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Living the End of Time in Chris Kraus' *Torpor (2006)*

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Abstract: This paper interprets Chris Kraus's novel *Torpor* (2006) as an experiment in what could be coined an 'anthropology of unhappiness'. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism and Sara Ahmed's critique of happiness as a normative ideal, the analysis presents Sylvie and Jerome as individuals shaped by 20th century trauma, historical awareness, and the exhaustion of the modernist legacy. Their relationship presents the torpor – biological, affective and historical – as a dominant structure of feeling that emerges from Holocaust memory, psychoanalytic impasse and the decline of futurity at the so-called end of history. Through autofiction, Kraus produces a form of life writing that aligns with Gilles Deleuze's idea of literature as symptomatology: like Sade and Masoch, she portrays subjectivity not as a pathology, but as a diagnostic force. Although torpor appears to be the antithesis of becoming, Kraus also explores how deterritorialized forms of torpor can generate a paradoxical vitality that is aligned with necropolitics. The novel's feminist rejection of reproductive futurism mirrors Judith Butler's reinterpretation of Antigone and resonates with queer temporalities that challenge chrononormativity. Ultimately, Torpor charts a transition from melancholic attachment to a new, post-romantic structure of feeling – an affective regime in which unhappiness becomes epistemological and 'Krausism' emerges as a 20th century mode of life and thought.

Keywords: autofiction; autotheory; unhappiness; life-writing; psychoanalysis

> Just like a ghost you've been haunting my dreams
> So I proposed on Halloween
> Love is kinda crazy with a spooky little boy like you
>
> Lydia Lunch *Spooky* (1980)

1 Introduction

Let's talk about postmodern melancholia. In the following pages, I engage with Chris Kraus's 2006 novel *Torpor*. In this book, Kraus not only writes about her life with Sylvère Lotringer, as she did in *I Love Dick* (1997) and *Aliens & Anorexia* (2000), but also about a 'structure of feeling'. 'Structure of feeling' is a term first coined by Raymond Williams. In their essay on metamodernity, a heuristic classification of our current era, Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen explain: "In other words, a structure of feeling is a sentiment, or rather still a sensibility that everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down[,]"[1] and further,

1 Van den Akker/Vermeulen "Periodising the 2000s", 7 (2022).

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"it is that element of culture that circumscribes it but nonetheless cannot be traced back to any one of its individual ingredients."[2]

In order to describe the structure of feeling of the late 20th century, which coincides with the timeframe of the novel's narrative, Kraus employs the popular genre of autofiction. First emerging in Serge Doubrovsky's *Fils* in 1977 engaging with Philippe Lejeune's *On Autobiography* (1973), the term 'autofiction' refers to the uncertainty and immediacy between history, biography and fiction.[3] Adopting a certain style of shamelessness, Kraus regards autofiction as a form of *l'écriture de la faille* ('writing from a fault') or *une écriture propre au manque* ('a form of writing suitable to loss').[4] This style resonates with writing about trauma and bearing witness, but ultimately resolves around her own story, as she refuses to speak for anyone but herself. Here, writing becomes a form of autotheory and autotherapy.

This shamelessness therefore performs a form of parrhesia, or truth-telling.[5] Rather than writing a biography or making confessions, Kraus uses postmodern theory to reflect on and transform (a) (her-)self.

Kraus's take on autofiction is thus more anthropological; hence the novel sounds the possibility of and forces itself to become an "anthropology of unhappiness". Unhappiness is the common ground of the structure of feeling living (at) the end of time. In this context, Kraus's writing connects to Sara Ahmed's *The Promises of Happiness* (2010) and Lauren Berlant's *cruel optimism* (2011).[6] These texts are also concerned with the structure of feelings of a post-capitalist, post-critical and post-realist society in which all the promises of the 20th century (if there ever were any) have turned into threats.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant provides a critical analysis of optimism as a form of cultural hegemony. According to Berlant, optimism becomes cruel when it no longer functions as a force to overcome problems such as inequality, racism and the ecological crisis. Instead, it rather positions us within a narrative in which we can remain optimistic without ever changing anything. The harsh truth of Berlant's book is that optimism has become a feel-good ideology regarding a future that will never materialize, while disregarding the present.

