Re-Learning to Read: Gary Shteyngart and the Commodification of Reading Practices

Clemens Spahr

Abstract
This essay argues that Gary Shteyngart’s Super Sad True Love Story is an allegory of contemporary reading practices, and as such a critical intervention on par with, and coincident to, the postcritical reframing of the act of literary criticism. In Super Sad True Love Story, Shteyngart paints a picture of a world that perpetually reads but hates books, sending his two protagonists on a quest for literacy. This period is also implicitly named by the postcritical intervention into reading for depth and its replacement by reading on the surface. The novel stresses the epistemological function of literature in an illiterate period. Shteyngart demands that we attend closely to the nuances of contemporary reading and writing practices, thereby emphasizing that literature needs to stress its status as literature if it wants to remain relevant. In addition to arguing that Super Sad True Love Story is a novel about relearning to read in a time hostile to reading, this essay establishes how the book runs into a number of contradictions. The novel’s discursive versatility and the marketing campaign that accompanied it perpetually threaten to undermine the novel’s aspiration to re-establish an immersive mode of reading, as it allows readers to isolate its appearance as a commodity from its critique of reading practices. Shteyngart’s novel offers an important critique of the contemporary literary situation; but its formal and economic strategies also call into question its ability to cognitively map the contemporary cultural moment.

“I know professors who can’t read an entire book—professors of English literature, mind you.”
Gary Shteyngart

I

Amidst the sprawling range of topics discussed in Gary Shteyngart’s Super Sad True Love Story, it has gone largely unnoticed that the novel is primarily a book about reading practices. Perhaps appropriately, Shteyngart’s frantic language, his wildly inventive style, and the endless stream of contemporary theoretical concepts featured in his novels have invited a wide range of readings. Super Sad True Love Story, the most ambitious of Shteyngart’s works, has been read as a novel about how finance capitalism changes individuality, as a text that “stages the relays between persons and credit, representing this relationship as instrumen-
tal, technologically mediated, and historically specific” (McClanahan 41; emphasis added); it has been claimed that the novel “marks out how digital fantasies of posthumanism form the basis of a new kind of realism for the digital age” (Malewitz 109); and it has even been suggested that the novel is “Shteyngart’s literary representation of biogerontological research” (Kriebernegg 68; emphasis added). These readings are good indicators of the popularity certain topics enjoy in the humanities, and it is not a coincidence that readers find these topics represented in a novel which caters to an endless range of contemporary academic discourses.

In the wake of Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* (2015), postcritical readers will readily question these approaches as they apparently understand texts as receptacles for academic, cultural, and social tendencies (which do not necessarily coincide). Even more so, it may be objected that such readings are primarily self-authorizations of specific academic positions. Postcritique would suggest that these readings fall prey to what could be labelled the representational fallacy: they assume that texts *represent* a particular extra-literary discourse instead of asking about the text’s literary operations and how these affect the reader. In the best case, such readings assign the text the ability to illustrate a particular cultural or social phenomenon; in the worst case, the text becomes a pseudo-empirical verification of a theoretical position not borne out by the text’s formal operations.

Indeed, there is a point to be made that a particular brand of contemporary academic reading practices follows a logic of representation which sees meaning represented in, rather than constituted by, the text. Such readings identify particular themes in a text in order to stress these topics’ academic and cultural relevance *qua* the author’s prestige, while simultaneously shifting the authority for finding the true meaning of the text to the professional reader. Often these reading practices, as postcritique reveals in a gesture slightly at odds with its distaste for revelatory readings, serve to substantiate the reader’s “claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work” (Felski 2).

It would be tempting to suggest a return to philology, which, as we shall see currently, is an approach suggested by *Super Sad True Love Story* itself, despite the novel’s theoretical nature. As a form of postcritical reading, we could stress how Shteyngart’s satirical portrait of the post-contemporary world is not at all interested in grand theoretical paradigms or a conceptual mapping of the contemporary world, but uses its narrative strategies to make the reader “atten[d] to the text, or to one’s affective responses to it” (Best and Marcus 10). Following Felski’s polemical intervention, we could assert that “[a]fter a long period of historically oriented scholarship, scholars of literature are returning to aesthetics, beauty, and form” (Felski 154), and proceed to show that Shteyngart’s novel is in fact a joyful deconstruction of contemporary reading practices that seek to unveil a text’s hidden meaning. And indeed, these suggestions resonate particularly well with Shteyngart’s novel, as *Super
Sad True Love Story, as we shall see, dwells on the question of literacy and reading to a degree that has largely gone unnoticed.

