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‘WE ARE ALL HUMAN RESOURCES’

The Weird as Neoliberal Critique in Thomas Ligotti’s “My Work is Not Yet Done”

ABSTRACT

This article posits Thomas Ligotti’s weird novella, “My Work is Not Yet Done,” as an ideal site for interrogating the malicious effects of the neoliberal project. Neoliberalism, namely the depoliticization of economies and privatisation of state apparatus, has developed unevenly across the globe since the 1980s. Though ostensibly promoting freedom and prosperity, this socioeconomic framework has contributed to widespread financial inequalities, exacerbated global climate crises and, during the COVID-19 lockdown, endangered countless lives for the sake of economic progress. Corroborating Mark Fisher’s conceptualisation of ‘capitalist realism’, proponents of neoliberalism have normalised its principles by maintaining the illusion that there are no alternatives to them. Weird fiction is therefore uniquely positioned to depict the impacts of neoliberal dogma, based, as it is, around granting an outside perspective on presumed epistemological

structures. Thomas Ligotti is one of the most celebrated writers of weird fiction in the last thirty years. This article will console his definition of the weird with Fisher’s own in order to demonstrate that Ligotti uses a sense of ‘real externality’ to critique neoliberalism’s profit-driven individualism. While being a self-proclaimed socialist himself, Ligotti states that “My Work is Not Yet Done” uses the corporate world to depict his own pessimistic philosophy. But by analogising the metaphysics of pessimism through an archetypical corporation, Ligotti simultaneously reveals the inhumanity of neoliberalism itself. As such, this article argues, Ligotti’s novella represents a timely critique of the neoliberal project and evidence that weird fiction is uniquely positioned to repudiate the value of unjust hegemonies.

KEY WORDS: Thomas Ligotti, the Weird, neoliberalism, corporate horror, pessimism

Behind the scenes of twenty-first century economics lurks the utopian vision of a market-based society, a project that political theorists refer to as 'neoliberalism.'² Under the various iterations of this ideology, performativity ("the best possible input/output equation") takes precedence over all other considerations and causes the competition for profit to replace the "idealist and humanist" systems of legitimation previously embodied by the family, church and/or state.³ It is a corporate world bereft of these archetypical "grand narratives"⁴ that constitutes the central setting in Thomas Ligotti's "My Work is Not Yet Done" (2009),⁵ a novella whose underlying concern is a pessimistic repudiation of existence. However, in the process of depicting Ligotti's radical (anti)philosophy, "My Work is Not Yet Done" simultaneously offers a satirical indictment of neoliberal capitalism, the author using a corporate drone's workplace revenge fantasy to analogise the horror with which he regards sentient life.

Like the "Will-to-live,"⁶ the pernicious force that perpetuates all human suffering according to Ligotti, the neoliberal capitalism depicted in "My Work is Not Yet Done" compels humanity to consume all aspects of life that detract from the competitive pursuit of profit. By depicting this, Ligotti demonstrates how neoliberalism reframes human beings as a literal 'human resource.' Reading "My Work is Not Yet Done" alongside contemporary critiques of neoliberalism, therefore, demonstrates that Ligotti's novella uses the revelatory function of weird art to exhibit the inhumanity of the neoliberal system, as he envisions it, arguing that it turns both workers and consumers into resources that inexorably fuel the pursuit of profit. In doing so, this article establishes the weird, as conceived by such literary theorists

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2 See, for instance, Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015) or Lisa Duggan's entry for 'neoliberalism' in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (2014).

3 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 46.

4 These "metanarratives," as Lyotard also refers to them, are hegemonic constructs that impose a narrative order on subjective experience; Lyotard suggests "the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, [and] the creation of wealth' as examples of such narratives (Lyotard, xxiv).

5 "My Work is Not Yet Done" (henceforth MWINYD) is referenced here as part of the *My Work is Not Yet Done* collection (Virgin Books, 2009), though it was originally written in 2000 and intended to be read as a stand-alone novella.

6 Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (henceforth *Conspiracy*), (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010), 327.

as H.P. Lovecraft and Ligotti himself, as an ideal site for repudiating the value of pernicious hegemonic structures.

