‘Totaled City’: The Postdigital Poetics of Ben Lerner’s *10:04*

Introduction

> I'd say you were doing something pretty dangerous this time … Mixing fact and fiction ... I'd say stick to fiction, straight fiction (Carol Reed, *The Third Man*, 1949).

In Carol Reed’s film, *The Third Man* (1949), the novelist Holly Martins spends much of the film trying to find out who murdered his friend, Harry Lime. Famously, the setting is postwar Vienna, a city divided into four sectors, each under the control of either American, British, French or Soviet forces. The film follows Martins over three days, much of it shot on location, including the famous Riesenrad, or ferris wheel, in Wurstelprater. At one point Martins is invited to give a talk to a local book club on ‘the contemporary novel’. As his lecture falls apart, Martins announces that his latest work is a novel entitled *The Third Man*. This metafictionality permeates Graham Greene’s script: in one of Martins’ earlier works, *The Lone Rider of Santa Fé*, we are told that a rider hunts down a sheriff who unlawfully killed his friend. It is clear that in Martins’ version of *The Third Man*, it is Trevor Howard’s Major Calloway who is the corrupt sheriff, responsible in some way for the murder of Lime. Reed’s film, however, shows us that, in ‘reality’, it is the ‘murdered’ friend, played by Orson Welles, who is the real villain. Martins has to kill Lime himself in a shootout in the sewers beneath the city, finally confronting what his friend has done.

Greene had outlined the story to *The Third Man* in, what was at that point, an unpublished novella; the script was adapted from this version and then further edited by Greene on set. This provides one additional level to our nested narratives: Greene writes Martins who writes *The Lone Rider of Santa Fé*. Both Martins and Greene are writers in Vienna working on a novel called *The Third Man*. Yet the film is no simple dime western; like a lot of Greene’s work, it explores real-life abuses of power and corruption where the divide between good and evil is not straightforward (Brennan, 2010). And in both Greene’s and Martins’ version of

The Third Man, it is a writer of fiction who is cast as the lone rider, charged with discovering the killer. And it is the writer who finally becomes the ultimate arbiter of justice.

Reed's film hovers over Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014). It even makes an appearance at the start of the novel, watched by the narrator as Hurricane Irene bares down on a ravaged New York, a city temporarily split into its own emergency zones (2014, p. 22). Although the narrator quickly moves on to *Back to the Future* (1985), from which the novel gets its title, the inclusion of *The Third Man* (1949) is clearly meant as some kind of symbolic reference point. Just like Reed's film, *10:04* explores the creative tension between fiction and non-fiction; and just like the film, it also has a writer as its main protagonist, set in a city through which the writer's restless movement is encoded. *10:04* even has the writer delivering a lecture on the writing process, something that also occurs in Lerner's first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011). Yet while there are undoubted synergies between the first and second novel, it is also apparent that *10:04* is a far more ambitious work, both in terms of its narrative design but also critical intent, specifically in terms of time.

It is these ambitions that underpin much of what I have to say in this chapter. Crucially, I argue that *10:04* is a significant milestone in the exploration of metamodernist sensibility. Issues of authenticity and meaningful affect are never far from the surface of the novel; indeed, their discussion forms a kind of critical nucleus around which the novel's emplotment is inscribed. As the narrator states in the novel, 'Art has to offer something other than stylized despair' (Lerner, 2014, p. 93). Trying to understand what that 'something' might be is a major theme of the novel. *10:04* not only offers a powerful example of emergent metamodernist thinking in this regard; I suggest it also constitutes a significant development of these ideas and concepts, particularly in regards to cityspace and the experience of time. This chapter positions *10:04* as an overt attempt to create a new literary form through which these metamodernist specificities, namely the relationship between cityspace and time, are both inscribed and interrogated. *10:04* should therefore be understood as a kind of creative praxis, what Barbara Bolt terms a 'materialising practice', by which new and emergent

knowledge is brought to bear on existing theories and ideas (Bolt, 2004; Bolt, 2010, pp. 27-34).