In *The Promises of Happiness*, Ahmed discusses and deconstructs a discourse surrounding a particular understanding of happiness. This concept is shaped by multiple sources, especially self-help literature, a philosophical discourse, and social science. Ahmed also explores the relationship between happiness discourses as an ideology and technologies of the self, such as self-reporting, which she argues is now a key to happiness. Similar to confession around 1800 or therapy since Freud, as Foucault has shown,[7] the happiness discourse now engages in the production, disciplining, and control of the self.[8] The promise of wealth, for example, does not lead to happier people, especially as it becomes clear that an increasing number of people are and will be excluded from wealth and even basic existential security.[9]

Crucially, Ahmed notes that "unhappiness remains the unthought in much philosophical literature, as well as in happiness studies."[10] In order to understand unhappiness, she reflects on the history of the term, which first meant "causing misfortune or trouble". The unhappy one is a troublemaker. Later, 'unhappy' came to mean "wretched in mind", where "wretched" evokes the figure of the outcast, the one at the edge of a discourse. From this point, Ahmed asks whether a rewriting of the "history of happiness from the point of view of the wretch"[11] is possible.

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2 Van den Akker/Vermeulen "Periodising the 2000s", 8.

3 For further reading see Bradford (2010) "Life Writing", Doubrovsky et. al. (1993) "Autofictions and Cie", Wagner-Egelhaaf's "Handbook of Autobiography and Autofiction", Effe/Lawlor (2021), "The Autofictional".

4 Cf. Dix, "Autofiction" (2002).

5 Michel Foucault famously discusses the forms of speaking the truth from pastoral to psychoanalytical scenes questioning. Drawing on concepts established in Greek antiquity Foucault's concept of parrhesia as speaking the truth becomes a mode of challenging power. In the case of Kraus, it is the power of history, gender, and the writing she challenges.

6 Cf. Stuhr-Rommereim, "A delicate Time" (2015).

7 Cf. Foucault, "Fearless Speech" (2001), "The Hermeneutics" (2005), "The Government" (2010), and "The Courage" (2011).

8 Ahmed, "The Promise", 10.

9 Ahmed, "The Promise", 7.

10 Ahmed, "The Promise", 17.

11 Ahmed, "The Promise", 17.

This is where Kraus's text becomes relevant, because it is precisely that: the writing of an unhappy outsider about the interdependencies of the subject, or the "I", with norms, identities, life goals and economic sovereignty. Kraus's alter ego, Sylvie, might be, what Ahmed calls a "feminist killjoy".[12] The feminist killjoy's tactic here is a form of autotheory. Kraus writes: "The men just gape as Sylvie mounts a passionate defense of how *female lived experience can be channeled through poetic avant-gardist forms, but in the process, changes them*."[13]

Here, Sylvie turns toward the renewal of critical (postmodern) theory through poetry. Yet "the men" are not amused. No one wants to hear her opinion. On other occasions,[14] she is excluded because of a language barrier: the *lingua franca* of the novel's postmodern discourse is French, which Sylvie does not speak. Spoken language thus becomes a weapon of exclusion, while writing appears as her only viable mode of expression. Consequently, Sylvie/Chris's status as a 'feminist killjoy' is tied not only to her disruption of male-dominated conversations but also to writing itself as a form of subversion. Writing may therefore be understood as a process of transformation or metamorphosis – indeed, as a form of feminist awakening. Yet such a description risks reproducing a patriarchal narrative in which female emancipation is legible only as a teleological awakening through writing. Throughout the novel, Sylvie initially appears as a submissive subject, yet one who gradually becomes self-authorizing. By describing her life with a male intellectual from within the scene of postmodern thought, she not only rediscovers a feminist point of view but also performs it. Her writing – an anthropology of unhappiness – emerges as a poetically and analytically valid mode of critique. This mode of critique can be described as autotheory.

Autotheory, as Lauren Fournier describes in her book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism* (2022), is doing theory after the era of philosophy, grounded in the self, experience, and reality.[15] Merging with autofiction, it forms a new mode of critical engagement with reality, subjectivity, and society. As Kraus writes: "Lately, words from Sylvie's Marxist-feminist youth have been coming to haunt her. Words like 'white male skin and gender privilege' were perhaps … not so far off the mark?"[16]

In the following, I offer a close reading of Kraus's *Torpor* to introduce what may be called an "anthropology of unhappiness" in relation to Berlant's and Ahmed's accounts. Secondly, I want to connect the anthropology of unhappiness to Gilles Deleuze's understanding of writing as a symptomology of life. Here, I demonstrate how Kraus differs from 'classical' autofiction and life-writing moving towards autotheory. Lastly, I explore the bio- and the necropolitical implications of this anthropology of unhappiness. In doing so, I address how psychoanalysis and critical theory as literature or 'poiesis', may contribute to a critique of the status quo, which resonates with the biological sense of torpor: "a state of decreased physiological activity".[17]

