Yousef Alghawi and Ryan Williams

Editor's Introduction

Each year, the graduate student edition of Spectator reflects the works presented at the previous year's First Forum Graduate Student Conference. As such, this issue reflects the time, effort, and ideas of Skyler Osburn and his conference organizers. In his fiery call for papers, accumulation and excess are concepts that urge us towards that "European modernity," which we find ourselves "heir of," based as it is on "long traditions of unequal exchange."[1] These topics, this "accumulation" and "excess," are prime for further (intro-/in-)spection as both a defining logic of capitalist wealth and, importantly, also as a source of liberatory, anti-capitalist resistance; concepts that "speak to local and global histories, radical filmmaking traditions and other poetic acts of defiance[2]."

How can such powerfully diametric positions be adhered to simultaneously when the traditional Marxian critique sees that "accumulation of wealth at one pole [the bourgeois] is… at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole [the proletariat]?"[3] While the foundation may be Marxian, accumulation and excess serve as idiosyncratic markers through, against, and in conjunction with Marx's works. Instead of limiting itself to this (useful) entry point, our edition of Spectator elaborates on the "positive, productive aspects[4]" of accumulation and excess, moving past critique in favor of teasing out all prospective threads inherent in such weighty terms.

This begins with a central question: can there be an excess of thought? Let us look inwards-out for an answer.

Spectator itself is heir to a long tradition of accumulation and excess; a position inherent in fostering and proliferating discourse. This 2023 edition is but a singular moment in the prestigious run of Spectator as a publication, first started in Spring of 1982. Discourses abound; there is no shortage of discussions, arguments, intersections, ideas and dialectics over each and every minutiae of theory. As chroniclers, we chart the paths through the ever-referential; accumulating grand conversations yet abhor hoarding them for any personal gain; as Spectator is an accumulation of discourses unstuck in time, this introduction, too, depends on a capture, collection, and organization of prior, important conversations. This is a positive, critical accumulation, not dependent on gatekeeping information, instead serving as a resource allocation reliant on uninhibited dissemination; we defer to a prior event yet allude to future pedagogy.

If accumulation of discourse can be based on altruistic sharings rather than selfish possession, then academia itself may avoid the danger of neoliberal "accumulation by dispossession;"[5] not dependent on peddling proprietary discourses or claiming the ideas collected in our issue are therefore our ideas, we therefore banish the ideas of an inherently exploitative accumulation, favoring instead an accumulation by compilation. Archives, hardly spaces of excess, are contingent on these compilations, and so too are graduate journals.

Crucially, the excess of ideas are separate from excessive ideas, the latter we proudly cater towards. Many shadow concepts exist based on negative phenomenologies and materials of lack–"depletion, dissipation, deficiency, dearth," the end-results of lop-sided, parasitic accumulation to excess. But the excessive threatens through its own counter-shadows–increase, concentration, abundance, opulence. If you cannot beat them, overwhelm them, and our ideological cup certainly runneth over.

This framing is exemplified by John Berger's brilliant synthesis, "At a certain moment—if you're lucky—the accumulation becomes an image—that's to say it stops being a heap of sign and becomes a presence."[6] Transcending into a sum of its parts, an accumulation of signs, synthesized through praxis, may transition into a higher ontological ordering: the image. We here at Spectator deal in images; our presence will certainly be felt.

Perhaps excess, if there indeed is one, is just

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by virtue of proliferating these conversations and thereby forever expanding the surrounding, respondent (or despondent) discourses; or maybe it is because of media studies', philosophy's, and criticism's inseparable ties to the idea of The Academy as a business. But we must not allow ourselves to be burdened by, nor conflated with, these overall structures; we work through the system not for it.

Relatedly, our cover design invokes a world burdened by structure and fractured into disparate pieces. Our surroundings – captured in an excess-oriented, ever-present flux – are obscured to our senses: where the once familiar now bewilders, the once clear now unseen, and our once sturdy roots now disconnected from an Earth taken for granted for far too long. With stasis now un-earthed, only the brutal, relentless power of disunification remains. The world at large – specified by Berger as "the economic global tyranny of speculative financial capitalism, which uses national governments (and their politicians) as its slave-masters, and the world media as its dope-distributor" – holds profit as the integral, centering the importance of financial gain in all of our lives through "ceaseless accumulation" and imposing on its " view and pattern of life which is hectic, precarious, merciless and inexplicable."[7] Our cover image visualizes this fractured world, that we again, have inherited.

Our issue begins with Sebastian Wurzhainer's "Rendering Land Useful: Marxism and the Erasure of Indigenous Lifeways in Chingachgook, the Great Serpent." Drawing on a broader history of tensions between Marxism and Indigenous communities, Wurzhainer's piece examines the politics of land and Indigeneity in Chingachgook, The Great Serpent, a representative example of the popular DEFA Westerns produced in East Germany during the Soviet Bloc. These films often positioned Indigenous characters as colonized subjects with whom audiences should sympathize with, thereby implicitly reinforcing East Germany's claims about Soviet Union colonization. Wurzhainer argues that the portrayal of Indigenous communities in Chingachgook must be situated as part of German culture's longstanding and fetishistic fascination with Native Americans, and that the film embraces Marxist views that conflict with Indigenous epistemologies regarding the use and ownership of land. These political tensions manifest in the film's narrative design and aesthetics, both of which render land as solely use-ful while disregarding understandings of land which center on sacredness and agency. In this way, Wurzhainer argues that Chingachgook and other DEFA Westerns transform the image of Indigenous peoples into useful tools for the propagation of Marxist doctrine, occluding actual Indigenous communities and lifeways in the process.

