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Re-Emergent Wilderness and Waste: Matter in the Time of the Capitalocene in Stories by Franz Hohler and Andreas Eschbach

Abstract: Franz Hohler’s “Die Rückeroberung” (1982) and Andreas Eschbach’s “Quantenmüll” (2004) are speculative short narratives of material re-emergence (wilderness) and material’s original excision (waste). Within frameworks of vibrant materialism and the Capitalocene, where wilderness and waste are similarly devalued within commodity capitalism, close readings of these stories reveal the often overlooked aspects of capitalist attempts at material organization – between successfully commodified and disruptively non-commodified matter. These stories narrate the slow violence of that attempted organization and its inevitable failure. This approach reorients common conceptions of eco-utopia and eco-dystopia as various phases of capitalism’s attempts to maintain the appearance of its domination over, and organization of, material nature. Furthermore, these close readings help to clarify the distinction between the end of capitalism and the end of the world.

I

Within German-language ecological fiction, there has been a growing tendency of narratives that represent a kind of re-emergent nature that “fights back” against human society, defending itself against society’s destructive effects on “nature” itself (Sullivan 2017). Likely the two best-known narratives in this vein are the best-sellers *Regenroman* by Karen Duve (1999) and *Der Schwarm* by Frank Schätzing (2004).¹ The former represents a scenario where there is too much rain and too many slugs for the bucolic and pastoral Mecklenburg environment; the latter represents marine flora and fauna that quickly become far too active and aggressive for the equilibrium that the diffuse protagonists of scientists, industrial exploiters, and polluters had come to expect in the preceding decades. In both of these narratives there is something more-than-human acting in a way that it had not done

¹ These have also garnered a significant amount of critical attention. For example, see Dürbeck 2012; Dürbeck 2017a; Dürbeck 2017b; Goodbody.

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before, at least not recently. Both texts focus on a recent and evident, spectacular, and ultimately dystopian, “deviation from expected equilibrium” (Serres 86).² These kinds of speculative fictional narratives of re-emergence that have become so popular in Germany and beyond, beg two sets of interrelated questions.

The first set of questions deals with the active, deviant material, that is, the more-than-human matter that seems to be actively “fighting back” against decidedly human expectations, whether of equilibrium or otherwise. This re-emergence questions, in a peculiar way, the dualist separation of the human from the more-than-human. It also reveals divisions within the more-than-human itself, and how those historically expected equilibria are reinforced. The second set of questions deals with the temporality of that re-emergence. There must have been a history of material excision that was followed by, if not necessary for, some expected equilibrium. Only from such an exclusion could material “nature” disruptively re-emerge. The “re-” of re-emergence thus itself implies a (potentially hidden) pre-history. These two sets of questions, in turn, elicit further lines of inquiry: whose expectations are these and when were they set? Is the expectation one of an actual equilibrium? Between whom or what is an equilibrium expected? To begin answering these questions, close readings of two short stories, namely Andreas Eschbach’s 2004 “Quantenmüll” and Franz Hohler’s 1982 “Die Rückeroberung,” help to reveal capitalism’s utopian expectations of equilibria based on perfect classification, on separation, and on the organization of materials, on its perpetual effort to maintain its systems of exclusion, and on its perception of that system’s failures as dystopian. That is, these speculative fictions of material re-emergence highlight the oft-ignored interrelation between commodity capitalism and its construction of non-commodity material “nature.”

Both Andreas Eschbach, one of Germany’s more successful science fiction writers, and Franz Hohler, one of Switzerland’s most well-known satirists, are often associated with environmental and ecological themes, if from distinct points of view.³ Eschbach’s sci-fi eco-thrillers, such as *Solarstation* (1999) and *Ausgebrannt* (2007), regularly represent speculative technology to investigate various aspects of sustainability and the environmental cost of globalization. Though Eschbach’s narratives are often apocalyptic, a kind of anthropocentric utopianism endures, where humans “must become better managers of nature,” often through technology, “if today’s Western society is to continue” (Fritzsche 69). Hohler, on the other hand, explores political society’s relationship with nature through speculative sit-

2 For critiques of “spectacles” of this kind, see Nixon; Horn, especially Chapter 3: “Das Wetter von übermorgen.”

3 See Fritzsche; Weber; Haque; and McInnis.

uations. As something of a companion piece to “Die Rückeroberung,” Hohler’s first novel, *Der neue Berg* (1989), reveals the circumstances behind the unwillingness of public officials to deal with the growing threat of a volcanic eruption, a newly “animate nature” (Barkhoff 232), on the outskirts of Zurich. However, the short stories of these two authors, “Quantenmüll” and “Die Rückeroberung,” are unique among narratives of re-emergent matter, despite the 20-year difference in publication, in their sustained focus on the dynamics of re-emergence in general, and the importance of otherwise overlooked capitalist systems of separation that precede and precipitate that re-emergence in particular. Those dynamics are not plot points, but rather are the focus of the plot itself.

