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Fictions Ltd.: Representations of Corporations in Post-World War II American Fiction  
and Film

A Dissertation Presented

by

Ralph Elliot Clare

to

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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My project explores the still emerging late-capitalist world-system through American literary, filmic, and pop cultural representations of one of its primary motors, the multinational corporation. Having expanded in size, scope, and power to an unprecedented degree in our neoliberal capitalist era, the corporation, with its long-time legal status as a “fictional person,” constitutes an embodiment of capital, with the tangible material result of the corporate body appearing to trump the (post) human’s.

The corporations represented in the various texts discussed—novels by Frank Norris, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, Richard Powers, and Joshua Ferris; dramas like *Executive Suite*, *Network*, and *Michael Clayton*; comedies like *Ghatsbusters*, *Gung Ho*, and *The Office*—function as temporalized, if temporary, figures for the immateriality of capital. As such, they crystallize an economic system far too complex and dizzying to comprehend in and of itself. At the same time, these representations function as sites wherein the economic concerns, crises, and fears prevalent at the moment of their cultural production are cast and recast, thereby both affecting and being affected by the economic discourses of their eras.

Taken collectively, these Post-World War II corporate fictions balance cultural critiques of a capitalism deemed “too big to fail” (as evidenced, for example, in the railroads, pharmaceutical, and automobile industries) against the possibilities of resistance to a system in whose endgame we now all appear to be participating. A study of them reveals, on the one hand, the dissolution of once-great American Industries, the withering of labor power, the disappearance of blue-collar jobs, the decenteredness of capital, the corruption of supposedly democratic institutions, and the financialization of everyday life that signals the first translations of biopower into a veritable bioeconomy. These suggest the declining or shrinking spaces of resistance for subjects. On the other

hand, the study reveals the continuing resistance of the subject amidst the deterritorializations and reterritorializations of capital and its corporate bodies.

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It is likely no one ever masters anything in which he has not known impotence; and if you agree, you will also see that this impotence comes not at the beginning of or before the struggle with the subject, but in the heart of it.

Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle"

The first thing I did was make a mistake. I thought I had understood capitalism, but what I had done was assume an attitude—melancholy sadness—toward it. This attitude is not correct.

Donald Barthelme, "The Rise of Capitalism"

The King is Dead, Long Live the...

In Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*, Thomas leads a crew responsible for dragging the enormous corpse of his father to burial in a mock-heroic narrative. The Dead Father, however, is "not quite dead yet," as a character in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* says in quite a different context. Indeed, the Dead Father harangues his charges, whines and complains against his flagging phallic power with all the bathos of a Beckett character or the death-denying, sputtering King in Eugene Ionesco's absurdist play *Exit the King*. The Dead Father is "[d]ead, but still with us, still with us, but dead," impossible witness to his own demise, his incipient burial (3). Along the journey, Barthelme allegorizes the *pater familias*'s body, variegating its meanings so that it comes to stand for the entire western literary canon and eventually all of western civilization as well. As Lois Gordon suggests, the Dead Father's corpse becomes the *corpus* of western literature itself (162).

It is tempting, however, to allegorize the Dead Father's *corpus* in another fashion as well, which, while it may be a bit of a stretch, need not be accused of trying to tie down the meaning of *The Dead Father* the way Thomas and his crew securely fasten their massive burden for travel. Like the mysterious balloon that one day appears

swathed over the city in Barthelme's famous story "The Balloon," such figures simultaneously invite and deny interpretation, even if, "we have learned not to insist on meanings" (*Unspeakable* 16). To view the Dead Father's *corpus*, its life-in-death status, as not unlike the "artificial" personhood of another kind of *corpus* or body, the limited-liability corporation, might prove to be enlightening.<sup>1</sup>

In their immensity and scope of power; their condition of being a person, yet not a person; their "life-giving" properties of providing life's necessities; their oppressive legacy of commodities and advertisements; their patriarchal injunction to perpetuate the economic system for which they stand; their being too "big to fail" or die; and their seemingly pervasive existence (to the extent that no world without them is adequately imaginable), corporate bodies resemble that of the Dead Father. Yet while it appears in times of economic crises that their powers are waning, corporations somehow continue on, transforming the line "dead but still with us, still with us but dead" from a pretty rhetorical chiasmus to a pressing social conundrum.

The purpose of this study is to explore the figurations of corporations in post-World War II American fiction and film with an eye toward understanding the greater contexts from which such figurations arise. What are the forms and (dis)contents that fictional representations of corporations take on in such texts? What does it mean to make a metaphor of the corporation, to see it as a kind of monstrous beast or person, or even as a self-perpetuating machine or system beholden to nobody? What is the result of

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<sup>1</sup> The capitalist system was certainly on Barthelme's mind from the heady years of the 1960s through the '70s. 1972's *Sadness* contained the story quoted in the epigraph, "The Rise of Capitalism," in which it is clear he had recently been reading Marx. To see the Dead Father's *corpus* as signifying on a dying economic system is not too far of a stretch after all.

reducing corporate malfeasance to one particularly greedy CEO? How does an always present, yet latent, corporate presence manifest itself in a text? Such figurations of corporations say much about the economic and social climate out of which they are imagined and within which they circulate. For this reason alone it is as important to see how corporations have been portrayed in film and television, as well as in literature. Considering the influence corporations have in the world today, it would seem more important than ever to pay attention to the ways in which popular texts consciously or unconsciously approach the dilemma of corporate power. Corporations, moreover, have attained that strange binary status, in many people's perceptions, of being familiar and socially necessary, yet destructive and selfish. Many popular cultural representations of corporations, for instance, tend to circle ceaselessly from one end to the other in this binary, never exploring the (dialectical) contradictions around which such a binary understanding of the corporation circulates—only reaching a “synthesis” through an imaginary ending that often belies its own saccharine solution. What many representations of corporations fail to lay bare is that the workings of a capitalist system are constantly changing, which both affects and is affected by corporate power itself. Thus, in seeking to unpack representations of twentieth-and twenty-first-century versions of the corporation in post-World War II American fiction and film, it is first necessary to place them within a larger economic context.

A Zombie is Haunting America!

Capitalism has proven over the last few centuries that, to borrow a Mark Twain quip, rumors of its demise have been greatly exaggerated. The current economic crisis, the so-called “sub-prime mortgage crisis,” has thus engendered a grave horror-show range of responses to corporate capitalism. Marx’s *Capital* famously employed the figure of the vampire to suggest the life/labor sucking behavior of the capitalist apropos the worker, yet a different undead metaphor governs economic discussion these days, one not unrelated to the living Dead Father. As *The Economist* bemoans “The Return of Economic Nationalism” on the cover of its 5 February 2009 issue that pictures a ghoulish hand bursting from a grave, the discourse as to what kinds of economic systems are alive, dead, on life support, or making a full recovery appears up in the air (or long since buried in the grave). *The Economist*’s implication is clear. Keynesianism is zombieism, and the recent revival of interest in zombie films (*28 Days Later*, *Shaun of the Dead*, the *Resident Evil* series, and *Zombieland*, to name just a few released since 2002) has weirdly coincided with the suggested resurrection of a supposedly dead economic policy. Whereas some critics have pointed to George Romero’s 1978 horror-zombie classic *Dawn of the Dead* as being a satire of the humdrum daily life under capitalism<sup>2</sup> (as suggested by the zombies tramping their way around a mall), fiscally conservative voices like *The Economist* show how easily this reading can be reversed. The recent kitchy success of the Seth Grahame-Smith novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) thus may inspire some topical and neoconservative rewritings of controversial classics, perhaps *Atlas Shrugged with Zombies* or *The Fountainhead and the Undead*. Today,

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<sup>2</sup> See Harper for a synopsis.

such texts would argue, government implemented zombie economics is sure to lead to the feasting on entrepreneurial brains and the spread of mindless, drab socialism, the health care system of which will be inadequate for stitching back on all those pesky limbs that keep falling off since people will be, literally, falling apart.

