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On Literary Apathy: Forms of Dis/Affection in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018)

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Abstract: There is an important countertradition in U.S.-American literature that goes against intense feelings and instead highlights apathy, unfeeling and disaffection. As a few scholars from affect studies have recently argued, apathy can signal a "detachment from attachments to hegemonic structures of feeling" and holds "the potential for striving toward a radical politics of liberation" (Yao 2021: 17). Literary texts that highlight apathy formally and thematically thus reflect on broader socio-political contexts of emotional withdrawal that was caused, for example, by labor fatigue, late capitalism and addiction, and pose a challenge to the affective status quo. One recent text that stages this complex dance between feeling and unfeeling is Ottessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. In this article I argue that Moshfegh's novel complicates the apathetic protagonist's naïve goal of *re-affection* – that is, her attempt to overcome apathy, find happiness and reintegrate into society – by embedding her emotional experiences within an overpowering affective economy that is constituted by media, capitalism, neoliberalism and other socio-political forces. Instead of 'correcting' the affective pendulum from a solipsistic apathy into a naïve happiness, Moshfegh's novel 'awakens' her readers to a more complex and undetermined spectrum of affective structures.

Key terms: representations of apathy, affect, dis/affection

> Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when without moving from his privacy, Bartleby in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, "I would prefer not to."
> – Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853/2017: 1475)

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> *Mary is paler than before and her eyes shine with unnatural brilliance. The strange detachment in her manner has intensified, she has hidden deeper within herself and found refuge and release in a dream where present reality is but an appearance to be accepted and dismissed unfeelingly – even with a hard cynicism – or entirely ignored.*
> – Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1956/2002: 99; original emphasis)

> How nice – to feel nothing, and still get full credit for being alive.
> – Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969/1991: 105)

> And though the coldness I have always felt leaves me, the numbness doesn't and probably never will. This relationship will probably lead to nothing... this didn't change anything.
> – Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (1991/2006: 379)

The United States of America has been known for its pioneering spirit, the hopeful promise encapsulated in the American dream, and an overall proactive, go-getter attitude. Although these national traits have been criticized for their problematic coalition with capitalism, neoliberalism and cultural imperialism; and even though critics such as Lauren Berlant (2011) have detected a sinister cruelty beneath these nation-wide structures of optimism, the United States maintains a deeply affective status in the broader cultural imagination. Whether cheerful or desperate, hopeful or cruel, in pursuit or in retreat – the U.S.A. is known for emotionality, sentimentality and intensity. Indeed, notions such as 'disaffection', 'unfeeling' and 'apathy' seem to be in fundamental disagreement with this national public image. There is, however, an important countertradition in American literature that goes against intense feelings: from Herman Melville's Bartleby, who apathetically rejects labor,[1] to Eugene O'Neill's Tyrones, whose opioid and alcohol addictions widen the rift between the family members, to Kurt Vonnegut's unnamed protagonist, who struggles with detachment as a consequence of his experiences in WWII, to Bret Easton Ellis's Patrick Bateman, whose pathological coldness is reflected in and enhanced by consumer culture. These different sociopolitical contexts of emotional withdrawal – labor fatigue, drug addiction, brutal war and late capitalism – have fueled the staging of a particularly U.S.-American conflict between feeling and unfeeling that persists to this day.

1 Sianne Ngai begins her seminal book, *Ugly Feelings* (2005), with an examination of Melville's "Bartleby" as a prototypical story that deals with negative, neglected and ugly feelings.

In this article I look at a recent text that is not only aligning itself with this countertradition but also advancing the discussion on how apathy and art can interact in a productive manner. I examine the tensions between care and apathy, affect and disaffect, attunement and alienation, in Ottessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. I argue that the novel complicates the protagonist's naïve goal of *re-affection* – that is, her attempt to overcome apathy, find happiness and reintegrate into society – by embedding her emotional experiences within a much larger and overpowering affective economy that is constituted by media, capitalism, neoliberalism and other socio-political forces. Instead of 'correcting' the affective pendulum from a solipsistic apathy into a naïve happiness, Moshfegh's novel 'awakens' her readers to a more complex and undetermined spectrum of affective structures. By paying close attention to formal features such as narrative voice, description and style, it becomes clear that Moshfegh's novel invites readers to rethink apathy not just as an inevitable consequence of a broken system but also as a chance to step outside of the affective structures of care that sustain that system.[2] After all, apathy signals a withdrawal from social structures and can therefore pose a serious challenge to the way society is organized: "Unfeeling", claims Xine Yao in her book *Disaffected* (2021), "is the detachment from attachments to hegemonic structures of feeling and the potential for striving toward a radical politics of liberation" (17). Through her distinct style, which provokes a wide spectrum of strong affects, Moshfegh's novel examines personal and political apathy and thus continues a crucial counternarrative in U.S.-American literature.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation follows a protagonist who goes through a complex affective journey that ultimately ends on an ambiguous note. With this dis/affective ambiguity, in which care and apathy collapse into each other, Moshfegh has grasped a 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977) that has pervaded the contemporary era of Brexit, Trump and, now, Covid-19. With an increasingly escalating climate change crisis, a raging pandemic that is soon to enter its fourth year and a growing political divide that seems unbridgeable at this point, the urgency to care for human and non-human others is higher than ever. This urgency to care, however, is too often instrumentalized by capitalism and redirected into a consumption-based practice of 'self-love' and 'selfcare': the affective gaze is turned inward and away from the world and the individual is asked to 'take care of themselves' *in order* to quickly reintegrate into the work force. Feeling serves to sustain the system of labor and consumption and this act of turning inward and

2 For recent scholarly attempts to unite (aesthetic) form with affect, refer to Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of Affects* (2015) and Caroline Levine's *Forms* (2015).

away – here in the name of 'self-love' – disrupts the material and political conditions of society. In this system, feeling thus implies a *feeling for*, whereas apathy brings out the unproductive downside of neoliberal individualism.

Ottessa Moshfegh is one of numerous contemporary authors who explores these dis/affective overlaps between our private and public lives, including the British writers Sally Rooney, Ali Smith, Olivia Laing and Anna Burns.[3] Moshfegh is an American author of Croatian-Iranian descent who, in the last ten years or so, has reinvigorated the literary market with her darkly funny and twisted tales. Born in 1981 in Boston, Massachusetts, Moshfegh completed a BA in English at Bernard College, an MFA at Brown University and was a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. As a child of the "program era" (McGurl 2009: 12), Moshfegh's writing is marked by a self-reflexive tendency, an awareness for medium, genre and form and an interest in storytelling and art more broadly. Her stories are voice-driven and explore disgust, loneliness, addiction, existential questions and "the underbelly of human behavior" (Levy 2018: n. pag). Her oeuvre consists of the experimental novella *McGlue* (2014), the four novels *Eileen* (2015), *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), *Death in Her Hands* (2020) and *Lapvona* (2022), the short story collection *Homesick for Another World* (2017) and various other short stories and essays. Alternatively compared to Angela Carter, Bret Easton Ellis and Charles Bukowski, Moshfegh's fiction is often shocking, provocative and vulgar. She is the *enfant terrible* of contemporary American fiction.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation is Moshfegh's "refined and depraved" (Levy 2018: n. pag.) anti-labor novel with an absurd premise: it tells the story of a misanthropic 26-year-old, white, wealthy woman who is so tired of her own life that she decides to sleep for an entire year.[4] She comically calls it "hibernating" (Moshfegh 2018: 3), but, given that this project is aided by "upwards of a dozen pills day" (Moshfegh 2018: 11–12), Jia Tolentino specifies it as a "chemical hibernation" (2018: n. pag). In her glowing review for *The New York Review of Books*, Joyce Carol Oates states that the "novel reads like an uncensored, unapologetic, despairingly funny confession" by an urban "Sleeping Beauty" (2018: 24). Because of the novel's central dialectic between sleep and politics, Lori Feathers has identified Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov* (1859), a Russian satire about a sleep-loving protagonist, as an important literary predecessor (Feathers 2018). There is also a

