitous immiseration of populaces. The second movement charts the lives of Ulrich’s dream-characters, Boris the violinist, doomed poet Irakli, and hectic entrepreneur Khatuna, as they grow up and struggle to survive the entry of Bulgaria and Georgia into a globalized world. If the first movement emphasizes changing productivity revolutions and accumulation by organizing its chapters according to the periodic table, the titles of the second movement emphasize ecological crisis and exhaustion by employing a taxonomy of extinct and threatened marine animals: Beluga, Ichthyosaur, Dugong, Manatee (DeLoughry 59). These creatures imply an ambivalent analogy with the biophysical natures of the postcommunist countries, rapidly subsumed into and exhausted by the neoliberal regime.

Throughout the movement, Irakli’s experimental poetry assembles a catalogue of ecological degradation and neoliberal extraction. In the first movement of the novel, the text is dominated by Ulrich’s quasi-scientific list-making, replicating the bureaucratic rationalization of his life’s work as factory director. By contrast, the second movement is interpolated by poetry, the product of Irakli’s peculiar ideasthesia. Overly sensitive to both the horror and the euphoria of modernity, Irakli’s sensory perceptions trigger the activation of new concepts, making poetry out of sense-ideas. When he first hears Boris’s “gypsy” compositions, he senses the music as poetic exclamations that embody antic energy and charged political consciousness: “embark rebellious! [...] proclaim the tsunami klaxon!” (280). When he
listens to Boris playing Schnittke’s second violin sonata, the dissonances form anguished quatrains:

radium cholera bitumen patriot
albatross dessicate fungicide pyramid
chemical Africa national accident
multiply hurricane industry motivate (279)

These lines are sparse, yet evocative of the neoliberal regime as comprised of a series of ecological disasters: the chemical monocultures of industrialized agriculture dessicating the factory-farm of the Global South; the petrochemical dependencies producing climate volatility and ever-worsening natural disasters; the industrial accidents of transnational corporations in semi-peripheral manufacturing zones; the nuclearized competition of military-industrial complexes; the disease vectors spurred by privatization of water and global commons and exhaustion of local ecologies.

Irakli’s paratactic quatrains are reminiscent of the avant-garde L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets in North America, while also alluding to the spare diction of the radical modernist Bulgarian poet, Geo Milev. Terse modular units critically mirror the radical simplification of nature by financialization, which reduces all diversity to commensurability for exchange. The dehumanized list of nouns and verbs without subjects or pronouns creates an effect of radical depersonalization, while the use of corporate and bureaucratic jargon acts a shorthand for the neoliberal doctrine of privatization and rationalization, biopolitical surveillance and securitization, thus capturing the paradoxical double movement of increased regulation of citizens and deregulation of finance in the neoliberal state: “structural legalise radical standardize/terminal citizen management privacy” (278-9).

Stripped of connective syntax, the interconnections between each word are left to the reader to detect, an exercise in re-correlating the relations that constitute the world-ecology.

Irakli’s art could be understood as a experimental poetics of globalization whose ideasthesia circumvents reified abstractions, corollary to Boris’s music, which is described as embodying an “aesthetic attitude to globalization” (278), a prophetic
refusal suffused with an uncanny authenticity that unleashes “new kinds of desire” and awakens his audience to their alienated “absence” (279). After a childhood spent in an abandoned factory-town, developing his own musical style from a fusion of Romany, folk, and jazz music, Boris is discovered by a New York world beat music producer, Plastic Munari, and feverishly marketed into a fairytale overnight success in a global market hungry for exotic novelty. If Boris recalls the real-life Bulgarian folk choir, Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares, who achieved unexpected fame in the world music scene in the 1980s with their otherworldly antiphonies, then the fittingly-named Plastic, with his canny ability to “make his money from trends and cycles, predictions and futures,” acts as a hieroglyph for the neoliberal regime of information technology, digital networks, and new media driving the rapid assimilation and circulation of cultural commodities across the world-market. Boris struggles to maintain his artistic autonomy, refusing to participate in promotion, violating his contract by playing music for free, diverging from his packaging as an ‘exotic’ folk artist to invent industrial music with vacuum cleaners and factory sounds. An experimental musician, he is disinterested in profit, and resists the fetishization of purity of style, yet he is ineluctably drawn into the celebrity machine.