From there, we move on to two pieces examining forms of escape: "All that we plot together: forms of escaping in Brazilian contemporary cinema" by Aline Portugal, and "'Somos la Puta Resistencia': The International Appeal of Money Heist" by Michelle Risacher. Portugal's piece brings together two recent Brazilian independent films — Tremor Iê and Mato Seco em Chamas (Dry Ground Burning, 2022) — and examines how each explores the topic of the incarceration of women. Both ethically and aesthetically, these films not only represent imprisonment, but also produce, through their gestures, different forms of escape. Portugal builds a poignant metaphor throughout her piece, exploring the many different meanings of the word "weave" – across languages and cultures. Portugal unites the films through the stories they tell, the methods through which they are told, and the ultimate unification that their narratives provide. The world, Portugal argues, is an amalgamation of all of our lives, woven together to form an all-encompassing weave – a plot that unites us all. The powerful interpersonal connections found in Tremor Iê and Mato Seco em Chamas are defined by what Portugal describes as a wayward collective way of doing things. Within a carceral world, we survive not not by idealizing an existence free from constraints, but by weaving our lives through these constraints and practicing our own forms of freedom within them, we survive by doing what Portugal describes as "plotting against the plot."

In "'Somos la Puta Resistencia': The International Appeal of Money Heist", Risacher places one of Netflix's most popular shows into the streamer's broader, global corporate strategy. She mounts a compelling, multifaceted argument centered around the multicultural, multi-historical aspirations of Money Heist, and the way that the show spins a sprawling web of interconnected identities and aspirations into a cogent, political manifesto. Risacher centers much of the second half of her piece on an exploration of the show's usage of the historic Italian protest song "Ciao Bella," which became something of an anthem to

Spain during the initial days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The potency of this song – and Netflix's struggles with marketing around this song – only serve to show how pointed, messy, hypocritical, and ultimately powerful Money Heist's call to revolt against neoliberalism is. As Risacher argues, Money Heist crafts a sprawling, international, and politically resonant televisual space where imagining global resistance is both possible and, in fact, inextricable from our collective history.

Next, we have "Women and Silence: The Female Transition from Silence in Cinema" by Emeer Hassanpour. Hassanpour's piece examines Gelegenheitsarbeit einer Sklavin (Part-Time Work of a Domestic Slave) and Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles to build a compelling case around the power of silence as both noun and verb, as a concept of serenity and a tool of oppression. Uniting these two films, Hassanpour examines the complexities of female oppression and the constant struggle for emancipation within patriarchal societies. These two films explore how women function in differing environments, ones united by a neoliberal system intent on conforming them to their patriarchal roles and overall capitalist oppressions. In examining Gelegenheitsarbeit einer Sklavin, Hassanpour builds an interesting case for voluntary silence as a weapon, as a means of dispossessing capitalist forces of their means of oppression. By contrast, Hassanpour posits Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles as a film that arrives at a different conclusion, plunging its title character into inconsolable silence, forever muted by the crushing weight of a world that – historically, socially, and intellectually – prevents her emancipation from an all-encompassing entrapment. In both films, Silence is established by Hassanpour as a "collection of historical, philosophical, and social cognition in the form of a collective class that faces antagonistic paradigms."

Next, are two essays about the technologization of the human form: "Technologizing Humans in the Information Economy: Computational Imagining of Human Cognition in Disney Pixar's Inside Out (2015)" by B. Dalia Hatalova and "I Started a Garden and Ended Up with a Global Industry: The Neoliberal Ethos of "Cozy Games"" by Alexandra Petrus. Through the lens of Pixar's emotion-personifying film, Hatalova explores how the human experience is being processed into readable algorithms. In a time where artificial intelligence technologies are developing measures to actively resemble humans/humanity, contemporary media also attempts its own reconstitution of human emotions and cognition. Disney Pixar's Inside Out participates in visually technologizing internal human functioning as highly discrete and industrialized. In analyzing how the quotidian world of Inside Out's protagonist, Riley, is intercut with representation of her interior cognition, Hatalova explores how these images simplify the complex neurological functioning of the brain into personable character representations, arguing that these personifications require further interrogation in view of the proliferation of digital technology. Hatalova's piece puts forth a thorough examination of Inside Out's internal world construction by utilizing research on artificial intelligence, algorithms, digital infrastructures, and information capitalism.