3 Another recent text that focuses more concretely on apathy, labor and art, similar to Moshfegh's novel, is Colin Barrett's "Anhedonia, Here I Come" (2016). This *New Yorker* short story revolves around Bobby, an unsuccessful, drug-taking 29-year-old who "wanted to be a poet but suffered from a day job" (Barrett 2016: n. pag.).

4 As Octavia Bright notes in an online feature for Penguin, "Moshfegh's book pre-empted lockdown" by featuring a distressed character who stays indoors for an entire year (2021: n. pag.).

U.S.-American ancestor for Moshfegh's sleeper: Washington Irving's humorous "Rip van Winkle" (1819), who falls into a 20-year-long sleep in the Catskill Mountains and misses the American Revolution. Although they appear to be apolitical, both Oblomov and Rip are highly politicized figures.[5] The same is true for Moshfegh's unnamed protagonist.

This orphaned, modern-day princess is clearly tormented by her personal traumas that slowly unfold as the 'year of rest and relaxation' progresses. Her struggle to navigate her life between trauma and apathy, between caring and detaching, is narrated in a darkly humorous manner and the overall tone of the novel "flickers between sincerity and insincerity" (Diebel 2018: 38). In a similarly tongue-in-cheek fashion, Moshfegh addresses former President Trump in an open letter and asks: "Mister President, what, in your opinion, is the usefulness of art? What of entertainment? What of dreams, and beauty, and how about food?" (Moshfegh 2018: n. pag.) Moshfegh is an author who is clearly interested and invested in politics, even though it is often relegated to the subtext of her stories.[6] Even though *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is overtly about a privileged white woman's experience of dis/affection, her conception as a character who withdraws from the world and sleeps her way into a new reality – in this case, 9/11 and its geopolitical aftermath – roots her within an American literary tradition that juxtaposes interpersonal care and political dissent. By embedding individual apathy within a broader historical context, Moshfegh provokes her readers to revisit the assemblages of art, affect and politics.

Critical Approaches to Apathy, Un/Feeling and Dis/Affection

The study of strong feelings in literature and art goes back to Greek Antiquity. In his *Poetics* (c. 335 BC), Aristotle writes that tragedy "is a representation of an action of a superior kind [...], effecting, through pity and fear, the purification of such emotions" (2013: 23). This abbreviated definition of 'tragedy' highlights the

5 Two other noteworthy predecessors are Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888) and H. G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Awakens* (1899), both of which embed the figure of the sleeper within a national political context. More recently, Christopher Clark's non-fictional book *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (2012) uses the image of the political sleeper to explore the historical moment that turned into WWI.

6 This changed with the publication of *Lapvona* (2022), whose multiple storylines explicitly revolve around the corruptness of political and social leaders.

importance Aristotle puts on emotions: pity and fear are affective building blocks of the genre and the ultimate goal is catharsis (or what is here translated as "purification"). The history of literature proved to continue this tradition of highlighting intense feelings, as artistic movements such as sentimentalism and romanticism, and genres such as Minnesang and melodrama, can attest to. Even today, critics such as Rita Felski fall back on feelings such as 'enchantment' and 'shock' to identify the fundamental *Uses of Literature* (2008). Hogan writes that "emotion is a crucial factor in the generation and organization of stories" (2016: n. pag.), which is why there are centuries worth of artistic and critical reflections on the subject.

One key moment in the study of emotions is the early twentieth century, when Marxist intellectuals such Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and other members of the Frankfurt School critically discussed how emotions can be instrumentalized for fascist aesthetics. If art can produce emotions, so the argument goes, then it can also manipulate its readers, viewers and listeners into affective obedience and political compliance. In 1936 Walter Benjamin cautioned against the "*Ästhetisierung der Politik*" by fascists and said that communism has to respond "*mit der Politisierung der Kunst*" (2015: 169; original emphasis). In the same year, Bertolt Brecht proposed his anti-Aristotelian device of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) to prevent audiences from identifying with characters on stage: by preventing viewers from identifying with fictive emotions too easily, they are turned into critical observers rather than passive empaths (Brecht 1936/1974: 93); or, to put it in Brecht's words, "[t]he alienation effect intervenes, not in the form of absence of emotion, but in the form of emotions which need not correspond to those of the character portrayed" (1936/1974: 94). It is this dis/affective incongruity that is so valued by early- and mid-twentieth-century intellectuals, because it harbors the potential for political dissent. Indeed, Ottessa Moshfegh, whose novel I discuss in the next sections, has revealed in an interview that she writes "stories about people who feel alienated [...] to de-alienate the reader" (qtd. in Pham 2017: n. pag.).

The notion of the 'culture industry' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1947/2010) extends this warning about the affective overlap most poignantly by expressing how the factory-like mass production of films, magazines and other cultural products evokes shallow emotions and eternally-deferred desires to alienate consumers from the material conditions of class inequality and to numb society into a passive state of acceptance. "The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry", Adorno and Horkheimer argue, and "[t]he old experience of the movie-goer, who sees the world outside as an extension of the film he just left (because the latter is intent upon reproducing the world of everyday perceptions), is now the producer's guideline. [...] Real life is becoming indistinguishable from

the movies" (1947/2010: 1113). This blurred boundary between life and art and, here specifically, between the material conditions of reality and the illusions of film, is so dangerous because it is a strategy that upholds capitalism and by extension also exploitative political structures:

> Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again. But at the same time mechanization has such power over a man's leisure and happiness, and so profoundly determines the manufacture of amusement goods, that his experiences are inevitably after-images of the work-process itself. [...] This raises the question whether the culture industry fulfills the function of diverting minds which it boasts about so loudly. (Adorno and Horkheimer 1947/2010: 1116–1117)

As an extension of labor, the art produced in the culture industry only seemingly helps to 'escape' work while it in fact hardens the underlying structures that keep workers docile. Moreover, by filling the precious free time after work with these cultural products, the workers' minds are "divert[ed]", the potential for revolution diminished and the capitalist machinery preserved. While Adorno and Horkheimer's theory has been criticized by numerous scholars over the years – first and foremost for their elitist distinction between 'high' and 'low' art and their negative views of the easily gullible 'masses' – their reflections on how the entanglements of art and labor have shaped cultural affects (speak: numbness, passivity, apathy) remains pertinent to this day.