The term 'neoliberalism' is applied unevenly across the humanities and social sciences as it signifies differing and even contradictory ideologies in different times and places. In Sweden, for instance, the term intersects with support for "the continued legitimacy of welfarism," a socialist agenda that contrasts the "bold free-market reforms" enacted by Anglo-American neoliberalism under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.⁷ According to political theorist Wendy Brown, however, wherever neoliberalism is implemented it "transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic."⁸ Despite its many guises, therefore, neoliberalism can be said to transpose all individual, commercial and political actions onto a scale of economic 'worth'; a process which Ronaldo Munck argues encourages competitiveness "from the household to the world economy."⁹

This economic Darwinism guarantees commercial growth, supposedly, growth which neoliberalism's supporters envision as "the most efficient way to allocate resources" and "the optimum context to achieve human freedom."¹⁰ Material wealth is thereby equated with social progress and prosperity via the quantifiable increase of profit margins rather than individual well-being or customer satisfaction. In order to encourage this process, therefore, Western governments such as those of Thatcher and Reagan have followed a "deliberate policy of [economic] depoliticization"¹¹: empowering corporate institutions through the "deregulation of the markets," "suppression of trade unions, lower taxes and a transfer of public services to the private sector."¹²

Despite it ostensibly distributing wealth across developed nations, however, critics of neoliberalism argue that its proclivity to encourage exploitation has had a negative impact on the lives of all save the wealthiest minority. Indeed, neoliberalism's opponents argue that it has "dramatically increased" economic inequalities around the globe,¹³ undermined efforts towards "social progress and equality of opportunity,"¹⁴ and prompted a "reality-denying at-

7 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 20.

8 Brown, 9–10.

9 Ronaldo Munck, "Neoliberalism and Politics, and the Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Alfredo Saad Filho and Deborah Johnston (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 64.

10 Munck, 65.

11 *Ibid.*, 68.

12 Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, *Neoliberal Gothic: International Gothic in the Neoliberal Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 4.

13 Bruno Tinel, "The Crisis of Neoliberalism," *World Review of Political Economy* 2, NO. 1 (Spring 2011), 118.

14 Blake and Monnet, 1.

titude,” according to which profit is prioritised over sustainability and social cohesion.¹⁵ To make matters worse, such critics argue, neoliberalism has become hegemonic in the twenty-first century through its bureaucratic restructuring of education, a self-sustaining ideological shift that increasingly incorporates performativity into the “common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.”¹⁶ Resisting and/or reflecting upon one’s position within neoliberalism distracts and detracts from its central concern (optimising the profiteering process) and are therefore discouraged. The result is that as more aspects of contemporary life become subsumed beneath the neoliberal worldview, the conviction that “there is no alternative”¹⁷ to the single-minded, institutionalized pursuit of profit only grows stronger.

According to contemporary literary critics Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, gothic horror texts are unparalleled when it comes to the cultural critique of neoliberalism and the purportedly inhumane acts perpetrated under it.¹⁸ Indeed, their introduction to *Neoliberal Gothic* (2017) asserts that the gothic is “ideally positioned, as a mode, to evoke and interrogate” the “turmoil” caused by the neoliberal experiment, “focusing as it does on the monstrous, the liminal and the domestic in ways that undermine dominant ideologies, question old truths and envision different ways of being.”¹⁹ Furthermore, they argue that the gothic uses these central maxims “to give voice to the occluded truths of our age,”²⁰ defamiliarizing entrenched structures and thereby exposing the injustices so often obscured behind presupposed socio-political values.

David Simmons’s *American Horror Fiction and Class* (2017) corroborates this argument, demonstrating that such contemporary gothic texts as Brett Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991) explicitly depict monstrous psychological states resulting from the internalisation of neoliberal ideals – namely the pursuit of individual gratification via “aggressive interpersonal competition.”²¹ The unpunished crimes in Ellis’ novel, Simmons argues, portray neoliberalism as encouraging heinous acts of violence and exploitation by rewarding them with social prestige and material wealth. Consequently, *American Psycho* pathologizes Reagan-era neoliberalism and the “rat-race yuppie culture of the 1980s,” satirising both through the protagonist’s

15 Nolen Gertz, *Nihilism and Technology* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 11–20.

16 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

17 Brown, 221.

18 See, for instance, the economic exploitation allegorised by aristocratic vampires in such Gothic classics as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922)

19 Blake and Monnet, 14.

20 Blake and Monnet, 1.

21 David Simmons, *American Horror Fiction and Class: From Poe to Twilight* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 170.

abhorrent actions.²² However, while such texts have provided effective cultural commentaries on prevalent socioeconomic structures, no iteration of the gothic mode is more intent on granting alternative perspectives on presumed ideological systems than 'the weird'.²³