2 Anthropology of Unhappiness

Torpor is a novel about a seemingly unequal intellectual couple. Shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain Sylvie, 35, proposes the idea to adopt a Romanian child, initiating a journey to the now "free" Eastern Europe. Jerome, 53, already a father, does not refuse, but continually postpones and evades the arrival.[18] Adopting a child from Eastern Europe seemed to be a common practice among middle-class, middle-aged U.S. couples at the end of the millennium. Yet the legal situation has changed: "Sylvie and Jerome don't know that foreign adoption has been outlawed in Romania since the beginning of the summer."[19]

12 Ahmed, "The Promise", 50–87.
13 Kraus, "Torpor", 192.
14 Kraus, "Torpor", 149.
15 Fournier, "Autotheory", 1–69.
16 Kraus, "Torpor", 208.
17 Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torpor.
18 Here, Chris Kraus uses the same names as in George Perec's novel *Les Choses. Une histoire des années soixante* connecting her writing to the situationist-style, to everyday life, history and ethnological perspective on the own society.
19 Kraus, "Torpor", 47.

Sylvie, Jerome and their ugly dog Lily embark on the journey.[20] But it is clear from the outset that the novel is not about becoming a happy family; rather, it questions existence as a heteronormative couple at the 'end of history', as Francis Fukuyama famously framed it: "Jerome and all his friends believed that history would soon be disappearing. ('History' was defined by them as the continuity they knew.)"[21]

Furthermore, Sylvie is a failed artist and movie director from New Zealand (her films "were unfashionable: messy, inchoate, intensely private spirals of association. Too punk to be a formalist, too intellectual to be underground …"),[22] whereas Jerome is a renowned academic in the field of the so-called French theory ("impresario and cultural interpreter"[23] of French theory for the New York art world) which he helped popularize. Thus, the reader confronts not only theory as intertext, but also real intellectual figures, such as Félix Guattari. These elements fit the concept of autofiction; it is evident from the beginning that Sylvie resembles Chris Kraus and Jerome Sylvère Lotringer.

In my reading of the novel, I address not only the relation between literature and reality, but also the unhappiness that is told as a structure of feeling. From my perspective, Chris/Sylvie uses autofiction to write an anthropological account of Western civilization; a "transcription".[24] And that account is also embedded within the novel itself. It should have been written by Jerome, yet he is depicted as an academic who not only refuses to write but is unable to. This is not only a cliché; it is central to the "anthropology of unhappiness". 'Anthropology of Unhappiness' is the name of the project, Jerome is supposed to write. It is assigned by Sylvie. She describes his opus magnum as the "Anthropology of unhappiness" which is deeply rooted in Jerome's/Sylvère's life. Therefore, Sylvie's anthropological study does not entails a lot of data from different people, but only of one life, that of Jerome's. This means, that in her own view her life is marginalized to the point it almost disappears. Here writing becomes a means of engaging with, on the one hand, the dialectical understanding of history as it unfolds into unhappiness of a specific generation (a male subject) and, on the other hand, as the concrete unhappiness of a woman and her path out. Jerome, as both a historical subject and a real person, is a male European Jewish intellectual living in the United States, a Holocaust survivor, and a key figure in the dissemination of postmodern thought.

Sylvie, by contrast, lacks a history that confers symbolic capital; her artistic endeavors failed, misunderstood or ignored. Successful writing appears as the practice of describing everyday life, while intellectual writing in the academic sense repeatedly fails. One mode of writing 'heals' the failure of the other. Thus, Kraus's writing becomes not only a de- or transcription of everyday life, but a form of theory beyond postmodernism melancholia towars history. Her writing is almost therapeutical – not in the sense of attaining wellness or reintegrating the self into late-capitalist subjectivity, nor as self-analysis, but as a transformation of French theory through autofictional practice. Therefore, the novel becomes part of a certain genealogie.

Fournier (2022), describes the current field of academic thought as the result of the translation of 'philosophy' first into 'theory' and then its differentiation into specific "studies".[25] Now, autotheory emerges, she argues, as a performative practice of doing theory through and with artistic modes of expression, where the personal becomes political.[26] The novel is not simply a reflection of two lives, but a form of re-living: a written talking cure, confronting, what might be called the opposition of autotheory: autotherapy. Kraus hides no feelings, ideas (miss-)understandings or (miss-)conceptions. Her writing is described as shameless[27] in the sense of a specific form of

20 Kraus, "Torpor", 37.
21 Kraus, "Torpor", 43.
22 Kraus, "Torpor", 118f.
23 Kraus, "Torpor", 118.
24 Mattar, "Introduction", 13: "Unmediated by genre, literary games, and devices like metaphor and allegory, Kraus' writing functions more like transcription".
25 Fournier, "Autotheory", 51–54.
26 Fournier, "Autotheory", 8.
27 Mattar, "Introduction", 13: "Shamelessness is key in making the personal political, the private public, without which neither release nor action are possible".