In Eschbach’s “Quantenmüll,” the narrator, Jens, awaits the presumed end of the world with a freshly opened bottle of very expensive wine and recounts his central role in that end. Some years ago, Jens and Konrad, both unappreciated technicians at a particle accelerator, come across a field during maintenance of the accelerator. Anything thrown into the field seems to disappear completely. Hoping to make a name for themselves in the world of particle physics, they keep the field secret from the public until they are able to study and publish presumably groundbreaking and award-winning research. In order to finance this research, they allow Jens’ brother, for a fee, exclusive access to the field, which he utilizes for all manner of permanent disposal. Though their first year of research yields few meaningful results, a significant amount of money finds its way into their pockets thanks to the exorbitant fees paid for permanent disposal. Their main research breakthrough, namely that the field could give rise to a seemingly infinite series of sub-fields, promises to effectively solve all problems of disposal and simultaneously enrich Jens and Konrad. However, Konrad, having remained focused on research, eventually finds that the energy required for the field to function has been growing and would soon require more energy than available, at which point all of that material pollution and waste would catastrophically return.

Though written some two decades earlier in a different style and tone and dealing with a re-emergent “nature” rather than pollution and waste, Hohler’s “Die Rückeroberung” effectively pre-figures the continuation of Eschbach’s narrative of excision with his own narrative of re-emergence. In Hohler’s story, re-emergent flora and fauna deviate from any expected equilibria and ultimately come to “re-conquer” the metropole of Zurich. First, golden eagles return to the city, occasionally hunting pets. Then large herds of deer disrupt all manner of traffic. Since no-one can deal with the herds, citizens briefly cheer the return of wolves that hunt and therefore occasionally disperse the deer, until those wolves, in turn, begin to hunt small children, who then require armed guards to escort them whenever they leave the house. Snakes likewise return, biting and occasionally killing people. Bears return as well, less physically violent towards humans but wreaking

havoc on various restaurants and shops. Ultimately, however, it is plant life that causes the most disturbance, particularly ivy that grows so quickly as to overtake all roads, cars, and office buildings.⁴ Zurich grinds to a halt and the population flees save for a few hearty citizens, including the narrator, who plan to stay and come to find a new form of equilibrium.

II

Both wilderness and waste have long been viewed as mere objects, or at least as objectified Others ontologically separate from, and at the whim of human subjects to control and manipulate them, to mold and shape them into something useful – useful, of course, for humans. More recently, however, thinkers like Michel Serres, Jane Bennett, and many others have begun to complicate dichotomies between nature and society, non-human and human, object and subject.⁵ Serres presents the history of “[n]ature” that had “acted as a reference point for ancient law and for modern science because it had no subject,” but was beginning to act seemingly of its own accord (Serres 86). This is no longer merely a blunt reaction, but rather a purposeful and pointed response to human disturbance: “Now [nature] has a subject once again” (Serres 86). Nature not only reacts, but acts. Bennett expands this argument beyond the dichotomies of subject/object and culture/nature in order to examine matter itself. For Bennett, matter as such, much like Serres’ “nature,” has long been considered “dull matter,” as “passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert,” which was waiting for “vibrant life (us, beings)” to use it or imbue it with meaning (Bennett vii). Bennett argues, however, that this hierarchical differentiation of so-called “vibrant life” over “dull matter” in fact hides the vibrancy of all matter. That is to say, there is no “vibrant life” and “dull matter,” but rather, as her book’s title indicates, only a combination of the two, a monism of vibrant matter, “ontologically one, formally diverse” (Deleuze qtd. in Bennett xi). There are only actants and assemblages of actants without any inert intransigence. Rather, according to Bennett, these assemblages have *thing-power*: a “curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). While Serres’ re-subjectivated nature is a useful framework, Bennett’s vibrant matter bypasses difficult

⁴ Sullivan herself has recently focused on this plant-based aspect of re-emergence in her project surrounding what she has called “The Dark Green” (see, for example, Sullivan 2019 and 2020). See also Stobbe, Kramer, and Wanning.

⁵ See Iovino and Oppermann. For a discussion of non-human manipulation of the environment, see Odling-Smee, Lala, and Feldman.

questions regarding the concept “nature” itself and generalizes a framework better suited to read narratives of re-emergent matter.⁶

Bennett begins her investigation into this vibrant thing-power with an encounter she had with a storm drain and the material stuck in it: “one large men’s black plastic work glove / one dense mat of oak pollen / one unblemished dead rat / one white plastic bottle cap / one smooth stick of wood” (4). Here, elements of “nature” and of capitalist detritus are seen together as a vibrant “assemblage, [where] *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities” (Bennett 5, emphasis in original). Both nature and culture, wilderness and waste, reveal themselves as assemblages of actants with a kind of thing-power, which is to say, they re-emerge from their previously perceived dullness to now be viewed as vibrant matter. Unsurprisingly then, both wilderness and waste are equally well suited to narratives of disruptive re-emergence. As Bennett highlights, their location atop a grated storm drain belies their (non)place in the expected equilibria. Not only would this assemblage of vibrant matter have been previously viewed as “dull,” it was not meant to be viewed at all. Bennett recognizes the previously hidden vibrance of matter in her confrontation with it precisely when it is meant to be excised, no longer part of the various smoothly functioning systems of culture; when it is meant for swift and silent removal, in Bennett’s example literally flushed out and away into the Chesapeake Bay, never to be seen again (4).⁷ The momentary breakdown of that system briefly reveals not only the vibrant matter that was meant to be properly separated and concealed by that system. It also critically reveals the system of separation and concealment itself, whose seamless functioning otherwise allows it to be entirely overlooked, as if there were no system at all, as if there were a “natural” equilibrium.⁸ These systems of supposed excision and equilibria, separation and organization, are anything but natural. They are capitalist.