Barack Obama, however, has proven himself to be neither zombie nor socialist (nor, for that matter, was Keynes<sup>3</sup>). In fact, Obama may have been the first to announce, “the King is dead, long live the King,” as his economic policies eschewed the appointment of a “car czar” in Detroit and the temporary nationalization of the banks, and instead implemented the “Cash for Clunkers” program and used the Treasury Department as that all important “lender of last resort,” snapping up the numerous “toxic” assets, guaranteeing all those risky loans, and allowing private enterprise to pick through the carnage and invest in what it found to be the safest bets. All risk and loss will accrue to the government (read the American taxpayers), all profit to the private companies. After bailing out the big financial players, Americans are still awaiting job creation that the administration assures us is on the way—it is just “lagging behind.” Essentially, the Obama administration is advocating the same trickle-down economics as did Reagan in the 1982 recession, recently leading Nobel Prize winning economist and liberal Paul Krugman to describe Obama’s economic policy as, not surprisingly, “a zombie doctrine.”

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<sup>3</sup>As Robert L. Heilbroner writes in *The Worldly Philosophers* apropos of Keynes’s *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*,

[. . .] while Keynes espoused a policy of managing capitalism, he was no opponent of private enterprise. ‘It is better that a man should tyrannize over his bank-balance than over his fellow citizens,’ he had written in *The General Theory*, and went on to state that if the government would only concern itself with providing enough public investment, the working of the vast bulk of the economy could and should be left to private initiative. In review, *The General Theory* was not a radical solution; it was, rather, an explanation of why an inescapable remedy should work. (278)

All in all, not much of the neoliberal landscape appears to have changed since its Great(est) Communicator was in office.

If Keynesianism, Socialism, and Communism are the (un)dead, what then do we make of neoliberal capitalism? Perhaps now that genomic and stem cell research will gain momentum under a democratic presidency and an economy hungering for new research and technologies to invest in, capitalism will regenerate or submit itself to reconstructive surgery.<sup>4</sup> It will have to. Because what is clear is that neoliberal capitalism as it has been instituted and practiced over the last thirty years is the real corpse here, but it is a corpse that always seems to return to the spotlight, like the insistent corpse in Hitchcock's *The Trouble With Harry* (1955), or better yet, in the context of neoliberalism's promise of never-ending conspicuous consumption, *Weekend at Bernie's* (1989).<sup>5</sup> While the trouble with Harry is that his corpse keeps reappearing where it is not wanted, Bernie's corpse is purposely dragged along for a luxurious weekend party at his beach house and is, in fact, the talisman that unlocks the gated communities of leisure. Thus it is that we need to ask: Is neoliberal corporate capitalism really "too big too fail," or bury, as the case may be? How long are we expected to drag this load with us and to where are we taking it? Or is this more a case of the load pulling us down with it as the ground caves in beneath our feet?

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<sup>4</sup> The Obama administration recently confirmed an earlier promise with a step in this direction, approving the NIH's recommendation to allow research into thirteen new stem cell lines. See Wade.

<sup>5</sup> Stranger still, Bernie Lomax is the president of a New York-based insurance company. He invites the two protagonists (ladder-climbing executives) to his beach house for the weekend in order to keep tabs on their discovery of embezzlement, of which Lomax himself (unbeknownst to the two) is guilty.

## The Late, Late Capitalism

The peculiar status of the corporation in the era of late capital is largely a result of the rapidly shifting economic circumstances of the post-1945 world. A brief overview of how different theorists have conceptualized this era and its changes will help establish an understanding of the “base” out of which the modern-day corporation rises. Throughout the chapters to follow I deploy these theorists’ concepts at key moments in my arguments, although it should be remembered that while many of their ideas overlap or buttress one another, there are many disagreements among them as well.

It was Immanuel Wallerstein who first introduced a “world-systems” theory to academia in the 1970s, proposing that to conceive of the post-World War II world meant understanding capitalism not only historically and with a respect to a much longer past than most attributed it, but also as a complex and interrelated global, capitalist phenomenon that was heading toward a major crisis. The novel aspect of such a project, writes Wallerstein, was that “[i]nstead of national states as the object of study,” world-system theorists could substitute “‘historical systems’ which, it was argued, had existed up to now in only three variants: minisystems; and ‘world-systems of two kinds—world economies and world-empires” (*World Systems* 16). Greatly indebted to the concepts of the Annales school historiographer Fernand Braudel, world-systems theorists thus sought to break down boundaries between disciplines in order to pursue their broad and complex view of the role of capital in the world-system.

One of the finest examples of world-systems theory to appear is Giovanni’s Arrighi’s *The Long Twentieth Century*, which borrows the concept of historical-systemic

cycles and the “*longue durée*” of capital from Braudel to argue that the history of capitalism can be broken down into four successive systemic cycles of accumulation, beginning with a Genoese cycle (15<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries); a Dutch cycle (late 16<sup>th</sup> to late 18<sup>th</sup> centuries); a British cycle (mid 18<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries); and a U.S. cycle (the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to today) (6). Within this model the global study of capital is expanded beyond a more traditional Marxism since “the really important transition that needs to be elucidated is not that from feudalism to capitalism but from scattered to concentrated capitalist power” (11). During each systemic cycle of capitalist accumulation, there arises a dominant hegemonic power that dictates and controls the networks of the world-economy until its particular cycle of accumulation reaches a limit, at which time the hegemonic power’s own internal contradictions erupt. Thus, the strengths of the hegemonic power that allow it to dominate a particular cycle of capital accumulation ultimately become the very weaknesses that cause it to collapse.

A reading of the four cycles allows Arrighi to conclude that financial expansions announce “not just the maturity of a particular stage of development of the capitalist world-economy, but also the beginning of a new stage” (87). Yet the problem for Arrighi and other world-systems theorists is applying the “knowledge” gained from the study of systemic cycles of accumulation to a prediction of the future of capital. In the conclusion to *The Long Twentieth Century*, published in 1994, Arrighi surmises that the next hegemonic power to replace that of the crisis-ridden U.S. cycle is Japan (a well-educated guess at the time), a nation whose rising sun has since been eclipsed by the red dawn of China, supposedly the latest power to threaten U.S. economic hegemony and marking,



perhaps, what Fareed Zakaria has recently called the “Post-American World,” in which several nations will share global economic hegemony. To be sure, divination is a tricky art, but Arrighi’s exquisitely detailed cycles leave the reader feeling that world-systems theory is merely the mechanical story of capital and its inevitable expansions and contractions as it continually matures toward some obscure end-point. In short, it reproduces the classic Marxist conundrum of how to enact change in the world—to what degree the rising up of the proletariat is a historical necessity and to what degree a matter of education, preparation, and organization. Contrary to Arrighi’s intention though it is, the world-systems theoretical perspective is ultimately too deterministic. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write, apropos of Arrighi’s study, in *Empire*, “*everything must always return, and the history of capitalism thus becomes the eternal return of the same. In the end, such a cyclical analysis masks the motor of the process of crisis and restructuring [ . . . ]*” (239).

Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, of course, has its rhizomes in world-systems theory (as well as the work of Deleuze and Guattari), but the main thrust of its argument is more future-looking than the more “backward-looking” Arrighi.<sup>6</sup> When Arrighi writes at the end of his study that “it is possible [that] over the next half-century or so [ . . . ] a world empire will actually be realized,” although “[w]hat the substantive nature of this world

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<sup>6</sup> The amount of information and details provided by Arrighi in his description of each systemic cycle of capital accumulation is astounding, though sometimes frustrating and repetitive as well. Although Arrighi titles his book *The Long Twentieth Century*, it takes a very long time to get to that century, which passes perhaps too quickly, though not without a rich and illuminating account of capital’s latest cycle. Still, since Arrighi’s cycles overlap one another, as we move on to consider each successive cycle, we are inevitably, and at times frustratingly, pulled back into a discussion of the previous cycle, so that the very deterministic and constraining feel of the cycles is reproduced, at times, at the narrative level. No cycle ever entirely withdraws from the discussion, which, like each systemic cycle of capital, comprises both a strength and weakness of Arrighi’s exploration.

empire will be [ . . . ] is a question to which the research agenda of this study cannot give a meaningful answer” (354), it is as if Hardt and Negri decided to answer him, although with one qualification: “*We have to recognize where in the transnational networks of production, the circuits of the world market, and the global structures of capitalist rule there is the potential for rupture and the motor for a future that is not simply doomed to repeat the past cycles of capitalism*” (239). For Hardt and Negri, then, Empire is the outcome of Arrighi’s “world empire;” it entails that “sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire” (xii). Empire, a network-power spread through governmental and supra-governmental organizations, comes to dominate all facets of life, resulting in the bio-production of life itself on a world scale.

But Hardt and Negri hold faith in exploiting the “ruptures” in and between systemic cycles of accumulation because of what they call the “multitude,” which is essentially Marx’s proletariat, the Subject of history that took a back seat or was thrown out of the car entirely in world-systems analysis. The return of this repressed Subject of history is thus a forceful one: “We need to consider [ . . . ] the power of the *res gestae*, the power of the multitude to make history that continues and is reconfigured today *within* Empire. It is a question of transforming a necessity imposed on the multitude [ . . . ] into a condition of possibility of liberation, a new possibility of this new terrain of humanity” (47). Moreover, this proletariat “is not what it used to be,” since “under the category of the proletariat we understand *all* those exploited by and subject to capitalist domination,”

which nevertheless “should not indicate that the proletariat is a homogeneous or undifferentiated unit” (53). Such an expansion of the proletariat far from its traditional “working class” base is surely anathema to orthodox Marxist thought, but the historical role of the proletariat remains basically the same: “The power of the proletariat imposes limits on capital and not only determines the crisis but also dictates the terms and nature of the transformation. *The proletariat actually invents the social and productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future*” (268). Hardt and Negri, then, see the driving force of change in the world of late capital in the multitude itself, which, although it has been subjectified by a regime of bio-power, will eventually control the networks and mechanisms of this inexorable productive power, since “[t]he deterritorializing power of the multitude is the productive force that sustains Empire and at the same time the force that calls for and makes necessary its destruction” (66). Constituted by and constituting Empire, the multitude somehow (Hardt and Negri never are precise as to the means to this end) inherits the world.

*Empire* is so future-oriented, however, that it has been charged with comprising a kind of utopian thinking that adopts the conventions of science fiction.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, its bold claims as to the (be)coming regime of Empire appear to be cut off, or at least put on hold, as the “War on Terror” has led to two “preemptive” wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have ultimately alienated the U.S. from much of the world instead of giving rise to a truly global terrorist security force or organization. Slavoj Žižek has also taken issue with the ontological basis of Hardt and Negri’s argument in *The Parallax View*, claiming

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<sup>7</sup> See Timothy S. Murphy’s “To Have Done with Postmodernism: A Plea (or Provocation) for Globalization Studies” and Joseph Tabbi’s “American World-Fiction in the Longue Durée” in *Fictions Present: Situating Contemporary Narrative Innovation* (eds. Berry and Di Leo).

that their Deleuzian influenced ontology is problematic, while the authors simultaneously remain “*too* Marxist” because they “rehabilitate the old Marxist notion of the tension between productive forces and the relations of production” (266). It is no surprise that the Hegelian influenced Žižek would take umbrage here. After all, Hardt and Negri claim that their concept shows that “the power of the dialectic, which imagines the collective formed through mediation rather than through constitution, has been definitively dissolved” (405). Žižek, however, argues that for Hardt and Negri,

[t]he organizational forms of today’s capitalism—decentralization of decision-making, radical mobility and flexibility, interaction of agents—are perceived as pointing toward the oncoming reign of the multitude. It is as if everything is already here, in ‘postmodern’ capitalism—all that is needed is an act of purely formal conversion [. . .].” (263)

Hence, “is not their notion of the pure multitude ruling itself the ultimate *capitalist* fantasy [. . .]? In other words, is not the capitalist *form* (the form of the appropriation of surplus-value) the necessary form, formal frame/condition, of the self-propelling productive movement?” (263). Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* leaves us, then, with “the anxious suspicion that this self-transparent direct rule of everyone over everyone, this democracy *tout court*, will coincide with its opposite” (264). Thus, by reintroducing the dialectic into the productive ontology of Hardt and Negri, Žižek reminds us of the dual potential underlying such a singular and ebullient faith in the multitude.

This darker underside of what Žižek calls “postmodern capitalism” is explored by David Harvey in *The Postmodern Condition*, in which Harvey draws parallels between

postmodern art and culture and a postmodern economy. Employing the concept of “flexible accumulation,” Harvey argues that the economic troubles of the 1970s—the oil “shocks” and embargo, stagflation, and a sputtering Keynesian capitalism—proved to be the groundwork for a revolutionary overhaul in capitalist modes of production. In economic terms, the move from modernism to postmodernism, for instance,

is marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on flexibility with respect to labor processes, labor markets, products, and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation.” (147)

In short, the one-time boundaries of capital—such as Keynesian regulation and the State’s role in protecting the “social”—had become too rigid and congealed for capitalists’ liking. The new economic regime, neoliberalism, would tear down such regulations, usher in a wave of privatization, and gut the State’s social programs, thus compromising the State’s ability to provide for society’s basic needs. The result, writes Harvey, is that “[t]he relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms” (156). Contra Hardt and Negri, Harvey views the flux and tenuousness of the postmodern condition as mechanisms of further repression, not revolution.