In the past twenty years some of these aspects have also been examined within the growing research field of affect studies, with important scholars such as Sara Ahmed, Sianne Ngai, Lauren Berlant and Eugenie Brinkema paving the way.[7] In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sara Ahmed explores how emotions such as pain, hate, fear and disgust are collective entities that 'stick' to and move between bodies. By circulating in "affective economies", emotions "align[ ] subjects with collectives" and thus ultimately shape the nation (Ahmed 2004/2014: 8, 1). As Stephen Ahern explains, this "relational ontology" of affect theory derives from a Deleuzian-Spinozist line of thought and overlaps with actor-network theory, new materialism and posthumanism, all of which "see the human as embedded in, as subject to, even constituted by, networks of relation larger than the individual" (2019: 13). In a 2014 article titled "Not in the Mood", Sara Ahmed dives deeper into what she calls "affect aliens", meaning subjects who do not align with affective collectives and subjects who are "*alienated from the nation by virtue of how they are affected*" (Ahmed 2014: 13; original emphasis).Working

7 For useful overviews of the field, refer to the *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text* (2019) and *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism* (2017).

with Martin Heidegger's notion of 'attunement' and Max Scheler's concept of 'communities of feeling', Ahmed elaborates how important it is for nations to foster societies that are attuned to or in tune with the official power structures. Citizens who are not in the 'right' or 'official' mood thus become political deviants.

How powerful these national affective economies can be is also explored in Lauren Berlant's seminal study *Cruel Optimism* (2011). In this book, Berlant discusses a pathological affective configuration that she detects in various aspects of American society. "A relation of cruel optimism", explains Berlant,

> exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (2011: 1)

This notion of optimism, which is cruel not only because it defers the desired outcome endlessly but also because it actively works against that outcome, chimes with what Adorno and Horkheimer say about the culture industry: products of the culture industry, which are overtly marketed for pleasure and relief from the realities of labor and inequality, actually tie audiences to an eternal loop of deferral and repression, thus sedating them and keeping them from meaningful political participation. The same logic applies to cruel attachments, for example to the idea of the 'American Dream': "Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (Berlant 2011: 2; original emphasis). With these political, economic and oppressive structures of affect in mind, it is not surprising that scholars of literature and culture have grown suspicious of intense feelings in the last couple of decades.

In *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015), Rachel Greenwald Smith argues against the "affective hypothesis", that is, "the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience" (2015: 1). This affective hypothesis is problematic because, as already hinted at above, it supports the underlying assumptions and structures of neoliberalism:

> Neoliberalism imagines the individual as an entrepreneur; the affective hypothesis imagines the act of reading as an opportunity for emotional investment and return. The neoliberal subject is envisioned as needing to be at all times strategically networking; feelings, according to the affective hypothesis, are indexes of emotional alliances. (Smith 2015: 2)

Smith's explanation for why the emotional attunement between subjects and cultural products can be so damaging echoes Brecht, Ahmed and Berlant, all of whom point out the importance of affective misattunement as a form of political dissent.

There is a number of recent publications that discuss dis/affection and its ties to politics more thoroughly: in "Disaffected Consent: The Post-Democratic Feeling" (2015), Jeremy Gilbert writes about an increasingly popular Western European attitude that, "on the one hand, [...] involves a profound dissatisfaction with both the consequences and the ideological premises of the neoliberal project" and, "on the other hand, [...] involves a general acquiescence with that project, a degree of deference to its relative legitimacy in the absence of any convincing alternative, and a belief that it cannot be effectively challenged" (2015: 29); in "Detachment, Disaffection, and other Ambivalent Affects" (2020), Helen F. Wilson and Ben Anderson examine the affective formations of nationalism and ask how disaffection produces an "oscillation between forms of attachment and detachment that characterise, and sometimes coexist within, people's ordinary relations with nationalism(s)" (2020: 593); and Tanya Agathocleous's *Disaffected: Emotion, Sedition, and Colonial Law in the Anglosphere* (2021) focuses on how the British Empire has influenced the overlap of affect and law in India to this day.

Some publications focus on the cultural representations that arise out of this overlap between dis/affect and politics, including Emily Horton's "Contemporary Crisis Fictions: Twenty-First Century Disaffection" (2020) and Xine Yao's *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (2021). Horton argues that contemporary crisis fiction employs disaffection as a strategy to move "away from deep psychology and its focus on the subject and the interior, towards the transpersonal and material emphasis of affect theory" (2020: 355). Instead of depleting the texts from intensity, Horton concludes, the "portrayal of radical disaffection" opens up a new space "to reveal multiple intensities" that surpass the individual (2020: 369). In *Disaffected*, perhaps the most comprehensive study on apathy in American literature to date, Yao "reads against the grain of the culture of sentiment", "rethink[s] the ongoing racial and sexual politics of unfeeling not as oppression from above but as a tactic from below" and "excavate [s] unfeeling occluded by the stifling imperatives of the political stakes of sympathy" (2021: 3). Thus thrusting into a similar direction as Sarah Ahmed's "Not in the Mood", Xine Yao's book offers an exciting new perspective on American literature of the long nineteenth century and paves the way for further studies on modern and contemporary U.S.-American fictions such as *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

As my literary analysis in the next sections shows, Ottessa Moshfegh's novel works hard to trouble the reader's habituated affective strategies and prevent them from any easy attunement with hegemonic narratives: it employs a dark humor that makes the reader's laughter catch in their throat; it features a privileged and

arrogant character for whom it is impossible not to care, even though she herself is apathetic to others; and, to name one more example, the novel ends with a televisual mediation of 9/11 without resolving the tension that is built towards this thematic and formal climax. Indeed, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* successfully oscillates between feeling and detachment, care and apathy, attunement and alienation and ultimately asks how we can or should feel about the present moment.

While misattunement can take on various shapes or forms, I am particularly interested in the notion of 'apathy' (which I use interchangeably with 'disaffect' or a state of 'unfeeling'). Apathy, to put it simply, is a withdrawal from the world of emotions; it is a lack of interest, enthusiasm or feeling. Etymologically going back to the Ancient Greek '*apatheia*', which is a compound of *a-* ('without') and *pathos* ('suffering' or 'emotion'), this noun traveled from Greek to Latin and finally to French, from where it entered the English language in the early seventeenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines apathy as a "[f]reedom from, or insensibility to, suffering", a "passionless existence", an "indolence of mind", and an "indifference to what is calculated to move the feelings, or to excite interest or action" (*OED* s.v. *apathy* n.). There are numerous notions adjacent to or overlapping with apathy, including unfeeling, disaffection, detachment, depression, lethargy, melancholy, passivity, indifference, idleness, fatigue, inertia, anhedonia, acedia, avolition, abulia, stoicism, asociality and so on. Instead of attempting to disentangle this terminological web – a common problem in affect theory – I want to use 'apathy' as an umbrella term to express a mode of withdrawal and disengagement.