In his essay on “Surviving Globalization,” Dasgupta tartly describes cultural globalization as a “shrill jamboree and marketing and celebrity” reliant on the assimilation of peripheral cultures: “The energy of the arts – ‘world cinema,’ ‘world music,’ novels from the ‘periphery’ – was supplied by a frisson of distance: the euphoria of the strange and exotic” (Dasgupta “Surviving”). In Solo, the rapid commodification of Boris’s music—which seems to his bourgeois audience to offer something pure and thrillingly archaic in its distance from consumer society—sets up a parallel between the subsumption of immaterial cultural labor and the material plundering of nature in post-Soviet states. The novel stages the limits to autonomy for artists who are conscious of the culturally homogenizing dynamics of globalization, and critical of capitalist exploitation, yet who remain enmeshed within the commodity relations of the culture industry. It is only after Irakli commits suicide, driven by a despairing sense of exhaustion, that Boris decides to flee the industry and pursue “a new music” without pay (338). If Irakli embodies the tragedy
of the artist’s restricted autonomy, Boris is the hope of its partial transcendence, the survivor whose existence points to creativity beyond commodity relations. Through Irakli’s and Boris’s artistic challenges, the novel offers a metatextual commentary on the tension between its own aims to produce a world-historical critique of global capitalism, while being itself a “world novel” circulated as a commodity and subject to market pressures. In the final section, I will conclude by exploring the formal implications of the novel’s structural approach to historicity and futurity—this attempt to create the conditions of possibility for the imagination of a “beyond.”

III. Futurity, Retrospect, and the World-Historical Novel

Solo’s focus on an individual protagonist diverges from other recent world-historical novels which are more epic in scope and cast of characters. For example, Jorge Volpi’s Season of Ash manipulates characters to be present for every “newsworthy” event of the late twentieth century—from the Chernobyl disaster that opens the novel, to the Mexican debt crisis, to the fall of the Berlin Wall marking the rise of unipolar American hegemony. This wooden plotting produces a paralyzing sense of determinism even at the very moment it seeks to evoke history. The end of the cold war, the rise of American capital, the impotence of the Global South before the ravages of structural adjustment, all feel wholly inevitable, headed inexorably towards a timeless present, an end without end. The preponderance of famous Great Men, place-names, and dates emphasizes the making of history-from-above, preventing any narrative evocation of the concomitant presence of collectivities acting from below. By contrast, Solo is situated on the periphery of world-historical events, and refrains from maneuvering its protagonist through a repertoire of historical set-pieces. Dasgupta has written that Bulgaria is central to his counter-history of capitalist modernity, precisely because it is “one of those places which has taken the pummelling of the 20th century, the periphery which allows the centre to become,” a transistor zone for competing ideologies and empires (Crown). Rather than overdetermining the social sensorium of hegemonic cores, the novel offers Ulrich’s concerted life situation as a slantwise window into the larger totality of
capitalist modernity in which semi-peripheries are constituted through processes of peripheralization and chaotic transition essential to core accumulation.

