In the last chapter we saw how financialization is driven, in part, by quotidian forms of virtuosity and creativity that evolve within and contribute to a cultural climate increasingly saturated by the codes and logics of financial speculation. In this chapter we explore the relationships between finance and creativity in more detail.

On the one hand, the financial sector is incredibly creative. Some of the finest and most refined minds of each successive generation are cherry-picked from elite universities hedge-funds, investment banks and their institutional periphery to dream up ever more rapid, cunning and diabolical ways to make money out of money. The development of new derivative financial products, new avenues of inter-market arbitrage, new revenue streams to capitalize, new technologies of high-frequency trading and new ways of reading, visualizing and interpreting the market have seduced not only the graduates of elite business programs, but also PhDs in fluid dynamics, astrophysics, cellular biology and computer engineering. To be sure, the vast majority of what goes on in the financial sector is deeply uncreative (endless number-crunching and paper-pushing, scrupulous research on economic sectors and investments, meticulous computer programming, hectic digital trading and ruthless power-brokering). Taken as a whole, however, the financial sector is a staggering reactor of human creativity, a playground of the mind where the unfathomable pressure of intense competition creates a remorseless ecosystem of constrained innovation, which, no less strange than the uncanny depths of the ocean, is populated with monsters at the very limits of the imagination.
Still, for all that intelligence and innovation, the sector mostly produces immaterial financial assets or metaphoric wealth—in other words, practically nothing of tangible or lasting value. From one angle, in fact, it destroys value: liquidating public assets by privatizing services, foreclosing on homes and businesses, and imposing austerity measures that funnel social wealth upwards to an apparently lawless global oligarchy. Financial forces also superintend a global economic system that is characterized by a massively unfair global division of creative labour, where creative opportunities are reserved for a fraction of the world’s population (mostly in Northern cities). The remainder spend longer days and shorter lives in fields, factories and kitchens, with little opportunity to practise creativity and even less to have it recognized or valued. Most of the wealth “created” by the financial sector is, in a sense, derivative—it derives its value as a reflection or means of representing real-world labour and wealth. Finance, at least at first blush, appears to be a glitzy simulacrum of value that nonetheless disciplines and (dis)orients the economic and social world. In this sense, finance is, a form of class war, which synthesizes, aggregates and puts to work the creativity of the financial “industry” in the interests of perpetuating and, indeed, more deeply entrenching reigning inequalities and forms of exploitation.

Financial wizards would counter that their constant lust to find new ways to maximize moment-to-moment returns generates an atmosphere of competition and “creative destruction” in the global economy that spurs on and fosters human creativity in the corporate form. Financiers pride themselves on being what we might call “angels of creative destruction” who drive a market of accelerating returns that renders obsolete those stagnant or sluggish firms and organizations that can’t keep pace. Unlike Benjamin’s (1968) aghast angel of history, who is propelled out of heaven and fated to watch the destruction it leaves in its wake, these spirits show no regret for the destruction left behind them and face narcissistically forward, towards the short-term future, where they find only their own reflection, as financial markets further discipline our broader social and economic worlds.

This chapter investigates and historicizes what I will call contemporary finance capitalism’s dialectic of creativity from two angles. First, it seeks to understand the contradiction between finance’s particular