The creative exploration of the city remains one of the central pillars of Lerner's approach. For Lerner, cities have become powerful metaphors for our contemporary condition; the metaphysical, emotional and ecological issues that he prioritises in his writing are overtly manifest in the large, sprawling conurbations of twenty-first-century urbanism (Hamilton, 2015, pp. 1-13). He uses the term 'totaled city' to suggest that we have reached a point of social and cultural failure in how our lives are lived. Yet there's something else here too that makes *10:04* a particularly important work. Elsewhere I argue that the ontological shifts characterised by metamodernism have also led to a reinterpretation of digitality as a distinct and separate domain (Jordan, 2019). What I term postdigitality is defined by new forms of digital and non-digital hybridity, new structures of, what Tim Ingold terms, *meshwork*, connecting embodied practice with the technological (Ingold, 2016). My chapter adopts two critical positions in this regard: first, it argues that postdigital hybridity is a key characteristic of metamodernism; and secondly, it argues that an understanding of the spatial and temporal effects of this hybridity remains at the heart of *10:04*. The work is therefore not only a metamodernist novel, but also one that offers an important and critical response to our hybridic postdigital condition. From the physicality of the page, with its grainy black and white photographs, through to the text's curiously archaic technological cadences, *10:04* offers what Lerner, writing as Lerner within his own novel, calls 'a threshold between worlds, between media' (2014, p. 43).

***10:04*: Post-Crash / Post-Postmodern**

To date Lerner has written three novels and four poetry collections. He has also published an essay, *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016), and has collaborated on three mixed-media publications with artists Thomas Demand (2015) and Anna Ostoya (2018), and film director and author Alexander Kluge (2018). Both his poetry and fiction have received notable

awards and accolades, including the Hayden Carruth prize for his fifty-two sonnets cycle, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004), and the Believer Book Award for *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011). *10:04* was shortlisted for the 2014 Folio Prize; his latest novel, *The Topeka School* (2019) was shortlisted for the 2019 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. When considering his prose, it is clear that there is a strong correlation between all three novels; however, this connection is especially evident in the first two, *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*. Each appears to be autobiographical, about a writer/poet struggling to complete a project. Both are predominantly set in cities, Madrid in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, and New York in *10:04*; and both share a backdrop of systemic dislocation: growing political unrest and the Madrid train bombings in the former, Hurricane Irene and wider concerns about ecological degradation in the latter. Anxiety about art and the value of artistic practice more generally runs through the two works (Hope, 2019, pp. 321-332). The novels, then, are significantly intertwined, even to the point where 'the unreliable narrator' of the first novel is fleetingly mentioned in the second (Lerner, 2014, p. 148). And as we'll see, this interconnection also reaches out to his non-fiction and artistic collaborations. Yet, despite these and other similarities of theme and technique, I would argue that *10:04* marks a significant development of Lerner's oeuvre. Perhaps this is best described as an intensification of style, a confidence and maturity in the way Lerner pushes and explores the experimental boundaries of his fiction.

It is the contention of this chapter that these literary and stylistic properties are a direct result of the author's critical engagement with metamodernist ontology. In other words, *10:04* has its sights not just on our enmeshment with neoliberalism; what concerns Lerner is something far more profound, namely, the emergence of a new dominant cultural logic in which our conceptualisation of space and time is fundamentally reconfigured (Jameson, 1991). Through this critical focus, *10:04* can be understood as a meditation, or exegesis, on the form and function of creativity itself in this post-postmodern world.

For Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, this new era emerged in the 2000s (2017, p. 4). The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the 9/11 attacks and the financial crisis are

all seen as key indicators of a paradigm shift in how western capitalist society is understood. Annie McClanahan, in her study of the impact of mounting levels of (unpayable) indebtedness on contemporary culture, offers a picture in which 'this sense of crisis has become both the ambient context and the manifest content of cultural production' (2017, p. 15). Such 'crisis subjectivity' (2017, p. 196), as she terms it, is based upon an uneasy relationship with neoliberalism at best, a pragmatic acceptance of an economic reality that has been revealed as unsustainable in multiple ways. The cultural, social and economic tensions that underpin these concerns are at their most overt within those cities that form the essential nodes of global capitalism; it should not be surprising then that here we also find the focus of Lerner's novels.

