

Late-stage capitalism in the works of George Saunders

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DIPLOMSKI RAD

Late-stage capitalism in the works of George Saunders

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Abstract

The aim of this paper was to explore the phenomenon of late-stage capitalism, which has gained major publicity in recent discourse, but the term itself has a fifty-year history. The term encompasses many issues, among which are the commercialization of culture, molding together of the economic and cultural spheres, supremacy of technology and transnational corporations, and the alienation and exploitation of workers. Since the impact of late-stage capitalism is extremely pervasive, the literary world is also impacted by it, which is very much visible in the works of George Saunders, both in their subject matter and their formal aspects. Saunders exposes the greed of those in power and showcases the powerlessness of the average person to fight back against a system that seems to have no alternative in sight. The reading analyzes works from all of his short story collections, pinpointing “Sea Oak”, among others, as a vessel for critique of the late-capitalist-controlled media that dumbs down the language and provides a distraction to the uneducated in their pursuit to potentially become more active and critical citizens. Saunders’ use of first-person limited point of view in his narrative is used to expose the false promises of more freedom and choices at a time when hyper-individualism impacts the society as a whole. It also explores the postmodern workplace that Saunders so deftly characterizes by using corporate doublespeak and creating situations where readers feel for the protagonists who have their personal freedoms stripped away and are vulnerable to the threat of replacement.

Key words: late-stage capitalism, commodification, commercialization, doublespeak

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1. Introduction

George Saunders is an American writer best known for his short stories that depict near-future dystopias that feel eerily plausible when looking at present day world developments. I will argue that many of these developments, such as difficult living conditions for the average person and exploitative workplaces, are products of late-stage capitalism. Taking that into consideration, I will analyze the works of George Saunders to see how this development in capitalism impacted his writing considering the content, but also the formal elements. The first part of this paper will tackle the origins of the term ‘late-stage capitalism’, when it first gained prominence and how the meaning has evolved to the present day. I will investigate its impact on the social, political, and cultural spheres, with additional focus on the literary form, connecting late capitalism to postmodernism as was first done by Fredric Jameson. As Saunders himself has published essays which criticize the recent developments when it comes to the Western media, I will begin the analysis of the late-stage capitalist language with his views on the matter, which will further inform the decisions he makes when writing fiction. The language of the late-stage capitalism era is one that is characterized by jargon and corporate doublespeak, with the idea to hide the truth behind a veil, presenting only what is deemed necessary in the pursuit of the most important capitalist goal, which is always profit. The heightened lyricism of modernism, which involves a utopian view of the world and uses embellished language full of rich and vivid descriptions that is far removed from the language of large corporations that dominates the linguistic landscape, is seen as not being adequate for transmitting critical messages about topics that are salient in today’s society, which is why embracing the bombastic and exploitative language of late-stage capitalism in Saunders’ writing is the only way to expose all of the absurdities that plague our society. I will continue with the exploration of the narrative point of view, arguing that Saunders employs the first-person limited perspective to explore the late-stage capitalism promises and realities of extended personal freedoms and choices. Saunders’ favorite playground to explore these issues is the postmodern workplace, where coming in and just doing your job is not enough because employers expect a certain type of performance that includes complete emotional dedication, trying to present the workplace as a second home, but the workers are the ones who only get the scraps. Older people are also victims of the postmodern workplace. They cannot just enjoy old age because the support system is basically nonexistent.

2. Late-stage capitalism

Fredric Jameson, in his seminal work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, claims that “the general use of the term *late capitalism* originated with the Frankfurt School” (xviii). The Frankfurt School was a group of researchers that implemented Marxist theory in a “form obsessed with the critique of capitalist society as a system with an economic base and with a superstructure and ideology which were dependent on that base” (Wiggershaus, 5). They identified a society that is extremely alienated and unfair towards the working class that is exploited and humiliated (Wiggershaus, 6). Jameson himself highlighted two prominent features salient in the works of Adorno and Horkheimer, who were part of the Frankfurt School, “(1) a tendential web of bureaucratic control (in its more nightmarish forms, a Foucault-like grid *avant la lettre*), and (2) the interpenetration of government and big business” (xviii). As Jameson rightly notes, the definition of the term *late capitalism* has morphed since these early days, considering the fact that the two prominent features highlighted by him have just become a part of regular life, something that no one really even notices anymore (xviii). The newer understanding of the system and what it represents includes:

the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now global scale. (Jameson, xix)

Another important figure in the popularization of the term *late capitalism* is Ernest Mandel, whose PhD dissertation from 1972 titled *Der Spätkapitalismus* was translated into English in 1975 as *Late Capitalism*. He provides the theory of late capitalism that claims that there is “no arbitrary separation of the social or socio-political sphere from the economic sphere (that) can provide a satisfactory answer to the question of the overall nature of late capitalism” (525). This ties into the idea of the dominating technocratic ideology of this period that proclaimed “the ability of experts to overcome all explosive conflicts and integrate antagonistic social classes into the existing social order” (Mandel, 525). This meant that technology, which became a huge factor in the economic world, was also supposed to be the factor that brings about peace and unity, which is in reality, of course, very far from the truth. There is no such thing as a