Jason W. Moore’s *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015) explores, among other things, precisely these capitalist systems of excision and equilibria, both in relation to material nature supposedly beyond capitalism and as a foundational element

6 Somewhat infamously, Raymond Williams has noted the complexity of the concept of *nature*, “perhaps the most complex word in the language,” and its relation to matter as such, where nature is simply “the material world itself, taken as including or not human beings” (164–165).

7 From Ted Steinberg’s investigation of “how the ecological consequences of eating and flushing become so invisible, so enmeshed in the wish to forget” (802), Stacy Alaimo creates a bodily analogue. See Alaimo 8.

8 This dynamic has often been dubbed the naturalization thesis of ideology, which “transforms history into nature” (Barthes 128), in this case a particularly apt description. See also Žižek 11.

of capitalist ideology itself.⁹ Highlighting the same dualist tropes that his project means to overcome, Moore argues that “Capitalism’s governing conceit is that it may do with Nature as it pleases, that Nature is external” (Moore 2015, 2). That is to say, “capitalism as a project” ideologically constructs “Nature with a capital ‘N’—external, controllable, reducible” (Moore 2015, 2, emphasis in original). This opens a new critical dialogue between the monisms of new materialism and theories of the Capitalocene, a dialogue this article hopes to initiate. That is, the traditional view of capitalism as doing something to nature, a subject doing something to an object in Serres’ vocabulary, or vibrant life doing something to dull matter in Bennett’s, not only “implies separation” between capitalism and nature (Moore 2015, 12–13), but rather demands it. As Moore summarizes, “the view of Nature as external [to Society] is a fundamental condition of capital accumulation” (Moore 2015, 2). Nature has largely been seen as “for the most part playing roles as tap (raw materials) and sink (pollution)” to capitalist society (Moore 2015, 33). The separation of pre-commodified wilderness from capitalist society for now and the excision of post-consumption waste from capitalist society from now on are, for capitalism, the same ideological movement. For Moore’s project, that means that, in order to move beyond the capitalism/nature duality toward the “double internality” of “capitalism-in-nature/nature-in-capitalism” (Moore 2015, 13), capitalism is more accurately recognized as “a way of organizing nature” (Moore 2015, 2, emphasis in original): nature with a lowercase ‘n’ of vibrant matter,¹⁰ which capitalism replaces with the ideological formation Nature, is separated and stripped of its thing-power. This capitalist ideology of “organization” is not merely separation/excision of wilderness and waste, but also the immediate dulling objectification of their matter, so that nature is simultaneously viewed as an “external, controllable, reducible” Nature (Moore 2015, 2). Nature as dull object separated from, and under the control of capitalist Society is, in fact, Serres’ expected equilibrium; nature as vibrant subject, internally re-emergent, is its disruptive deviation. In short, separation and excision, organization and equilibrium are all part of one and the same effort by capitalist ideology to replace nature with Nature.

As with any application of ideology in the real world, this is not a single movement, but rather a continual reproduction of itself, the repetition and reinforcement of those movements, the expected equilibrium that determines the ease and success of capital accumulation. While this ideology and its apparatuses can

⁹ Moore’s larger project expands across many of his works and the larger World-Ecology Research Network. See also Moore’s edited volume *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* (2016) and Raj Patel’s collaboration with him, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (2017).

¹⁰ See the third definition of “nature” in Williams 164–165.

ease the processes of capitalism, they are always imperfect – Bennett, in her example, was able to catch a glimpse of the assemblage of actants, elements of wilderness and waste, in the storm drain leading out to the Chesapeake Bay. Just as importantly, however, that assemblage is simultaneously a remainder and reminder of the capitalist ideological apparatus itself, momentarily disrupted from its natural appearance or, rather, the disruption of its camouflage that then reveals itself as apparatus. The brief disruption to the ideology marks and, at the same time, is the “deviation from expected equilibrium” (Serres 86). In speculative fiction, that disruption is not inherent to those capitalist ideological apparatuses. Capitalist separative excision and organizational equilibrium can, theoretically, function as perfectly as the author desires. In narratives of re-emergent matter, of course, this perfection can only last for a while. Like Bennett’s storm drain, the re-emergent materials depicted by Eschbach and Hohler, the quantum waste of “Quantenmüll” and the so-called wilderness of “Die Rückerobung,” have (supposedly) been permanently separated and organized into a form of capitalist equilibrium. Capitalist excision is utopian, technologically perfected in order to leave no residue at all. This techno-utopian excision is precisely what the field in Eschbach’s “Quantenmüll” offers: a field where both the thing and the thing-power’s ability to disrupt equilibrial commodity capitalism are gone without a trace, “spurlos verschwunden” (“Quantenmüll” 13).