Writing the City

For Lerner, the city remains the essential hub, or nodal point, in contemporary life. It is the point at which the invisible forces of, what might loosely be termed, global capitalism are more readily experienced, the contradictions of neoliberalism most keenly felt and engaged with. To be in a city, then, is to be on the front line of humanity's striving for meaningful survival in the face of accumulating economic and ecological crises. Here's the narrator of *10:04* describing a celebratory meal with his agent at an expensive restaurant in New York:

> I swallowed and the majesty and murderous stupidity of it was all about me, coursing through me: the rhythm of artisanal Portuguese octopus fisheries coordinated with the rhythm of labourers' migration and the rise and fall of art commodities and tradable futures … and the mercury and radiation levels of the sashimi and the chests of the beautiful people in the restaurant - coordinated, or so it appeared, by money. One big joke cycle. One big totaled prosody (Lerner, 2014, p. 156).

For Lerner, capitalism is a form of prosody, the underlying structure or rhythmic pattern to our lives. Yet, as the narrator reflects on the enmeshment of his meal with the global

economy, he also realises that this system of living, this means of, what Heidegger called, 'being-in-the-world', is fundamentally unsustainable and therefore totaled, broken beyond repair, to the point where it no longer has any value (Bolt, 2011, p. 3). If the prosody of human existence is broken, then new forms and structures need to be written, new ways of 'being-in-the-world': for Lerner, artistic practice is not pushed aside in these times of crisis but instead takes centre stage.

Lerner, of course, is not the first writer to critically and artistically engage with the economic and social contradictions of urban living. A direct precursor to his concerns, and something that Lerner himself appears to directly draw on, is the collective of avant-garde artists who came together under the banner of the Situationist International (Sadler, 1999; Wark, 2011). Creative methodologies such as the the *dérive* and *détournement* allowed the situationists to create, what McKensie Wark calls, 'a practice of the city as at once an objective and subjective space' (2011, p. 27). *10:04* is strategically set in Manhattan, the very heart of global capitalism; the narrator spends a lot of time walking through the city; and the novel meditates on the nature of affective creativity, in particular the tension between fiction and non-fiction, authenticity and inauthenticity. Finally, underneath it all, is the narrator's obsession with, what he perceives to be, a growing ontological disconnect with the 'real' world, what Arne De Boever, in his own analysis of *10:04*, calls 'psychosis' (2018, p. 11). This final point is foregrounded by the narrator's possible diagnosis of Marfan, a genetic disorder whose symptoms include, so we're told, 'poor proprioception … a terrible neurological autonomy not only spatial but temporal' in which the brain 'can detect local texture variations, but cannot integrate that information into a larger picture, cannot read the realistic fiction the world appears to be' (Lerner, 2014, pp. 6-7).

De Boever, however, is only partly right when he describes *10:04* as finance fiction, a novel that specifically engages with 'the new economic reality that contemporary finance has produced' (2018, p. 8). Lerner's returning interest in the situated, embodied experience of 'being-in-the-world' speaks of more fundamental concerns: the words

proprioceptive/proprioception, for example, appear seven times in *10:04*, surely a high number, given the particularity of the term. Whereas Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (Ellis, 1991) and Sherman McCoy in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Wolfe, 1987) encapsulate the hedonism of financial markets in their prime, I would argue that the narrator's psychosis in *10:04* is fundamentally a response to his perceived need for embodied authenticity and moral affectivity. And it is this ontological shift, from postmodern solipsism to new forms of moral and ethical connectedness, that positions *10:04* as an important metamodernist intervention.

Metamodernism, of course, is still a nascent academic term. While it is the prefered noun for Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (2017), there are a host of other names too, including post-postmodernism, cosmodernism (Moraru, 2011) and the sui generis, digimodernism (Kirby, 2009). While Christian Moraru's cosmodernism calls for 'a new togetherness, for a solidarity across political, ethnic, racial, religious, and other boundaries' (2011, p. 5), metamodernism emphasises an in-betweenness of feeling, an oscillation between lingering postmodern anxiety and the need for ethical force and truthfulness. Yet, at its heart, is the imperative of the Anthropocene, the sense that things cannot go on as they have been if we are to survive as a species, where, as van den Akker and Vermeulen remind us, 'wealth is concentrated at the top 1 per cent of the pyramid, while rising sea levels and super storms crumble its base, where the rest of us reside in highly precarious conditions' (2017, p. 17).