écriture féminine, distinct from "autobiography, memoir or confession".[28] *Torpor* is not concerned with the poetic production of a subject, an "I", within language. It does not ask "who speaks?" or "who writes?" Rather, it develops Deleuzian life-writing: a symptomatology of living at the end of time, a structure of feeling that resists closure and demands a reconfiguration of biopolitical understandings of life, subjectivity, gender, and death.

The term "anthropology of unhappiness" originates in the novel itself: "Jerome takes his Toshiba laptop out, and Sylvie wonders if this is where he'll finally start to write *The Anthropology of Unhappiness*?"[29] Sylvie links post-Soviet Romania to Jerome's Holocaust trauma. The trip and the potential adoption should be the vantage point from which Jerome finally writes: "Perhaps he'll finally write *The Anthropology of Unhappiness*."[30]

Her writing is ventriloquial: instead of stream-of-consciousness, Kraus's text becomes *the* Anthropology of Unhappiness Jerome should have written. Sylvie repeatedly implies she helps Jerome with his writing, indeed writes for him to the point "she's been demanding gifts of clothes when she writes Jerome's texts and grades his student's papers. For the last essay that she'd 'helped' him with, he'd bought her a $200 pair of shoes."[31]

Sylvie understands the "anthropology of unhappiness" as an ontological and epistemological problem, a "mystery". The realization that "[i]t's much too late for them to have a child"[32] becomes knowledge from which something might be built: "To work with it and not let it defeat them? If it was too late to have a baby of their own, why not adopt one?"[33] Adoption holds – resonating with Berlant's and Ahmed's analysis – the promise to overcome the unhappiness: the end of history might entail a future not of bloodline but of genealogy, of a discontinuous history.

Thus, the novel reflects its own therapeutical procedure: "it might be possible to save another human life through this single metaphoric act, despite (in fact, because) they'd never have the psychic means to save their own lives."[34] This is the therapeutic aspect of autofiction – *not* the constitution of a normal subject, but the deconstruction of normality and its production. Autofiction here is not narcissistic, but multiple and intergenerational. Near the end Kraus writes:

> But sometimes, on bad days when they are alone together, Sylvie and Jerome will remember their trip to Romania *as it really happened*. When Sylvie is overcome with shame at having come so close to being a Third-World baby grabber, when she tries to understand the falseness of their project and what it says about their lives, Jerome will try and comfort her. 'It could have been worse,' Jerome will say.[35]

Reality and fiction awkwardly drift apart. The italicized "*as it really happened*" unsettles truth and autofiction. The "falseness of their project" reveals the anthropology of unhappiness as *conditio humana* of the 20th century.

The trip to Romania was financed primarily by a DAAD fellowship that Jerome received. Berlin, the symbolic capital of post-historical melancholia, frames and haunts the journey. First, because it entails a luxurious environment where Jerome should "have the confidence to start in earnest on *The Anthropology of Unhappiness*, and then everything would change, they'd no longer be unhappy."[36]

Second, because here, in Berlin, Sylvie encounters not only an intellectual scene that exclude her – particularly when Jerome and his friends (the publishers of the famous Merve theory books) begin speaking French (which she cannot speak). In Paris, where they meet with Félix Guattari and his entourage, Sylvie is again excluded through language. Orality here becomes a weapon of hierarchy and separation, whereas writing holds a promise of alleviating pain. This is particularly evident in Jerome's themes. Jerome's cosmos of writing resolves

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28 Mattar, "Introduction", 12: "What does it mean that writer and film-maker Chris Kraus treats herself like this? That she speaks about herself? And what makes this speaking about self more interesting and dangerous than autobiography, memoir or confession? What distinguishes it from notions of écriture féminine?".

29 Kraus, "Torpor", 91.

30 Kraus, "Torpor", 77.

31 Kraus, "Torpor", 198.

32 Kraus, "Torpor", 83.

33 Kraus, "Torpor", 83.

34 Kraus, "Torpor", 83.

35 Kraus, "Torpor", 273.

36 Kraus, "Torpor", 117.

around the holocaust and his personal biographical experience as a survivor of the Second World War: "Throughout the trip, Jerome would have been seething in a vague unspeakable resentment. Another summer gone, and he had nothing but a folder full of notes to show towards the progress of his book, now titled *Modernism and the Holocaust*."[37] Sylvie notes at another point: "Jerome was already two months late with *Death: The Unfinished Life*, the essay that he'd promised for a large New York museum show, […]."[38] Here, Sylvie explicitly writes, that she helps him write his texts. And that help as well as Jerome's acceptance of the help "would bring them closer".[39] The unhappiness Sylvie explores is tied to the inability to write, especially the male inability to write. And this inability comes from being a subject of history. Jerome is such a subject turning into the object of the anthropology of unhappiness.