But we cannot do justice to Shteyngart’s text by turning our back on critical, symptomatic readings (even of the more nuanced sort) and embracing “such themes as joy, hope, love, optimism, and inspiration” (Felski 152). Apart from the fact that the rhetoric of this postcritical alternative is as unsettling as it is unspecific, the postcritical critique of representation relies on a dichotomy that the text itself undermines. While taking seriously the justified postcritical critique of representation and the important questions it asks about the role of the text, I ultimately think that this intervention is insufficient for capturing the cultural work that literary texts can do, particularly with regard to a work that stages its own involvement with the literary market and its situatedness in a global social totality. Shteyngart’s critique of contemporary reading practices ultimately insists that these are false alternatives: the novel establishes a mode of engaged reading that is literary and social at the same time.

This essay argues that Super Sad True Love Story is an allegory of contemporary reading practices, and as such a critical intervention on par with, and coincident to, the postcritical reframing of the act of literary criticism. In his novel, Shteyngart paints a picture of a world that perpetually reads but hates books, sending his two protagonists on a quest for literacy. The novel stresses the epistemological function of literature in an “illiterate period” (327), a period that is also implicitly named by the postcritical intervention into reading for depth and its replacement by reading on the surface. But even in this world there is a strong undercurrent of literacy, which is made available through the two protagonists’ writing: as the novel’s author fiction establishes, the text in front of us is drawn from the protagonists’ journals and e-mail accounts. The novel demands that we attend closely to the nuances of contemporary reading and writing practices, thereby emphasizing that literature needs to stress its status as literature if it wants to remain relevant.

In addition to arguing that Super Sad True Love Story is a novel about relearning to read in a time hostile to reading, I will establish how the book runs into a number of contradictions as it simultaneously caters to as many contemporary academic discourses as possible. The novel’s discursive versatility and the marketing campaign that accompanied it perpetually threaten to turn the book into a commodity which surrenders the aesthetic autonomy to which it aspires. Ultimately, this dual emphasis creates a tension which threatens to undermine the novel’s claim to have re-established a proper mode of reading, as it allows readers to isolate its appearance as a commodity from its critique of reading practices. As such, the book offers a critique of the symptoms of the contemporary literary situation. But in its indecisiveness about its own status as a work of art (the doubts about the powers of literature, but also its positioning as a commodity that threatens the wish for a rejuvenated
modernist autonomy) Shteyngart’s novel also calls into question its ability to cognitively map the contemporary cultural moment.

II

Shteyngart’s eclectic and sometimes anarchic style has turned him into one of the stars of contemporary American literature. Because this style caters to a broad audience, his novels are immensely marketable commodities. Shteyngart has also emerged as a public person, as he comments on contemporary culture and politics in *The Guardian* and on MSNBC and eagerly promotes his works through social media. He has accrued institutional prestige: his works are *New York Times* bestsellers and are well received by both journalists and academic critics. Shteyngart’s works are particularly well received by academics as his novels offer a wide variety of possible points of entry; the various discourses that Shteyngart evokes link up with a number of influential contemporary academic paradigms.

Perhaps as a consequence of the advertising that accompanies Shteyngart’s works, readings of *Super Sad True Love Story* have not paid sufficient attention to the performed literariness of the text. Amidst Shteyngart’s omnipresence and the extensive reach of his topics, it is often overlooked that *Super Sad True Love Story* is a plea for close reading. In a perceptive review, Ruth Franklin has pointed out that by choosing the epistolary novel and the journal as his characters’ modes of writing, Shteyngart employs “two of the most antiquated literary forms” (Franklin). Franklin sees these modes, which may be more adequately referred to as historical or traditional rather than antiquated, as a “gesture of canny irony.” And indeed, it could be argued that transforming traditional storytelling into an appropriate expression of the digital, posthumanist, and global age is precisely one of the tasks of contemporary literature. In this sense, *Super Sad True Love Story* seems to mediate between earlier forms of interiority and a historical constellation supposedly characterized by the disappearance of the self. And yet, while all of the satirical novel’s devices can be read as ironic, Shteyngart is in fact quite unironic about the novel’s employment of form. Both fictionalized writing modes, the journal and the letter, are presented as meaningful forms of writing in and out of a world of illiteracy.

This emphasis on proper reading as a prerequisite for critique and agency is evident from the text itself, as we will see. But it can also be detected in Shteyngart’s general diagnosis of contemporary American culture and of the literary world. Instead of describing his novels as the adequate expression of a new media age, Shteyngart actually insists on separating literary form from other narrative forms, and he is wary of attempts to see TV shows as the new novel of the visual, digital age. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Shteyngart lays out his aesthetics in rather traditional terms:
I know professors who can’t read an entire book—professors of English literature, mind you. So everyone’s attention span has been shot. We’re no longer used to processing long strings of information. When a book is no longer a book but yet another text file, it’s very hard to say, “OK, I’m gonna devote myself to the 300 pages of text on my screen” when I have all this other stuff that I need to do. That’s why channels like HBO and Showtime have taken over to a big extent. The kind of stuff that used to appear in novel form now appears in “The Wire” or “Breaking Bad.” They deliver the narrative thrust that we need. They teach us about different worlds and different ways of living. But at the same time, they don’t require textual immersion. You just passively sit there and let these things happen on the screen. (Kuntz)