In *10:04,* the city, like capitalism itself, has become hollowed out, an outmoded signifier for an age that is already past. Lerner uses the adjective 'totaled' to describe this redundancy, a condition that applies equally to the lives of individual women and men. This wider socio-cultural enmeshment, this being-in-the-world, is what Lerner is referring to when he uses the term 'totaled prosody': the cultural logic or ontology of neoliberal postmodernity (2014, p. 156). The formation of new ways of living, of new post-postmodern prosodies for the twenty-first century, is, at least in part, the responsibility of artists and writers such as Lerner,

working their ‘way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid’ (2014, p. 4).

Importantly *10:04* provides a critique of its own creation and publication; in this way Lerner offers up for analysis his creative praxis into what these new forms of prosody might actually look like. And central to this is his experimentation with autofiction. Gibbons in particular has noted the prevalence of autofiction within the wider canon of metamodernist writing (2017, pp. 117-130). By autofiction, Gibbons is referring to texts that blend autobiography and fiction as a deliberate creative technique. In the past this might have been associated with the sort of postmodern experimentation that came under the rubric of metafiction, in other words fiction that represented the constructed nature of all knowledge. Yet, with the waning of postmodernism, metafiction has become postironic, or, to use Lee Konstantinou’s term, ‘credulous’: ‘Credulous metafiction uses metafiction not to cultivate incredulity or irony but rather to foster faith, conviction, immersion and emotional connection’ (2017, p. 93). Contemporary autofiction, then, rather than denying the possibility of an objective self, seeks to reinstantiate it through an interrogation of our being-in-the-world. In other words, the focus of works such as *10:04* is as much the *process*, as the *subject*, of being, a renewed engagement, as such, with a hermeneutics of the self. *10:04* purposely locates the narrator ‘in a place, a time and a body’ (Gibbons, 2017, p. 118), a calculated affectivity that seeks an emotional and ethical connection with its readers.

Postdigital

An important aspect of this situated embodiedness is, what I shall call, postdigitality. One of the first to use the term was the composer, Kim Cascone. In an article written at the beginning of this century, Cascone argued that a new era was emerging, one in which ‘the revolutionary period of the digital information age has surely passed’ (2000, p. 12). At the heart of Cascone’s approach was an artistic disenchantment with digital technology, a sense that a new creative period had arrived in which artists were no longer willing to simply accept the perceived superiority of digital form and expression. Cascone observed that one

outcome of this was the increasing willingness of musicians to add distortion and glitches into their recordings, deliberately re-emphasising a productive and technological process that digital technology naturally erased from the listening experience. Florian Cramer calls this the rise of DIY ethics and maker culture and sees it as a critical part of our postdigital age (2018, p. 367). Indeed, for both Cascone and Cramer, the avant-garde and the radical is now associated with, what Cramer calls, a 'post-digital hacker attitude', in which the distinction between old and new media is broken down and remediated (2015, p. 20). Two of the key conditions, then, for postdigitality is both the pervasiveness *and* consequent normalisation of computationalism; in other words a complex enmeshment of digital technology with everyday life, to the point where to describe something as 'digital' becomes almost meaningless. As David M. Berry and Michael Dieter note of this postdigital condition, '[c]omputation becomes experiential, spatial and materialized in its implementation, embedded within the environment and embodied, part of the texture of life itself but also upon and even within the body' (2015, p. 3). And this enmeshment, of course, reaches outwards from the body to the very operation of market capitalism, in the form of humanless, machine-led processes such as high frequency trading and algorithmic modelling (De Boever, p. 8; O'Neil, 2016).

In *10:04* too, digital technology is all pervasive and utterly normalised, particularly within the city. In a sense, digitality in *10:04* is everywhere but also nowhere. The smartphone in particular is used incessantly across the novel, as a means of communication, a timepiece and a direction finder. The narrator's journeying across New York in *10:04* is an exploration of, and reflection on, these new forms of hybridic spaces (de Souza e Silva, 2006), characterised by the increasing entanglement of the digital and non-digital:

> So much of the most important personal news I'd received in the last several years had come to me by smartphone while I was abroad in the city that I could plot on a map, could represent spatially, the major events … of my early thirties' (Lerner, 2014, pp. 32-33.