“collective societal subject” (Adorno, 14), that is just the idea that is being pushed in hopes of coercing people into the belief that there is no alternative. The push for technological advancement is often what brings forth hazard for humans, since the driving force behind that push is profit, often at the expense of people’s health. Mandel provides the example of synthetic products pushed to the market by the chemical industry without proper studies of potential biological and ecological risks (578). This is a major problem of late capitalism, where a very small ruling class has the ability to determine public interests. Technology is also connected to Mandel’s idea of ‘long waves’ of capitalism, where technological advancements mark significant points in the evolution of capitalism. The first wave was the wave of the industrial revolution, from the end of the 18th century to 1847, followed by the long wave of the first technological revolution, characterized by the generalization of the machine-made steam engine, up to the 1890s, with the long wave of the second technological revolution, marked by the generalized application of electric and combustion engines, lasting to the Second World War. The long period after is characterized by generalized control of machines through electronic apparatuses and is the wave of the third technological revolution (Mandel, 121). This is the period synonymous with the term *late capitalism*, which would mean that it just presents a phase, or a new development, in the history of capitalism, during which the great forces of the world have experienced rapid development by means of modern technology, and also because of the fact that they were no longer bogged down by the costs and sacrifices of the Second World War. This technologic development also brought about the reorganization of international relations, decolonization of colonies and laid the groundwork for the emergence of a new economic world system (Jameson, xx). The previously mentioned member of the Frankfurt School Theodor Adorno also touches on the nature of technology in relation to this period, and while he claims that technology itself is not to blame for the negative developments in modern society, he says it is rather that the “interconnectedness with the social circumstances in which it is embedded has become so fateful” (8). By that, he is referring to the fact that the ruling few have used technology for nefarious purposes, namely, to create weapons of mass destruction, dominate and centralize.

Jameson adopts Mandel’s framework of ‘long waves’ of capitalism and the idea that this *late capitalism* stage is a period of an all-encompassing nature. As stated earlier, Mandel claimed

that there is no distinction between the socio-political and economic sphere, while Jameson's focus is on the fact that the terms *cultural* and *economic* essentially become the same, and that late capitalism is also just a literal translation of the term postmodernism (xxi). Postmodernism represents the idea of certain things ending, such as the welfare state, social democracy, and the modernist movement, urged on by the social and the psychological transformations of the 1960s (Jameson, xx). That is the time of many social movements, for civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, the environment and anti-war. Economic developments continue at their own pace, not stopping because of what the masses are trying to achieve, and they nevertheless end up influencing all aspects of human experience as they shape the world around us. This time of questioning, skepticism, defiance, and an 'anything goes' mentality contrasts the more rigid and hierarchical construction of modernism, but it ultimately fails to provoke and scandalize since it becomes institutionalized and "at one with the official or public culture of Western society" (Jameson, 4). The culture of the postmodern experiences "an immense dilation of its sphere (the sphere of commodities)" (Jameson, x), with culture itself becoming a product that is so commodified that it marks the victory of the economic sphere and capital over culture. Jameson brings forth the argument that there is an extreme economic urge to produce more and more new goods, which means that aesthetic innovation and experimentation becomes part of the system funded by foundations, grants, and other forms of patronage, giving architecture as the prime example, with "extraordinary flowering of the new postmodern architecture grounded in the patronage of multinational business, whose expansion and development is strictly contemporaneous with it" (5). Richard Brosio also agreed with the proposition that postmodernism acts as a "superstructural manifestation of the economic dynamics of late capitalism – a condition characterized by multinational corporations, (...), the threat of globalism and totalism as the result of capitalism's colonization of everyday life by advertisement and consumer goods that threatens to make each and every person in the world an addict" (4). This description will also be very clear in the readings of Saunders' short stories because many of them are set in conditions that are described above, often to a slight level of absurdity and satire, but more often than not something that can definitely be imagined as a potential future considering the course that the world is set on under the guidance of the machinery of late-stage capitalism.

As late capitalism is something that does not, and cannot, have one definition that can even hope of encompassing all of its aspects and impacts, different authors have different takes on it, sharing similarities in their definitions and adding their own spins to the whole interpretation of term. In more recent times, the terms *late capitalism* and *late-stage capitalism*, which are generally used interchangeably, have gained significant prominence in different forms of publication and on the internet. It has become a term of very broad meaning, with Annie Lowrey of *The Atlantic* describing it as “a catchall phrase for the indignities and absurdities of our contemporary economy, with its yawning inequality and super-powered corporations and shrinking middle class”. In the same *Atlantic* article, Jameson himself comments on the rise of popularity of the term that he has brought to prominence in the English-speaking world, saying that mentioning capitalism in any shape or form used to be taboo, while it has almost become mainstream to throw the term around today. Looking at Google trends for the popularity of Google searches for the terms *late capitalism* and *late-stage capitalism*, we can see a clear rise in their popularity throughout the 2010s, probably as a result of the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Occupy Wall Street movement that it spurred in 2011, when people took to the streets because the government chose to bail out the banks that caused the crisis itself. More and more people started to think critically of the enormous wealth inequality and injustices that are, and have been, very much a reality of society.

If we have established the colossal impact of late capitalism on practically every aspect of the modern world, including the economic, socio-political, and cultural spheres, it is also important to extend our interest on its influence on literary form, to give us a theoretical framework for critical reading of Saunders’ work. If we once again turn our attention to Jameson, he analyzes the difference in the highmodernist and postmodernist moment by contrasting Van Gogh to Warhol, finding “the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal features of all the Postmodernisms” (9). Another feature of postmodern culture he adds is the “waning of affect” (10), by which he means the end of the bourgeois ego, but also the end of unique and personal style and the liberation from feeling (15). What also characterizes the style of postmodernism is the linguistic fragmentation, meaning that there is no norm that writes strive to fulfill, but there is rather “a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity”, where the “faceless