The point is not whether this is an adequate description of the reception of TV shows. Shteyngart’s comment is most remarkable for its insistence on literary form, particularly as the interview was conducted in the context of the publication of Super Sad True Love Story. It is significant that a contemporary author renowned for his adaptive style describes the act of watching academically canonized TV shows as an inferior surrogate for the experience of reading. For Shteyngart, literature needs to insist on its status as literature, rather than simply conform to contemporary cultural trends. Shteyngart insists that reading is “textual immersion” and that this experience is what creates literature’s unique resistant potential. That he references academia as part of the problem of illiteracy, or rather, as part of a wrong form of literacy, is particularly significant in this context; the economization of the university (where you have to attend to “all this other stuff”) seems to systematically prevent textual immersion and, ultimately, to even propagate a form of reading that devalues textual immersion.

In response to these conditions and the reading practices they have produced, Super Sad True Love Story has fittingly been marketed in a way that supports its author’s critique of contemporary reading practices. The problem of illiteracy as well as the inability to read properly has been explored even in Shteyngart’s promotional videos. Shteyngart is one of the few authors who produce promotional videos for their books. These are professional productions, featuring popular actors such as Ben Stiller and equally popular writers like Jonathan Franzen. Besides being rather entertaining, these clips help establish the logic of the literary market as it expresses itself in Shteyngart’s novels. In the YouTube clip for Super Sad True Love Story, released by Shteyngart’s publisher, Random House, James Franco, Jay McInerney, and Jeffrey Eugenides, among others, enthusiastically endorse the book. The fictionalized version of Gary Shteyngart is presented as a completely uncultivated Russian immigrant, who teaches at Columbia University but enervates his students with incoherent thoughts expressed in broken English. His famous readers praise Super Sad True Love Story, but, when pressed to comment on the novel’s ending, they admit to never having finished the book. The video’s fictionalized Shteyngart cannot read, and, conversely, no one
reads his novels. This systemic illiteracy, however, does not matter, because the author ticks all the boxes for marketability. Shteyngart is said to have “risen to the top of the literary ranks, […] easily outshining his last two novels.” This level of excellence is not connected to the work of art he produces, but is a function of the fact that “he knows how to work the literary world” (Shteyngart, “Book Trailer”). The novel emerges as a commodity traded in a quantified literary world: the audience’s standardized, manipulated expectations have been measured and Shteyngart emerges as an author who simply caters to these expectations.

This disregard of the actual thing at hand (the novel) in the name of measureable categories abstracted from its constitution as a work of art displays exactly the logic of quantification that Shteyngart describes in his novel, where characters are assessed purely in terms of their scores. As Julio Ramos has written in Divergent Modernities: “Quantification is not oriented toward the object of representation; the object only exists in terms of its interchangeability, its adjustment to the parameters imposed by the measure of exchange” (176). The same process occurs in the video: the logic of quantification is also the logic that underlies an academic “star system” by which, as Lois Tyson writes, “prestigious universities compete with one another in terms of the name recognition of their faculty, rather than the quality of education offered their students; and, at the lower rungs of the university ladder, the selection of dissertation topics solely for their perceived marketability” (147).

Writing is here presented as a practice that does not question but reproduces the logic of quantification and commodification, and Shteyngart, the simpleton, is its perfect agent. In the video, the institution of literature itself is therefore affected by a process of commodification in which it actively, and willingly, shares.

Through its satirical portrait of a superficial literary world, the video establishes the logic of the novel’s post-literate world, in which everything is measured in terms of its exchange value. The true meaning of the video—one that the novel’s intended audience is, of course, supposed to be able to decipher—is that the real Gary Shteyngart, author of Super Sad True Love Story, is offering an ironic take on a literary world that is part of the culture industry, and that Shteyngart, the media-savvy critic of the media, is someone able to play the system while at the same time writing his way out of it. This may seem like a familiar strategy of subversion—the author ridicules the literary scene and its market mechanisms, and in the process uses these structures to introduce a discourse on literacy and art that partially unhinges the logic of the market. But it turns into a problem because the comprehensive commodification of the literary market renders impossible such acts of subversion. We will return to the point that Shteyngart’s novel is part of the same logic that he seeks to abandon in the second half of this essay—and to the question of how this observation affects the novel’s plea for a renewed textual immersion. For now, it is important to see that Shteyngart is trying to
write his way out of this world of illiteracy in Super Sad True Love Story. Shteyngart’s satirical, near-future dystopian novel asks how, in a society characterized by surveillance, self-regulation, and the reification of everyday life, a meaningful form of the literary imagination can still exist.