From a clinical and neuroscientific point of view, apathy is a symptom and a syndrome that is "prevalent across many neurodegenerative, neurological and psychiatric disorders", including Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease and major depression, to name just a few (Robert and Manera 2021: n. pag.). Philippe Robert and Valeria Manera have compiled an impressive research overview in their contribution to *Apathy* (2021), which shows that, in spite of the definitory differences amongst scientists, a disordered motivation is commonly viewed as a key feature of apathy (2021: n. pag.). According to the most recent set of diagnostic criteria from 2018, a patient should have four symptoms to be diagnosed with apathy: first, a "quantitative reduction of goal-directed activity either in behavioural, cognitive, emotional, or social dimensions in comparison to the patient's previous level of functioning in these areas"; second, a "[l]oss of, or diminished, goal-directed behaviour or cognitive activity", a "[l]oss of, or diminished, emotion" or a "[l]oss of, or dimished engagement in social interaction"; third, these symptoms "cause clinically significant impairment in personal, social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning"; and finally, fourth, these symptoms "are not exclusively explained or due to physical disabilities [...], to motor disabilities, to a diminished level of consciousness, to the direct physiological

effects of a substance (e.g. drug of abuse, medication), or to major changes in the patient's environment" (Robert and Manera 2021: n. pag.). While authors of fiction often take creative liberties to warp the rules, criteria and conditions of life to fit the story they want to tell – Infermiterol, for example, is a potent drug that Ottessa Moshfegh invented – it is remarkable how accurately the symptoms of the protagonist from *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* align with these diagnostic criteria.

Turning Inward and Away: Apathy in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

When Reva – a pretty, young, bulimic and indebted alcoholic of Jewish descent – optimistically asks her best friend to go to a party on a Friday night, the latter rejects the offer and explains that she wants to stay in to "hibernate" (Moshfegh 2018: 59). This surprising response comes from the unnamed protagonist and autodiegetic narrator of Ottessa Moshfegh's dark comedy *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Set in New York City in the year 2000 and leading up to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, this protagonist is embedded in the historical context of a national and global crisis. As a spoiled 26-year-old and self-proclaimed "WASP" who "hate[s] everything" (Moshfegh 2018: 35), she has decided to take prescription drugs for a year so she can spend the majority of her time either sleeping or in a semi-conscious state. In spite of the fairy tale associations, "Moshfegh's nameless narrator is more Bartleby than Sleeping Beauty" (Scholes 2018: n. pag). A year of rest, she thinks, will completely transform her life:

> I'd be renewed, reborn. I would be a whole new person, every one of my cells regenerated enough times that the old cells were just distant, foggy memories. My past life would be but a dream, and I could start over without regrets, bolstered by the bliss and serenity that I would have accumulated in my year of rest and relaxation. (Moshfegh 2018: 51)

These hopes resonate with the current neoliberal emphasis on 'selfcare' (Tolentino 2018), where self-improvement is one face mask or one new purchase away.

Although she is wealthy, blonde, pretty and fits into a skinny size two, Moshfegh's narrator is incredibly depressed, cynical and withdrawn from life.[8] Playing

8 Compare this to the plain protagonist from *Eileen*: "I looked so boring, lifeless, immune and unaffected, but in truth I was always furious, seething, my thoughts racing, my mind like a killer's" (Moshfegh 2015/2016: 7).

with the preconceived notion that someone who "look[s] like an off-duty model" (Moshfegh 2018: 35) could not possibly be unhappy on the one hand, and with the cliché that privileged rich people are empty inside on the other, this protagonist enlists a host of complex feelings from the reader. Through the lens of this cynical character, her friend's optimism appears naïve and readers are forced "to locate repulsion [...] in effort, in daily living, in a world that swings between tragic and banal" (Tolentino 2018: n. pag). She is the anti-hero of contemporary decadence. At first glance, even the plot seems to be an anti-plot. Its pared-down action and focus on the narrator's interiority makes this character-driven novel more reminiscent of Edith Wharton's domestic dramas of the mind than of Herman Melville's grand voyage in search of a white whale – both are explicit intertexts (Moshfegh 2018: 22, 60).

Whereas the exterior world of early-2000s America is represented as a shallow, consumption-oriented and broken system that produces inadequate professionals like Dr. Tuttle and favors Bush over Gore, the 'inside' space is also evoked through various rooms, flats and houses: they speak of class, social status, past traumas and mental health struggles, but also hold the potential for safety, self-improvement and new beginnings (Moshfegh 2018: 127–134, 220–222, 246–251). From its plot to its themes to its descriptive style, Moshfegh's book is obsessed with the inside, the internal and the personal. Contrary to what the commonly mentioned luxury goods, the superficial fixation with beauty standards and the glorification of drugs may initially suggest – reminiscent of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) and Jordan Belfort's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2007) – this novel raises deep and troubling questions about the contemporary U.S.-American identity.

The protagonist's spoiled, decadent lifestyle often makes it difficult to identify with her woes.[9] Take this passage, for example: "Compared to me, [Reva] was 'underprivileged.' And according to her terms, she was right: I looked like a model, had money I hadn't earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so I was 'cultured'" (Moshfegh 2018: 13). In spite of this overt rejection of relatability, the protagonist also wrestles with an array of personal issues that stem from a lifetime of abuse and neglect, which make it impossible to dismiss her struggles as class-based 'champagne problems'. Both her parents dead, the protagonist is "plagued with misery, anxiety, a wish to escape the prison of [her] mind and body" (Moshfegh 2018: 18). Although she had a neglectful, abusive, alcoholic mother and a distanced, scientist father, the protagonist's parents' deaths infuse the novel with a sense of loneliness, unbelonging and *weltschmerz*.

9 Cf. Lincoln Michel's review "The Pleasures of Hating in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*" (2018).

As the protagonist admits half-way through the novel, she always wanted a father who would "soothe" her and a mother "to hold [her] while [she] cried" (Moshfegh 2018: 139, 147). Because she never received any affection from the "people who were supposed to love you, but couldn't", however, she is unable to properly mourn her father's death from cancer and even admits to feeling "peace" after her mother's suicide six weeks later (Moshfegh 2018: 64, 152). She does have a brief period of "sobbing" and crying in her parents' house before she plunges into a year-long depression (Moshfegh 2018: 153), but it is a contained scene that in the narrative moment, nine or so years later, seems like a faint memory to the unfeeling narrator.

Ironically, the protagonist turns out to be more similar to her hated mother, who crushed Valium into her child's bottle to put her to sleep (Moshfegh 2018: 69), than she would like to admit, replicating her drug problem and her lifestyle as a "somnophile" (Moshfegh 2018: 46). A more subtle way in which their similarity is established is in their use of the same brutal language: the protagonist's mother compares her husband's funeral to "waiting for a train to hell", "hell" being one of her favorite metaphors; similarly, the protagonist wants to wriggle out of attending the funeral of Reva's mother because it "would be hell" (Moshfegh 2018: 142, 123). In this darkly witty manner, Moshfegh illustrates how cruel language and a disordered relationship to life can be passed down the same way that the mother passed down her beautiful looks to the protagonist.