Neoliberalism's capitalist revolution, however, has been a relatively quiet one. Yet as Harvey writes in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, "[n]eoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on the ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (3). Neoliberalism's ascent to the capitalist logic of the day—or three decades to date—was a long time in the making, as its primary adherents, Milton Friedman and Frederick Hayek, had long been evangelizing the glories and ultimate utopia of a truly "free" market. Its more recent, less ideologue-driven (though nonetheless ideology-bound) adherents have been Frances Fukuyama and Thomas Friedman, who, each in his own way, have sung its praises under the banner of "globalization." In *The End of History and the Last Man*, published in 1992, Fukuyama famously pronounced "the end of history," based on the belief that "while earlier forms of government were characterized by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse, liberal democracy [is] arguably free from such fundamental internal contradictions" (xi). The expansion of capital to a truly global market, the failures of State-centered economies, and the fall of the Soviet Union surely meant we would all inherit "the Promised Land of liberal democracy" (xv). Any day the Third World developing countries would see the kind of economic boom times that the major Western capitalist power were enjoying because, essentially, "the *ideal* of liberal democracy [can]not be improved on" (xi).

Friedman similarly espoused a faith in globalization that minimized its discontents, such as the crash of the Asian Tigers and the fiasco of Long Term Capital

Management. In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* globalization is not exactly the end of history, but it is the beginning of a new and incontrovertible system: “In the globalization era, the fundamental political question is: How do you make the best of the only hardware and operating system that works—globally integrated free-market capitalism?” (352). This choice to accept globalization is really no choice at all; it is an imperative, argues Friedman, no matter what the potential problems with globalization. Friedman’s call to America to oversee this shift to globalization, moreover, continues the rhetoric of American Exceptionalism that John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill” speech initiated. Friedman claims that “America can be, and should be, the world’s role model in answering this question. America has had two hundred years to invent, regenerate and calibrate the balances that keep markets free without becoming monsters. We have the tools to make a difference. We have the responsibility to make a difference” (352). Thus, a contradiction emerges in that globalization is a predetermined and unalterable event, yet one that can be tamed, manipulated, or mastered, as Friedman writes in his typically brash and pragmatic Yankee style: “America is blamed for this because, in so many ways, globalization is us. We are not the tiger. Globalization is the tiger. But we are the people most adept at riding the tiger and now we’re telling everyone else to get out of the way” (309). Friedman’s advice for smoothing the transition to this new economy for the developing world, however, is simply a neoliberal creed advising for a stronger rule of law, a commitment to IMF (the International Monetary Fund) policies that can ease the way for the “Electronic Herd” (Friedman’s term for investors, corporations, financial players, etc.) “to buy companies in [ . . . ] weakened economies” so

as to initiate “the creative destruction that is essential to capitalism—eliminating inefficient firms and replacing them with better-managed and capitalized ones operating according to the best international standards” (365). Friedman asks that the IMF offer social safety nets to help with the predictable neoliberal fallout of massive unemployment, but neoliberal policies have clearly shown that the IMF and World Bank are heavily influenced and structured to benefit countries with the strongest economies, such as the U.S. Friedman simply holds out faith that an ideal form of globalization would take the social welfare of people into consideration, when he knows full well this has not been the case, and that a free-market system interested in the short-term gains that can be exploited in a hyper-fast and interconnected “global” market cannot, by its own logic, in any way take such people into account. Friedman’s global vision is, in the end, a praise of the *ideal* of globalization, which returns us to Fukuyama’s comment about liberal democracy as the “ideal” end point of history. In response, one could easily argue that communism, in its “ideal” state, cannot be improved upon—and one could argue, as many have, that an *ideal* communist society is preferable to an ideal liberal democracy. The ideology of “ideals,” once reflected upon, is mere rhetorical nonsense.

Even as early as 1944, Karl Polanyi, in *The Great Transformation*, traced this ideology of an ideal form of *laissez-faire* capitalism to Britain during the industrial revolution: “[b]orn as a mere penchant for non-bureaucratic methods, it [economic liberalism] evolved into a veritable faith in man’s secular salvation through a self-regulating market. [. . .] The liberal creed assumed its evangelical fervor only in response to the needs of a fully deployed market economy” (135). The fervor of this belief



reached such a pitch that soon “*laissez-faire* was not a method to achieve a thing, it was the thing to be achieved” (139). The dangers of such an unregulated market, however (and no market is actually ever “free” in that sense, contrary to neoliberal arguments), are clear: “the idea of a self-adjusting market implied a stark utopia. Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man and transformed his surroundings into a wilderness” (3). In turn, the destruction of society and people’s lives is directly tied to the inverse expansion of the “free” market (via privatization, deregulation, and hyper-commodification) and the loss of the freedoms and rights of people. As Polanyi writes, “the liberal idea of freedom thus degenerates into a mere advocacy of free enterprise—which is today reduced to a fiction by the hard reality of giant trusts and princely monopolies” (257).

Today, then, as capital’s ability both to create and to transcend its own boundaries has been facilitated by neoliberal policy, the resulting world economy takes a particular turn:

For every new financial activity, a new set of institutions has emerged.

However, with deregulation of the financial services industry in Western nations, the distinctions between commercial banks, investment banks, pension funds, mutual funds, venture capital firms, and insurance companies are breaking down. The enlightened are trying to become future supermarkets of financial services, similar to the pattern in the information industry, where telephone companies, TV cable companies,

TV satellite companies, TV networks, Internet providers, and computer hardware and software companies are trying to become the single provider of information to individuals and institutions. (Jia-Ming and Morss 208)

Here we see one of capital's primary contradictions: as monopolization pushes for the centralization of capital and production, it can do so only via fragmenting and dissolving formerly distinct modes of capitalist accumulation. Thus, the familiar capitalist drive toward monopolization, is also a primary instance of how neoliberal capitalism's blurring between capital's *own* modes of *financial* production gives rise to a spectacular and speculative phase of capital that, though there have been speculative manias and crashes throughout capital's history, is more interconnected, leveraged, and tenuous than ever.

David Harvey, in *The Limits to Capital*, employs the definition of such "fictitious capital" delineated in Volume III of Marx's *Capital* to point out that this type of capital is "contained in the very concept of capital itself. [. . .] The barrier [that] fixed capital creates to future accumulation [. . .] can be overcome only by way of the credit system in general and by the creation of fictitious capital in particular" (269). This necessary metamorphosis of capital, then, simply explodes in the neoliberal moment, in which financial deregulation and privatization allow capital to run more freely and speculate more wildly than ever. As the financial system has become more complex over the last thirty years, Harvey's surmise that "[t]here are, it seems, as many different markets for fictitious capital as there are forms of property ownership under capitalism" (276) appears truer than ever (the emergence of credit default swaps and collateralized debt obligations, for instance) and is the obvious environment out of which the latest financial crisis

sprung, a crisis in which mortgage-backed securities plummeted in value when inflated housing prices dropped because sub-prime borrowers could no longer afford to meet their mortgage payments. The securities, themselves bundled up into various packages, were subsequently spread throughout various markets in the logic of risk-spreading, which proved only to spread the risk throughout a highly interconnected and temperamental world economy.

Such a speculative and unstable economic system finds its analogue in the fleeting, image-driven pastiche that is postmodern culture, that peculiar social and cultural logic, as Fredric Jameson has defined it in *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, that marks “the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (44). Because the modern world economic system has grown so dizzyingly complex, people’s perception of this world, or economic system, is directly affected, so that, claims Jameson, it is impossible to “cognitively map” one’s place within such a system. Instead, the world is constituted by the spectacle that, as conceived by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*, “is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (24) in which “spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another” (22). Or, perhaps worse, this world collapses into mere simulacra that herald “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (1), as Jean Baudrillard argues in *Simulacra and Simulations*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The key difference between Debord and Baudrillard is, as I see it, the total abandonment of any kind of Marxist critique by Baudrillard at this point in his thinking (1981, though the turn begins after 1968).