Alexandra Petrus's piece - focusing on Stardew Valley and the emerging genre of "cozy games" – explores how these supposedly relaxing, anti-capitalist games require hours and hours of tedious in-game labor, which ultimately uphold capitalism. Though these cozy games are marketed as wholesome refuges from urban precarity – thanks to the customization and crafting of character, possessions, and landscape – in-game objectives require hours of grinding, or repetitive, tedious in-game labor. Eventually, after countless hours of playing Stardew Valley, consumers emerge as the sole proprietor of a regulation- and tax-free conglomerate. Petrus argues that this virtual labor reproduces the very neoliberal structures that place young adults in overwhelming states of precarity. With Stardew Valley in particular, the game's anti-corporate narrative advocates a path from urban employment to agrarian entrepreneurship, mirroring the mass shift among young adults toward self-employment in the wake of Covid-19 discontent. Using Angela McRobbie's Be Creative, Petrus explores how the rapid evasion of corporate responsibilities for employees-turned-contractors has further perpetuated the collective anxieties driving young adults into the escapist realms of cozy games. Petrus also argues that the cozy game genre is one amid a plethora of wellness industry products that, as Julie Wilson describes in Neoliberalism, preserves neoliberal hegemony by temporarily remedying symptoms of capitalism-induced unwellness in service of uninterrupted productivity.

Eileen DiPofi's "Exceeding the "Solemn Geography of Human Limits": Political Kinship in Derek Jarman's Blue." DiPofi posits Jarman's 76-minute film, solely visually composed by the proprietary color International Klein Blue (IKB), as a film of monochromatic excess. Dipofi breaks down Jarman's refusal of what he calls "the pandemonium of image"[8] – the overdetermined regimes of visual representation which reduce and commodify the subject – instead focusing on Jarman's expansive visuality through a totalizing Universal Blue. Created by Jarman as he lost his sight from AIDS-related causes, Blue plunges us along with Jarman into the "fathomless blue of bliss," disarticulating the visual's organization of coherent subjectivity and prompting what Ara Osterweil calls an "embodied vision," forcing us to encounter our "radical contingency" in the world.[9] DiPofi argues that, in this final film, Jarman's perception of a kinship beyond the limits of the visible allows him to eschew the overdetermined representation of two contemporaneous crises – AIDS and the Bosnian genocide. Not beholden to visual regimes of representation which reduce and Other both the refugee and the person with AIDS against the normative English subject, Jarman affirms an ontological kinship between himself and the Bosnian refugee, recognizing their differences, yet acknowledging their mutual marginalization by the dominant logics of capitalism, nationalism, and imperialism.

This issue concludes with a number of book reviews. Mike Goemaat discusses Amanda Lotz's Netflix and Streaming Video: The Business of Subscriber-Funded Video on Demand, an analysis of the continuously evolving nature of subscriber-funded streaming platforms, and its fundamental restructuring of the business behind mass media entertainment. Relatedly, Jackie Maldonado reviews Reasserting the Disney Brand in the Streaming Era: A Critical Examination of Disney+ by Robert Alan Brookey, et al. This work postulates the Disney+ platform, along with Disney's many high-profile acquisitions, as a portable articulation of "Disney magic," interconnecting the various Disney enterprises as a totalizing brand expression across many IPs, theme parks, and platforms. Anushka Kartha, conversely, discusses "The Indian Indie," an independent cinema that posits itself as a glocal response to the Bollywood monolith in her examination of Ashvin Devasundaram's Indian Indies: A Guide to New Independent Indian Cinema. Our reviews round out with Hailee Bartz's review of Adam Lowenstein's Horror Film and Otherness, a dive into the social relationality of horror films as both an expression of othered anxieties and its reflection of material reality in a sociological, psychological, and anthropological manner.

Being just another cumulative point in our journal's history; Spectator is now at the excess-limits of our introduction. We leave with one last question: what's left after all our talk of accumulation and excess? While histories of exploitation often focus on the literal stripping of peoples, land, and culture for excess gain, critical approaches have the unique opportunity to build from nothing. The crimes of colonial legacies/realities must be acknowledged and accounted for, but to stop inspection there is to cast a perpetual, defining lens on subjects who possess far richer histories than their victimhood. The following papers address these classic issues of accumulation in ways that celebrate excessive ideas and accumulations into images and presence, a series of overflows that we hope floods these traditional legacies of lack.

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Ryan Williams is a student in the Cinema and Media Studies Master's Program at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. He received a bachelor's degree in Film, Television and Digital Media from UCLA. His interests include new media formats, lost and compromised cinema, and archiving.

Notes

1 Osburn, Skyler. First Forum 2022: Accumulation and Excess (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2022).
2 ibid
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4 Osburn, First Forum 2022: Accumulation and Excess
5 Harvey, David. "The 'New' Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession." Socialist Register, 40 (2004).
6 Berger, John. Bento's Sketchbook. London: Verso, 2011.
7 Berger, John. "Some Notes about the Art of Falling: Charlie Chaplin--Excerpt." British Film Institute, 2020. https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/archives/john-berger-notes-on-charlie-chaplin
8 Jarman, Derek. Blue. New York: Overlook Press, 1994. 11.
9Ara Osterweil, Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 17, 12.