Popularised in Western culture by such early twentieth-century writers as Mary Elizabeth Councilman, Howard Philips Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith, the weird movement has its roots in the earlier Symbolist and Decadent traditions, along with such eerie, supernatural stories as Algernon Blackwood's *The Willows* (1907) and M.R. James' "Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad" (1904).²⁴ H.P. Lovecraft himself offers one of the most widely quoted definitions of the weird in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927). Here, he posits that while a weird tale need not be overtly supernatural, it must contain a certain "atmosphere": an "unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces" which reveals the subject's 'true' existential position and relative insignificance.²⁵ Though in Lovecraft's own stories these 'outer forces' were often represented as cosmological entities (most notably the pan-dimensional 'Great Old Ones' and their poster boy, Cthulhu), it is the defamiliarizing effect of these outer forces that the author considers the weird tale's primary concern.

According to Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), 'outer, unknown forces' might refer to a glimpse of the supernatural (as it does in H. G. Wells' "The Door in the Wall" [1906], a cosmological 'other' (as with Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" [1936], or a shift in scale (as with Richard Matheson's *The Shrinking Man* [1956]. Whether a scientific worldview, anthropocentrism, or the assumption of safety in one's own home is defamiliarized (as with the aforementioned examples respectively) the weird tale's atmosphere forces the reader to reconsider their subjective reality "from the perspective of the outside": offering an alternative frame of ontological reference that renders a set of presumed values "obsolete."²⁶ Ligotti himself praises the use of this so-called 'atmosphere' in horror fiction. Quoting Lovecraft, he defines it as a "mood of intense and fruitless human aspiration typified by the pretended overturning of cosmic laws"²⁷ — the horror arising, within his preferred brand of fiction, not from 'monstrous' deviations from normative values but from the inability to escape a monstrous conception of normality itself.

22 Simmons, 169–170.

23 See Roger Luckhurst's "The Weird: A Dis/Orientation" (2017) for an in-depth analysis of the weird's tangential relationship to the gothic.

24 Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (New York: Macmillan, 2012), 1–2.

25 Howard Philips Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature: Golden Edition* (1927), 5.

26 Mark Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 10, 13.

27 Quoted by Ligotti in *Conspiracy*, 2507.

Fisher deems this literary 'atmosphere' a sense of "real externality,"²⁸ through which the reader experiences their lived-in reality from the external perspective of someone (or something) unbound by familiar physical, biological or moral laws (literally, an external perspective on what is presumed to be fundamentally 'real'). To create this sense of 'real externality' then, such weird tales as those written by Lovecraft and Ligotti suggest "an ominous state of affairs beyond what our senses perceive and our mind comprehend"²⁹; revealing, at least partially, that there are forces at work beyond the limits of human perception and understanding. The resultant 'atmosphere' suggests that "the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world" are not universally valid³⁰, and thereby allows said categories to be re-evaluated, potentially. This suggestion that one's values and assumptions may not be as inviolable as one may think makes the weird ideally suited to exploring alternatives to presupposed ideological systems.

As already mentioned, neoliberalism has gained a hegemonic status in the twenty-first century and is accused by contemporary theorists of duping Western societies into an unjust status quo (Blake and Monnet, for instance, describe neoliberalism's central tenets as "at best an illusion and at worst a deliberate deception"³¹). Reflecting this growing resentment, there has been a marked turn towards the critique of this ideology by contemporary writers of the weird, perhaps the most direct challenges appearing through the revolutionary socialism found within the 'New Weird' movement.³² Thomas Ligotti's "My Work is Not Yet Done," on the other hand, uses philosophical pessimism to emphasise the reality-consuming perniciousness of neoliberalism. Rather than depicting the overturning of this contentious regime, "My Work is Not Yet Done" uses plot, setting and (above all) weird atmosphere to reveal the inhumanity of the neoliberal world; literalising this pernicious socioeconomic ideology by depicting it as an all-consuming presence that can only be escaped through self-destruction.