The plot of Shteyngart’s second novel, Absurdistan (2006), reaches around the globe; similarly, Super Sad True Love Story traces how individuals are subjected to the global conditions of finance capitalism and surveillance. But Super Sad True Love Story does so with a particular view to the ways in which writing and reading have been commodified and to how they reinforce these processes of commodification. For Shteyngart, the literary world as a particular field within a differentiated modernity is a problem. Not only has it become self-involved; illiteracy and the inability to create textual immersion seem to be characteristic of a world that unintentionally reinforces the practices it seems to reject. Super Sad True Love Story is Shteyngart’s attempt to write himself out of a commodified world but also out of a quantified, professionalized literary scene in which the author and his cultural capital often matter more than the work of art itself. The novel represents a world in which “[l]iterature’s no longer considered to be something that can change the world, that can change the opinions of anyone, except for a very small group of intellectuals,” as Shteyngart himself has stated (Kuntz).

The novel, then, proclaims a form of engagement on the reader’s part that is not simply an operation of deciphering hidden ideological meanings and excavating a deeper layer underneath the text’s surface. Asking about the place of literature in this world (or in these worlds), Super Sad True Love Story can be understood as a form of cognitive mapping, to use Fredric Jameson’s term: it is a spatial representation that enables individuals to map their subject position within a “global social totality” (Geopolitical Aesthetic 31). To turn to Jameson’s concept at this point seems to be somewhat counterintuitive, as Jameson’s works have been, predictably, singled out by Felski as the foremost representative of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Hardly any phrase seems to substantiate the postcritical criticism of symptomatic readings more than Jameson’s “political unconscious.” When the recent adoption of the concept of the political unconscious is considered, Felski’s identification of Jameson as the American critic who “set the tone for a subsequent generation of critics by gearing up an exceptionally powerful interpretative machine” (56) is perhaps understandable. But to proclaim that Jameson believes that “[w]hat a text seems to be saying is either distracting or deceptive” and that “its subterfuges must be resisted, its superficiality proclaimed” (56) completely disregards Jameson’s emphasis on the text’s didactic function.² It is precisely this didactic function that we need to discuss in order to understand the operations of Shteyngart’s text.

If we avoid the pitfalls of the false duality between hermeneutics and text-oriented affective response, which postcritique has helped establish by insisting on the “distinctive agency of art works—rather than
their imagined role as minions of opaque social forces or heroes of the resistance” (Felski 12-13), it is helpful to realize that there are variants of hermeneutic methods that assign the text an active role. In fact, while it is certainly appropriate to link Jameson to a form of critique that engages in reading for depth and the revealing of the unconscious layers of texts, it should be remembered that Jameson’s work dwells heavily on questions of literary form and on the agency of texts. While there may be a bent of ideology critique that has contented itself with revealing the ideologemes of a text, the Marxist tradition has always emphasized the cultural work that texts do. The concept of “cognitive mapping,” a term which Jameson famously borrowed from urban geography, not only brings together questions of form and meaning, but also emphasizes the cultural work performed by texts. For Jameson, cognitive mapping is a cultural operation that enables individuals to map their subject position within a “global social totality” (Geopolitical Aesthetic 31). Importantly, for Jameson it is art that can achieve such a cognitive mapping, or at least provide its outlines: “Achieved cognitive mapping will be a matter of form” (“Cognitive Mapping” 356).

But Jameson also insists that his model of interpretation foregrounds the cognitive and pedagogical dimensions of political art and culture, dimensions stressed in very different ways by both Lukács and Brecht (for the distinct moments of realism and modernism, respectively) (Postmodernism 50). The addendum in brackets is crucial, as it historicizes the function of the literary text as well as its pedagogical dimension. In accordance with his periodization of “late” capitalism as the stage of capitalism after 1945, Jameson sees the “growing contradiction between lived experience and structure” (“Cognitive Mapping” 349) at its height with postmodernity. Cognitive mapping “does justice to the situation of individuals in ever more horrendously complex social matrices which end up being global” (Jameson on Jameson 159).

Shteyngart’s novel seeks to map precisely this contemporary historical moment. In addition, as we have established, for Shteyngart this situation is complicated by the fact that the writer needs to write through the webs of a commodified literary world. Cognitive mapping can therefore be understood as a literary operation in which the text’s agency and the reader’s imagination intersect; as such, it is precisely the cultural work that Shteyngart wants contemporary literature to fulfill. The question is, then, if the text can imagine a form of literary agency, despite its systemic and self-imposed entanglements.

III

In Super Sad True Love Story, Shteyngart sends his two protagonists on a quest for literary expression in a post-national, hyper-mediated world. Lenny Abramov, the novel’s skeptical protagonist, is employed as “Life Lovers Outreach Coordinator (Grade G) of the Post-Human Ser-
vices division of the Staatling-Wapachung Corporation” (5). A slightly overweight middle-aged man, Lenny is responsible for helping people attain eternal youth. Over the course of the book he engages in a peculiar, contradictory relationship with his exact opposite, Eunice Park, a college student obsessed with self-monitoring and self-advertisement through social media. Their different approaches to writing the self are reflected in the form of the novel, which is largely constituted by Lenny’s introspective journal entries and Eunice’s GlobalTeens entries (a mix of e-mails and chat protocols). While the relationship begins as a superficial exchange between two contradictory characters, it increasingly turns into a meaningful conversation about literary expression and interaction in a digital neoliberal world characterized by political and economic struggles.