Dangerous chemical and radioactive byproducts are the first materials to be excised by the field: “Dichlormethan, Quecksilberverbindungen, Altröntgenfilme, Chromschwefelsäurereste und Ammoniumdichromat” as well as “wässrige langlebige Radionukleide” (“Quantenmüll” 17). With the creation of sub-fields, excision is expanded to all the matter that does not matter, that has no immediate value, that gets in the way, that could potentially disrupt the system. More importantly than merely an excision of supposedly dull matter, the sub-fields extinguish the capacity of that actually vibrant matter’s thing-power to disrupt the new techno-utopian set of expected equilibria that allows systems of commodification to function smoothly. Eschbach’s narrator highlights this while recounting the story of the sub-fields, describing them as “Müllentsorgungsanlagen” – seemingly playing on the German *entsorgen* (to dispose), which might more literally be understood as the removal of concerns (*ent-sorgen*). For example, “Radioaktiver Müll, einst ein unlösbares Problem – *weg*. Die abgebrannten Brennstäbe aus Kernkraftwerken, über die wir uns früher so viele *Sorgen* gemacht haben – *aus der Welt geschafft*” (“Quantenmüll” 21, emphasis added); both fuel rods and their attendant concerns are literally excised from Earth. This utopianism allows those who excise to no longer worry about the disruption of expectations and equilibria. Once things and their thing-power are excised, problems will be solved and utopian equilibrium reached. In other words, the proper and perfect excision of matter’s disruptive thing-power

is the equilibrium expected, it is the goal. This excision is personified, literally, by Dieter, Jens's brother, who disruptively refuses to allow the production and commodification of sub-fields ("Quantenmüll" 18–20), leading Jens to kick Dieter into such a sub-field – matter and thing-power are perfectly excised, problems are solved, and commodity capitalism remains undisrupted and undisruptable in perpetuity.

In the speculative fictions of re-emergence, the excision of matter and its thing-power is, however, never perfect and the problems and disruptions remain neither solved nor silenced. This failure and the resulting re-emergence are not merely the driving forces behind the narrative, but they also evidence the inherently flawed concept of perfected excision and expectations of equilibria that stem from it. The imperfect excisions and inexplicable thing-power that these short stories feature do not serve as a "warning function" against some future dystopian society (upon re-emergence), but rather critique the excisions, presupposed as perfect, of disruptive things and thing-power in the present, real world of late capitalism (Rosenfeld 247). These stories narrate late capitalism's inability to solve – and unwillingness to recognize – imperfect excision. They reveal attempts to mask that imperfection. Perhaps this is why, as Sullivan noted (2017), narratives of re-emergence are so resonant with the present-day dynamics theorized by material ecological thinkers such as Serres and Bennett as well as critics of nature/culture duality such as Moore. However, the focus of many of these narratives lies in the surprisingly vibrant agency or subjecthood of the re-emergent matter, rather than on the socio-historical contexts. Though the supposed re-emergence – in fact, less a re-emergence than an initially incomplete excision – of material and its attendant thing-power is an inciting incident of narratives of re-emergence as such, the history of excision that predates any future re-emergence is largely overlooked. Such narratives often begin, so to speak, *in media res*. "Quantenmüll," however, immediately and continually contextualizes the re-emergent matter as *Müll*, garbage, pollution, and waste. Eschbach's story, therefore, is uniquely focused on the history of capitalist devaluation and imperfect excision that precedes disruptive re-emergence.

III

While "Quantenmüll" ends "im Augenblick der Singularität" (24), as all of the supposedly excised matter re-emerges from the fields, Hohler's "Die Rückeroberung" pre-figures the continuation of the narrative and begins with the re-emergence of vibrant matter, which had previously been excised, and its soon to be disruptive thing-power. The degree to which "Quantenmüll" focuses on imperfect excision, is

mirrored by that of “Die Rückerobierung,” which focuses on re-emergence and, more specifically, on attempts to re-establish equilibria through repeated capitalist excision. Hohler’s unnamed narrator in Zurich, sitting at their desk, notices on their neighbor’s television antenna a golden eagle that otherwise belongs only in the Alps, “am nächsten von hier vielleicht in den Bergen von Glarus” (“Die Rückerobierung” 5).¹¹ The eagle is not supposed to be in Zurich; it was properly and conclusively excised some time ago. If not to another dimension, then such matters and concerns are excised at least to another canton of Switzerland, “etwa 50 Kilometer von der Stadt entfernt” (“Rückerobierung” 5). While the eagles appear to re-emerge as dull matter, they are in fact an example of concerning thing-power and come to disrupt previous equilibria as concern itself. “Die Leute wurden ermahnt, zu ihren kleineren Haustieren gut *Sorge* zu tragen” (“Rückerobierung” 7, emphasis added), as their pets are being hunted by eagles. Eagles are only the first in a series of re-emergent matter(s) that are not supposed to be in Zurich. After the eagles, come deer, bears, wolves, snakes, and unmanageably fast-growing plants. These materials are not supposed to be in the city nor grow like this; nor are their attendant concerns (*Sorgen*) supposed to continue. “Die Rückerobierung” narrates the many attempts to establish equilibria through capitalist excision. The different framework of excised matter – wilderness rather than waste – raises different concerns than those in “Quantenmüll.”