Due to the ontological nature of the critique in "My Work is Not Yet Done," any discussion of this novella must necessarily begin with an account of Ligotti's personal philosophy, the central preoccupation of his work and life in general. Although Ligotti himself has shied away from public exposure, his pessimism is espoused in extensive detail in *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2010). Life, the world and consciousness are all "MALIGNANTLY USELESS,"³³ Ligotti maintains here, for every individual must continually

28 Fisher, *Weird and the Eerie*, 15.

29 Ligotti, *Conspiracy*, 2520.

30 Fisher, *Weird and the Eerie*, 15.

31 Blake and Monnet, 4.

32 See, for instance, the unionising of magical familiars against political oppression in China Miéville's *Kraken* (2010), or, indeed, Miéville's own political career.

33 Ligotti, *Conspiracy*, 3141.

obscure constant suffering and uncertainty with “[i]solation, anchoring, distraction, and sublimation.”³⁴ Consequently, these psychological processes are the basis for every ideological structure (including that of neoliberalism) and, by extension, every facet of the societies that these structures comprise. This means that as humanity is made to endure an “objectionable and useless” universe, forced to persist by “the Will, or the Will-to-live,”³⁵ human civilisation is merely an inevitable side-effect of aimless beings frantically keeping themselves distracted.

Although it may seem paradoxical that a writer with such nihilistic convictions should oppose any specific socioeconomic structure, Ligotti has openly stated that he “politically self-identifies] as a socialist,” qualifying this by saying that he “want[s] everyone to be as comfortable as they can be while they’re waiting to die.”³⁶ Contemporary capitalism is, to Ligotti, “an inescapable disease,” an especially “brutal and inhuman”³⁷ offshoot of human consciousness, and its critique in “My Work is Not Yet Done” demonstrates how “the weird writer’s work engages with the ‘real world’ in a number of direct and interesting ways.”³⁸

According to Stefan Dziemianowicz, Ligotti’s fiction “discomposes the certainty of the ‘real’ world”³⁹ to make the reader question what is corporeal, what is delusional, what is metaphorical, and whether there is any meaningful distinction between such labels. The real and the imaginary intermingle in the ambiguous wasteland of “The Red Tower” (1997), for example, and the M.C. Escher-esque cityscape of “Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech” (1985), before such texts “typically end with characters doubting everything they once thought true about their world.”⁴⁰ Throughout Ligotti’s oeuvre this inevitable slide into an “incomprehensible but more terrifyingly insistent ‘reality’”⁴¹ registers on a metafictional level, Dziemianowicz argues, Ligotti suggesting that reality itself is “a dream from which we, his readers, are about to be rudely awakened.”⁴² However, while Ligotti’s tales have often been stylistically disconnected from the lived-in world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (or at least set in an analogous nightmare vision of said world) “My Work is Not Yet Done” is far

34 Ibid., 492.

35 Ibid., 527–671.

36 Thomas Ligotti, “Interview with Tina Hall,” in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti* (Burton: Subterranean Press, 2011), 177.

37 Ibid., 177.

38 Simmons, 182.

39 Stefan Dziemianowicz, “Nothing is What it Seems to Be: Thomas Ligotti’s Assault on Certainty,” in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader*, ed. Darrell Schweitzer (Rockville: Wildside Press, 2003), 38.

40 Dziemianowicz, 43.

41 Ibid., 43.

42 Ibid., 52.

less abstract in its form and content, featuring a named and relatively reliable protagonist and a (relatively) realistic setting.

Taking the opening of “Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech” as an archetypal example of Ligotti’s writing style, one encounters an impressionistic dream-world full of poetic contradictions, described in the present tense to suggest a purgatory-like (im)permanence: “There is a stairway. It climbs crooked up the side of total darkness. Yet its outlines are visible, like a scribble of lightning engraved on a black sky.”⁴³ This is starkly contrasted by the naturalistic opening setting in “My Work is Not Yet Done”: a “modernized office space,” a “pre-Depression style” tower block and a conference room offering “a fine panorama of several other old office buildings.”⁴⁴ The latter opening therefore grounds Ligotti’s novella in a stereotypical and therefore recognisable corporate setting, a shift in discursive style that is unsurprising when one considers the text’s intended purpose. In Ligotti’s own words, “‘My Work is Not Yet Done’ uses the corporate system as a starting point,” utilising what he believes to be the epitome of twenty-first century capitalism to argue that “the all-encompassing system of human existence—in fact, all organic existence—[is] something fundamentally and inescapably evil.”⁴⁵ The relatively naturalistic setting therefore grounds the novella in the reader’s lived-in reality, and while the novella later breaks from realism in order to literalise neoliberalism’s pervasiveness, “My Work is Not Yet Done” still represents one of Ligotti’s most sustained engagements with verisimilitude.