According to Fredric Jameson, problems of determinism in the historical novel are related to temporality, since “no historicity can function properly without a dimension of futurity, however imaginary” (“Antinomies” 297). Where the reader might “normally stand in for the place of the future, as we peer into the various pasts offered by novels claiming to be historical” (Antinomies” 297), the contemporary novel confronts a temporal crisis rooted in the reader’s existential disjuncture from historical time, the difficulty of representing history in “an age that has forgotten to think historically” (Jameson “Postmodernism” ix). For Jameson, this crisis of historical imagination poses a formal conundrum for the modern historical novel: the problem of how to evoke a “totalizing retrospect” which can resurrect the present as history via the invention of a future. He argues that the “exaggerated inventions of fabulous and non-existent pasts” in magical realist fictions are formal inventions that “unsettle the emptiness of our temporal historicity, and try convulsively to reawaken the dormant existential sense of time by […] the electro-shock of repeated doses of the unreal and the unbelievable” (cited in Anderson 10). In his essay on globalization, Dasgupta similarly highlights a crisis in historical time arising in tandem with the total integration of the world-market: “Time no longer soared above all this. It had become only another commodity among many—and there was no more talk of “progress” (“Surviving”). In response, Solo offers its own experiment in the formal generation of totalizing retrospect by way of the unreal. Ulrich is buffeted by a history he cannot make sense of, which consistently thwarts his aspirations and constrains his actions. It is precisely because of his own sense of a crisis in historicity that he feels compelled to construct a dreamworld that improvises upon the material of his past in order to synthesize a future beyond his imprisoning present. This generic rupture in the second half of the text does not represent so much an end of history as an attempt to conjure a not-yet-real history which does not yield to imagination in the previous mode.

Despite yearning his entire life to “make stuff,” Ulrich is denied two creative vocations, first music, then chemistry, and consigned to a life of bureaucratic
managerialism. Yet, even as he is cut off from western scientific knowledge, he persists in the seemingly absurd endeavor of replicating the advances of petrochemical synthesis on his own, painstakingly producing the plastic for a pair of lumpen tortoiseshell sunglasses, rather than buying cheap, mass-manufactured versions. These home experiments prove tragic, when he is blinded by an explosion of sulphuric acid, rendering him “useless” in the neoliberal economy (164). Ulrich’s compulsive desire for productive artisanal labor and first-hand knowledge gained through experiment poignantly highlights the systematic dematerialization and deindustrialization of the Bulgarian economy by contrast. Paradoxically, while his preference for practical experimentation is shrouded in a lack of understanding of how scientific innovations can be bound up with oppressive configurations of accumulation and power, it could nonetheless be conceived not as apolitical, but rather as foregrounding an alternative politics of value. As a “failed” professional scientist, Ulrich is not interested in innovation for the sake of career advancement or the production of intellectual patents. He fundamentally rejects the conception of experiment for the sake of exchange value or the parceling of knowledge into alienable commodities. His labor to make odd plastic facsimiles is an exercise in autonomy which rematerializes the human in the sphere of production, recalling Jameson’s observation that science can operate in fiction as the image of “the true non-alienated labor as which art was once seen” (“Antinomies” 312). One of novel’s returning motifs is “triumphant failure” (348), or what Dasgupta calls Ulrich’s “tragic optimism” (Colbert): his utopian pursuit of science, while blinded to the tragic consequences of industrial science, his lifelong obsession with a sense of his failure in comparison to the scientific heroes of his youth. However, in the second movement, this failure is transmuted into something productive: Ulrich grants Boris the “gift” of his own “failed music” (348). Failure is a form of non-value, in contrast to which value can be determined; it is the marker by which the world can be seen to require a new shape. To practice, to discover, to imagine, to remake the world, risks failure; the experiment cannot proceed without the risk. Ulrich fails to become a professional inventor, chemist, or musician, but he does not fail to experiment, and retains a kind of impossible autonomy under both
Soviet state capitalism and neoliberal capitalism that is enabled precisely by his lack of total incorporation into the sphere of commodity relations. As such, he is another figure in the novel for the problem of creative autonomy in the global market, especially since in the second movement, he transforms his own yearning for creative production into a fantasy of his son’s musical creativity, so that the first movement’s emphasis on scientific experimentation metamorphoses into artistic experimentation in the second.

