

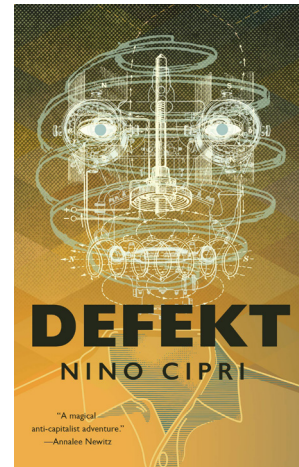
Review of *Defekt*, by Nino Cipri

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Nino Cipri is a queer and trans/nonbinary writer and editor. They are a graduate of the Clarion Writing Workshop and the University of Kansas's MFA program. They are the author of the award-winning debut fiction collection *Homesick* (2019) and the novella *Finna* (2020). Cipri's *Defekt* is a winner of the British Fantasy Award. The narration takes place in an unknown time in a fictional corporate group, LitenVärld, an interesting Swedish name that means "little world" in English. As the narration reveals, the protagonist, Derek, is a humanoid working machine (Cipri's narration does not specify Derek's species) and the most loyal employee for LitenVärld. However, Derek's diligent working schedule is interrupted one day when he suffers from concerning physical conditions: a nose bleed and bloody cough.



This marks an ironic narrative turn, for one would assume a working machine will not suffer from physical weakness, which in return, foreshadows the company's overwhelming exploitation of its employees. But more ironic is that only by then is Derek informed that LitenVärld employees are entitled to sick leave. Thus, he asks for one day off; yet, unbeknownst to him, this single off day invites troubles with the company, in that his manager refuses to believe his reason for being absent and calls his loyalty into question.

Therefore, after returning to work, Derek is tasked with one special obligation: to eliminate the defects or "defekta" from other pocket universes. It is through the demystification of defekta and of pocket universes that we can catch a shivering insight into the company's exploitative supply chains. Through blackholes, LitenVärld opens portals to other, smaller universes with cheaper labor – hence, pocket universes – and delivers requested products back to LitenVärld for assembly. However, when requested products go through blackholes, there is a chance of mutation owing to gravitational pulls, so that these lifeless products may be transformed "into animate, murderous, mutant furniture. Corporate calls them defectives, or defekta in Swedish" (74).

Here, behind the seemingly science-fictional motifs in his narration—black holes and animated objects—what the author presents to us is rather a realistic concern about modern-day globalization, rooted in Marxist political-economic insight concerning the estrangement of labor:

This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces—labor’s product—confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor. Labor’s realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.” (40)

To Marx, private ownership of production material produces the alienization of labor, in that under the capitalist mode of production, a worker is separated from his/her/their own products. In the era of globalization, this estrangement is furthered by geo-economic distances between developing countries where products are manufactured, and developed countries that claim most profits from production. Similarly, in the narration, Cipri manages to re-represent such an alienating process through a shift of locus from the pocket universes to the major universe containing LitenVärld.

Moreover, the estrangement of labor results in the deprivation of a worker’s significance, in that Marx argues that “man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.” (42). In the novel, this alienized human nature manifests itself first and foremost in the protagonist’s inhuman identity as a human-made working machine and further in his loss of self-identification outside of his position at LitenVärld: “He always felt naked without his uniform, and the feeling was more acute with mirror was coming in handy” (21-22).

To Marx, the solution to this lies in the class struggle between the bourgeois and proletarians, led by a collective entity of the working class, the Communist Party in his *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Cipri conducts an inward, but perhaps not less violent, search for such a solution. In particular, in the nightly inventory shift, Derek encounters the other four team members – his doppelgängers. Dirk is an earlier, masochist version of him whose dominating ego suppresses empathy, whereas Darkness represents the queer side of Derek, as demonstrated by the use of the non-binary pronoun “they.” The remaining two persona of Derek, Delilah and Dux, on the other hand, result from an industrial malfunction, in that Derek’s kinds are set to be adult men, while Delilah is a woman and Dux a teen. Led by the self-elected team leader Dirk, the five Ds set out to exterminate defekta in the inventory.

It is interesting to note how the five Ds form a small-scale patriarchy inside the small world of LitenVärld. It is more interesting to note an implicit connection between (conventionally-defined) masculinity and royalty to the company. Among them, Dirk is the most faithful one, whereas the rest of the four’s fidelity declines along with their waning manhood. This evokes how patriarchy, represented by Dirk in the novel, and capitalism, signified by LitenVärld, can be intertwined with each other, as Engels explores in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1902).

While others are searching for defekta, Derek realizes he can communicate with the outlaws. Sympathizing with them, Derek decides to show mercy, making himself a de-facto defekta in the eyes of Dirk. The two soon brawl with each other, carrying strong symbolism in the novel. As demonstrated earlier, the four Ds represent a unique persona of Derek himself, which makes the fight not only over fidelity to the company, but over the controlling of Derek's self-identification – either with the capitalist corporate company or with himself. With the help of the other three, Derek murders Dirk and launches a revolution inside the little world by negotiating with the company at the end of the novel. The finale serves more than as closure for Cipri's narrative arc but rather an indicator that capitalism and patriarchy can be overthrown by not only the unified working class, but the unified queering group. Here, I do not limit my understanding of queer to simply sexuality, but rather return to its archaic meaning, as in weird and marginalized. The two lexicons remind us of identity politics that draw attention to “the unjust squandering of resources on the less deserving – on migrants, people of color and queer people.... In this sense, identity politics is positioned in a variety of Marxist frameworks as ineffectual; as a politics founded on difference, it is inherently incapable of building the broad-based movement needed to destabilize capitalism” (Kumar et.al, 5-8). However, at the novel's conclusion, we see a possibility or at least an attempt, albeit at the fictional level, of reconciling identity politics with the Marxist paradigm of redistribution. The novel finishes with an email where the other four Ds demand that the company increase employee social welfare benefits. Moreover, the last chapter, titled “Changing the World, One Room at a Time,” foreshadows a potentially more radical and broader-based movement against capitalism. In this sense, identity politics proffers another possibility, as an analytical tool, of unifying the marginalized groups to co-sabotage capitalism.

Works Cited

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Yimin Xu is a Ph.D. student in the School of Humanities and Languages at UNSW Sydney. Her research interest is gender in Chinese science fiction, Chinese fantastical literature and Chinese popular culture in general. Her current PhD project focuses on the modernity rhetoric behind gender representations in contemporary Chinese science fiction and the resurfacing of the late 19th-century national memory of Western semi-colonization in current Chinese science fiction writing. With her project, she hopes to contribute her own part to the great effort of de-colonization studies in China. In addition to this research, she is the country representative of Australia for the Science Fiction Research Association.