It is within this particular neoliberal, late capitalist climate that the corporation has become a more powerful agent of capital than ever before. In fact, corporate power and prominence have grown in tandem with that of an expanding and developing capitalist system. It would not be going too far to say that the one is dependent on the other, and vice versa. Granted unprecedented rights and powers, corporations have been able to benefit greatly from the liberalization of the economy and the trumpeting of the “free market” that the above theorists have circumscribed and criticized. Even the proliferation of media, images, and simulacra has benefited and helped to propel the corporation into the awareness of individuals in very particular ways. A short overview of the history and development of the modern corporation is therefore needed to understand the corporation’s prominence in the world economy today.

#### A Brief History of Corporate Time

The history of the corporation can be traced back to the sixteenth century with the emergence of joint-stock companies. Joint-stock companies were much smaller than today’s corporations, often having only a few hundred members, and were granted charters by the monarchies that ruled in their countries of origin. Such companies became necessary because the scope of many of the projects they hoped to carry out required large amounts of capital, which is basically the underlying narrative of all

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Debord in 1967, however, talks about the “proletariat” and still, despite the pronouncements of the autonomy of the spectacle, sometimes indulges in an emancipatory rhetoric, speaking, at one point, of the “*false consciousness of time*” (114). Baudrillard’s cynical and apocalyptic tone would seem to preclude any such resistance to the hyperreal. Debord and Baudrillard make fine emblems of the divide between pre- and post-*Mai 68*. In short, if Debord and Baudrillard found themselves in William S. Burroughs’s *Nova Express*, Debord would storm “The Reality Studio” that projects the images taken to be the world, whereas Baudrillard would claim that reality is now the studio of its own instantaneous presentation.

corporate growth over the last four hundred or so years. These companies, in fact, were often formed in order to spur Imperialist adventures in European nations' colonies, giving rise to entities such as the British East India Company. As Arrighi writes,

Joint-stock chartered companies were part-governmental, part business organizations, which specialized *territorially*, to the exclusion of other similar organizations. Twentieth-century transnational corporations, in contrast, are strictly business organizations, which specialize *functionally* in specific lines of production and distribution, across multiple territories and jurisdictions, in cooperation and competition with other similar organizations (73)

This early blending of government and private enterprise meant that, many times, after a joint-stock company had served its purpose—through establishing trade in a particular area, etc.—the charter would be pulled and the company would cease to exist (249-250).

As the capitalist system began to expand, particularly during the Industrial Revolution, so did the number of corporations, as large-scale “public works” projects required massive capital investment in order to proceed. This was nowhere truer than when it came to building railroads, both in Britain and the U.S. In nineteenth-century America, for instance, as expansion pushed westward, the U.S. government found it beneficial to spur development of the “frontier” and conduct massive public works projects by contracting the work out to large corporations. These corporations, urged onward by the pursuit of profit, would then complete the job in the most efficient manner. But such a great concentration of power in the hands so few gave rise to the threat of

monopolies or trusts that would dominate or sweep aside the very “settlers” it was meant to serve.

Before the railroad trust could raise the capital for its vast plans, however, a niggling problem with the corporation remained to be solved. The structure of companies left investors responsible for their stake in a company’s fortunes so that they could be held personally liable for a company’s debt. Midway through the nineteenth century, however, the size of corporations and the massive amounts of capital they required to function made it necessary to open the companies up to public investment, thus engendering a new middle-class stock-owning public. In order to encourage investment, the idea of a “limited liability” company took shape. Investors, under “limited liability,” would only be accountable for the money that they had staked in a company’s stock and nothing more. By the late nineteenth century, the limited liability of a corporation was an established principle.

At the same time, several regulations were lifted regarding merger laws, and soon, as Joel Bakan writes, “with the most meaningful constraints on mergers and acquisitions gone, a large number of small and medium-sized corporations were quickly absorbed into a small number of very large ones—1,800 corporations were consolidated into 157 between 1898 and 1904” (14). Adding to this consolidation of corporate power was the Supreme Court decision of 1886 that a corporation was, legally, a “person” and was thus entitled to all the rights entailed under the Fourteenth Amendment, which was originally added to the Constitution in order to give rights to former slaves. With the ruling, however, corporations now gained the same rights as any individual. The result in the

legal world is telling, writes Jamie Court: “Fifty percent of the Fourteenth Amendment cases thereafter related to the defense of a corporate business, as opposed to one-and-one-half percent for African Americans’ status. The disadvantaged status of the people vis-à-vis corporations today springs from this ruling by the Supreme Court” (27). This strange transubstantiation was nothing less than the embodiment of capital, which would have dire consequences for individuals.

At the dawn of the twentieth-century, corporations held a significant amount of power, although the Great Depression, populist resentment, and two World Wars would keep capitalism in check. As Geoffrey Jones writes, the Great Depression led to “[e]xchange controls, the collapse of capital mobility, protectionism, the decline in primary commodity prices, falling incomes [ . . . ], and the spread of nationalistic governments in Europe and Asia” (84), which negatively affected international business. Jones surmises that perhaps this nationalization was “the most significant consequence of the 1930’s depression” because it “encouraged firms to strengthen their ‘local’ identities” (87). Domestically, corporations in the U.S. suffered too, as Roosevelt’s New Deal was perceived as anti-business and labor unions flourished with populist resentment of large firms. In times of war, however, the government found itself compelled to rely on corporations such as Ford or U.S. Steel to manufacture munitions and military vehicles. Corporations were patriotically “doing their part” in the war, too, and making a tidy profit besides.

During the immediate post-World War II era, corporations in the U.S. remained fairly benign. A few large corporations dominated U.S. production—the GEs, IBMs, and

GMs—and thanks to collective bargaining with labor and an economic boom, corporations tended to be somewhat paternalistic in their attitudes towards their employees. Pension packages, health insurance, benefits, stock sharing programs, and the like were regular features of even industrial manufacturing jobs, which were plentiful and even offered opportunities for minorities and women who before had little opportunity to work such jobs. Corporations, at this time, were no longer seen as the inimical monsters they had by so many before World War II, as a film like *Executive Suite* (1954) clearly shows. Corporations could afford to compensate their employees well since their troubles with labor earlier in the century had been settled and wages and prices remained relatively stable, making the production and marketing of a whole slew of new commodities and technologies to the emerging, eager, and financially flush consumers even easier.

It is at the end of this *Pax Corporate Americana* that we begin to see the internationalization of finance and corporations to an unprecedented degree over the next three decades, which gives rise to the most dominant corporate capitalist form of our time, the multinational corporation as we know it. Mira Wilkins notes, however, that multinationals have their own *longue durée*, stretching back to ancient times.