Shteyngart paints a picture of a world that hates books. But he also shows that even a world that disdains individuals like Lenny, who believes in the educational function of reading and writing, is actually full of writing, and that this writing, although it tends to be instrumentalized in the pursuit of prestige and power, can change into a true form of literary expression. It is consequently Eunice Park who slowly begins to write her way out of this world: her e-mails begin in an absurdly comical internet-speak in the service of improving her social rankings. As Annie McClanahan notes, “the caricatured persons of Super Sad are defined by the overabundance of data” (43), and it is Eunice’s texts that give expression to, and reinforce, this logic.6 But once Eunice engages in a relationship with the humanistically inclined Lenny, she develops a different mode of writing. In one of her final GlobalTeens entries she announces her tragic love for Lenny, displaying a complex insight into her own lack of security and unhappiness:

Common unhappiness, as the doctor said, but also common responsibility.
I can’t just be an abused little girl anymore. I have to be stronger than my father, stronger than Sally, stronger than Mommy.
I’m sorry, Lenny.
I love you. (Shteyngart 298)

Addressed to herself, the entry is a declaration of love for Lenny both thematically and through its adoption of a literary style significantly different from her initial use of internet slang. Through her interaction with Lenny, whose journal entries display the same reflexivity from the outset, Eunice writes her way out of the logic of commodification, achieving at least a rudimentary sense of agency.

Super Sad True Love Story is first and foremost what its title promises the reader—a sad love story. Eunice and Lenny’s relationship ultimately fails despite their ability to communicate with each other. It seems that even the most sincere way of addressing one another is doomed. Shteyngart captures this situation in satirical portraits of his characters or types. Super Sad True Love Story is also a novel about the quest for

6 Eunice’s development exemplifies the dangers of self-optimization that Deborah Lupton has described in The Quantified Self. “Illness, emotional distress, lack of happiness or lack of productivity in the workplace come to be represented primarily as failures of self-control or efficiency on the part of individuals, and therefore as requiring greater or more effective individual efforts—including perhaps self-tracking regimens of increased intensity—to produce a ‘better self’” (74-75).
relationships, for reading and reaching each other, in a world in which individuals are only products of numbers and quantification practices. Having worked its way through the consequences of life in a digital world and under late capitalism, the novel arrives at a vision that seems possible only in the face of systemic failure: “Because we can’t connect to our äppärät, we’re learning to turn to each other” (274). The sadness that pervades the novel is not simply that two lovers cannot find each other, but that such a relationship has become unlikely due to the social practices of the time. Only once writing and conversation isolate themselves from the quantified world can they become meaningful again.

A crucial scene in the novel establishes the situation that Lenny and Eunice try to overcome in their writing. The scene shows how the novel’s near-future hypertechnological world transforms individuals into mere statistics. When Lenny sees a woman at the bar, he presses his äppärät to his heart. The device assesses Lenny’s impression of the woman in numbers based on the data it has collected on both Lenny and the woman: “fuckability 780/800, personality 800/800, anal / oral / vaginal preference 1/3/2” (89). The whole scene is streamed online by his friend Noah. Of course, the traditionalist Lenny is outraged by the fact that the äppärät pretends to know his view of others. When Lenny, while being streamed live, ponders the meaning of relationships and love in a hypertechnological, globalized world, Noah cries out: “You just halved my viewer load. You’re killing me here, Abramov […]. Okay, folks, we’re streaming here in Rubenstein’s America, zero hour for our economy, zero hour for our military might, zero hour for everything that used to make us proud to be ourselves, and Lenny Abramov won’t tell us if he fucked this tiny Asian chick” (94). There is a basic awareness of the catastrophic political situation here (“zero hour”), but what matters in the media-saturated world of a failing America is self-advertisement in measurable numbers.

What Noah and most others do not see is that their practices have created and perpetuated that zero hour in which the United States is replaced by a post-national constellation of totalitarian capitalism. The permanent accumulation of numbers that measure prestige is the structuring principle of the world in Super Sad True Love Story, and assessing and quantifying have become a naturalized form of social practice. The problem in the novel is that while the “young people with äppärät” think they are “immune to the rest of the world” (124), their practices actually contribute to the chaos. In their collective frenzy for perfect scores, they lose track of what this data is used for—namely the maintenance of a failing empire. Not only has consumerist capitalism turned the body itself into a product that needs to be constantly optimized, advertised, and sold; in the novel, this is the logic that leads to the United States becoming a failed state.