Ligotti’s protagonist and self-loathing misanthrope (Frank Dominio) begins the novella as a supervisor at the anonymous company that constitutes this setting, a company which epitomises the neoliberal ideal. As Dominio explains, his workplace strives to “serve up the cheapest fare that its customers would tolerate, churn it out as fast as possible, and charge as much as they could get away with”⁴⁶: the managers aspire to wring profit from their customers via exploitative performativity. This business model is unregulated by governmental intervention and unconcerned with the welfare of customers, society or the environment, as demonstrated by its physical presence: the office block rises from a sprawl of homeless communities, abandoned warehouses and general “degeneration and decline.”⁴⁷ In this way the company typifies what political theorist Lisa Duggan, in particular, foresees as the “procorporate” movement of neoliberalism.⁴⁸

43 Thomas Ligotti, “Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech,” in *Songs of a Dead Dreamer and Grimscribe* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 172.

44 Ligotti, MWINYD, 8.

45 Ligotti, “Work Not Done? Art of Grimscribe Interview.”

46 Ligotti, MWINYD, 43.

47 *Ibid.*, 9.

48 Duggan, 181.

More abstractly, though, Ligotti also uses this archetypal, faceless corporation and its middle-manager henchpersons to allegorise the state of affairs that the author believes makes life an “evil . . . absurdity.”⁴⁹ Principally, this can be seen through the text’s representation of the Will-to-live: the “blind, deaf, and dumb force that rouses human beings to their detriment.”⁵⁰ Developing Arthur Schopenhauer’s conception of the term, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* describes this phenomenon as “a mindless and untiring master of all being, a directionless force that makes everything do what it does, an imbecilic puppeteer that sustains the ruckus of our world.”⁵¹ “In pessimistic philosophies,” the reader is told, “only [the Will] is real, not the things activated by it,” all of which are mere “puppets”⁵² of this all-consuming desire to exist – or at least avoid death. And while Ligotti has alternately claimed and denied that he believes in a *literal* force working against the interests of sentient life, he does claim to use such an “*anima mundi*” in his stories to represent “a personal evil” and “the same kind of driving force as the Will-to-Live.”⁵³

In “My Work is Not Yet Done,” Ligotti’s protagonist envisions and later encounters this pernicious force, which works “behind the scenes”⁵⁴ to perpetuate suffering – a “sinister presence” that he names “The Great Black Swine.”⁵⁵ This “grunting, bestial force,” which has “animated” and “used” Ligotti’s characters in order to “frolic in whatever mucky thing came its way,” is an anthropomorphic/zoomorphic embodiment of the Will.⁵⁶ It, too, represents “the only Thing-in-the-World” and animates a world built from “costumes and masks, the inventory of an ancient and still flourishing theatrical supply company.”⁵⁷ This ontological perspective reframes Ligotti’s characters (indeed, all sentient life) as mere personifications of this impersonal, impalpable Will: “puppets” or “mechanical entities that appear human.”⁵⁸ As the obscure phenomenon forcing all civilisation to continue, therefore, the Will causes every human subject to endure what Ligotti perceives as continual suffering in the pursuit of self-involved delusions of meaning.⁵⁹ Crucially, however, Ligotti’s novella uses the apparatus of its corporate setting to add more nuance and real-world applicability to this abstract ontology.

49 Ibid, 2007.

50 Ibid, 671.

51 Ibid, 321.

52 Ibid, 675.

53 Ligotti, “Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies Interviews Thomas Ligotti,” in *The Dark Arts Journal* (June 2019), emphasis in original.

54 Ligotti, *Conspiracy*, 2520.

55 Ligotti, MWINYD, 109.

56 Ibid, 109 (emphasis in original).

57 Ligotti, MWINYD, 111.

58 Ligotti, *Conspiracy*, 148.

59 Ibid, 136–148.

According to Dominio, the exploitative corporation he works at represents an “institutional manifestation of *the swine*,”⁶⁰ this ‘swine’ moniker, used throughout the text to designate an affectation of the Will itself. Compounding its connection to this pernicious force, the corporation that embodies the neoliberal ideal is described as similarly weird, for while the setting is realistic in appearance, its chronological, spatial and economic attributes are repeatedly depicted via indeterminate, vague or irrational language. According to Frank (who has himself worked there “forever”⁶¹), this nameless corporation exists on a “secret timeline of geologic tedium,”⁶² where ambiguous products are created by “countless” divisions⁶³ whose operations are “as much a mystery”⁶⁴ to Frank as they are to the readers themselves. Besides allowing Dominio’s workplace to represent capitalism in its entirety (after all, Frank tells the reader, “one business is essentially the same as another”⁶⁵), the ambiguity of this setting conjures around it a sense of incorporeal “*wrongness*,”⁶⁶ as if the neoliberal ideology that this setting represents was an ‘outer, unknown force’ operating beyond physical and temporal limits.