In the first movement, Ulrich dreams of writing a “chemical opera” for one of the workers whom he hears singing during a factory shutdown. Her artistic resistance against the dehumanization of forced industrialization resurrects his belief in the creative potential of chemistry as life-making. In the second movement, he transmutes these desires into fiction. His imagined son Boris spends his Kunstbildung improvising solos in a factory abandoned after postcommunist deindustrialization. Similarly, Irakli plans to write a “philharmonic novel” that would tell the “real” story (315) of the modern age. These dream artworks take up where politics and science have failed: acting as the sphere of conviction where the remaking of the world can be imagined. In the first movement, two of the tragic failures which Ulrich feels most keenly are the loss of his best friend’s utopian politics and creativity, and the repression of his own musical imagination. In giving his imaginary son—“the strange offspring that might have grown out of man like him” (78)—the name of an assassinated revolutionary, Ulrich resurrects the possibility, if not the actuality, of future revolution, just as he resurrects the folk music banned during the Communist regime, a music with its origins in a pre-capitalist social collectivity.10

In literary tradition, the diptych short story is closely associated with the criticism of social divisions, as in Hermann Melville’s The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids, whose contrasting halves famously employ inverse similitude to reveal how the complacent luxury of the bachelor merchants is built on the hellish exploitation of women workers in New England paper mills. In photography, diptychs are often used to illustrate a lapse in time or activity. Dasgupta’s renovation of the form taps its potential for both social critique and temporal mobility, but
unlike Melville’s stories, *Solo’s* second movement does not wholly invert its first. Ulrich dreams that he travels to New York to hear his lost son play, but a fairy-tale reconciliation is denied, for he is never able to tell Boris that he is his father. A third movement to *Solo’s* ‘philharmonic’ novel—the synthesizing conclusion typical of a sonata form or a symphony—never arrives to resolve the previous two. Ulrich’s dream-world does not reverse his own defeats, but rather imaginatively projects elements of his thwarted desires into a future unfolding beyond the geographical and temporal limitations of his own present. It is a future that he cannot observe directly, only imagine. This dreaming is a compositional form of what Freud called *Uberdeterminierung*. As such, the content summoned up by the condensation of Ulrich’s life-experience is perhaps less important than the formal process itself, ontologically necessary to the conjuring of the future out of the detritus of the past. As Kenneth Olwig writes, just as “dream thoughts can create privileged images that condense many thoughts into the single totality of a picture,” so too is “the mode of production...similarly a picturelike totality that embodies within it the contradictions that will bring about its transformation” (Olwig 106). At the level of form, even if not at content, since Ulrich never imagines anti-systemic movements, this could be understood as the novel’s attempt to dream a global totality in which the not-yet-visible future is already latent.

One of the “Notes” to *Solo* posted on Dasgupta’s website is an extract from Raymond Federman’s “The Real Begins Where the Spectacle Ends,” a manifesto calling for new literary forms that create a space of resistance to the derealizing flux of media spectacle in neoliberal capitalism. Ulrich’s blindness, like Irakli’s ideathesia, offers new varieties of sensory experience, aural and imaginative, which circumvent reified images of global totality: “The shape of the world changed when Ulrich lost his sight. When he had relied on his eyes, everything was shaped in two great shining cone rays. Without them, he sank into the blank continuum of hearing, which passed through doors and walls, and to which even the interior of his own body was not closed” (81). The altering of his perception simultaneously enables a new mode of cognition, creating the conditions of possibility for dreaming: Ulrich’s preternaturally-enhanced hearing moves through space differently, mapping the
world through “sine waves,” while “the blackness of his obliterated vision [makes] a fertile screen for his daydreams” (82). Here, as in Dasgupta’s first novel-in-parts, the échappée de vue is employed as a formal negotiation of the challenges to world-historical imagination and totalizing representation: the space in an obstruction that illuminates a view, however partial, of the whole beyond. Unbounded by visible abstractions, extended by an imagination generating new forms, the flatness of Ulrich’s previous perception gives way to a more complex concept of the shape of the world, imagined as both history and futurity.

Notes

1 For articulations of world-literary criticism, see Deckard (2013); DeLoughry (2012); Graham, Niblett and Deckard (2012); Niblett (2012); Shapiro (2008); WReC (2015), among others. For an introduction to world-ecology, see Moore (2011).