Shteyngart’s novel can be understood as an attempt to write his way out of a world of illiteracy by deeply engaging it. The media and technol-
ogy landscape he establishes are certainly features to keep the reader interested, but they are also an essential part of the novel’s attempt to work through the contemporary historical moment in the name of a belief in human relationships. Shteyngart’s novel asserts the self-making function of literary language and its ability to work through, and perhaps transcend, the logic of optimization and marketability. The entire novel is about the power of literature to at least preserve a core of humanity in what it refers to as an “illiterate period” (327). The narrative of Lenny and Eunice seems to constitute that redemptive core.

In the end, both Lenny and Eunice achieve a sense of critique and reflexivity by expressing themselves in writing and reading one another closely. Yet, in the context of the desire for literacy that the novel expresses (a desire that we do not have to unearth from the deep structure of the novel, as it is openly presented as such), this depiction of writing and reading is full of tensions. On the one hand, Eunice’s and Lenny’s writing practices ultimately prove to be strangely inadequate responses to a global crisis. The novel constantly evokes a global socioeconomic crisis, which ultimately results in the cataclysmic event referred to as the Rupture, as the ultimate condition for meaningful expression. “Fuck the creative economy,” Lenny exclaims at one point, “[t]here’s no food downtown” (258). Similarly, Eunice’s sister is engaged with the partisans and increasingly forces Eunice to feel a sense of solidarity.

Instead of engaging with these events, Eunice’s and Lenny’s writing is ultimately detached from the political situation. After the Rupture, both Lenny and Eunice essentially turn in on themselves, although it is fairly clear that the system that hindered their relationship is still firmly in place in a world now controlled by the People’s Capitalist Party. When Lenny loses his home at the end of the novel, he moves to Italy, a place where “old people” like himself are “not despised simply for being old, where an older man, for example, could be considered beautiful” (328). It is the place of the Renaissance, with its universalist ideas of beauty. But there are signs that even the pastoral areas of Italy will soon be incorporated into the regime of the People’s Capitalist Party, and that the beautiful life is no longer available even in its most individualist variety as withdrawal and refuge. Eunice’s case is different from but eerily similar to Lenny’s. She abandons Lenny for Joshie, the embodiment of neoliberal quantification, because he is rich enough to support her desire to express herself in painting. Again, this is an act of withdrawal, as Eunice’s expression occurs in a space where it is meaningless. It is fitting that her final e-mail, in which she professes her love for Lenny, is addressed to herself—as insightful as it is, it does not have an audience. Neither protagonist, then, can turn writing into a form of agency.

Again, I am not interested in unearthing hidden ideologies here. The point is that the novel pushes its narrative toward these contradictions in an attempt to map the contemporary historical and institutional moment. The novel clings to a vision of literacy and critical art, but ascribes
Clemens Spahr

560 Amst 64.4 (2019): 549-65

it a public function that its main narrative cannot fulfill. This is not a contradiction of any sort, as we could simply read the novel as a dystopian vision that illustrates the impotence of writing and reading in an illiterate age. But these contrasts emerge as structural problems when the novel engages in a discussion of its ability to map the contemporary socio-institutional moment. In the end, the novel seeks to mediate private and public, literary expression and politics. Eunice’s and Lenny’s private texts are ultimately published and therefore made available to the public, and it is here that things start to become confusing. The texts become public not intentionally but accidentally. In the novel, the manuscript is somehow magically transformed into a book. The narrative is framed by an author fiction, in which a fictive editor comments on the book’s publication history. In a narrative sleight-of-hand, the narrator tells us that someone hacked Eunice’s account and stole her e-mails for publication. In an even more contrived storyline, we learn that Lenny had gladly uploaded his written diary entries to his GlobalTeens account, thereby making them available to be hacked as well. The narrator does not explain the motivation for the publication of these texts, but their publication is necessary for the novel’s final turn with regard to reading practices.

The convenient narrative sleight-of-hand aside, the interesting point here is that once published, the book is rapidly absorbed by the literary market. Illiteracy is not only characteristic of the novel’s near-future digital world, but also of a literary world which has largely adapted to the logic of commodification. A post-Rupture reviewer chides Lenny for his journal’s “navel-gazing,” while Eunice is singled out for praise because her texts constitute an attempt to “negotiate her way through the precarious legacy of her family and to form her own opinions about love and physical attraction and commerce and friendship” (328). The reviewer does not see that in their conversations, Lenny and Eunice move beyond assessing each other in numbers, leaving behind the logic perpetuated by their äppäräti, nor does he understand the evolution of Eunice’s style. Instead, because of his inability to link the texts with each other, he reduces Eunice’s writing to a cliché about the world as such (“her own opinions,” “negotiate,” “precarious legacy,” etc.). This is a key moment in the novel. The reviewer does not so much offer a misreading as a lopsided reading of the text. Because of Eunice’s rhetorical fireworks, the reviewer can easily, if selectively, provide evidence for his claims. Eunice’s text draws so much attention to its author (if unwillingly so) that it obscures its status as a work of art. Its partaking in a consumerist culture effaces its ability to provide an occasion for textual immersion.