"Sylvie sees Jerome as someone who has traveled monumental distances. […] That he is someone who has consciously been drawn through larger currents."[40] He is a subject of history in both senses: *subjectum* as being subjected to history's forces and *agent* who makes history. Jerome "[l]ike most of his generation in Europe, […] still uses the word with a capital "H": as if this abstract noun was a god or a person."[41] As a survivor of the Holocaust Jerome embodies the history of the 20th century. He is haunted by memories of his father's arrest by French police and German SS, his mother's and sister's peril, and his own escape. Kraus writes: "Suddenly she understood that all of Jerome's books on death might be connected to his Jewishness. And that his Jewishness could not be separated from the War. She understood that History, for Jerome, was a code-word for the Holocaust."[42] That understanding is connected to Sylvie's reflection on trauma literature. She writes:

> Trauma literature describes experiences that aren't fully registered at the time of the event. […] 'To be traumatized is to be possessed by an image of an event,' writes Cathy Caruth, a theorist of trauma. Yet trauma also is a numbness: […] Within this state, all future life is predicated by the past; becomes conditional.[43]

Not only the relation of trauma and History becomes visible, but also the difficulty of writing, embodied by Jerome. This explains his preoccupation with death: "The windowless north wall of Jerome's room is lined entirely with books on death: *Death: A Social History, Death on the Installment Plan, The American Way of Death, Death-Rites of the Pygmies, Death Within the Camps.*"[44] Death bonds Sylvie and Jerome: they collaborated on a film called *How to Shoot A Crime*, which stages Jerome's fascination with death and causality. Every death must have a reason. In contrast to the mass murder of the Holocaust, the search for causal reason in death is telling. Yet what most fascinates Jerome is his own death:[45] "Jerome thinks constantly of dying. […] She has mostly given up on happiness."[46]

It is not only death but the crime scene itself, the material site of murder, in opposition to the metaphysical aspect of death that obsesses him. The crime scene promises hermeneutic inquiry: "And this is how Jerome sees his life: a crime scene. Like the primitive systems of exchange described by structural anthropologists, Jerome's death is a code that can't be cracked: an anthropology of unhappiness."[47]

This allows us to specify the object of an anthropology of unhappiness. the hermeneutics of one's own death. Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* resonates here: Looking at his dead mother's photograph produces History with a capital H. His life becomes history not only in division to his mother's history, but in looking at it, recognizing history in the photograph. The photograph as a medium and as a materiality of history "has the

37 Kraus, "Torpor", 52.
38 Kraus, "Torpor", 121.
39 Kraus, "Torpor", 121.
40 Kraus, "Torpor", 67.
41 Kraus, "Torpor", 136.
42 Kraus, "Torpor", 157.
43 Kraus, "Torpor", 158.
44 Kraus, "Torpor", 66.
45 Kraus, "Torpor", 48.
46 Kraus, "Torpor", 107.
47 Kraus, "Torpor", 49.

same relation to history that the biographeme has to biography."[48] But there is a certain style to read those elements of history and it is rather a form of deconstruction than hermeneutics; a deconstruction of history with a capital H, of a history that murders some people and lets other life. For Jerome, the holocaust becomes the main event, the crime scene which is the source of all unhappiness in all the survivors. Here a specific form of necropolitics becomes visible. The anthropology of unhappiness is not about the biopolitical engagement of the subject, but its thanatological even necropolitical aspect.

Therefore, the novel can be read in dialogue with Jean Baudrillard's theory, not least because Kraus and Lotringer published Baudrillard through *Semiotext(e)*. Yet this connection is not merely institutional or historical. Baudrillard's theory is particularly relevant to the novel's autofictional discourse through its engagement with hyperreality as the mediated double of life. Secondly, his work also resonates with the novel's engagement with the end of history as well as with the media revolution that is depicted and refracted through the topos of "Romania."