Nonetheless, she writes,

to a significant extent there [is] a wide divide between the modern MNEs [multinational enterprises] and their many precursors. Modern MNEs of the 19<sup>th</sup> (particularly late 19<sup>th</sup>) and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have had a formidable impact on globalization. The MNE integrates the world economy in a



manner that differs from trade, finance, migration, or technology transfer; it puts under one organized structure a package of ongoing relationships—transfers of goods, capital, people, ideas, and technology.” (51)

It is, therefore, in the immediate decades after World War II that the multinational corporations help to instigate the new phase of capital expansion and transformations the world over that my study most concerns. As Jones succinctly puts it,

From the 1950s onward a new global economy began to be constructed as MNE service firms started international dissemination of management practices, cultural values, and lifestyles—as well as the building of a new trading and financial infrastructure—and as multinational banks and trading companies moved money, commodities, and information around the world on an unprecedented scale. (102)

When the economic crises of the 1970s hit, however, things would change significantly. The oil and energy crises, stagflation, inflation, rising unemployment, increasing international competition (especially from the rapidly recovering economies of one-time devastated post-World War II West Germany and Japan), and the unraveling of the Bretton Woods agreement that pegged international currency to the U.S. dollar and insured a stabilized world-economy, put great pressure on the U.S. and world-economy. Economists and business leaders quickly changed their one-time paternalistic tune of the post-World War II decades and scrambled to find ways to secure the capital that seemed to be fast drying up.

This led to a wave of financial liberalization supported by (supposedly) ideologically free supranational organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF, both of which loaned money to countries desperate for economic stimulus, though the loans came with strict demands to implement neoliberal economic structuring, which essentially forced such countries into adopting neoliberal practices to their eventual detriment. In the U.S., chiefly during the Reagan Administration (though it began under Carter's), this meant attacking the State and its power to regulate industry and commerce, as well as ushering in a wave of deregulation, privatization, and a slashing of social programs. Thus, writes Harvey, while neoliberalism is upheld by its proponents as “a *utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism,” it is, in practice, “a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (*A Brief* 19). We will see such a nascent utopian vision of capital's projected conquest in Arthur Jensen's panegyric to globalization in *Network*, yet we shall more often see the social and political effects of such an ideal vision throughout this study.

Corporations thrived in such an environment, as the era of mega-mergers and mega-profits ensued. After the Reagan Revolution and Tax Revolt transformed the American economy once again, corporate profits soared, much of which was a result of financial maneuvering and tax cuts: “Whereas corporations paid 39 percent of all taxes collected in the United States in the 1950s, they paid only 17 percent in the 1980s. The share paid by individuals rose from 61 percent to 83 percent” (Korten 201). All in all, in

the span of under two decades, corporations had managed, thanks to neoliberal economic policy, to snatch record profits from the jaws of recession.

Not surprisingly, the pace of corporate growth during the neoliberal era is astounding, as Brian Roach writes:

FDI [foreign direct investment] outflows grew slowly from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. FDI then nearly tripled between 1984 and 1987 and continued to grow steadily at a rate of around 20 percent a year during the first half of the 1990s. [. . .] The growth of FDI out-flows in current prices during the period 1982-2001, an absolute increase of more than 2,100 percent, has far outpaced the growth in exports (257%) and world output (195%). (25)

As a result, multinational corporations have multiplied both in the U.S. and abroad: “[. . .] the number of MNCs in developed countries increased by 63 percent between 1990 and 2002, the number of MNCs in developing countries increased by 258 percent during the same period” (24). Nonetheless, the explosion in corporate might is particularly germane to the U.S.:

When we consider the geographic distribution of only the very large MNCs, the corporations become much more concentrated in the United States and Japan, although this has also been changing in recent decades. About 64 percent of the largest 250 industrial companies were headquartered in the United States in 1960. [. . .] Coming forward to 2002,

we find only about 38 percent of the *Fortune* 500 firms headquartered in the United States [. . .]. (24-5)

The effect of this neoliberal transformation of the economy that has gone invisible-hand-in-corporate-hand with the multinationals has been a tendency to destabilize not only former social and cultural structures (as the critiques of Jameson, Debord, and Baudrillard claim) but, in turn, to destabilize the capitalist system itself, in which corporations find themselves compelled, much like the bargain-hunting consumers they rely upon, to seek out the cheapest labor markets and hop from one nation to another in search of the best deals for low-cost production. The greatest effect of neoliberal economic policy, however, has been the radical redistribution of wealth in America so that the top one percent (millionaires are common now, multimillionaires too, and billionaires are where it's at [Wolff 14-15, 2004]) own 34.6% of the wealth, the next nineteen percent own 50.5%, and the bottom eighty percent of the country owns 15% (Wolff 2007, qtd. in Domhoff<sup>9</sup>)—a distributive scale similar with how the U.S. and other wealthy nations compare to the poorer nations of the world. The widening gap between the rich and poor—experienced today in America as the “squeeze” on the middle-class—along with the cuts in social welfare programs and safety nets and a fresh crisis in capital have left a dire fallout, not just in the U.S., but in the entire interconnected and “globalized” world of late-capital.

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<sup>9</sup> Comparatively, Wolff's data show how pre-neoliberal economics insured a more even distribution of wealth in America. Whereas in 1976, the bottom 99% of America owned 80.1% of the wealth, this number dropped to 75.2% by 1981, and plummeted to a low of 61.9% in 1998. Overall, a general 15% drop in the bottom 99% of America's control of wealth was established by 2007, that is, before the latest financial crisis (qtd. in Domhoff).

In short, the history of the corporation is integral to the history of capital, and particularly to the development of American capitalism. Marx spoke of the dialectical relationship between technological advances and capital restructuring in order to accumulate more relative surplus value, and it would appear that no one “technological” advance has been more influential, far-reaching, or persistent than that of the corporation. While many material technological advances—the railroads, the telegraph, the radio—may have become obsolete or less integral to the capitalist system than they were upon their initial discoveries, the corporation has continued to mutate throughout its four hundred-year history and remains as important, if not more important, to the system than ever before. From the joint-stock company, to the corporation, to the limited liability corporation, to the legal “person” granted Fourteenth Amendment rights, to the multinational and neoliberal transformations the corporation has proven to be a primary dynamic motor, both affected by and affecting the multiple reconfigurations of capitalism.

#### Re-presenting the Corporate Body

A major reason the corporation has increasingly become a focal point in various films and texts is not least due to the unparalleled mergers and corporate earnings since the 1970s. It is also, I would argue, due to the fact that corporations have, as a result of their rapid growth, become a direct and indirect way of addressing the habitual, yet novel, economic problems arising from late capitalism. Serving as the primary representatives of the capitalist system, figurations of corporations allow for a temporary crystallization

or solidification of an economic system so dynamic that it continually dismantles social, cultural, and political structures, creating a world wherein, as Marx and Engels wrote, “[a]ll that’s solid melts into air.” What representations of corporations do is reverse this “natural” process for a moment, condense the immaterial back into something conceivable *and* perceivable. If nothing else, they can offer ways for understanding what is responsible for this melted air being so smoggy and so foul. Because our economic system is, as Jameson has argued, truly beyond the individual’s comprehension or cognition, the corporation offers a limited means of perceiving it, a kind of “face” or image, as inadequate as it ultimately may be.

I would suggest that the manifestations of corporations in literature and popular culture serve as primers on late capitalism, often attempting to critique it, and thus are valuable representations. There is, then, an underlying dialectic within my study between the corporation and the capitalist system itself at any given particular point in time. In suggesting a dialectical concept of the corporation, I do not wish to re-instill a kind of vulgar Marxist analysis here, one comprising a simple cause-and-effect, base/superstructure model. At times, it may seem as if some of my analyses are groping for a solid foundation or economic base from which to claim all problems arise. But these moments are more a way of “touching base” in both senses of the phrase—meaning it is important to reflect upon the specificities of *what kind of capitalism* we are dealing with at any given textual and historical moment, and also that this base keeps us from floating away into the ether of social, political, or psychological explanations that themselves appear to have little connection to anything else.