The publication and reception of Eunice’s and Lenny’s texts is such a decisive narrative moment because it illustrates the novel’s overall predicament. The form of Shteyngart’s novel is supposed to be a counterpoint to the media world it portrays. Shteyngart’s frantic imagination and verbal
inventiveness essentially create an amalgamation of the academic paradigms the novel criticizes. This dilemma is nowhere more evident than in his marketing campaigns. Despite the promotional video’s ironic gestures, it actively reinforces a logic which can be digested only in the most superficial of ways. It criticizes a system which it simultaneously employs. It is instructive, but by no means necessary to know the promotional video I analyzed previously. The logic of the video is also at work in the form of *Super Sad True Love Story*, where stylistic fireworks detract from the aesthetic questions the book itself asks. What may be perceived as a cunning use of the literary market threatens to turn his books into commodities. It caters to a form of reading that it seeks to satirize and criticize.

Indeed, the question is whether subversion is still possible, given that the subsumption of art under capital has occurred to a degree where an outside that employs and rewrites established practices seems impossible. Nicholas Brown has argued that in the age of the “real subsumption [of art] under capital,” “what looks like meaning is only an appeal to a market niche.” If this is the case, interpreting the work at hand would be meaningless, as it would be no more than a commodity. Brown’s example is *Avatar*, about which director James Cameron has suggested that particular features “make no sense,” as they were included only because they appeal to the audience’s expectations. For Brown, the question about meaning is therefore pointless: the formal features of the film are not intended to make sense, so no sense can be made of them. Correspondingly, Brown states that “[i]f a work of art is not a commodity—or if it is not only a commodity, which is to say that a moment of externality to the commodity form is analytically isolable, which is to say that there is something in the work that is not a commodity—then it makes entirely good sense to approach it with interpretive tools, since it can plausibly be intended to mean something.” For Brown, this signals a desire for art’s autonomy that has been lost after Modernism.

It is precisely this desire that ultimately shapes the narrative of *Super Sad True Love Story*. Shteyngart very much believes in his claim to autonomy and the importance of literature, but at the same time he renders his marketing gimmicks part of the fictional world he creates. Again, it is not so much the unconscious of the novel that we need to tap into here; Shteyngart lays out his vision of art in one of the novel’s final scenes. In an inconspicuous episode toward the end of the novel, Lenny visits a photography exhibition, which displays “extreme satellite zoom-ins of the deadly conditions” in post-Rupture America (317). Individualized, close-up photographs taken by a person would not have the systemic point of view the photographs present. The point of these photographs is to view the individual closely from the impossible viewpoint of the totality within which the individual seeks orientation. In other words, the photographs are a form of cognitive mapping.

Lenny is profoundly unsettled by these images. When he wants to engage the photographer in a dialogue about his art, spikes shoot up

---

7 What Brown means by real subsumption is that the logic of capitalism has fully subsumed every branch of cultural production and become its constitutive logic: “What differentiates Adorno’s culture industry from the self-representation of our contemporary moment is that the art-commodity now has no other.”
around the artist, isolating him from his audience. Lenny responds by resorting to the experience of aesthetic immersion, without realizing that this is actually the point of the photographs: “Oh well, I thought. At least the art was great” (Shteyngart 318; emphasis in original). Ironically, Lenny still clings to his individualist perspective instead of dissolving it in the work of art. As the scene makes clear, however, it is not that at least the art is great, and that it would be greater to talk to the artist and learn about him or his intentions; it is that the artist does not matter, and that by keeping his personality as well as his marketing strategies separate from his art, he ensures that his art cannot be reduced to the logic of the market. This is Shteyngart’s dream: that it is possible, even in a world ruled by the People’s Capitalist Party, to create a form of art that retains a modernist claim to autonomy. The writer (or artist) must play the game of the literary market; at the same time, he should be able to cancel out personal questions and draw his audience’s attention to structural questions, engaging the reader in an act of cognitive mapping instead of turning art into a vehicle for commercial success.

The book therefore ends on a modernist desire for artistic autonomy. If “[a]chieved cognitive mapping will be a matter of form” (Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping” 356), then it is symptomatic that the form of Super Sad True Love Story retains a contradictory meaning. For the way in which Shteyngart markets his novel and in which he employs contemporary discourses caters to the logic he criticizes to a degree where the work of art threatens to be dissolved in the marketing act. This is a symptomatic problem of contemporary literature that the novel self-consciously presents. From the forced publication to its lopsided reception, the new writing practice proves a contradictory endeavor and is ultimately portrayed as a failure. Writing seems to work as a private form of consciousness-raising, but it proves powerless in the face of a completely commodified world, and is, in fact, easily commodified and emptied of its critical potential once it enters the literary marketplace. The cognitive mapping performed by the novel is part of the world it sets out to criticize to a degree that renders its own claims precarious. This is not to evaluate the novel as a success or failure, or to hold it to an ideological or political standard that we would like to see it fulfill. It is rather to foreground the text’s claim to cultural agency and the tensions that characterize such a claim in the contemporary institutional and larger historical moment.