In “Die Rückerobierung,” the emotional aversion to the contamination of a society supposedly perfectly separated from, and purified of that contamination, like that in the utopian post-field world of “Quantenmüll,” is nowhere to be found.¹² In Zurich, the re-emergent matter is less a contamination, at least initially, than a curiosity if occasional annoyance – “Das hat auch etwas Schönes, gewiß, und auf eine Art ist es eine Bereicherung des Stadtlebens” (“Rückerobierung” 12). While ornithological groups posit various theories to determine why there are suddenly golden eagles in the city, there is also hope that tolerating the eagles might actually take care of the city’s growing rat problem. Similarly, Zurich’s police are trained by American cowboys in herding and lassoing the copious deer, until the arrival of the wolves to hunt those deer solves, at least to a certain extent, the problem. The bears get in the trash but rarely do much damage. This is not, of course, to suggest that there are no difficulties in the re-emergence of this wilderness within Zurich. While those wolves do help to disperse and cull the herds of deer that take over streets and parks, they also begin to hunt down children walking to school.

¹¹ Hereafter referred to as “Rückerobierung.”

¹² Though my argument here is based on, and building toward, decidedly different criteria, there are resonances with Brian McInnis’s reading of “Die Rückerobierung” as an allegory of Zurich’s ecological ignorance and xenophobia.

Even these events, however, are immediately contextualized by the narrator as merely the new normal, a rhetorical shift in the means, from pedestrian deaths by car to deaths by lupine mauling, but no different in actual number of deaths: “Daß jedes Jahr ein paar Kinder unter den Autos starben, daran hatte man sich gewöhnt, das war eben ein möglicher Tod in der Stadt...” (“Rückeroberung” 14). Even the growing attacks by venomous snakes do little more than persuade people to be a bit more careful when reaching into an oven or a vending machine, or crawling into bed. The people of Zurich, despite these annoyances, inconveniences, and even deaths, begin “langsam darauf einzurichten, daß man diese Tiere möglicherweise nicht loswerden konnte, sondern irgendwie mit ihnen leben mußte” (“Rückeroberung” 15). Finding something beautiful in living with these animals and the threats that they pose, indeed believing that it even enriches the city, re-orientes the catastrophic and dystopian tones that narratives of re-emergent matter and thing-power, like “Quantenmüll,” so often employ – at least for a while.

The human inhabitants of Zurich seem initially willing to adapt their lives and to co-exist with the re-emergent wild animals. As such, this is not so much a human crisis, even less a so-called “natural” or environmental crisis. Rather, “Die Rückeroberung” focuses, subtly if persistently, on the crisis of consumer capitalism and its equilibria, which have been disrupted by the wild animals’ re-emergence. Changes, which are continually described as inconvenient for human beings, up to and including the mauling of school children, are regularly reoriented as a dystopian disaster for commodity exchange. The first bear, for example, shows up in Zurich’s main train station looking for something to eat, tipping over trash cans with a swipe of his paw, until the bear finally “bediente sich ausgiebig” to the contents of a large grocery store (“Rückeroberung” 15). An inconvenience to human commuters to be sure, but the real victims of the bear’s presence are those who make their living through the commodification of food. Indeed, the Zurich train station is not only, maybe not even primarily meant for public transportation, but rather for the presentation and exchange of commodities. The narrator highlights its official name: “Shopville” (“Rückeroberung” 15), less train station than a shopping mall with a train station attached, with just short of 200 shops available for the (potentially travelling) consumer, at least until the hungry bear causes Shopville to be shut down. The narrator continually introduces the re-emergent material and thing-power of wild animals as a disruption to the humans living in Zurich, if a disruption that those humans were in one way or another willing to deal with – learning to herd, travelling in groups to avoid mauling, liberalizing hunting laws, double checking before reaching for something. For all the disruption to humans, however, that same re-emergent material and thing-power is characterized as potentially dystopian when compared with the paradigm of capitalist consumption.

This tenuous balance between human disruption and capitalist dystopia, however, is not undone by venomous snakes or any other fauna that would succeed it, but rather by flora, “gegen die man noch machtloser war. Sie sah zuerst harmlos, fast erfreulich aus, aber bald wurde klar, daß gerade sie das eigentliche Ende bedeuten konnte” (“Rückeroberung” 17). Unlike the fauna that materially re-emerges within the city center, seemingly from some non-metropolitan elsewhere, the wild ivy that already exists in Zurich begins to function differently – an already existent vibrant material with a newly invigorated and disruptive thing-power: The “Efeu [fing an,] plötzlich unheimlich schnell zu wachsen” (“Rückeroberung” 17). Soon various other vine-like climbing plants join the ivy, creating a hydra-like assemblage of fast-growing tendril-actants. Though other plants likewise begin to grow quickly and well beyond previous scales – “die Blätter wurden so groß, daß sie ein parkiertes Auto zuzudecken vermochten” (“Rückeroberung” 18) – it is the fast-growing ivy that spells the end of Zurich because of where it grows:

Mit äußerster Mühe konnte zunächst durch tägliche Pflege verhindert werden, daß es sich auch an Glas- und Betonbauten festkralte, die Verwaltungsgebäude der großen Firmen, die Hotels, die Banken, die Warenhäuser, alle mußten Leute einstellen, die nichts anderes zu tun hatten, als den ganzen Tag Efeu zu schneiden. (“Rückeroberung” 17–18)

These fast and large growing plants do little to threaten human beings but quickly and ultimately bring the flow of capital and commodities to its knees. In other words, the re-emergent vibrant matter and thing-power of “Die Rückeroberung” are by and large dystopian disruptions to the “expected equilibria” of the continued function of capitalism, rather than human beings.