This new hybridic condition, what Sarah Pink and Larissa Hjorth call 'online/offline' entanglement (2014, p. 496), induces a kind of sublimated anxiety within *10:04*'s narrator, a subconscious concern about its impact on how we experience the world. The narrator's condition of Marfan can be understood as a direct transference of his own anxieties concerning the technologically-mediated displacement, or cognitive dislocation, induced by his engagement with hybridic space. Whereas Jason Farman extols the virtues of the 'technological proprioception' of hybrid space (2012, p. 88), Jeff Malpas is much more circumspect (2012). Malpas describes the impact of mobile technology as engendering an intense form of individualisation, a cognitive separation from those physically around them, which results in an individual being essentially 'displaced' (2012, p. 33). Further, for Malpas, there can only be consciousness *through* place; any disruption to constructions of place will necessarily have a fundamental impact on human subjectivity (Malpas, 1999, p. 10).
In part, Marfan fits with De Boever's use of 'psychosis', in other words, a condition interpreted as a response to the frenzied contradictions of market capitalism. Yet, if psychosis offers a new kind of post-crash literary realism, as De Boever suggests, then it is one that also draws on much wider socio-cultural change, underpinned, at least in part, by the significant technological development described by Malpas. Such innovations would include the rise of the world web web, the development of mobile devices such as ipads and smartphones, and the spread of wifi and broadband access. In their turn, these have enabled further conceptual developments, including the 'internet of things' and 'smart cities' (Townsend, 2013).

10:04 is a response to this fundamental transformation in how we live our lives, a working through, a materialising practice, of these broad societal changes. By asking what remains of traditional notions of place and embodiedness in the hybridic spaces of a postdigital city, *10:04* interrogates the very things that Gibbons isolates as key characteristics of contemporary autofiction: situatedness and embodied subjectivity (2017). The author's

anxiety around his proprioception, his failing spatial and temporal awareness, is a constant theme in the novel. Yet, concurrently, the narrator is also hyper sensitised to spatial and temporal affect. Even a gaslight produces a kind of temporal vertigo: 'it was as if the little flame in the gas lamp he paused before were burning at once in the present and in various pasts, in 2012 but also 1912 or 1883, as if it were one flame flickering simultaneously in each of those times, connecting them' (Lerner, 2014, p. 67).

One of the key scenes in the novel is the narrator's encounter with Christian Marclay's art installation, *The Clock* (2010). *The Clock* is a looped 24-hour montage of film, video and television clips. All of the sequences in the montage reference a specific time in some way or other, either overtly through dialogue, or on clocks and watches; but also less obviously through everyday objects such as TV sets, microwaves, computers and pagers. Marclay has spliced these fragments together in chronological order and then synchronised the entire 24-hour loop with real time, so that 3pm in the installation will only show at 3pm, and so on. As Jane Campbell writes in her response to the artwork, '*The Clock* bears witness to time's perplexing elasticity … there is only now, and now, and now, and now - one moment endlessly giving way to another' (2018, p. 20).

Despite *The Clock's* overt foregrounding of the technological inscription of time, the narrator of *10:04* notes how it simultaneously emphasises the embodied nature of time, both individually but also as a collective experience: 'Marclay had formed a supragenre that made visible our collective, unconscious sense of rhythms of the day - when we expect to kill or fall in love or clean ourselves or eat or fuck or check our watch and yawn' (Lerner, 2014, p. 53; Horton, 2019, pp. 326-7). It is not that *The Clock* attempts to collapse the divide between the fictional and real; rather, by drawing attention to its own artificiality, the constraints of its own fiction, it brings to the fore the affective power that such fictions can have: 'As I made and unmade a variety of overlapping narratives out of [*The Clock's*] found footage, I felt acutely how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction' (Lerner, 2014, p. 54). These 'overlapping narratives' spill out into the very form and content of *10:04* itself, in which Marclay's physical installation is

transmediated into a textual encounter in the course of which the narrator begins to work on a new piece of fiction, fiction that, at that moment, we are reading. Yet this layering is also technological, in which the interplay between the video installation, the smartphone, the embodied narrator and the final printed text of the novel is emphasised. The author's anxiety around his proprioception is less about an existing medical condition and much more about these fundamental changes to how space and time are experienced. De Boever's post-crash psychosis, the mounting threat of global ecological disaster, together with the advent of ubiquitous digital technology, combine to engender new forms of hybridic prosody, to use Lerner's term, in which situatedness and embodied subjectivity are foregrounded.