IV

Part of my reading practice here has been to avoid a gesture of unveiling, instead teasing out the meanings the text itself suggests, while also holding the text accountable to the claims it makes. In Life between Two Deaths, 1989–2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties, Phillip Wegner gauges the critical work that cultural texts do. Wegner states that
these texts “think” in a way that may “teach our theories” (6); he seeks to “explore the ways in which mass cultural documents in the 1990s ‘think’ in a particular and original fashion both the historical situation of their present and the very nature of historical movement” (6). Instead of simply rejecting hermeneutic methods, Wegner demands that we identify “translation operations that rewrite the specific codes of the examined texts into some of our theoretical ones” (6). A similar account has been offered by George Lipsitz. In Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place, Lipsitz identifies a new wave of “grass-roots theorizing about complicated realities” (3) in popular music. Assigning such an active role to cultural production runs into a number of productive tensions and contradictions, as we have seen. This is particularly the case for a novel that seeks to use the nomenclature of current academic trends, while at the same time displaying its frustration with their tendency to render void the act of reading as “textual immersion.” But approaches such as Wegner’s and Lipsitz’s seem to be two of the most productive ways of assessing the role of contemporary literature without subjecting it to a simplified ideology critique, and without giving in to the simplified dichotomies that have characterized the debate surrounding postcritique.

Super Sad True Love Story is best situated as an intervention into theories of how to properly assess the cultural work novels can do. With regard to television drama, Stephen Shapiro has suggested that “contemporary subscription drama functions as a crucial laboratory for remaking the relations between classes within the cross-over of a broadly bourgeois audience and popular narrative form, content, and medium” (“Realignment” 178). Shapiro’s term, which he borrows from Raymond Williams, is “alignment”: the cultural work aligns (or realigns) its audience with social positions they do not currently occupy. As opposed to mobilizing the audience for a particular political project, realignment for Shapiro has a more concretely collective dimension as the work of art asks its audience to step “from one side of the line to join in on the other” (Shapiro, “Culture” 148). Shapiro is more clearly concerned with questions of class than I was here, and, of course, Shteyngart would be skeptical about the alliance between television and the literary text. Yet, bearing in mind the difference in media form, Shapiro’s approach is very helpful as it puts the agency back into the work itself, for it is the didactic function of the work that teaches the audience something about their position and the necessity to reposition themselves.8

These attempts help us gauge the possibilities and limits of textual agency. This is particularly relevant as contemporary American literature itself insists that these questions be broached through close attention to the operations of the text. Shteyngart’s text subscribes to a notion of engagement, as it seeks to involve the reader in the chaotic cognitive mapping the novel attempts. In its attempt to teach the reader how to read again, Shteyngart’s novel is a critical intervention on par with, and

---

8 In this context, instead of seeing the text as a representation of a particular discourse, Shapiro and Lazarus ascribe it an almost prescient function: “Cultural expression precedes political expression; the latter, in fact, is in part a production of the former” (8).
coincident to, the postcritical reframing of the act of literary criticism, suggesting their respective symptomaticity of an underlying moment of challenges to literature’s social function.

In his final collection of essays, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), Edward Said argued for a “return of philology.” By no means discouraging the self-reflective quality of critique, Said addresses the larger political concerns underlying a critique that increasingly distances itself from the text and becomes involved in a world of its own: “Expertise as a distancing device has gotten out of control, especially in some academic forms of expression, to the extent that they have become antidemocratic and even anti-intellectual” (73). Postcritique, even if its alternatives are rejected, identifies a problem at the heart of Literary Studies today: if the critic emphasizes his or her own work over the work of the text, if the act of reading is perceived as more political than the text itself, this logic contributes to the devalorization of what Felski calls the text as “a potential source of knowledge rather than just an object of knowledge” (84).

*Super Sad True Love Story* is a particularly instructive case. If most critics fail to talk about the novel’s form (its use of the epistolary novel, its discussion of aesthetic autonomy), instead teasing out various theories, there is a point to be made that Shteyngart himself is responsible for such lopsided readings because his novel caters to the logic of marketability as much as it refutes it. At the same time, this is necessary to embrace this strategy in order to reestablish the social role literature can fulfill. The novel’s contradictory ending should then be understood as the contradictory situation of a literary and academic field caught between the demands of quantification and marketability, and as an attempt to transcend that logic. *Super Sad True Love Story* is an important episode in contemporary American literature’s attempt to navigate the precarious space between commodification and literary expression. It is an allegory of contemporary reading practices that outlines the parameters along which art needs to operate today if it wants to successfully map our current historical moment.

**Works Cited**