masters continue to inflect the economic strategies which constrain our existence, but they no longer need to impose their speech”, which leads to “the postliteracy of the late-capitalist world” (Jameson, 17). However, this part of Jameson’s claims might have been accurate at the time of his writing, but it does not paint the linguistic framework of today’s society, which is dominated by the rise of corporate doublespeak, where the faceless masters do indeed impose a type of speech and control its production and usage. Corporate doublespeak is language that corporations deliberately use to make the bad seem good, and to find a way to shift blame and responsibility away from themselves. For example, if companies decide to lay off some workers, it will be described as streamlining production, or as offering their workers a career-change opportunity. In essence, it promotes a way of communicating messages that obscures true meanings and requires a deeper, more critical look at what we are presented in the public sphere on a day-to-day basis. Another crucial feature of postmodern culture is pastiche. Pastiche is “the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language” (Jameson, 17). This imitation is done by “the cannibalization of all the styles of the past” (Jameson, 18), which can be well seen in rap and hip-hop music, and also in cinema by way of the nostalgia film. It is also a part of the general intertextuality, which plays a major role in postmodern works, including Saunders’ first novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

Gabriel Chin, in his reading of late-stage capitalism in the works of Murakami and DeLillo, finds that both authors use a layer of mediation that “obscures a private reality hidden beneath”, meaning that “reality is that which is private, that which is left unexpressed by any given possible form of public expression” (3). This presents an intriguing idea, in that the conditions in the real world, where images, newsreels and advertisements dominate the media landscape and drape a veil over what is actually happening in the world, which is then also applied to how literary works are written. Everything has to go through a filter of commodification in order to reach the audience, as the corporations decide very deliberately what will be presented to the public, so the truth is never explicitly present, but rather hidden behind the facts that are deemed appropriate to be shown to people to elicit the reaction that is wanted. This is one of the ways in which late capitalism tries to mold identities and retains the status quo.

3. The language of late-stage capitalism

In his essay “The Braindead Megaphone”, which is part of the collection of essays with the same name, Saunders offers his vision of how language as a whole has evolved in the postmodern American society. This is a very telling essay in helping us understand the way Saunders writes about media in his fiction. He criticizes the development of language use in media, the downfall of which, according to Saunders, began at the time of the O.J. Simpson trial, continued through the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and escalated during the war in Iraq, following 9/11. As the title of the essay and the essay collection suggests, the megaphone – presenting the media that is loud and omnipresent and is “the composite of the hundreds of voices we hear each day that come to us from people we don’t know, via high-tech sources” (10) – has gone braindead, and with it, has taken the curious part of help in deciding what is moral and intelligent (6). He also makes the argument that “stupid, near-omnipresent media makes us more tolerant toward stupidity in general” (7). Mass media creates narratives and tells stories, but those stories and narratives are lacking because of the nature of mass media, which requires a rapid output of content to a huge audience. This means there is no time and effort to produce content that is linguistically rich, intelligent, and thought-provoking. The driving forces behind this are market interests and profit. The large media conglomerates control our understanding of the world, bombarding us with countless loud barrages of information, because, at the end of the day, their main gift is the “ability to compel people to continue to watch them” (*The Braindead Megaphone*, 12), meaning that the whole truth is far from their priority. The end product is something that is deemed acceptable for the purposes of making money, while perhaps presenting a resemblance of the truth.

The language of late capitalism is also riddled with jargon and corporate-speak. As Kelly comments on this, as opposed to modernism: “the writer’s distance from this corrupted language is no longer assumed: the old modernist recourse to a heightened lyricism, rather than offer a way out, often points in this fiction to an irresponsible aestheticism” (202). By this, he is referring to the fact that, for writers such as Saunders, it is no longer an option to have their style of writing so different to the prevailing discourse of the current capitalist age, as it is far too disconnected to the world situation at large, as the dominant discourse reaches a point where it is

very difficult to find and adopt a critical distance to it. Because of this, this style of discourse is embraced, because it is the only way to expose its absurdity and exploitation of human emotion. This is also interesting to discuss because Saunders himself admitted that the move from a minimalistic and modernist writing style in his early writing career to a more typically postmodern style later helped him a lot in finding and developing his authorial voice, which could have been an influence on his treatment of modernist and postmodernist style in his short stories, as the modernist one did not provide him with a way to deal with the world in a way which he found appropriate. An example of the heightened modernist lyricism can be found in the “The Falls”, a short story from Saunders’ collection *Pastoralia*. The character representing this style is Aldo Cummings, who is described as “an odd duck who, though nearly forty, still lived with his mother” (176). His appearance and demeanor are in opposition to what is going on in his head. He considers himself a struggling artist, with thoughts running through his mind that sound like this: “The ephemeral loss of the day to the fleeting passages of time. Preening time. Preening nascent time, the blackguard. Time made wastrels of us all, did it not, with its gaunt cheeks and its tombly reverberations and its admonishing glances with bony fingers” (179). The part of the story from his point of view is written entirely in such a manner, with a palpable sense of ridicule for the lyricism that Aldo tries to produce for completely inane things. He also dreams of being one day discovered and famous for his work, but his reasons for this are very superficial, as he states that he wants to “buy Mom a Lexus and go with someone leggy and blowsy to Paris” (184). On the other side of the story, we have Morse, who is described by Cummings as “a dullard in corporate pants trudging home to his threadbare brats in the gathering loam, born, like the rest of his ilk, with their feet of clay thrust down the maw of conventionality, content to cheerfully work lemminglike in moribund cubicles while comparing their stocks and bonds” (184). Morse is just a regular guy trying to get through life. He is a typical member of the late-capitalist society in that he is a helpless cog in the overall machinery. He daydreams about having some sort of significance but has convinced himself that he is not capable of much more than working for a faceless corporation and barely getting by. This is the reality for a great many people in society, and it is what Cummings is mocking, but when push comes to shove at the climax of the story, when two girls are about to drown, it is Morse who jumps into the water, knowing that he is doomed. Cummings ends up being a coward when faced with a situation for which he could have been remembered for doing something significant. If we extend this to our