Baudrillard writes "only death is pornographic"[49] and Sylvie asks herself: "Why, Sylvie wonders, does Jerome torture himself by reading every piece of Holo-porn? He'd never been a prisoner himself. Why does he let these simulated memories of the camps define his every action?"[50]

This also applies to Sylvie, the anthropologist: She has four abortions during her relationship with Jerome. These four pregnancies and abortions connect biopolitical to necropolitical questions. Jerome relates pregnancy to terrorism and to feminism, when he mocks Sylvie for her desire to become a mother:[51] "'Ahhh, sweetie,' Jerome laughs. 'I thought you were a feminist.'"[52] Abortion is also tied to history: "The therapist tells her, *It's alright to mourn*. Sylvie wanders if it's possible to be saved by history."[53] Sylvie's relation to death is not the Holocaust, even though she is Jewish too. Rather, the four abortions mark a transformation from biopolitical to necropolitical regime at the end of history. The end of history does not conclude intergenerational suffering; it intensifies it.

Sylvie and Jerome share also a distinctive subjectivity of the 20th century, that of the artist: She is one, he always wanted to be one. She hopes to teach him.[54] But they are bound in their desire for death, echoing the Freudian death drive as Baudrillard describes it: "In other words, with the death drive, Freud installs the process of repetition at the core of objective determinations, at the very moment when the general system of production passes into pure and simple reproduction."[55] Reproduction after production has exhausted itself.

Their suffering structures their sexuality: "She wonders if the sex they have could accurately be called S/M?" Jerome himself stashed "a cardboard box of gay male S/M zines" under his bed on which the sleep with each other:[56] "Their sex is totally disconnected. It's like a therapy appointment."[57] "[A]ll 'historical societies", as Baudrillard explains, "are arranged so as to dissociate sex and death in every possible way, and play the liberation of one off against the other which is a way of neutralizing them both."[58] While historical societies dissociate sex and death, here they merge. What Sylvie calls "holo-porn" becomes central to Jerome's subjectivity: sex and death intertwine, ultimately baring an object of happiness. Sylvie seeks to become that object, but not an object of desire. She becomes rather an object of unhappiness. Ahmed argues (resonating Lacan's theory of desire and the *objet petit a*), happiness is always happiness about something.[59] There is always an object, but never one that is the object of happiness. Sylvie tries not only to become such an object, but also searches for those objects: Jerome, her

48 Barthes, "Camera Lucida", 30 (1981).
49 Baudrillard, "Symbolic exchange", 184 (1993).
50 Kraus, "Torpor", 230.
51 Kraus, "Torpor", 71.
52 Kraus, "Torpor", 72.
53 Kraus, "Torpor", 80.
54 Kraus, "Torpor", 152.
55 Baudrillard, "Symbolic exchange", 184.
56 Kraus, "Torpor", 66.
57 Kraus, "Torpor", 66.
58 Baudrillard, "Symbolic exchange", 184.
59 Ahmed, "The Promise", 21.

dog, the Romanian child, her carrier. But ultimately all fail: "Without Jerome, she is simply sad for sadness now."[60]

Where Jerome's represents the pornographic death, Sylvie wants to consume it: "More than a steady boyfriend, she wants to eat and fuck the dead. She wants to be extremely intimate with history."[61] She achieves this through relentless work and deep dives into biographies of interesting people. She performs Baudrillard's theory of symbolic exchange and death, especially the "killing-possessing-devouring"[62] logic of culture. With Sylvie's desire to eat and fuck the dead, she not only undergoes the "killing" part of culture's imaginary, but engages with the "figure of the double".[63] Yet her desire is not only a repetition or performative act of Baudrillard's theory, but it exceeds the theoretical framework through performing "recreational sex".[64] Ultimately, Sylvie leaves Jerome. In Los Angeles she enters a state of therapeutical reflection: recreational sex is not fucking but "expectant emptiness".[65] Here, Sylvie transcends the symbolic economy of sex and death that structured 20th century unhappiness. In that economy, life has value only when it is meaningful as Sylvie believed for a long time.[66] At the end, value itself dissolves.[67] This frees her from the anthropology of unhappiness and its structure of feeling, yielding what Baudrillard (via Bataille) calls "death as a principle of excess and anti-economy".[68] It is no longer the Freudian death drive haunting Jerome, but a new death and a new sexuality. The novel thus marks a shift in the understanding of death (drive), sex, and subjectivity: it reveals them as myths and reconfigures them at the end of history.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, Jerome is the perfect object of the anthropological gaze: As a Holocaust survivor, his relation to his mother is fraught: "AS THESE EVENTS unfold, Jerome things guiltily about his mother."[69] His mother still lives in Paris. He has to visit her frequently and does so. But he never enjoys the visits. Furthermore, she always fits him money, so his guilt is not only bund to his position as a son and to their shared history of surviving the holocaust but also economically making him, the professor, still regress into a form of capitalist immaturity. But not only his relation to his mother and to History makes him a suitable object, but also his relation to his own body. He practices bodily asceticism, fasting as painful autonomy: "Jerome discovered fasting during his first stoned days in New York. Fasting offered him a marvelous, self-regulated pain and independence."[70]