The protagonist's desire to hibernate for an entire year is thus an attempt to overcome her grief and get over her traumatic childhood. In contrast to a classic hero, who has to venture out into the world on a quest and mature into a better version of themselves along the way, Moshfegh's protagonist tries to find the solutions to her problems at home and in a state of unconsciousness. The protagonist's reflections, which are rather perceptive and sharp for someone constantly on drugs, stand in stark contrast to her dialogue lines, which are briefer and usually less cruel than her inner thoughts. For example, when Reva's mother passes away from cancer, the protagonist avoids Reva because she "didn't want to have to make it through Christmas with the lingering stink of Reva's sadness" (Moshfegh 2018: 109); when she visits her on-again-off-again boyfriend's apartment, she thinks that it "made him seem pathetic – status seeking, conformist, shallow" (Moshfegh 2018: 100); and her description of Dr. Tuttle, her psychiatrist who has "a face like a bloodhound's, folded and drooping, her sunken eyes hidden under very small wire-framed glasses with Coke-bottle lenses" (Moshfegh 2018: 21), is perhaps the most vicious. The protagonist's cruel gaze and malicious thoughts are often unprovoked, more reflective of her own character than of the people she describes. Even she knows that "[s]ometime soon, [her] cruelty would go too far" (Moshfegh 2018: 162). Like numerous other literary recluses before her,

most notably Charles Dickens's Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations* (1861), Moshfegh's social hermit is equipped with a dark mind that poisons the world around her.[10]

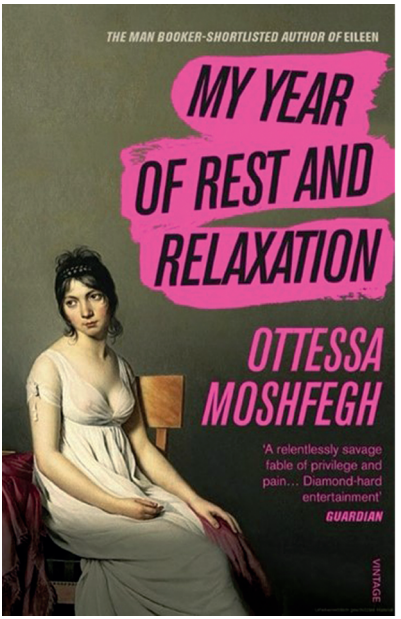

Figure 1 (left): Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, cover of Vintage reprint, 2019

Figure 2 (right): Circle of Jacques-Louis David, *Portrait of a Young Woman in White*, c. 1798, oil on canvas, 125.5 x 95 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Her unification of an apathetic attitude with a striking inner voice is also reflected on the novel's cover, which positions an unhappy, young woman next to a hot pink title (figure 1). The contrast between a mellow exterior body and a bold interiority could not be more explicit. The image is a reproduction of a painting called *Portrait of a Young Woman in White* (figure 2), created by the Circle of Jacques-Louis David around 1798.[11] This large painting, which is held at the Na-

10 Moshfegh's novella *McGlue* tells the story of a sailor who, because of his alcohol problem, cannot remember that he killed his best friend and maybe lover. Verbal, emotional and physical cruelty is a recurring interest in Moshfegh's oeuvre.

11 During her studies in art history at the University of Columbia, the protagonist drops a class on "Feminist Theories and Art Practices, 1960s–1990s" and replaces it with a class on Jacques-Louis David. "*The Death of Marat* was one of my favorite paintings", she states, "[a] man stabbed to death

tional Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C., is an unusual portrait of an unknown woman who is surprisingly uninterested to sit as a model. The slightly downward-turned head with big, upward-looking eyes indicates her ennui. Her right hand hangs limply onto her lap, deprived of any occupation or excitement. Her left hand, however, rests on a burgundy-colored cloth that is loosely draped over the chair, highlighting the stark white of her dress. Indeed, this sensual red challenges the innocence of her white dress, which is sheer enough to reveal her aroused chest. This painted woman seems to be both bored and aroused. The flushed cheeks and faint smile underline the sexual undercurrents in this portrait even further. With her pearl-white skin, rich brown hair and deep red lips, this painted woman conjures a fed-up version of Snow White. After all, the fairy tale princess is the literary cousin of Moshfegh's protagonist.

The painted figure's facial expression is so relatable for twenty-first-century viewers that it is easy to forget this painting was created over two centuries ago. This clever combination of old and recognizable patterns with a transgressive originality is also found in Moshfegh's novel, which spills over with new takes on established tropes, for example when the narrator self-deprecatingly associates herself with trash – "I could picture my selfhood, my past, my psyche like a dump truck filled with trash" (Moshfegh 2018: 99) – only to later reconfigure the idea of trash as a means of connecting with other people: "My trash mixed with the trash of others [in the trash chute]. The things I touched touched things other people had touched. I was contributing. I was connecting" (Moshfegh 2018: 115).[12] In a similar way to how the painted woman looks towards the light source, reluctantly allowing its beam to illuminate her pristine body and solemn character, Moshfegh's protagonist endures the relentless gaze of the author, the reader and herself. In spite of the protagonist's desire to escape consciousness through 'hibernation', this novel is ultimately also about selfhood and self-examination in a space apart from the stifling pressures of society.

At one point in the novel, the protagonist's apathy is also presented as an inability to recognize and understand fundamental emotions such as sadness or joy:

in the bathtub" (Moshfegh 2018: 190). *The Death of Marat* is a celebrated painting that is particularly well-known for the smile on the face of the corpse, insinuating a connection between pleasure and death. Moshfegh's novel treads a similar line between pleasure and pain.

12 Moshfegh is interested in "fucking with the conservative tropes of the novel" (qtd. in Allen 2017: n. pag.).

> Pondering all this down in Reva's black room under her sad, pilly sheets, I felt nothing. I could think of feelings, emotions, but I couldn't bring them up in me. I couldn't even locate where my emotions came from. My brain? It made no sense. Irritation was what I knew best – a heaviness on my chest, a vibration in my neck like my head was revving up before it would rocket off my body. But that seemed directly tied to my nervous system – a physiological response. Was sadness the same kind of thing? Was joy? Was longing? Was love? (Moshfegh 2018: 137)

Feelings can only be thought of, intellectually, but they cannot be felt in an embodied way. In a similar way to the narrator's questioning of the personal experience of these emotions, the novel is also full of instances that indicate the shortcomings of language to meaningfully convey affect, such as when Reva ponders on the grammatical correctness of "'condole *with*' someone", "'condole' someone" or "*console* someone" (Moshfegh 2018: 160; original emphasis). Amidst the plethora of dysfunctional relationships in this novel, language is identified as a main culprit: characters avoid uncomfortable talks about death, trauma and grief; they use spoken words and internal thoughts to wound each other, most notably in the relationship between the protagonist and her mother; and they struggle to identify, define and use words that express positive emotions such as love and consolation. Undoubtedly, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is about the torn connection between language and affect in a late-capitalist world dominated by experiences of alienation, detachment and solitude.