As Moore argued, though the expected equilibria created and maintained by capitalism are perpetually recontextualized by various circumstances, the fundamental constant is the separation of capitalist production and consumption from uncommodified Nature. Capitalism itself is based on the foundational separation between the natural, uncommodified material, from which a commodity is made (and to which it seemingly returns), and the material commodity, or rather the commodified material (Moore 2015). In many ways, this separation of capitalism from Nature, and certainly from any potential disruptions that this uncommodified material Nature may cause, is the first and the foundational aspect of capitalism’s ideological (non)relationship with the material world around it. This is precisely what narratives of disruptive re-emergence both critically subvert and, in that subversion, pointedly reveal. “Die Rückeroberung” shows more than the practical difficulties of materially excising the encroaching vibrant matter from the buildings of the large companies, the hotels, the banks, and the department stores. It also shows the immense amount of labor that this perpetual excision re-

quires: deer herders, bear hunters, ivy cutters, an army of laborers working around the clock to maintain a separation long since presumed complete, with problems long considered solved, *Sorgen ent-sorgt*. That ideological, which is to say fictitious, completion is the beginning and basis of capitalism's expected equilibria. Hohler's narrator notes, for example, that children are regularly run over and killed by cars in Zurich. "[D]aran hatte man sich gewöhnt, das war eben ein möglicher Tod in der Stadt, aber daß Kinder von Wölfen zerrissen werden, das sollte nicht vorkommen, nicht in einer Stadt wie Zürich" ("Rückeroberung" 14). Being killed by a commodity in a city of commodities is not only possible, but acceptable, as is being killed by a non-commodity in the non-commodified wilderness. Particularly striking to the narrator is the breakdown of the separation that is presumed inviolable, which is to say the re-emergence of vibrant matter and thing-power that is seen as dull and powerless, and literally and figuratively outside of capitalist society.

IV

"Quantenmüll" and "Die Rückeroberung" do more than represent the perceived dystopia of re-emergent wilderness or waste. They highlight the long and often silent history that leads to the eventual breakdown of this foundational separation between the non- or no-longer-commodified world and the world of commodity exchange. That is to say, they do not merely narrativize Serres' re-subjectivated nature that disrupts the "expected equilibrium" of the world (86), nor Bennett's monism of vibrant matter that recognizes thing-power "not restricted to a passive 'intractability'" (5).¹³ Rather, like Moore's critical project of "double internality" (Moore 2015, 13), these narratives critically reveal the historicity of commodity capitalism's central role both in the development and maintenance of that separation, as well as its dystopian panic upon re-emergent reconnection. Bennett notes that the "sheer volume of commodities and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter" (5). Largely unexplored, however, is the fundamental importance of that concealment, of the simultaneous excision of matter and suppression of its vitality to consumer capitalism. In addition to the eco-materialism of Serres, Bennett, and others, reading these short stories requires a theoretical framework and vocabulary that accounts for the fact that, in capitalist society, human interaction with matter overwhelm-

13 Indeed, these narratives often go further, highlighting other inter- and intra-actions between (bodily) materials as theorized, for example, by Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, and others.

ingly takes the form of commodity consumption or its aftereffects. In other words, these short stories explore the effects of the historical excision and disruptive re-emergence of vibrant matter, not merely within some non-descript society, but specifically within capitalist consumer society. As Bennett implied with her storm drain of vibrant matter and Moore made explicit with his double internality of “capitalism-in-nature/nature-in-capitalism” (Moore 2015, 13), the excisions and equilibria, separations and organizations are fictions of capitalist ideology that are dedicated to the facilitation of profit; here, even within speculative fictions.