original argument, that Saunders is exposing the heightened lyricism of modernism through the character of Cummings, we can infer the potential cowardice that its usage leads to, because it is so out of touch that it contributes absolutely nothing to the situation, except for pure fantasy. Morse, the character representing the postmodernist society, is, despite all his faults, at least a functioning member of the society and someone who was sparked to action when it was truly necessary. You have to leave the earlier tradition of writing because you will get nowhere by picturing and dreaming of a utopian dreamscape, where it has no legitimate foothold, even if the present situation has brought about the end of personal and unique style, as Jameson put it. On the other hand, this viewpoint could also be understood as acceptance of the status quo, as any and all imagination of a different and better world is shut down as being unrealistic, with the only way forward being pure pragmatism that, even though more grounded in reality, does not really provide any alternative in the long run.

If we look for further evidence of Saunders' use of heightened lyricism, we can look at the story "Escape from Spiderhead", from the 2013 short story collection *Tenth of December*. It is a story set in a dystopian world where prisoners are used as test subjects for drugs that can influence human emotion. One of them is our protagonist Jeff, who witnesses many horrors during testing and sees other subjects die, before he commits suicide in the end, to save Rachel from her demise. In his final moments, after administering drugs to himself and hitting his head on the corner of a table, his thoughts sound like this: "Night was falling. Birds were singing. Birds were, it occurred to me to say, enacting a frantic celebration of day's end. They were manifesting as the earth's bright-colored nerve endings, the sun's descent urging them into activity" (81). We can see the similarity in the scene that both Jeff here, and Cummings in the prior story, are painting. In this instance, this heightened style is again used as a sort of escapism and detachment from reality in Jeff's final moments. It must be said that the scene presented here has a definite cathartic quality to it, since Jeff's actions are done to protect another person, which is the opposite to what can be said about Cummings in "The Falls". At the same time, if we look at the bigger picture, Jeff's suicide will probably lead to no change in the system as a whole. It is doubtful that Rachel's faith is changed as well, and Jeff himself can probably be very easily replaced by another, since they are no more than lab rats to the scientists. If we employ this point of view to our reading of Jeff's dramatic final thoughts, there is again that hint of Saunders'

parody of the high-modernist style, with all of these grand and poetic thoughts misrepresenting the reality of the situation, being nothing more than pure aestheticism.

Kelly also adds another important point on language in the most recent period of capitalist development:

Marketing and advertisement have served to render as generic cliché the most lyrical and potentially meaningful moments of human lives. If authenticity can be defined as that which cannot be commodified, then it appears that nothing even remotely public can by now remain authentic. And language is inescapably public, as the contemporary writer knows well, a fact that presents nagging problems for a literature that wants to be original, affective, humanly and politically vital. (202)

We do not have to look far to see examples of this, with the controversial 2017 Pepsi advertisement¹ serving as a great example, when Kendall Jenner seemed to have solved the entire outcry of then widespread protests around the USA by a single can of soda. This seemingly banal example showcases plain and simple how these large multinational corporations are trying to simplify significant social events, turning even those into an opportunity to make more money, with no regard to presenting the situation in a manner that is truthful and honest. Kelly's vision could also be tied to Jameson's ideas of the pastiche, since everything that had prior artistic value is now used in the very lowest levels of content that is marketing and advertisement. Everything from the past is being transformed into something that can be commodified, losing its value and meaning.

In order to add to Kelly's point that everything public is commodified, including language, we can look at the story "I CAN SPEAK!TM", from Saunders' third short story collection *In Persuasion Nation*. It is a story about a product that is being marketed as "an innovative and essential educational tool" (*In Persuasion Nation*, 1). The product is a mask that is put over a face of a baby or a toddler giving it the power to communicate with its parents in language that resembles that of the adults. This in itself presents language as the "output of a commercial product" (Hayes-Brady, 34), meaning that it is commodified and commercialized in

¹ In the advertisement, Kendall Jenner leaves her photoshoot to join a protest that is clearly a part of the Black Lives Matter movement. During the protest, she hands a can of Pepsi to a police officer as a type of peace offering, to which the officer smiles and the whole crowd cheers.

the most literal sense. As the Product Service Representative Rick Sminks writes in the letter that is a response to a customer complaint about the product, “our product cannot read your baby’s mind” (1). That means that the phrases the toddler utters are limited to what the company programs into the product. The whole thing is just an illusion to please the adults who are not satisfied by the fact that their six-month-old baby cannot talk to them, which is indicative of the society we live in. It shows, in the slightly twisted fashion of George Saunders’ writing, that nothing is truly sacred to the ever-expanding consumerist society, not even the most innocent period of human life. An interesting connection could be made to some actual foreign language courses that accept babies from three months of age as their students. It is a far more benign example from the one in the story, but it shows a growing tendency in trying to commercialize language and language learning. Along with the fact that the language produced by the product is pre-programmed, and therefore highly limited, the same thing could be said about the language of Rick Sminks, who sounds more like an infomercial than an actual human being. As Hayes-Brady notes: “language, then, is reduced by commerce to a network of marginally postinfantile utterances, limiting communication to a blankly narcissistic, unreflective monologue” (36). The way Saunders parodies the speech of the salesman is very reminiscent to his metaphor of the braindead megaphone, which he discussed earlier. This is the limited, superficial, and dishonest language of advertising to which late-stage capitalism has led us. Language that is being sold to us that is so limited in its scope leaves us very little room to work with in order to create new and original thoughts, which is indeed the idea behind it, starting from the youngest possible age, so that as many people as possible are in line and perpetuate and reverberate this type of communication.