The book is shaped by this apathetic tone, which, in combination with the dark humor, gives the reader an unsettling reading experience full of jolting moments. Across 300 pages, eight chapters and 58 subsections, shocking descriptions that range from cruel to sad to funny provoke unexpected reactions in the reader, such as laughter at the narrator's depression: when her psychiatrist asks the protagonist in a formulaic, clearly uninterested way how everything is going at home, "[g]ood? Bad? Other?", and the protagonist responds with "[o]ther" (Moshfegh 2018: 83), Moshfegh invites her reader to think about the dysfunctional state of the U.S.-American healthcare system by making them laugh. The novel also contains more provocative moments of humor, such as when Reva asks "[d]ie young and leave a beautiful corpse. Who said that?" and the protagonist's response is "[s]omeone who liked fucking corpses" (Moshfegh 2018: 78). In the present times of heightened attention to language and political correctness, such necrophilia jokes seem as jarring as the protagonist's casual misogyny when she calls someone a "cunt" or her homophobic tone when she accuses her ex-lover of being "gay" (Moshfegh 2018: 55, 34). Moshfegh is clearly toying with her readers and testing their sensitivities, as if she intends to cut through the reader's layer of disinterested apathy with such a sharp style. Her use of register is indeed a conscious decision, as the metafictional scene in which the protagonist keeps a

dream journal suggests. In order to trick her psychiatrist to prescribe her stronger drugs, the protagonist invents disturbing dreams to imply a deranged subconsciousness:

> "A fire-breathing serpent disemboweled me and slurped up my entrails." I dreamt I stole somebody's diaphragm and put it in my mouth "before giving my doorman a blow job." I cut off my ear and e-mailed it to Natasha with a bill for a million dollars. I swallowed a live bee. "I ate a grenade." I bought a pair of red suede ankle boots and walked down Park Avenue. "The gutters were flooded with aborted fetuses." (Moshfegh 2018: 61)

The quotation marks indicate where the protagonist is inventing or adding to already existing dreams, going from swallowing "a live bee" to eating a "grenade", for example, or from walking the undefined streets of New York to them being "flooded with aborted fetuses". As the author of her dream journal, the protagonist seems just as intent on eliciting shock from her psychiatrist as Moshfegh is with the reader. Both the protagonist's and Moshfegh's language become increasingly distressing. Indeed, as a compulsive liar, the protagonist is portrayed as a sort of storyteller. Even though she lives in a world in which "telling [...] the truth wouldn't matter in the long run" (Moshfegh 2018: 81), the protagonist's lies, inventions of dreams and other distortions of truth brandmark her as an unreliable narrator.[13] This blurring of the boundaries between what is real and what is imagined, what is experienced and what is mediated, what is life and what is art, is a common feature throughout Moshfegh's oeuvre.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation is divided into 8 chapters, the first of which offers an exposition of all the characters and the idea of hibernation. The rising action happens in chapters 2 to 5, where the narration cleverly interweaves the protagonist's alternating states of being asleep and awake with her resurfacing memories of past traumatic events. Chapter 6 forms the first climax of the novel, making clear that the protagonist's choice to hibernate through drugs has developed into a fully-fledged drug addiction. Strikingly, this formal climax coincides with the inauguration of George W. Bush, the 43rd president of the United States. From this point onward the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which have only been hinted at so far (Moshfegh 2018: 30, 100, 203, 206, 208), loom over the book like a specter. In fact, 9/11 enhances the dramatic structure of the novel by creating tragic irony: present-day readers know more than the early-2000s characters, so they have a strong premonition about where the story is going. The tragic irony is reinforced when Reva – who, together with the protagonist's ex-boyfriend, Trevor,

13 In this she shares an important similarity with Vesta Gul, the protagonist from Moshfegh's metaphysical detective story, *Death in Her Hands* (2020).

works in the World Trade Center – bemoans that her boss "is starting a new crisis consulting firm. Terrorist risks, blah blah" (Moshfegh 2018: 203). Finally, the irony is enhanced by the juxtaposition between the protagonist's year towards 'wellness' and the nation's hurtling towards tragedy. Moshfegh's decision to parallel the protagonist's development with geo-political developments in the U.S. shows how deeply invested this book is in establishing a firm connection between the personal and the political. Indeed, by the end of the book the protagonist's personal trauma is replaced by national trauma, which provokes readers to rethink individual hardship within a broader context.

Once the formal climax has been reached and the story's endpoint as being 9/11 is established, Moshfegh's novel picks up speed and flies through chapter 7. This change of narrative pace is noticeable as chapter 1 to 6 cover eight months of narrated time over 250 pages, whereas the seven and a half months covered in chapter 7 are told in 30 pages. The augmented occurrence of "et cetera" in this section points toward this formal acceleration (Moshfegh 2018: 265, 269). Moshfegh's crunching of time mirrors the lived experience of the protagonist, who, at this point, is only awake for one hour every three days, and it also increases the sense of unavoidable doom as the novel speeds towards 9/11. Once the protagonist awakens from her hibernation, merely ten pages document her new, happy life. The reader barely has time to enjoy the results of her character development from cruel detachment to kind, happy compassion: "I was alive", "I was like a newborn animal", "I was free" and "[m]y sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things" (Moshfegh 2018: 276, 278, 287, 288). The protagonist's optimism proves to be a cruel one (Berlant 2011: 1), however, as her new-found state quickly gives way to the horrors of 9/11. The terrorist attacks are covered in the novel's final, one paragraph-long chapter 8, which reads like an epilogue to a book and a prologue to a new socio-political reality:

> ON SEPTERMBER 11, I went out and bought a new TV/VCR at Best Buy so I could record the news coverage of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers. Trevor was on a honeymoon in Barbados, I'd later learn, but Reva was lost. Reva was gone. I watched the videotape over and over to soothe myself that day. And I continue to watch it, usually on a lonely afternoon, or any other time I doubt that life is worth living, or when I need courage, or when I am bored. Each time I see the woman leap off the Seventy-eighth floor of the North Tower – one high-heeled shoe slipping off and hovering up over her, the other stuck on her foot as though it were too small, her blouse untucked, hair flailing, limbs stiff as she plummets down, one arm raised, like a dive into a summer lake – I am overcome by awe, not because she looks like Reva, and I think it's her, almost exactly her, and not because Reva and I had been friends, or because I'll never see her again, but because she is beautiful. There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake. (Moshfegh 2018: 289)

With this ekphrastic description of one of the most horrific images that has ever been broadcast around the globe, Moshfegh's novel comes to a shocking, affectively overpowering end and adds collective trauma on top of personal trauma. Reva, the only person who seems to care about Moshfegh's protagonist, dies. The marked switch to the present tense use, "I continue", indicates that the narrated time has caught up with the narrative time and, moreover, that this present is an enduring one that stretches into the present of the reader. This reading is supported by numerous scholars who view 9/11 as the caesura that demarcates a 'Before' and an 'After' in U.S.-American culture and politics, among them Ihab Hassan (2003: 6), and Josh Toth and Neil Brooks (2007: 3). The present is marked by a fall "into the unknown" that is also known and, more importantly, unavoidable: death. Amidst the plethora of fiction that conjure the image of a 'falling man' to capture this post-9/11, male form of existential angst, for example in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) and in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Moshfegh evokes the image of a 'falling woman' to create a female counterpart for this new terror of the present. As she herself puts it in an interview:

> we all got hijacked by that experience [...]. It's much easier to think that the villain is off in some distant land and all we need to do is build a fucking wall and get machine guns on the garrets. Actually, it's much harder to live with the reality that we are the evil too, and we are allowing it every day. (Moshfegh, qtd. in Filgate 2018: n. pag.)