At the beginning of the novella, Dominio holds a supervisory position in this corporation, whose workforce is made up of “fantastic beings”⁶⁷ who are just as abstruse as their workplace. Working among them in a constant state of paranoia, Dominio is wracked by “pangs of apprehension and self-consciousness”⁶⁸ because he suspects his co-workers are conspiring to “ambush” him.⁶⁹ This suspicion he extends to his underlings (“This remark caused a hurt look to cross Lisa’s face. It was a good one, very realistic”⁷⁰), the other middle-managers (such as “Perry the Piano Player” whose jazzy persona Dominio suspects is a “put-on”⁷¹), and his superior, Richard (“I could never be absolutely sure that it wasn’t pure indifference rather than a taste for malicious mockery that accounted for his persistently calling me Domino”⁷²).

While the swine/Will trope is perhaps the most direct connection to the weird, Dominio’s paranoia is key to conjuring a sense of ‘wrongness’ from the outset of the text. Regardless of the fact that Frank is deemed “the blackest

60 Ligotti, *MWINYD*, 7 (emphasis added).

61 *Ibid.*, 6.

62 *Ibid.*, 31.

63 *Ibid.*, 6.

64 *Ibid.*, 30.

65 *Ibid.*, 42.

66 Fisher, *Weird and the Eerie*, 15.

67 Ligotti, *MWINYD*, 9.

68 *Ibid.*, 7.

69 *Ibid.*, 13.

70 *Ibid.*, 6.

71 *Ibid.*, 86.

72 *Ibid.*, 10–11.

of the bunch” by his Machiavellian boss,⁷³ this supposed self-reflectiveness defamiliarizes the neoliberal system throughout the novella. Through it, Ligotti offers an estranged view from within this cynical conception of a corporate institution and, at the same time, reflects upon it. In granting this fallacious ‘outside’ perspective, the novella suggests that neoliberalism represents “an ominous state of affairs beyond what our senses [can] perceive and our mind comprehend,” while simultaneously reminding the reader of the subject’s complicity within it.⁷⁴ Even if the novella did not introduce fantastic elements in the second and third parts, therefore, this initial sense that there is “something pernicious that makes a nightmare of [Frank’s] world” confirms Ligotti’s tale (and the corporate system depicted therein) as having an ‘atmosphere’ of weirdness.⁷⁵

After being shamed into quitting this job, however, and bungling a suicide attempt, the comatose Dominio finds himself resurrected and disembodied (literally) when he becomes an omnipotent shade-like being, only described obliquely as an “inhuman malefactor.”⁷⁶ Besides allowing him to inflict an “abominable” revenge on his prior co-workers⁷⁷ (turning one into a manikin, another into a pig, sending a third into an endless maze of identical offices), Dominio’s newfound powers allow him to spy on those he suspected of conspiring against him. He discovers that “The Vicious Seven,”⁷⁸ the middle-managers who represent unadulterated products of the Will as “the purist breed of *swine*,”⁷⁹ had deliberately humiliated him into quitting his job as part of their aggressively competitive plot to usurp control of the company.

Besides confirming that these characters manipulated him into ruin for personal gain, Dominio’s powers also reveal that The Seven are actually *more* monstrous than he initially suspected – or are, at least, more abjectly repulsive in their organic and moral grotesqueness. Harry, for instance, is described to begin with as an “affable enigma” with a cheeky yet charismatic persona: “Always nattily attired, a politely attentive aura hovering somewhere about his person whenever one spoke to him, always willing to ‘get right on’ things anyone asked him to do . . . and never, ever, doing any of these things.”⁸⁰ Once the façade of lived experience is removed, however, Harry is revealed to be a conman whose previous identities are only alluded to as “Hank the Plumber, Joe the Roofer,” “Bob the Encyclopaedia Salesman,”

73 Ibid., 132.

74 Ligotti, *Conspiracy*, 2520.

75 Ibid., 1496.

76 Ibid., 74.

77 Ligotti, *MWINYD*, 74.

78 Ibid., 48.

79 Ibid., 5 (emphasis added).

80 Ibid., 23–24.

and “Harry the Robber and Rapist.”⁸¹ Through the perspective of an ‘outer, unknown force’ itself, therefore, the reader is allowed to see past Harry’s office demeanour to the Will-driven puppet beneath; in this case a deceitful sex-offender who has used a repertoire of false identities to gain both monetary profit and immoral pleasure.