Touching base in such a fashion is meant to reestablish a sense of purpose and security in my readings, not to reduce them to simplistic deterministic Marxist ones, and is obviously indebted to Althusser's notion of "overdetermination," in which there is, as Althusser claims, both a "*determination in the last instance by the (economic) mode of production*" and "*the relative autonomy of the superstructures and their specific effectivity*" (111). The corporation, in some sense, is both a form of the capitalist mode of production and part of the superstructure as well. Indeed, it is a key meeting point that blurs the distinction between each, as I suggest in the first chapter when examining the corporation as an example of Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus. My method, therefore, may work differently in different texts. Texts dealing more directly with corporations, for instance, may establish some form of critique of capitalism and require little in the way of reestablishing such a foundation. At other times, however, such a base must be recovered or revealed, since it may have "sunk" into the background or, like a *mis-en-scene*, become that very background to such a degree that it remains nearly invisible within it. Thus, the dialectical notion of a corporation is in no way meant to be reductive, but productive in revealing the various tensions and contradictions within corporations and corporate capitalism itself.

My study hopes to discover and tease out these various knots and tensions in capital's corporate bodies. Thus, the first chapter situates the corporation in the history of twentieth-century America. Looking at Frank Norris's prophetic representation of the coming corporate century in his depiction of the Railroad Trust in *The Octopus* and placing it against the slowly defaulting promises of post-World War II corporate

hegemony registered in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, I argue that corporations and capital have attained such a hold on American life that all avenues of resistance, already seen as troubled by Norris, have apparently disappeared by the time of Pynchon. Moreover, Norris's anticipation of the decentered corporation in the metaphor of the octopus comes to fruition in Pynchon's metaphor of the real estate/developer Pierce Inverarity's "incorporation" of America.

A sputtering Detroit and stagflating American economy become the subjects of the second chapter wherein I conduct a close reading of Ron Howard's 1986 comedy *Gung Ho*, a film in which a Japanese car company re-opens a failed auto plant in a small American town that, like Detroit, has seen the best of its economic times come and go. I contend that the film registers the fears of a fully recovered post-World War II Japanese economy that, in a sense, is returning late capitalism—with its novel and strict disciplining of old labor—to its source. The film, however, buries this more fundamental antagonism of the new transformation of capital under an array of cultural antagonisms between Japanese and American workers, which is further complicated by class antagonisms, as the Japanese are the white-collar workers, and the Americans the blue-collar workers who have lost their Protestant Work Ethic. The absence of any larger interrogation of Detroit's own management failures, which created openings in the American car market that Japanese auto makers would exploit, is instead projected onto a strict and unforgiving Japanese corporation and a supposedly lazy American worker. Thus, the film shows how a new transnational returns to its "birthplace" in the figure of an "Othered" corporation.



In the next chapter, I trace some more popular representations of corporate power through a reading of five films, *Executive Suite* (1954), *Network* (1976), *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Tommy Boy* (1995), and *Michael Clayton* (2007), that span four decades and give a fine example of shifting attitudes towards corporations as they affect and are affected by shifting modes of capitalist production. Not surprisingly, these films show that in times of economic boom, corporations and businesses are often seen as fairly benign, if not heroic, while in times of economic gloom, corporations become downright sinister. Oftentimes, the corporation is represented as somewhat schizophrenic—it wants to “be good” but there are people or principles governing it that are malevolent. As a result, these texts’ concerns with, and critiques of, corporate power are displaced onto a particular figure (one greedy CEO) or figures (woman/television) that bear the brunt, often unfairly, of such critiques. These films, then, are unable to sustain any deeper, systemic analysis of capital. This failure results in an ever-continuing Corporate Morality Play, marking the limits of pop culture’s probing of late capitalism.

Moving from popular culture’s representations of the corporation, I next consider a novel that deals with the very producers of such popular productions, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, which explores the culture industry’s and the media’s effects on contemporary American life. The novel serves as the perfect text to examine the intersections among media, medicine, the pharmaceutical industry, including the eventual medicalization of bodies in postmodern America. Jack Gladney’s comical, yet overwhelming fear of death and his exposure to toxic chemicals leads him to obsess over his health, both mental and physical, as he seeks for a “solution” to the riddle of a vapid

consumerist life. This he hopes to find in Dylar, the novel's Prozac-like wonder drug, which comes to stand, I claim, for a new wave of pharmaceuticals that began to emerge during the 1980s that have increasingly promoted the medicalizing of everyday life for profit. The uncertainty and fear generated by a spectacular media is capitalized on by corporations, specifically those of the pharmaceutical industry, resulting in people becoming perpetual patients, life becoming beholden to a bio-economy, and a reduction of the concepts of life and death to simulacral or virtual status.

The emerging example of biopower seen in the medicalization of daily life as it is captured in *White Noise* comes to the fore again in the next chapter that deals with William Gaddis's *J R*. *J R* shows a correlation between the numerous fractured families that appear in the novel and an emerging cannibalistic capitalism that is simultaneously fracturing the world. The J R Corporation, created by the adolescent J R VanSant, comes to stand for a new kind of corporate ideal as J R employs the metaphor of a "family" of companies to promote his idea of the complete corporatization of everyday life. Working against the "play to win" capitalism the novel displays via the Typhon Corporation, Gaddis suggests, through J R's Family of Companies, that this novel and obfuscating metaphor of corporate benignity is dangerous and has potentially global consequences. In its virtual "embodiment" of capital, the J R Family of Companies embodies America and potentially the world. Biopower here becomes the eclipsing of the nation-state by multinational corporations as they attempt to expand their frontiers from corporate America to a truly corporate-governed world.

The final chapter looks at how Richard Powers's *Gain* juxtaposes the history and anatomy of a corporation, Clare Soap and Chemical, against the history of an individual, Laura Bodey, dying of cancer. The inverse relationship between the corporate and organic body once again raises the issue of biopower, though in a more "personal" and sober context than in *J R* and *White Noise*, and suggests that what the individual human loses, the "individual" corporation gains. In treating the legal standing of the corporation as a kind of "person," Powers accepts the legal metaphor of corporate "personhood" as verbatim (instead of elaborating upon it, or offering a different metaphor) and investigates the ironic outcome of such a "person's" life. In a sense, this represents the most "self-conscious" and direct treatment of the corporation to date and suggests a certain end to corporate critiques of this type.

In the conclusion I offer an assessment of the possibilities of corporate critique from "within" the corporation itself, as imagined in popular "white-collar" texts that register the existential boredom, pettiness, and drudgery of office jobs, such as the television show *The Office*, the film *Office Space*, and Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End*. Here I explore the ways in which a critical voice from the "inside" can be appropriated by the corporation itself, serving as a troubling model for those who argue there is no "outside" of the system and that fighting it from within is the only option. From there I extrapolate on the future of corporate capitalism that, while still in current crisis, looks to renew its neoliberal roots. Returning to the notion of biopower as it has emerged in the chapters on *White Noise*, *J R*, and *Gain*, I assess the emergence of a true bioeconomy and the rise of biocapital itself as it relates to the widening gap between the

rich and the poor that is the hallmark of neoliberal economics and lays the base from which the contemporary corporation constructs its ominous edifices.