Moshfegh's use of the word "hijacked" is particularly poignant here as it evokes both the literal hijacking of the planes on 9/11 and a more metaphorical 'hijacking' of the national mind.

The long sentence, beginning with "[a]nd I continue" and ending with "she is beautiful", stylistically mirrors both the breathless moment of falling and watching the fall on TV. It encapsulates feelings of recognition and empathy, on the one hand, but also the reality of distance through mediation and detachment on the other. The final word of the novel, "awake", underlines the political meaning of the awake asleep dyad on which the novel rests. Indeed, an early passage in the novel suggests that there are different forms of being 'awake', for example during sleep: "I was aware of the nothingness. I was awake in the sleep, somehow. I felt good. Almost happy" (Moshfegh 2018: 40). In this apathetic version, being 'awake' means being aware that one is feeling nothing. By contrast, the image of the falling woman is linked to a state of full awareness and perhaps even autonomy; a state that can only be acquired in the final moments before death, resembling Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Even though this final "awake" refers to the falling woman, readers realize that this is actually the state of the protagonist who merely projects onto the falling woman. In comparison to her literal

awakening from her 'year of rest and relaxation', which happened a mere three months/ten pages earlier, this symbolic awakening feels more meaningful. Given that the novel places such an importance on sleep throughout the story only to end with "awake" as the final word, it is clear that the sleep awake dichotomy is crucial and, moreover, that this dichotomy is loaded with affective and political meaning. In an interview with Luke B. Goebel, the author states emphatically: "I just want people to *wake up*. I'm heartbroken by how brainwashed and enslaved my fellow humans are" (qtd. in Goebel 2017: n. pag.; my emphasis). This rhetoric clearly continues Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas on art, capitalism and politics into the twenty-first century.

This discussion is also tied to *em*pathy, the affective relative of *a*pathy. In her study on *Inclinations* (2014; transl. 2016), which proposes a critique of rectitude, Adriana Cavarero explores the aesthetic, moral and political implications of the inclined body in Western thought and representation. In other words, she explores the forms of the body as forms of affects. By studying body posture in various cultural products, Cavarero derives an aesthetics of relationality, that is, an aesthetics of care and withdrawal. "[T]he main problem" Cavarero states, "is how to persuade the self, proudly encapsulated in its verticality, to renounce its claim to autonomy and independence" (2014/2016: 102). Since a vertical, straight posture is associated with the subject's moral uprightness, rational equilibrium and, as the quote already states, autonomy and independence, the *inclined* body, by contrast, has traditionally been read as a symbol of powerlessness and even moral corruptness. Cavarero challenges these troublesome beliefs – especially their entanglements with gender – by focusing on the relational, intersubjective nature of inclination. An inclined body, after all, is usually inclined *towards someone* or *something*. She also discusses the horizontal body as an extreme form of inclination in her chapter on the Bulgarian-German author Elias Canetti, but there she only discusses horizontality in terms of death rather than sleep. The question that opens up at this point is how the posture (attitude) of Moshfegh's protagonist – whose sleeping, horizontal body can be read both as an apathetic inclination away from the world and as an empathetic turn inward towards her own needs – can be interpreted in relation to the falling, vertical and thus 'fully erect' body of the falling woman. Who here is truly awake, inclined towards the world and thus empathetic with others? How does apathy fit into this dynamic and does it have a distinct body posture? Does the body of a *text*, for example that of a novel, incline away or towards the reader when it discusses apathy?

By closing a novel about fatigue and apathy with 9/11 – even though readers will have anticipated it long in advance – *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* puts a big question mark where compositional resolution and personal improvement should have been. This ending thus fundamentally challenges contemporary make – over

narratives (self-help, personal growth, etc.) and asks whether the project of 'bettering oneself' is even possible in these circumstances.[14] The 'bettering', that is the successful adaptation of the protagonist to societal norms and patterns, would have made Moshfegh's novel a classical *Bildungsroman*. However, as the analysis of the novel's formal composition shows, the nameless narrator's bettering or *Bildung* is thwarted by the tense political landscape that culminates in 9/11. Moshfegh's novel thus rejects the streamlined structure of the *Bildungsroman* and, like other anti-*Bildungsromane*, it poses a serious challenge to the norms, values and structures of the society into which the protagonist is supposed to integrate (Moretti 1987/2000: 10–15). The society of the Clinton, Bush and implicitly also the Trump administrations, Moshfegh's novel seems to imply, is as dysfunctional as the protagonist herself, so there can be no hope for personal improvement.

In contrast to other well-known examples of 9/11 fiction, which are often concerned with the emotional aftermath of the attacks, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* leads up to and ends with the televisual mediation of the event. This is significant because, as Richard Gray argues, 9/11 novels tend to "assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures" even though they firmly insist upon the incomprehensible and world-changing nature of the attacks (2011: 30). By ending her novel where it ends, Moshfegh refuses this sentimental interpretation of 9/11 and prevents any national affects produced in the aftermath from being integrated within the emotional consciousness of the private individual. This refusal is vital, as it signals a resistance to the "instrumentalization of the event at the service of neoliberal political and economic goals that were more ideologically continuous than disruptive" (Smith 2015: 62). Thus we can interpret the novel's end as an affective dissent from hegemonic regimes of power (Yao 2021: 10–11).

Coda: Art as an Antidote to Apathy?

As the interpretation of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* above has shown, this novel is filled with tensions between care and apathy, affect and disaffect, attunement and alienation. Naturally, these tensions pose an ontological threat to the

14 *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* builds on an earlier story, "Bettering Myself", which was first published in *The Paris Review* in the spring of 2013 and later reproduced in Moshfegh's short story collection *Homesick for Another World* (2017). The autodiegetic narrator of this provocative tale is called Miss Moody and she works as a math teacher at a Ukrainian Catholic school in New York City. Like the nameless protagonist from *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Miss Moody has a substance abuse problem, a fondness for naps, a bad habit of calling her ex, no boundaries when it comes to talking about sex and she struggles to, as she calls it, "better" herself.

novel itself – why bother to write when one could just turn inward and away? To partially tackle this question, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* strongly relies on metafictional and autopoetic strategies. The novel bursts with references to and descriptions of paintings, art installations, VHS films, polaroid pictures, women's magazines, porn movies and other cultural artefacts from the early 2000s. Through its evocations of various, primarily visual media, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* reflects on its own status as art and its ethical responsibilities towards representing the affective, social and political world.