Through Harry’s depraved past, then, alongside The Seven’s drug addiction, alcoholism, gluttony, lechery, sadism, and cold-blooded despotism, Ligotti reveals that these conspirators are slaves to their own selfish desires, each aligned with the neoliberal precept of selfish exploitation that they use to fuel them. Indeed, Ligotti makes it clear that The Seven’s commitment to neoliberal capitalism is consuming every aspect of their social and private lives, neoliberalism “fundamentally recast[ing] the traditional relationship between the private and public domains”⁸²:

Who do you prefer spending your time with, not to mention most of your extra time – those people at home... or us? . . . We are your family. We are the only family that any of us have. Oh, some of you may have spouses or someone you live with, even children. But they aren’t your family.⁸³

Richard reveals, here, that the corporation itself has absorbed all aspects of The Seven’s personal lives, neoliberal values supplanting individual wellbeing and social cohesion – values typically lauded within socialist ideologies. As Fisher theorised, “[t]he values that family life depend on – obligation, trustworthiness, commitment . . . are held to be obsolete in the new capitalism.”⁸⁴ The Seven have dispensed with said values in the pursuit of individual gratification and material wealth – the same corporate goals, critics argue, that underpin neoliberalism.

Furthermore, it is no coincidence that when The Seven gather in one place they take the opportunity to “consume . . . incredible quantities” of food and drink without needing to alleviate themselves,⁸⁵ for in this way these characters biologically embody the neoliberal principle of performativity. During the conference meeting that initiates the events of the novella, Frank comments that The Seven “gulp mouthful after mouthful” without ever betraying signs of “bodily strain” or the need to relieve themselves.⁸⁶ Later in the novella, Frank describes the company’s business ideals as a notably similar process:

81 Ibid., 109.

82 Munck, 64.

83 Ligotti, MWINYD, 80.

84 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (John Hunt Publishing, 2009), 32–33.

85 Ligotti, MWINYD, 9.

86 Ibid., 9.

If it were possible to do so, the company would sell what all businesses of its kind dream about selling, creating that which all our efforts were tacitly supposed to achieve: the ultimate product – Nothing. And for this product they would command the ultimate price – Everything.⁸⁷

From Frank's pessimistic perspective, this corporation, like 'all businesses', aims to turn everything it can into a valuable commodity ('everything', in fact), and therefore prioritises the efficient transformation of resources into personal wealth over all other concerns.

Likewise embodying Ligotti's Will-driven vision of humanity, the company only produces "that which looks like what it has previously produced," its department dedicated to 'New Product' merely offering "recycled impersonations" of existing products that are only valuable in relation to themselves.⁸⁸ This company, then, is a symbol of a socioeconomic system that is determined to consume all resources at its disposal *without producing*, economically and biologically. Indeed, these middle-managers embody neoliberalism's perfected consumption process through Ligotti's cynical eyes, representing individuated extensions of a socioeconomic machine that devours everything and greedily minimises output.

In fact, so efficient is this machine at potentializing and consuming resources that even dissent is subsumed within it. The conclusion of Ligotti's novella reframes the preceding narrative as Frank Dominio's suicide note, written by his resurrected, shade-like soul after an unsuccessful attempt at self-destruction and before it finishes the job. Ultimately abandoning his quest for revenge, Dominio recognises that, even as he attacks the corporate entity that made his life hell, he is still being "manipulated and conspired against."⁸⁹ Like the rebellious artforms that are inevitably commercialised,⁹⁰ Dominio's acts of retaliation fuel the capitalist system, not least of which because violence against 'his' company only causes its equally menacing competitors to grow stronger.⁹¹ Ligotti's protagonist recognises and eventually escapes this complicity in the only way he deems possible – by killing himself. In the process of realising this, Dominio's defamiliarizing gaze allows "the pretended overturning of cosmic laws and the pretended transcending of possible human experience,"⁹² the novella's weird atmosphere portraying

87 Ibid., 43.

88 Ibid., 12–13.

89 Ligotti, MWINYD, 136.

90 See, for instance, Sklar, Autry and Klas, 2020 for an exploration of the commodification of punk music aesthetics through merchandising.