When it comes to Saunders’ fiction, one thing that is unmistakably a staple of his work is peculiar naming of things and concepts, by which “many names have been compounded and suffered a Madison Avenue adspeak makeover” (Cheney, 85). This involves names such as CivilWarLand, VeriTalk, ChatEase, SifterBoyDeLux, KnightLyfe and FunTimeZone. This is a testament to the earlier point of the lack of originality in the language of today. The idea of this limited vocabulary is just to find something catchy and marketable to make it as profitable as possible. Everything is also capitalized, trying to give it a certain air of importance. There are Separate Areas, Reserve Crackers, Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Forms, Employee

Agreements and many more. None of these things are very interesting on their own, but they are given these names that make them sound more than they are, in an attempt to make everything in the corporations very formal and serious. This practice of capitalization is also very prevalent when it comes to the often-used corporate doublespeak. Doublespeak can be defined as “language that pretends to communicate but really does not”, and as “language which makes the bad seem good, something negative appear positive, something unpleasant appear attractive, or at least tolerable” (Lutz, 4). Another way to describe doublespeak is as “the misuse of words by implicit redefinition” (Herman, 1). What is inescapably a part of corporate doublespeak is the “ability to lie, (...), and to get away with it; and the ability to use lies and choose and shape facts selectively, blocking out those that don’t fit an agenda or program” (Herman, 3). This shapes a corporate landscape where you can never quite be sure of the true message that is being transmitted, as there is usually a more nefarious meaning behind the seemingly benign language that is actually used. “Pastoralia” is filled with examples of this, such as Staff Remixing, which is an attempt to dance around the fact that workers are extremely expendable and are getting fired. There is also the Disposal Debit, which hides behind a very regular sounding term the fact that workers must pay to have their feces taken away. This practice of hiding the true meaning of words behind vague euphemisms is very much a reality in today’s corporate late-stage capitalist world. Commenting on these practices in present-day workplaces, Molly Young adds that “if everyone agreed to use language in the way that it is normally used, to communicate, the workday would be two hours shorter” (“Garbage Language”). This reveals that the goal in the workplace is definitely not to be efficient and straight-forward in language use, but rather to maintain an image and shape the way workers think. It is inevitable that “language becomes the means by which we shape reality and the means by which we communicate our perceptions of reality to others” (Lutz, 2). This is why dishonest and deceiving corporate doublespeak can be more dangerous than it may appear at first, because it forces the workers to use it to become a part of the workplace, which leads to the normalization of language that hides the truth.

4. First-person limited narrative perspective

One of the essential building blocks of storytelling is the narrative point of view. Saunders’ choices of narrative points of view in his stories, particularly his usage of first-person

limited perspective, point to certain tendencies that are going on in the world around us, in particular the increased promise of individual freedom and increased focus on oneself, leading to hyper-individualism. When discussing hyper-individualism, Huang et al take a look at the generation of people born between 1974 and 1994, whom they dub Generation Nexters, and examine the patterns that are shown in their transition into adulthood, a transition that “is marked by an emphasis on independence, including accepting responsibility for one’s self, making decisions and becoming financially independent from parents” (42). At the time of the publication of the article in 2010, 40% of the members of this generation have still lived and the family home and 73% of them have received financial help from their parents in the last 12 months, meaning that they still share close ties to their families, but also that they are accustomed to being the center of both their and their families’ worlds (Huang et al, 42). As a whole, 68% of them agree that their generation is unique, which makes sense if we look at them as a perhaps more sheltered and child-oriented generation than those before them. This is a major factor in the rise of hyper-individualism among them, who today form the bulk of people of working age.

These developments owe a lot to a political ideology that is closely tied to that of late-stage capitalism, and that is neoliberalism. Although they cannot be used interchangeably as terms, neoliberalism and late-stage capitalism share many of their ideologies and beliefs. According to David Harvey, the key characteristics of the neoliberal framework are “strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2), with the defining trait of “the financialization of everything” (33). These characteristics lead to late-stage capitalist practices of fervent competition and an overwhelming feeling of being always in an ‘every man for himself’ situation, since any kind of support network is almost non-existent. This grows into a completely different way of thinking and living, where you have to succeed on your own, which has, among other things, led to a huge influx of people trying to make it by being entrepreneurs or influencers, as they are seeing “people become famous because of who they are, rather than what they do” (Huang et al, 43). Harvey also provides insight into how neoliberalism has been so successful in leading to “incredible concentrations of wealth and power that now exist in the upper echelons of capitalism [that] have not been seen since the 1920s” (119). It is done through the usage of “wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the

grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power” (119). Those concepts are constantly pushed, and if taken at face value, they represent things that should benefit an individual, but reality tells a far different tale. In Saunders’ writing, we can look at these concepts through the usage of first-person limited perspective as the extension of these promises of increased individualized freedom and liberties, and exactly how these promises are actually false. The first-person perspective provides us with the closest and most intimate insight into the limitations to freedom and choice that a lot of ordinary people face, and these are exactly the type of people that dominate Saunders’ narratives. The ruling classes bring empty promises of more individual rights to get people’s support, and then pull the rug out from under them. This is how, for example, we get to experience Jeff’s point of view in “Escape from Spiderhead”, as he is not only stripped of his physical freedom, but also of his freedom to feel, as his emotional state is altered with the push of a button that administers different drugs into his system. This lack of freedom and choice is also quite evident in many stories that have workers as protagonists, who are stuck in positions they cannot get out from because there is simply no alternative. Saunders puts us into the shoes of the average worker, to lay bare the realities of neoliberalism, and to see how regular individuals, to whom many promises are made by the ruling classes, always draw the short end of the stick. We get to see it from the eyes of the protagonist in “Pastoralia”, who is stripped of his freedom to communicate freely, or from Mary’s perspective in “Downtrodden Mary’s Failed Campaign of Terror”, where she is forced to give up the freedom that should come with old age. Saunders tackles the topic of limiting an individual’s freedom and liberty of choice in a multitude of ways, as can be seen from just these few examples, and he does it so successfully by giving us deeper insight into his protagonists through the use of the first-person narrative. This insight is particularly relevant at a time when we can see blatant examples of the limitations of worker’s rights by some of the world’s largest corporations, such as Amazon and Tesla, with their illegal union-busting efforts being successful.