Sylvie embodies a form of death drive too: "Sylvie doesn't see the point of travel. She doesn't see the point of anything anymore. 'What's the point?' has recently become her mantra, followed by 'I'll never be happy again.' She talks romantically about her own death."[71] At the end she finds herself "simply gotten dumber and at the same time, more repelled by everything around her."[72] Stagnation, or torpor, has become the common structure of feeling of the late 20th century. The anthropology of unhappiness seems an artifact of a disciplinary society within an emerging control society: discipline internalized as historical burden.

Sylvie's "What's the point?" supplements Jerome's saying "It could be worse" – the worst being Auschwitz.[73] Their inability to "rescue" each other gives way to *Weltschmerz*: "And Jerome, who was normally so oblivious to these things, was deeply moved. The hopelessness of Sylvie's sadness made him dimly conscious of his own."[74]

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60 Kraus, "Torpor", 280.
61 Kraus, "Torpor", 152.
62 Baudrillard, "Symbolic exchange", 139.
63 Baudrillard, "Symbolic exchange", 140.
64 Kraus, "Torpor", 285.
65 Kraus, "Torpor", 285.
66 Kraus, "Torpor", 120.
67 Baudrillard, "Symbolic exchange", 146.
68 Baudrillard, "Symbolic exchange", 155.
69 Kraus, "Torpor", 106.
70 Cf. Kraus, "Torpor", 185. Fasting, and other practices of askesis are topic of Kraus' *Aliens & Anorexia*, where she complements the idea of not eating/consumption with the biography of Simone Weil.
71 Kraus, "Torpor", 119.
72 Kraus, "Torpor", 249.
73 Kraus, "Torpor", 101.
74 Kraus, "Torpor", 124.

Surely, one chapter is titled "Weltschmerz," yet the anthropology of unhappiness works against the fascistic tendencies of German Romanticism, Nietzschean *amor fat*i or Heideggerian lostness in the world.

Only one thing makes Sylvie happy: the existential-intellectual recognition of sharing Sartrean passages: "The Sartre routine gave Sylvie Green a triple rush of happiness and pleasure."[75] Their connection revolves around saving each other and thus themselves. But Sylvie cannot dispel Jerome's unhappiness, nor explain her own "nexus of [] misery".[76] At the novel's end, after leaving Jerome, Sylvie lives in Los Angeles a life, that is contrasted with Jerome's life which remains tied to Europe's history with a capital H: "[…] less absolute, perhaps. But better."[77] In this sense, the novel articulates a new understanding of life, a metamodern understanding perhaps, a life without an object of happiness.

3 'Krausism': A Symptomatology of Necropolitics

After my close reading of the novel, I would like to highlight a few aspects in relation to Gilles Deleuze's concept of literature as a symptomatology of life. According to Deleuze, writers such as Proust, Kafka and Beckett – above all Sacher-Masoch and de Sade – became famous for their writing of and toward "perversion". They are associated with medical and psychiatric discourses because they share a poetic strategy that Deleuze calls *symptomatology*. Symptomatology means "study of signs", as Daniel W. Smith explains,[78] and medicine studies the signs of life. As a philosopher of life, as Claire Colebrook explains, Deleuze understands literature as a "symptomatology of a new mode of living".[79] But Deleuze is not simply a vitalist; rather, he thinks a "passive vitalism".[80] This passive vitalism, which does not address life in general, but "a" life, resonates strongly with autofiction. Kraus, however, does not merely write about herself; she writes about a mode of living past the end of history which is bound up with the hyperreality of mediated experience. Moreover, what is "auto" in autofiction no longer guarantees access to truth or reality in a postmodern sense as a product of the interplay of discourses. This condition might seem to form the core of the anthropology of unhappiness – but it is not. At the center of this anthropology of unhappiness, understood as a new mode of living, is a female body that does not – and perhaps cannot – comply with the governing logics of late capitalism and patriarchy, even if it were to desire to do so.

Thus, an anthropology of unhappiness along the lines of Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* and Ahmed's *Promises of Happiness* address a similar "perversion" of postmodernity, one not fully captured by end-of-history-melancholia alone. I would argue that Kraus, like Sacher-Masoch and de Sade, achieves a form of life-writing that deserves its own designation: *Sadism*, *Masochism*, *Kraus-ism*.