91 Like a wounded gladiator, the company is left at the end of the novella "struggling for life in the corporate arena" (MWINYD, 138).

92 Lovecraft, quoted in Ligotti's *Conspiracy*, 2507.

human subjects as puppets of an unknowable system that can only be escaped through self-destruction.

According to Ligotti's own theories, then, "My Work is Not Yet Done" uses its 'atmosphere' to emphasise the neoliberal project's underlying inhumanity, foregrounding the ways in which it turns all individuals into human resources to fuel the socioeconomic machine – even as Ligotti uses the same setting to attack the desirability of life itself. Through the corporate setting, "nefarious" characters,⁹³ and the alignment of the company with the ontological horror of 'The Great Black Swine', Ligotti defamiliarizes the neoliberal system and depicts it as a pervasive machine intent on consuming all resources at its disposal – including the beings that sustain it. It is via this socioeconomic critique that "My Work is Not Yet Done" stands apart from other works of pessimistic fiction, for with it Ligotti has achieved significant critical acclaim and demonstrated what Simmons deems "the overwhelmingly pernicious effects of the capitalist system."⁹⁴

During the age of neoliberalism, "in which people, politics, culture, and technology are utterly enmeshed,"⁹⁵ corporations profit from the wilful self-negation of consumers and labourers while hegemonically encouraging the neglect of inter-social values. The institutionalisation of this ideology and the dismissal of all alternatives are particularly evident at the time of writing, for as the COVID-19 epidemic rages around the globe neoliberal governments continue to prioritise commerce over public health. Globally, as of 31st May 2020, the World Health Organisation has confirmed that 365,966 people have been killed by the coronavirus.⁹⁶ Yet in the Western world, at least, this loss of human life is overshadowed by concerns for the economic status quo.

In the UK, for instance, "the virtual office is now the new norm," with an unprecedented number of telecommuters utilising a mode of work that has been used, historically, to "erode workers' rights," shirk responsibility for pensions, sick pay and maternity leave, and sidestep health and safety laws.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, "[m]illions" of Britons are believed to have continued labouring throughout lockdown – workers who have been pressured to do so by a government that "actively encouraged" work to resume far earlier than scientific

93 Ligotti, MWINYD, 18.

94 Simmons, 182.

95 James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (New York: Verso, 2019), 84.

96 World Health Organisation, "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic," accessed May 31, 2020, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>.

97 Helen McCarthy, "Working from home has a troubled history. Coronavirus is exposing its flaws again," *The Guardian*, April 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/12/working-from-home-history-coronavirus-uk-lockdown>.

advisors recommended.⁹⁸ Despite the risk to workers' rights (not to mention human lives) the neoliberal project is fighting hard to continue uninterrupted. And, thanks to the culturally internalised values that neoliberal doctrines champion, an extended lockdown and its associated economic repercussions are held in more extreme abhorrence than death on a catastrophic scale.

“Something deeply weird is occurring within the massively accelerated, utterly opaque markets of contemporary capital,” announced James Bridle in 2019,⁹⁹ and, according to Ligotti at least, it is true that there are pernicious forces working behind the scenes of neoliberalism's politically endorsed doctrine. As this hegemony absorbs ever more aspects of contemporary life beneath the ideals of efficiency and performativity, the proliferation of this socioeconomic model is symptomatic of a “reality-denying attitude” and the spread of wilful ignorance.¹⁰⁰ While, at its core, then, remains the heartfelt pessimism regarding existence that underpins all of Ligotti's work (the belief that life is merely an inexorable descent into suffering and uncertainty) the manner in which “My Work is Not Yet Done” articulates this message constitutes a piece of direct and topical cultural satire. Through Ligotti's novella, therefore, one can see the weird atmosphere used to repudiate the apparatus of neoliberal capitalism and question the desirability of an increasingly hegemonic ideological structure. □

98 Mattha Busby, “Dancing with devil: people forced back to work fear for health,” *The Guardian*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/12/dancing-with-the-devil-safety-concerns-rife-among-people-forced-back-to-work>.

99 Bridle, 1707.

100 Gertz, 11.

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