“Quantenmüll” highlights precisely the intersection of capitalist excision and profit. Though Jens and Konrad are initially excited about the scientific possibilities of their discovery of the field, the economics thereof quickly become paramount. In order to fund their research, they suggest to Jens’ brother: “Du finanzierst ein kleines, feines, privates Forschungsinstitut, in dem wir [Konrad und Jens] dieses Feld erforschen. Dafür bekommst du eine Option auf eventuelle geschäftliche Nutzungsmöglichkeiten” (“Quantenmüll” 16). While Konrad begins researching, Jens “lernte, was man für seine fachgerechte Entsorgung in Rechnung stellen konnte. Einen wirklich erstaunlichen Betrag” (“Quantenmüll” 17). From here, Jens is hooked, fully abandoning the scientific research, for which they initially needed financing. Jens “fand die *wirtschaftlichen* Perspektiven der ganzen Sache weitaus interessanter” than the scientific aspects (“Quantenmüll” 18, emphasis in original). Upon Konrad’s discovery, mentioned above, that the field could be multiplied into a series of sub-fields, Jens immediately recognizes not the scientific, but rather the economic possibilities of a kind of franchising opportunity. This ultimately leads to the dispute with, and disposal of Dieter, Jens’ brother. From that point on, the field is entirely transformed into a capitalist enterprise, and a particularly profitable one. “Dreißig Jahre lang [nach Dieters Mord], ist alles gut gegangen” (“Quantenmüll” 22). There is still a disappointing lack of knowledge about the field itself, but Konrad is able to continue research “mit mehr Leuten, mehr Geld—*viel* mehr Geld” (“Quantenmüll” 22, emphasis in original). Indeed, there is more than enough to go around: “Und wir verdienten schweinemäßig Geld. Wirklich. Die ganze Welt kaufte unsere Geräte wie süchtig, und unsere Profite waren geradezu obszön” (“Quantenmüll” 22). The thirty good years are particularly and primarily good for commodity capitalism. Not only because Jens and presumably Konrad in his no-longer-little research lab are now wealthy, but because all capitalist concerns of disposal, the *Sorgen* of *Entsorgung*, are alleviated. That is to say, just as the manifold social complexities of production are hidden behind the individualized purchase of a commodity, so too are the multivalent difficulties of disposal miraculously hidden behind the opacity of the sub-fields, themselves now fetishized commodities. Only pure and frictionless, utopian consumption remains.

With the separation between the commodified and the non-commodity world perfected, with the excision of potentially disruptive vibrant matter and thing-power from the processes of commodity exchange no longer an ideologically “expected equilibrium” but an accomplished mastery, those thirty good years function effectively as a capitalist techno-utopia. Not only do these sub-fields solve all implicit guilt or concern of disposal for the consumers within the world of “Quantenmüll,” the subfields utterly and ultimately solve the friction of disposal for commodity capitalism itself. Speculative technology finally surpasses many of the stories that capitalism tells about itself – that it is in itself a utopian system of ease and convenience. This quantum *deus ex machina* of disposal as *Ent-sorgung* is liberatory for capitalism itself. Labor is no longer required in order to maintain those organizationally expected equilibria of vibrant matter and thing-power, nor to reinforce the separation of the commodified from the non-commodity world. Within this capitalist utopia as utopia of capitalism, the concerns are excised along with the need to create narratives surrounding the necessity of that excision, to create excuses when that excision inevitably fails, to do the continual work of excision, separation, and organization. The utopian technology finally allows capitalism’s silent fantasies of equilibrium as mastery to come true. As with all ‘supposed’ utopias, even those of capitalist world-economies and world-ecologies,¹⁴ they are never as perfect as imagined. In this particular instance, with both the narrative of these speculative fictions as well as the real-life present world that it critiques, that separation and organization of the (non)commodified world by (a techno-utopian) capitalism is far less perfect and far less permanent than imagined. The good times never last, nor are they self-sustaining.

Even in Eschbach’s techno-utopian speculative fiction “Quantenmüll,” the maintenance of that seemingly perfect disposal, that permanent separation and organization, in fact does require maintenance and, eventually, that required labor becomes unsustainable. This insight is Konrad’s first research breakthrough regarding the sub-fields: “der Stromverbrauch des Feldes ist der Schlüssel” (“Quantenmüll” 23). It requires energy to maintain even this utopian apparatus of division, separation, and organization. The energy required is growing “seit wir das Feld gefunden haben, und inzwischen steht fest, dass das Anwachsen des Stromverbrauchs einer hyperbolischen Kurve folgt” (“Quantenmüll” 23). Eventually, more energy is required than could possibly be created and the system of excising disposal fails. Hohler’s “Die Rückeroberung” represents this same problem from a decidedly less technological point of view, where the presumed separation be-

¹⁴ See Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World-Economy*, on which much of Moore’s concept of the Capitalocene is based.

tween Zurich and perceived wilderness is already largely accepted, an expected equilibrium even if admittedly imperfect. The response to the re-emergence of that wilderness is a perpetual, desperate attempt to reassert the capitalist organization. It begins with the continually advancing techniques deployed to cordon off deer from the businesses of a smooth-functioning capitalism into a park; this, in turn, creates not only an ersatz wilderness in and of itself, but also one with the well-established borders of the lakefront and two large streets. Eventually, the fight against the re-emergence ends when the amount of labor to keep material wilderness separated from material capitalism is deemed unbearable. Just as there is not enough energy for the field, neither are there enough laborers for the ivy/architecture separation. The material assemblages of wilderness and waste actants outlast capitalist labor and re-emerge to assert their vibrancy and thing-power, which in turn undo previous perceptions of a perpetual, utopian organization of a Nature that is “external, controllable, reducible” to capitalism (Moore 2015, 2).