“Sea Oak” is another story from Saunders’ short story collection *Pastoralia*, and it can serve as more proof for multiple issues that were discussed earlier. It is a story about a family that lives in a housing development named Sea Oak. Behind the beautiful sounding name lies “just a hundred subsidized apartments and a rear view of FedEx” (93). Our unnamed narrator works in a strip club named Joysticks that is themed around airplanes, with workers being Pilots

for their guests, which presents one of the typical performance-dominated workplaces that Saunders is famous for. The workplace is also infested with corporate speak and naming of concepts to make them seem important. Each worker has a Cute Rating that is given by guests, and “the minute your Cute Rating drops you’re a goner” (92). This concept of rating people on an arbitrary scale is already becoming a reality in our performance-driven world ruled by technological advancement. Suzhou, a city in China, launched an application that rates the conduct of their citizens based on their behavior in society, with the government giving and taking points based on good or bad conduct (Alonzo, *TechTimes*). This was an attempt towards even more control by those in power. After public outcry, the idea was eventually scrapped after a short period of usage, but the situation still shows that even though we live in a society where almost every one of our moves is monitored, there are still attempts to further this control and limit personal freedoms. Who knows how many attempts it will take before the ruling classes soften people enough to make this idea reality in one form or another, and not just something that is a feature of a dystopian society from the mind of a writer such as Saunders. This is a testament to the fact that Saunders has an almost prophetic tendency to conjure up dystopian capitalist worlds that are, at least at the moment of writing, just outside the realm of possibility, but that resemble reality more and more as time goes on.

Another relevant aspect “Sea Oak” touches upon is the world of media. In a scene from the story, the narrator’s sister and cousin, Min and Jade, are watching television while nursing their babies. The show they are watching is named *How My Child Died Violently*, a talk show that features parents of children that died in horrible ways. To paint a picture of the kind of show this is, the show’s host “explains that last week’s show on suicide, in which the parents watched a reenactment of their son’s suicide, was a healing process for the parents, then shows a video of the parents admitting it was a healing process” (“Pastoralia”, 94). Saunders doubles down on the absurd television shows in the story by also introducing *The Worst That Could Happen*, “a half-hour of computer simulations of tragedies that have never actually occurred but theoretically could” (“Pastoralia”, 107). Both of these examples showcase the type of entertainment that is very problematic in the present moment. The content that is provided does not serve to enrich the human experience, but rather it is just pure entertainment at its lowest, exploiting basic human emotions. Min and Jade, who are presented as typical consumers of such

content, are trying to study for their GEDs to perhaps get out of the housing development that is dangerous for them and for their children, but the television content provides is a big distraction to the uneducated, who are lacking the critical approach to what is presented to them. The media wants exactly this, to keep the lack of education by bombarding the masses with constantly loud and intrusive material. As Michael Trussler puts it, the situation seems to “indicate a culture industry bent on sublimating the public’s ongoing economic anxiety into voyeuristic entertainment, thereby reducing the likelihood of political awareness developing” (208). This is the braindead megaphone that Saunders described in his essay, the machine that just keeps spewing out mindless content that desensitizes people to violence and keep the people preoccupied with things that turn their attention away from real problems, which gives those in power even more freedom to do what they want without any interference.

Another notable character in the story is Aunt Bernie, who appears to be most at ease with the rough situation in Sea Oak. The narrator says that “sometimes she’s so nonbitter it gets on my nerves” (“Pastoralia”, 95). She is a perfect example of a person who has been brainwashed by the late-stage capitalist system that tries to perpetuate the idea that you should be happy and grateful in your current situation, even though the situation may be extremely unsafe and unsuitable for normal, decent living. One day, this dangerous environment leads to her death, as she is literally scared to death by an intruder. However, in a supernatural turn of events, Bernie comes back from the dead in a zombie-like form, and she is completely different from how she was during her life. She becomes aware of everything she has missed out on during her life as a passive bystander. She exclaims: “What fun is life when you don’t know nothing? You can’t find your own town on the map. You can’t name a single president” (“Pastoralia”, 119). She is faced with the fact that her “previous impoverished life was one of continuous self-denial” (Trussler, 207). Because of this, her return from the dead is characterized by the pursuit of the things that the modern consumerist society offers. However, she just ends up being stuck in a similar loop that she was in before, just on the other side of things. Before, she was just a passive participant in a society that treated her poorly, and now she is an active one, but she still cannot fulfill what she now wants because things do not magically change, she is still an underprivileged member of society. She has an idea of life “derived from “the movies” and an acceptance of the American dream of upward mobility” (Trussler, 208), but this age-old mantra of the “American Dream”

has long been nothing but a lie that is perpetuated generation after generation. The late-stage capitalist era is still trying to convince us that positive thinking and hard work are enough by shaping the narrative around a small number of successful examples, but this is a myth for the vast majority of regular citizens. At the end of the story, when Bernie dies for a second time, we reach what is perhaps the most poignant and real moment of the narrative, as she comes to the narrator in his dreams with a question: “Some people get everything and I got nothing,” she says. “Why? Why did that happen?”, with the narrator adding: “Every time I say I don’t know. And I don’t.” (“Pastoralia”, 125). This is the moment that truly signifies the image of the society of today, as there are just people like Bernie who did not and could not have what she wanted in life, with there being no legitimate reason to why that is beyond the fact that the whole system is deeply flawed and unequal.