'Krausism' names a subjectivity of the 20th century marked by trauma, historicity, and a being-out-of-joint with History with a capital H, as well as by social, libidinal/erotic and intellectual divergence from the norm. Here, her autofiction deconstructs the biopolitical conception of "life" as the "ultimate principle of survival, self-maintenance and continuity," as well as "the tradition […] as a mystical and unifying principle,"[81] both of which are often attributed to the genre's definition. Drawing on Colebrook's analysis, Krausian life instead appears as "a disrupting and destructive range of forces".[82]

However, Kraus does not stop there: she also interrogates the subject of writing itself, which is in *Torpor* appears schizophrenic. This is not a clinical diagnosis but an ontological concept developed by Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). It is a concept oriented towards processes of becoming. In *Torpor*, torpor functions as the dialectical antithesis to becoming. Embodied in Jerome, it is a structure of feeling linked to Holocaust survival and to theory as a means of reflecting history up to the present

75 Kraus, "Torpor", 54.
76 Kraus, "Torpor", 227.
77 Kraus, "Torpor", 285.
78 Smith, "Introduction" (1997), xvi. See also Colebrook "Deleuze" (2002).
79 Colebrook, "Meaning", 136 (2010).
80 Colebrook, "Meaning", 136.
81 Colebrook, "Meaning", 137.
82 Colebrook, "Meaning", 137.

moment. Becoming gestures towards the future; yet, as the novel shows, the future is also a form of torpor, albeit a deterritorialized one, a mode of torpor whose engagement with life is altered. It is not simply the Freudian death drive but rather a melancholic inflection of vitality itself. *Torpor* does not resolve into the "end of history"; instead, it signifies a rupture in history towards metamodernity.

Biologically, torpor is a state of decreased physical activity. It is not death. Yet torpor as a subjective state becomes a *state of exception*. Here Deleuze's understanding of writing as vitality meets Achille Mbembe's assertion that "language's function in such writing is to return to life what had been abandoned to the powers of death."[83] Kraus continuously writes against torpor, against the torpor of Sylvie and Jerome. Both figures remain exposed to the torpor of 20th century history.

Again, torpor is not death: Mira Mattar's edited volume on Kraus bears a resonant title: *You must make your death public* (2015). The title implicitly invokes Antigone, perhaps the first figure in literature to make death public: not only her brother's death but her own. In her reading of *Antigone*, Judith Butler explains how Antigone 'serves' death. She dismantles Hegel's interpretation (Antigone as the force of motherhood)[84] and Lacan's claim that her desire "lead[s] to death precisely because it seeks to defy symbolic norms."[85] Instead, Butler proposes an Antigone akin to Sylvie: a feminist killjoy living the end of time, performing a necropolitics (holocaust, abortion, no kids) while writing life. Furthermore, Antigone inaugurates a new subjectivity, defined by a difference of kinship:

> If kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political catachresis, the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, and kinship founders on its own founding laws.[86]

Hence, what *Antigone* is to a biopolitical understanding of death, Kraus's *Torpor* is to a necropolitical understanding of life. Both describe a "new field of the human", a field that leaves the postmodernity as well as vitalist autofiction.

In her essay on *Torpor* Helen Stuhr-Rommereim identifies a temporality out of joint. For her, Kraus articulates a queer temporality against a chrononormativity.[87] Chrononormativity, as Elizabeth Freemann theorizes in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* corresponds to what we might call the postmodern reality of (too) late capitalism: a biopolitical regime oriented toward the productivity of human bodies. Antigone (and Sylvie) refuses this temporal matrix; she proposes a necropolitical concept of kinship instead.

Hence, Baudrillard writes: "Only the death-function cannot be programmed and localized."[88] "To be dead", Baudrillard continues, "is an unthinkable anomaly;"[89] Sylvie's state of exception, her torpor, resembles this Baudrillardian horizon of death, or thinking death. At the novel's end, Sylvie performs a new form of torpor, undermining – like Antigone – the social and political boundaries between what can be called dead or alive.

Ultimately, she points towards a new structure of feeling, a reality to which Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis falters, because they cannot address a female subject which rejects the ideology of caring for an object of desire, freeing herself from the need to be happy. Yet this faltering could allow for a re-writing of psychoanalysis and the integration of 'Krausism' into the pantheon of 'perversions'.

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83 Mbembe, "Necropolitics", 8 (2019).
84 Butler, "Claim", 12 (2000).
85 Butler, "Claim", 17f.
86 Butler, "Claim", 82.
87 Stuhr-Rommereim, "A Delicate Time", 23.
88 Baudrillard, "Symbolic exchange", 126.
89 Baudrillard, "Symbolic exchange", 126.

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