2 Friedmann’s figure, generated in 1986, does not register the rise of East Asian capital and the BRICS, but remains suggestive as a visual method of mapping the geographic concentrations and striations of capital in global cities. Saskia Sassen has also written extensively on the ways in which specialized divisions of functions between global cities in the North and South concretize inter-state inequalities: see, for instance, Sassen (2005).

3 Dasgupta's use of the global city to plot the contours of capitalism is influenced by his involvement with the experimental Cybermohalla Hub in Delhi, a cultural lab for artistic mediation of the transformations of urban space and global reality: see his essays in the Sarai Reader (2002-2003).

4 As Moore notes, coal/steampower was one such revolution, producing a new energy regime to power the industrial revolution, and enabling an earlier phase of time-space compression that collapsed distance across the globe, as canals and railways were constructed not only across Europe, but across the expanse of British, European and Ottoman empires. This accelerated the export of raw materials extracted from peripheries and their processing in industrial centres, but also enabled the expansion of new forms of administrative, educational and political apparatuses, the swift circulation of cultural forms and commodities across geographical expanses, the production of new forms of consumption (including food and fashion regimes), and the invention of new forms of financial capital. Canals and railways not only transformed northern England from agricultural periphery into an industrial network of factory-cities and mill towns (which brought new forms of wage-labour exploitation, rationalization, clock-time, urban infrastructure and so forth), but also converted vast swathes of imperial territories such as India into monocultures for the production of single commodity cash-crops in cotton or opium, sweeping away traditional modes of agriculture and communal organization, and radically eliminating local biodiversity.

5 As historian of that era Morris Jastrow dryly relates, “It was felt in England that if, as Napoleon is said to have remarked, Antwerp in the hands of a great continental power was a pistol leveled at the English coast, Baghdad and the Persian Gulf in the hands of Germany (or any other strong power) would be a 42-centimetre gun pointed at India” (Jastrow 91).

6 Solo's own use of an Eastern European setting, while intended to provide a critique of Euro-American accounts of US hegemony, is vulnerable to the charge of “mining” the cultural experience of the semi-periphery, even if it is self-conscious of this danger.

7 Interestingly, given its discussion by Wendy Knepper in this issue, Jameson offers David
Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* as an exemplar of formal innovation that circumvents the crisis of historicity, however partially, by embedding stories set in a post-apocalyptic future within a nested narrative structure, inducing a retrospective view which makes history of the present.

8 Even here vestiges of social collectivity persist amidst the atomization of social relations, in that Ulrich is able to stay alive and dreaming despite his insufficient pension and lack of mobility because his neighbors care for him and bring him food and medicine.

9 Jameson refers here to the science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, although a counter-argument can be made that many of the sciences, particularly the life sciences, have been subjected to an unprecedented level of commodification in the neoliberal period under the intellectual property rights regime.

10 Even if folk music was repressed by the Soviet regime as not fitting its telos, the novel suggests that the dematerialization of communal society after the transition to capitalism—as in the total evacuation of the village where Boris grows up after the factory closes and structural unemployment becomes generalized—is just as deleterious in its effects on peasant and folk traditions. Deindustrialization and deruralization erode the bases for these communal forms, and the remaining traces are commoditized, as in Boris’s own music.

11 While I do not have space to discuss it, as part of their ongoing attempt to imagine new forms and structures, Dasgupta’s novels also experiment with multi-modal interdiscursivity. *Tokyo Cancelled* includes a series of photographs, which are also featured on Dasgupta’s website alongside “Notes” revealing antecedents for the composition of the stories. *Solo* continues this convention, publishing “footnotes” online together with slideshows of Dasgupta’s photography of Tbilisi and Sofia. Thematically, *Solo* portrays multi-modal collaboration between violinist Boris and poet Irakli, who perform simultaneously and publish liner notes with Irakli’s poems acting as titles for Boris’s compositions. This improvisatory composition suggests an attempt to imagine new forms of collective creation that move beyond the limits of individual imagination.

**Works Cited**