What we have in *10:04*, then, is an attempt to form both a new way of thinking about, and representing, this fundamental change in ontology. In this new cultural logic, the metaphor of the network ceases to have value (Castells, 1996, p. 83); instead, Ingold's term *meshwork* becomes far more instrumental (2016, p. 83). The individual nodes of a network are independent and static; further, as Larissa Hjorth and Michael Arnold state, a network 'privileges ramified dyadic relationships, and fails to signify collectivity, emotional affect and a shared horizon' (2013, p. 12). In comparison, 'the lines of the meshwork are the trails *along* which life is lived … it is the entanglement of lines, not in the connecting of points, that the mesh is constituted' (Ingold, 2016, p. 83). In a meshwork, it is our very entanglement, our being-in-the-world, that constitutes the 'inhabited world' (Ingold, 2016). Ingold uses the term 'wayfaring' to describe this movement 'along', and it offers a powerful way of conceptualising Lerner's own practice (2016, p. 85).

> Far from connecting points in a network, every relation is one line in a meshwork of interwoven trails. To tell a story, then, is to *relate*, in narrative, the occurrences of the past, retracing a path through the world that others, recursively picking up the threads of past lives, can follow in the process of spinning out their own (Ingold, 2016, p. 93).

Unlike the formless dérive, wayfinding is all about affective, situated and embodied connections, in other words, the fundamental means by which we engage and make sense of the world. In the online/offline, postdigital city, Pink and Hjorth recognise a new variant of Ingold's term, what they call the 'digital wayfarer' (2014). Here the emphasis is on movement across the relatively new condition of digital and non-digital entanglement as 'part of the ongoingness of everyday life' (Pink and Hjorth, 2014, p. 491). It offers an interesting lens through which to consider Lerner's metamodernist style, or prosody: rather than 'digital wayfaring', however, I would suggest that 'postdigital wayfaring' would be a better term in this regard, signalling more clearly Lerner's ontological concerns that I've identified here.

If the first characteristic of postdigitality in *10:04* is the representation of digitality within the novel itself, the second is its tactical emphasis on the value of non-digital form in, what Lerner calls, 'the postcodex world' (Lerner, 2014, p. 154). Despite the normalisation of digital technology across *10:04*, the novel remains purposely 'old-fashioned' in its emphasis on small presses and the physical purity of hard-copy publication. Lerner has form here: two of his collaborative projects, *The Polish Rider* (Ostoya and Lerner, 2018) and *Blossom* (Demand and Lerner, 2015), are published through Mack, a small press specialising in hard copy publications that explore the creative synergy between text and non-textual (photographic) art. *Blossom* (2015), for example, consists of a poem by Lerner, alongside Demand's high-resolution colour photographs of cherry blossom. Although it isn't stated, the tree is actually made of paper, the photographs a subtle examination of fraudulence and authenticity, themes picked up by Lerner's poem. The photographs are spread across both sides of a French fold, sometimes with additional images hiding (and not easily visible) inside. As a result, the book encourages a form of interactivity, a physical exploration of the printed page in which embodied entanglement is explicitly drawn into the storytelling process.