5. Saunders’ late-stage capitalist workplace

A short look at George Saunders’ biography gives us an insight into the fact that he worked many jobs in his earlier days, including being a roofer and a doorman. As is pinpointed in an interview he did with *The Guardian* in 2013, this period of poverty gave him a moral basis for the rest of his life because he got to see the reality of the American situation. He adds: “When you butt up against capitalism in that way, it leaves a scar that stays. Terry Eagleton says capitalism plunders the sensuality of the body and to get that experience first hand, I think you’ve got something to work with for the rest of your life” (Brookes). This is surely what served as a source of inspiration for many of his stories that involve dystopian and nightmarish workplaces, which are on the one hand often surreal, but always seem like a logical progression of where late-stage capitalism workplaces are headed to.

Sianne Ngai presents a take on three aesthetic categories that are “in our current repertoire best suited for grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism” (1). The categories are the zany, the interesting, and the cute, which constitute the production, circulation, and consumption processes of society. The category that is most relevant to our current discussion would be the zany, which originally “designated an activity or practice of

imitating the actions of others” (*Our Aesthetic Categories*, 8), before taking on the meaning that Ngai describes as “an aesthetic about performing as not just artful play but affective labor” (*Our Aesthetic Categories*, 1). By this, she reiterates the point made earlier that, in a postmodern workplace, work itself is not enough, you have to perform, as affective labor, “the production of affects and social relationships – comes to increasingly trouble the distinction between work and play” (*Our Aesthetic Categories*, 7). Zany is also “the only aesthetic category in our repertoire about a strenuous relation to playing that seems to be on a different level about work” (*Our Aesthetic Categories*, 7). This is interesting to consider because here we are discussing workplaces such as theme parks, which are usually viewed through the lens of play and fun, but Saunders examines them on a different level, giving us a look behind the curtain, as they are just drab workplaces very much removed from this fun factor that is projected to the outside world. The necessary performance and affective labor is, for example, present in the case of the unnamed narrator in “Sea Oak”, who must perform in a very demeaning way to try and keep his family afloat. This is also true for workers in Saunders’ theme parks, which are a repeated setting in his short stories, most notably in “Pastoralia”, the opening story in the collection of the same name. The people working there are also generally presented as more undesirable members of the society at large, as Ngai points out that “there is something strained, desperate, and precarious about the zany that immediately activates the spectator’s desire for distance” (*Our Aesthetic Categories*, 8). We see this in the way that they are treated as mere props in their workplace, rather than actual human beings, because “the zany object or person is one we can only enjoy – if we do in fact enjoy it or her – at a safe or comfortable distance” (*Our Aesthetic Categories*, 9), which is very true in “Pastoralia”, as the workers/performers are placed in large dioramas, physically separated from the visitors who are there to see them perform.

When it comes to the choice to place these stories in theme parks, Saunders commented: “if I put a theme park in a story, my prose improved, the faux-Hemingway element having been disallowed by the setting. Placing a story in a theme park became a way of ensuring that the story would lurch over into the realm of the comic, which meant I would be able to finish it” (*CivilWarLand*, 191). The theme park setting is a way to drape a veil over the real societal issues that are targeted, by shrouding everything in a thick layer of absurdity and humor. The emergence and rise in popularity of theme parks very much coincides with the emergence and

rise of late-stage capitalism, with the first theme parks opening in the middle of the twentieth century, the most famous of which is Disneyland, which opened its doors in 1955. Today, Disney World in Florida is the most visited theme park in the world. This massive popularity has led to a process that Alan Bryman names the Disneyzation of society. By that, he is referring to “the principles associated with the Disney parks which have spread increasingly beyond their gates” (28). He outlines four trends, with the most important one for our present discussion being emotional labor, which is a similar concept to the one of affective labor mentioned earlier. Bryman explains that “the behaviour of Disney theme park employees is controlled in a number of ways and control through scripted interactions and encouraging emotional labour is one of the key elements” (40). The idea is that workers should appear as if they are not even really working because they are enjoying themselves so much, but every emotion and interaction is thought of and controlled by the corporation. This is a very much a part of “Pastoralia”, a story in which the protagonist works as a full-time caveman in a Neanderthal theme park. His job as a caveman includes not speaking English, which is forbidden because he has to stay in character the entire time. His partner on the job, Janet, continuously gets mad at him for refusing to break character, even though they have not had any visitors looking in on them for the past thirteen days. The narrator even admits: “Not that I would actually verbally complain if I did have something to complain about” (1). He only speaks when he is directly asked questions by a company executive. This speaks of fear that is instilled into the character, considering they would accept anything thrown at them just to conform to the ridiculous job requirements. That fear is instilled in more ways than one. On the one hand, we have the fear of surveillance, which is a permanent fixture of the late-stage capitalist world – so much of our activity is tracked and under surveillance that we can rarely find moments where we feel safe from it, which leads to constant performance that would be appropriate if we were being watched. The other reason for his fear is revealed a little later on in the story, when we find out that one of his sons is ill and needs expensive medication, meaning that the narrator has no choice but to try and not lose the job that is barely making ends meet, to keep his son’s health situation under control. Through this, we can also get a taste of Saunders’ critique of the American healthcare system, which is driven by profit, and has no regard for human emotion and wellbeing. At one point in the story, the narrator’s wife faxes him the information that the drug Evemplorine, used to treat his sick son, has gone up in price to \$70 (34), just adding to the fact how ruthless the system is. It is a system