The book's beginning and end is marked by descriptions of gallery art, whereas its middle section – when the protagonist is in her drug-induced 'hibernation' – is dominated by descriptions of movies. The protagonist watches them to bridge her short periods of lethargic consciousness during her hibernation: "Things were happening in New York City – they always are – but none of it affected me. This was the beauty of sleep – reality detached itself and appeared in my mind *as casually as a movie or a dream*" (Moshfegh 2018: 4; my emphasis). The fictitious, dream-like quality of movies, which have always been compared to dreams, is embraced by the protagonist because it offers escapism. Film functions both as a site onto which emotions and hopes can be projected and as a lens through which the perceptions of one's own life are filtered. The novel is full of instances where the 'life as a movie'-trope is evoked and parodied, especially to exemplify the disparity between illusion and reality. "I suppose a part of me wished that when I put my key in the door", the protagonist says after a trip to the bodega,

> it would magically open into a different apartment, a different life, a place so bright with joy and excitement that I'd be temporarily blinded when I first saw it. I pictured what a documentary film crew would capture in my face as I glimpsed this whole new world before me, like in those home improvement shows Reva liked to watch when she came over. First, I'd cringe with surprise. But then, once my eyes adjusted to the lights, they'd grow wide and glisten with awe. I'd drop the keys and the coffee and wander in, spinning around with my jaw hanging open, shocked at the transformation of my dim, gray apartment into a paradise of realized dreams. […] I opened the door to my apartment, and, of course, nothing had changed. (Moshfegh 2018: 105–106)

The passage starts out as a sincere expression of the desire for a better life, but the by now familiar gestures of showing surprise, dropping the keys and "spinning around with [the] jaw hanging open" quickly turn the fantasy into a parody of a fantasy. The protagonist's parodic tone not only targets the TV format of home improvement shows but also of her own wish for "a different life […] with joy and excitement", cushioning herself from the blow that "of course, nothing had changed". The reference to home renovation shows, which broadly fall into the category of the makeover genre, self-referentially evokes the protagonist's own

absurd attempt to improve her life through "a year of rest and relaxation". The ways in which we imagine and live our lives, Moshfegh's novel suggests, is strongly influenced by the visual media we consume. As Moshfegh illustrates, visual and popular media invite the protagonist to distance herself from her own self, to view herself as other, and to imagine her life through the eyes of an imaginary viewer. Like the pills she consumes to sleep, the protagonist's televisual media consumption enhances her alienation and disaffection. The one exception here is the news coverage of 9/11 in the final chapter, which counteracts disaffection – albeit in an ambiguous manner.

In a 2017 interview, long before *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* was published, Ottessa Moshfegh states that she is "not going to lull readers into some sort of hypnotized stasis, which I think media tries to do, keep you trapped in your own fear. I want to excite people about new possibilities, and make them aware of the fascist mind-numbing game which is commercialism through media – addiction" (qtd. Lozada 2017: n. pag.). In the novel, this excitement is expressed in the way fine art is described in the beginning, before the protagonist's year of 'rest', and in the end, after that year but shortly before the 9/11 attacks. Having majored in art history at Columbia University, the protagonist has a pronounced awareness for media and art and acts as a mouthpiece to express aesthetic ideas. She admits early on that she "wanted to be an artist but I had no talent" (Moshfegh 2018: 16). Instead of being an artist, she works for an art dealer in a Chelsea art gallery: "I was the bitch who sat behind a desk and ignored you when you walked into the gallery" (Moshfegh 2018: 36–37). From potential artist to "bitch" behind a desk, Moshfegh's protagonist represents the failed dream of self-fulfillment and the reality of market branding. Even the art in the gallery, called "Ducat", is of a questionable value: "The art at Ducat was supposed to be subversive, irreverent, shocking, but was all just canned counterculture crap, 'punk, but with money,' nothing to inspire more than a trip around the corner to buy an unflattering outfit from Comme des Garçons" (Moshfegh 2018: 36). In spite of her apathy, she feels contempt for the artificiality of the art world and its people, and even defecates in the middle of an art installation when she is fired from the job. Her distaste for contemporary art could not be made any clearer.

After her 'awakening' and before the events of 9/11, Moshfegh gives her readers a four-page long scene at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art. This scene, which is filled with reflections on the purpose of art and long-awaited expressions of contentment, acts as a false ending that makes the ultimate blow of the terrorist attacks even more impactful. The protagonist finds herself in "the Met one afternoon in early September" because she "wanted to see what other people had done with their lives" (Moshfegh 2018: 284). Looking at still lifes or *natures mortes*,

Moshfegh's protagonist ponders life, mortality and art, asking whether these artists

> wish they'd crushed those withered grapes between their fingers and spent their days walking through fields of grass or being in love or confessing their delusions to a priest or starving like the hungry souls they were, begging for alms in the city square with some honesty for once? Maybe they'd lived wrongly. Their greatness might have poisoned them. [...] I didn't know what was true. So I did not step back. Instead, I put my hand out. I touched the frame of the painting. And then I placed my whole palm on the dry, rumbling surface of the canvas, simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial. Things were just things. "Ma'am!" the guard yelled, and then there were hands gripping my shoulders, pulling me to the side. But that was all that happened.
>
> "Sorry, I got dizzy," I explained.
>
> That was it. I was free. (Moshfegh 2018: 285–287)

This passage close to the novel's end encapsulates the protagonist's drastic development: no longer an apathetic hermit whose sole activity is the consumption of mind-numbing popular media, she has now become someone who questions the capacity of art to fully capture human experience. Moreover, she questions the fundamental value of art by proposing that the embodied experiences of life, for example the crushing of a grape between one's fingers, is superior to the artistic depiction of grapes. "Maybe they'd lived wrongly", she concludes, affirming the value of active living, feeling and sensing over the value of *mediated* living, feeling and sensing. When she puts her hand on the painting "simply to prove to [herself] that there was no God stalking [her] soul", committing one of the gravest *faux pas* in a museum, she reminds herself and the reader that all art objects are "just *things*"; objects in life, rather than life itself. Her rejection of the art world, which hails artworks as priceless and sacred objects of beauty, seems like a logical next step that follows her earlier rejection of the labor market and consumer culture. For this brief instance, before she is glued in front of the TV again to watch the news coverage of 9/11, Moshfegh's protagonist is truly "free". What kind of un/freedom follows after that is left open to speculation, as that is where the book closes.

In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, film is aligned with the labor market, capitalist consumption, illusion and apathy. Fine art is not exactly presented as an antidote to this system of dreams, illusions and cruel optimism either. Neither stuffed dogs, which are displayed at edgy new galleries such as Ducat, nor canonical paintings, which hang in global institutions of value such as the Metropolitan Museum, are offered as means to become less apathetic/more 'awake'. Indeed, in Moshfegh's universe the only tool to puncture through the thick layer of apathy is narrative – in all its vulgar, disgusting, rude, cynical, shocking, funny and moving glory. Her counterintuitive juxtaposition of content (a story on apathy) and style (affect-laden and affect-producing) thus highlights the creative

means of authors to forcefully stir the reader's emotions, to break their habitual patterns of seeing the world, and to force them to reflect on the social, political and economic narratives that dominate their lives. When the novel ends with its description of the 9/11 attacks, "awake" is the last word of the narrative. This final awakening happens in the face of global catastrophe and obliterates all previously established affective structures. Thus teleporting her readers from 2018 back into the year of 2001, Moshfegh urges them to revisit an affect-laden point that would decide upon the historical trajectory of the United States for the next two decades; an affect-laden point that would propel the nation further into a nightmare filled with terrorism, xenophobia, multiple wars, rising fascism, fake news and self-medicating consumerism. That point, back on the Tuesday of September 11 in 2001, has long passed, but the present moment is still in the making and receptive to a new awakening.

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