Wilderness and waste re-emerge, even occasionally represented as that “ontologically one” vibrant matter (Bennett xi) – “*Gebirge von Bauschutt, Fliesenscherben, und ölverseuchtem Aushub werden uns unter sich begraben. [...] Ozeanen von Urin, Klärschlamm, und Säureresten*” (“Quantenmüll” 24, emphasis added). The imagined and imaginary, but ultimately imperfect excision and separation is destined to fail. Capitalist organization and separation are temporal and temporary. Their excisions are never disappearances, but rather merely deferrals. Indeed, as Konrad explains to Jens, the material thrown into the field does not disappear in space, but rather, “*verschwindet in der Zeit*” (“Quantenmüll” 22, emphasis in original). These are the *good times* for capitalism. The non-commodified world of wilderness and waste that was thought to be excised ultimately re-emerges. The implicit fiction of those capitalist good times, however, now frames that re-emergent matter and its disruptive thing-power as not merely an emergence, but an emergency; an unforeseen and unforeseeable natural catastrophe. Close readings of these speculative fictions critically analyze, however, the long contextual history of supposedly and imperfectly excised vibrant matter and thing-power; whether as capitalist jubilation of a techno-utopia or capitalist promise of an expected equilibrium. They reveal the hidden labor and slow violence necessary to maintain utopia and equilibria, and their inevitable disorganization and disequilibria. In other words, these speculative narratives of a historically excised, separated, and re-emergent “nature” are simultaneously critiques of the capitalist system that co-produces that history. The dystopia and disequilibria in these narratives do little more than remind the reader that the coming mountains of construction waste, oceans of sewage, the currents of greenhouse gases, rising oceans, unproductive forests, and encroaching deserts, the disruptive wilderness and waste had, in fact, never been excised. They are all already here, outside the reader’s window.

It is simply the capitalist world as it exists right now. These stories are, therefore, less narratives of environmental emergency than narratives of capitalist and capitalism's dystopia.

V

Narratives of re-emergent vibrant material like "Quantenmüll" and "Die Rückeroberung" imply a moment when what had been normal, what had been expected, tips into the abnormal and, for capitalism, into the dystopian. Eva Horn suggests that these tipping points "sind Phänomene der spontanen Emergenz" (18). While the vocabulary of emergence and re-emergence has been problematized through critical readings of the stories by Hohler and Eschbach, it is not merely the vibrant material that is spontaneously revealed or that reveals itself. That is, the vibrant material is not what is being tipped, but rather it causes the tipping. Within the dynamics of these tipping points, vibrant matter reveals itself as an oft-unrecognized but active co-author of the tipping. In so doing, it reveals capitalism as simultaneously less omnipotent in its excisions, separations, and organizations of the non-capitalist world, as well as less credible in its univocal pretention to the production of its own truth. Capitalism frames the re-emergence of vibrant matter as a general catastrophe, rather than a specific threat to a set of its own expected equilibria, authored by and produced for the continued smooth function of commodity consumption. Narratives of disruptive nature and curiously animate vibrant matter are, then, every bit as much narratives of capitalism in crisis, of the problems and potential impossibilities of those capitalist attempts at organization. In their eventalization of otherwise "slowly unfolding [...] catastrophes [that] present formidable representational obstacles" (Nixon 2), these narratives critically evoke the imperfections of a presupposed separation, highlight the labor-intensive process of maintaining capitalist organization, and disclose presumed disposal as deferral, emergence as re-emergence, and capitalism as a world-ecology. This re-emergence is a critical re-cognition of the otherwise hidden ideological narratives of a utopian equilibrium of frictionless and perpetually sustainable commodity consumption based on the capitalist construction of Nature.

As speculative narratives uniquely focused on questions of capitalist organization, "Quantenmüll" and "Die Rückeroberung" question the dystopian effects of the re-emergence of non-commodified vibrant matter, wilderness and waste. In the non-speculative world, the vibrant matter does not return from another dimension – it is right here, it never left. Consumers are led to believe capitalism's fictions and strategically ignore matter – or imagine it to have been moved somewhere else. But there is nowhere else. Those utopian 'good years' are based on a

willful ignorance, a blind eye given to the slow violence of the interminable rather than spontaneous re-emergence as perpetual presence, a slow-moving catastrophe without demonstrable event, instead taking place over “profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to” (Morton 1). Indeed, the eventalization of this uniquely capitalist dystopia makes these speculative narratives so critically important. There is now an event, the slow violence made fast, made visible, temporalities returned to human scales (Nixon 15). A speculative re-emergence reveals the slow violence of actually existing capitalist attempts at material organization framed within human temporality. For the reader, however, the speculation continues: What if the world did not end? The dystopia of these speculative narratives is the dystopia of the capitalist organization of the material world, not necessarily of the world itself. Or rather, the speculative dystopia revealed by these narratives is functionally similar to the actual material world as it continues to exist currently; capitalism is increasingly (recognized as) incapable of organizing the material world for friction-free consumption. What if the world did not end, but simply capitalism? Eschbach and Hohler give something of the obverse of Mark Fisher’s infamous reformulation of Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek¹⁵ – “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2). These stories imagine the possibility of the latter without the former. The challenge now is not to confuse one with the other.

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15 See Jameson xii; Žižek 1.

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