These themes are equally apparent in *10:04*. Much of the book revolves around the materiality of publication, from the narrator's own work - including a novel we may or may not be reading with its inclusion of the short story, 'The Golden Vanity' - to the narrator's self-publication of *To the Future* with Roberto Ortiz. 'Virtuality' as a concept in *10:04* has an unusual duality, referring both to the extrapolated value of any object within the capitalist system (including the narrator's own hypothesised novel) as well as the more common understanding of something being rendered digitally. The effect of this synthesis is to directly equate a digital text with the workings of the market economy, while at the same time positioning the non-digital, or printed text, as something inherently immune from such contamination. Yet, crucially, Lerner does not want to wipe away digital technology; instead, *10:04* argues for new forms of creative hybridity, new assemblages of digital and non-digital entanglement. On the very last page Lerner includes a low-grade photograph of Vija Celmins', *Concentric Bearings B* (2014, p. 241). The work appears to consist of two photographs - one of the night sky and one of a plane - but this is a deliberate illusion, at least on the part of Lerner. The view of the night sky is an aquatint; that of the plane is a mezzotint. Both were images taken from magazine photographs. In the case of the plane, Celmins has translated it into a drawing before finally rendering it through the mezzotint process. This translation of image - from the physical plane, to photograph, to magazine illustration, to drawing, to mezzotint, before finally back into a digitised photograph in *10:04* - is a beautiful prosody in its own right, at the heart of which is Celmins' own artistic practice, the hand burnishing of a metal plate as part of the mezzotint process (Rippner, 2002, p. 59). As Lerner says at the very end of *The Polish Rider*, 'the verbal does not get the last word, or gets the last word, but then something else happens: the eloquence of the depiction of silence "talks" back' (Ostoya and Lerner, 2018, p. 59). In the silence of *Concentric Bearings B* lies the embodied practice of the artist, the physical inscription of handheld tools on a metal plate, before a handmade print can be taken on paper. This prosody of form, technique and non-digital/digital media, is also a prosody of embodied practice and the materiality of creative expression, a new kind of détournement for the metamodernist age; or

rather, part of the postdigital meshwork of our being-in-the-world, 'out of which we build a social world, a way of organising meaning and time that belongs to nobody in particular but courses through us all' (Lerner, 2014, p. 116).

Conclusion

> Oh Holly, what fools we are, talking to each other this way … Nobody thinks in terms of human beings. Governments don't. Why should we? (Carol Reed, *The Third Man*, 1949).

In the British version of *The Third Man* (1949) the prologue is narrated by the film's director, Carol Reed (in the American version, it is narrated by Joseph Cotton, the actor who plays Holly Martins). It is informal and direct, a personal address from the director, straight to the audience; and, of course, it adds a further level of complication to our nested sequence of narratives. From script to film to novella, *The Third Man* can be seen to offer a form of metafictionality, and, through that, a playful consideration of the affective possibilities of storytelling in which justice is finally metered out by the writer, Holly Martins.

The Third Man is one of the films that hovers over *10:04* like a guardian angel. The other, of course, is *Back to the Future* (1985). But it is *The Third Man's* metafictional exploration of creative affect and moral responsibility that, I would argue, strikes at the core of Lerner's artistic intent. If Harry Lime, in the above quote, is representative of postwar neoliberal ideology, then it is a world view that appears increasingly untenable and out of step with new forms of ethical and moral concerns. Some have called this 'new structure of feeling' metamodernism (Van den Akker and Vermeulen, 2017, p. 4); yet, whether or not one embraces the term, it is increasingly apparent that a deep, structural change has occurred in how we understand our engagement with the world - what, throughout this chapter, I've called being-in-the-world.

10:04 is one attempt at exploring how fiction might respond to this new ontology. Its playful use of a heavily autobiographical perspective, what Gibbons has termed 'contemporary

autofiction' (2017), inscribes this very praxis into the story itself. In other words, *10:04* is as much about the practice of metamodernist storytelling as it is about Ben Lerner, becoming a 'meta-contemporary text', to use Ben Davies' phrase (2019, p. 2). Two things emerge from this. The first is what I've called postdigital poetics, in other words, the form and specificity of digitality within the novel. The narrator's anxiety concerning the spatial and temporal effects of hybridic space, what I have described as the meshwork of physical and digital presence, remains a constant theme. This is reinforced through Lerner's emphasis on the embodied materiality of creative agency - the importance of the hardcopy book, and the materiality that then ensues through the physicality of making and reading. This rediscovery of an embodied imperative to our lives offers new types of prosody, to use Lerner's term, or rather, new forms of postdigital wayfinding in the world.

Second, and finally, the site of this postdigital poetics is overwhelmingly that of the twenty-first-century city for it is here where the contradictions and opportunities of our post-postmodern age are to be found. While the situationists sought new methodologies of transgressive reappropriation within the urban spaces of postwar Europe, writers such as Lerner are exploring new forms of hybridity and translation, foregrounding the situated embodiedness, the essential entanglement, that connects all our lives. As the narrator says at the very end of *10:04*, 'I am with you, and I know how it is' (Lerner, 2014, p. 240).

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