that, as a whole, works to dehumanize the workers in order to bend them into submission. They have to tolerate so much because they are brought to a point where they see no alternative, because capitalism strives to do exactly that, as “a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact” (Fisher, 6). Nothing is left behind, and during the process it sows the feeling of finality, which is why our narrator communicates in grunts even when there are no visitors around, and also why he has to pay the ‘Disposal Debit’, or ‘Shit Fee’, as it is called by the workers of the park (46). A memo from the higher ups informs us on why the workers must pay to have their feces taken away: “Why do you expect us to pay to throw away your poop after all you made it? Do you think your poop is a legitimate business expense? Does it provide benefit to us when you defecate?” (47). This is, of course, an exaggerated example aimed at being humorous, but it gives great insight into the minds of modern large corporations, which do not see their workers as human beings, but as a replaceable good. The same replacement happens in “Pastoralia”, when the narrator’s coworker Janet is replaced by another woman because of her subordination. The woman she is replaced with is even more fervent in her role-play, to the point where she has a permanent Neanderthal brow implant, proving that there is always someone out there who is more desperate and in need of money, making you replaceable if you will not go to the ridiculous lengths that the employers seek. All of this is a byproduct of the “contemporary workplace and the language and demands of a late-capitalist economy in which clocking on and completing a day’s work is no longer enough” (Marsh, 69).

The zaniness that Ngai mentions implies fun and humor, but it brings with it “the flailing helplessness of impotent rage” (“Our Aesthetic Categories”, 950). In the case of Louise, the narrator’s wife from “Pastoralia”, the financial and emotional duress she is brought under causes her to write to her husband: “thinking about just sawing off my arm and mailing it in”, but adding: “Ha Ha, not really, I need that arm to sign checks” (43). The situations that the late-stage capitalist system brings unto people causes rage, but it is very tough to do anything about that rage because there is no way out, the finality of the situation has set in and the only thing can be done is to accept the status quo. Another example of this rage can be found in the story “Downtrodden Mary’s Failed Campaign of Terror”, from Saunders’ first short story collection *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, where Mary, a 92-year-old woman, is forced to work because of

her financial situation, which is also a symptom of late-capitalist society. There is a trend of “pressuring millions of elder workers to stay on the job to stave off poverty”, with the reality being that “millions of Americans must toil through their elderly years just to stay afloat” (Ghilarducci & Cook, 2021). This is a concerning trend that came about because of pensions that cannot keep up with the continual increase in the price of living. Saunders brings this to the extreme, having a 92-year-old woman that has to work a physically demanding job in a museum, with a supervisor that does not treat her well on top of that, which could also be interpreted as a symptom of the global capitalist machine that is trying to spin the narrative of “greedy oldsters sucking up jobs and houses and Social Security and Medicare, leaving nothing for the next generation” (Schloredt, *Yes Magazine*). Mary is also aware of this ageism: “At ninety-two years old people assume you’re dense. They assume you don’t remember being young and have corny moral values and can’t hear well” (81). Those in power are looking to create an intergenerational conflict, which diverts attention from the ones that run the system and make the rules, pitting people against each other to keep them preoccupied with conflicts that will not change the situation at large. All these issues push Mary into trying to sabotage the exhibit she is working on, at which point she is trying to take control and says “that it feels good to finally be asserting oneself” (85), but when her sabotage is uncovered, she loses her job. This leads to her suicide attempt, as she concludes: “why prolong it, I’ve no income now” (87). The attempt turns out to be unsuccessful because of bystanders who rescue her, even though she begs for them not to. This whole sequence of events is a perfect showcase of the flailing helplessness of impotent rage. The rage that has built up in Mary turns out to be completely impotent because her plan fails, and she even cannot succeed in her suicide attempt, meaning that she is completely helpless and not in control of any part of her life.

6. Conclusion

Late-stage capitalism has undoubtedly reshaped the post-World War II society in all of its aspects, leading to the domination of information technology and transnational corporations, with technology becoming a means to control and surveil the masses. Saunders is very clear in his critique of these developments in the field of language, employing several language quirks that are quite present in the language that is used by corporations today, such as the capitalization of things and concepts, giving them an air of additional importance, and compound names of places and products that combine multiple words into awkward new terms. This a byproduct of the fact that there is no true originality today, as everything is just a retread of things said and done in the past. Neoliberalism is a political philosophy closely related to late-stage capitalism that promises more choice and greater individual freedoms, which is exposed by Saunders' choice in the narrative voice, through first-person perspectives of his protagonists, which us a deeper, more intimate look into how these promises are very far from what is happening in reality, as his characters suffer from a lack of choice and freedom, and have very little hope in escaping the difficult situations that they find themselves in. Saunders often showcases this by placing his protagonists in various workplaces, with Disneyfied theme parks being a favorite, asking employees to be performers while they are dealing with the inequalities inherent to the late-stage capitalist system, where they have little option but to remain quiet and blend in as best as possible, since the threat of replacement is always present as employers view their employees as nothing more than replaceable cogs in their machine. The protagonists that have not yet accepted the situation they are in express a certain rage that ultimately ends up being completely impotent and inconsequential. Saunders is an expert in showcasing believable stories and characters in situations that we could notice if we turned a more critical eye to the world around us, as he provides critique of salient problems in a society that has been rampaged in the pursuit of profit, doing so in his own personal satirical style that makes it possible to present these very difficult topics in a manner that is highly palatable.

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