What potentialities there are for various kinds of resistance remains an open, if troubling, question. Yet it would appear more imperative than ever to confront the fact that our troubled economic system needs some kind of restructuring (if not an outright overhaul), particularly the kind that will no longer simply pander to corporate interests at the expense of individual lives. It is the corporation, the embodiment of capital, which is the driving force of capitalism in its latest formation. For all their power, influence, and pervasiveness, however, corporations also make themselves into visible, material, and substantial targets for an ever-changing system driven by unseen and immaterial capital. And while the corporate imagination is bent upon finding new ways to accumulate capital and convince consumers to purchase more and more, our own imaginations are not so easily bound so long as they remain focused on conceiving of other possible lives and other possible worlds to this one, and, in the end, foster the common commitment and the willingness to bring them about.

## California Dreaming: Twentieth-Century Corporate Fictions at the End of the Frontier

I thought IBM was born with the world,  
The U.S. flag would float forever,  
The cold opponent did pack away,  
The capital will have to follow,  
It's not eternal, imperishable,  
Oh yes it will go,  
It's not eternal, imperishable,  
The dinosaur law  
Stereolab, "Wow and Flutter"

As the French pop group Stereolab reminds us, despite the "wow and flutter" of its neon signs and glittering commodities, corporate capitalism is not nearly as timeless and transcendent as it projects itself to be. It is a time-and-space bound economic system that structures the world in particular ways and compels it to particular ends. In other words, before beginning an analysis of the ways in which American fiction and popular culture have figured corporations in the era of late capital, there needs to be not only a historicizing of this peculiar institution, the corporation, but also a historicizing of its fictional representations.

So it is that we need to ask: In what ways have representations of corporations changed in American fiction throughout the twentieth-century, and how do the specific realities of corporate capitalism under which such texts are produced come bear on those representations? To answer these questions we will need to select two texts that can serve as representative of their historical periods, but which also display some sort of preoccupation with American capitalism. Such a choice contains a certain element of arbitrariness and pretentiousness to it, granted, but the search itself is fairly limited by its own qualifications. Nonetheless, two texts stand out as exemplary for this project.

Frank Norris's *The Octopus* comes to the fore for several reasons. First, the novel's publication date (1901) makes it one of the earliest fictional takes on a burgeoning twentieth-century corporate capitalism. Second, the novel *directly* focuses on capital's influence over social, cultural, and political life, and, even more compellingly, this focus is narrowed to a specific industry and corporation—the railroad Trust and the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad (or P. and S. W., based on the Southern Pacific Railroad Corporation). Third, the novel is a chronicling of the 1880s amidst the rough and heady days of industrialism, a key transitional time in the story of capital, and enables Norris to look forward as he looks back, and offer a fair prediction of capital's expansion during the first half of the twentieth-century.

Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is a novel similarly obsessed with exploring the malaise of its present (1966) with constant reference to the past, thus making the novel the perfect companion to Norris's already "historicized" novel. *Lot 49* also depicts a corporate monster set loose in sunny California, albeit a more chameleon-like creature than the one we encounter in *The Octopus*. And, like Norris's novel, Pynchon's is perched at an important moment in the story of capital, the dawning of the era of late capitalism, which saw the corporation emerge as perhaps the most dominant institution in the world. Pynchon calls attention to corporate capitalism's increasingly deleterious effects on postmodern life: *Lot 49* not only begins to question the emerging Corporate State, it also forecasts the possibilities of resisting it in the future.

Aesthetically speaking, these two works could not be any more different, and the same could be said about much of their content. But there is a major thematic strain that

runs from the one to the other, and that is the (historical) preoccupation with American capitalism and, more specifically, the corporation. The fact that the aesthetic and representational strategies of each text are wildly divergent only lends support to the claim that economic forces, here corporate capitalism, have far-ranging and far-reaching effects. In turn, aesthetic possibilities and limitations will prove to have a strong influence regarding how each text represents and figures the corporation.

This, in part, explains why it is possible to read *The Octopus* and *Lot 49* as producing inverse responses to the sense of the (im)possibilities of resistance. At first reading, this much seems clear: for all its devastation, capitalism in *The Octopus* contradictorily brings the world closer together (a nascent global capitalism), and therefore ups the chances of forming a resistant collective (The League). Even after extinguishing each possible attempt to resist the system and reaching the ultimate space of despair by its end, the novel quickly exchanges this conclusion with a fantastic vision of triumph. Such negativity is flushed out and into the space of global capitalism, which in its immense promise can contain such anguish and doubts until they erupt at a future date.

In *Lot 49*, by contrast, an exhausted capitalist expansion has resulted in an unmappable, chaotic world, in which the subject is wholly alienated, and the means and ends of political action obfuscated. The novel thus begins with the seemingly total *inconceivability* of resistance (Oedipa cannot imagine it, or even care), builds to the ambiguous possibility of a resistance through the Tristero, and ends with an impending apocalyptic note of (Oedipa's) despair as the lights go out in the auction house.

Yet while *The Octopus* appears the more optimistic novel and *Lot 49* the more pessimistic one, the underlying logic suggests that the earlier novel's (re)production of despair makes it a less hopeful novel than the guardedly optimistic *Lot 49*, which (re)produces the swirling political and cultural aspirations and anxieties of the 1960s. At the very least, *Lot 49* can be argued to be *ambivalent* regarding the possibility of resistance by leaving open a space in which a "new" kind of resistance might emerge (the dispersed, more properly anarchic Tristero), whereas *The Octopus*, having foreclosed on all possibilities of resistance, retreats into questionable, if Utopian, fantasies of global capital's future. An extensive and rigorous comparison of these texts, then, will uncover such complex continuities and discontinuities in both the realities and representations of corporations from the early to late twentieth-century in American fiction.

#### In an Octopus's Garden

Frank Norris's *The Octopus* stands as one of the earliest fictional representations of a corporation in American literature. The novel dramatizes the struggle between California wheat farmers and the railroads in the San Joaquin Valley during the late nineteenth century, specifically those farmers involved in the Mussel Slough Tragedy of 1880, in which five farmers and two marshals (themselves farmers working for the railroad) were killed in a shootout over land disputes. Norris employs the infamous metaphor of the octopus to suggest the scope and influence of the Southern Pacific Railroad Corporation at the time. As the novel's poet-protagonist Presley imagines it, the railroad is a "vast symbol of power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over



all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path,” and it is a “leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus” (51). Norris’s primary representative tentacle for the railroad arrives in the grossly adipose figure of S. Behrman, whose unctuousness enrages many of the farmers who must deal with the railroad’s shady maneuverings through Behrman on a day-to-day basis. Later in the novel, after the railroad has successfully ousted the farmers from their land, Presley finds himself in a chance meeting with the president and owner of the P. and S.W., Shelgrim, a man whose power and girth easily overshadow even Behrman’s impressive frame.

We have been warned about Shelgrim before, since he epitomizes “the New Finance, the reorganization of capital, the amalgamation of powers, the consolidation of enormous enterprises—no one individual was more constantly in the eye of the world; no one more hated, more dreaded [. . .]” (104). When Presley, during a visit to San Francisco, stumbles onto the P. and S.W.’s headquarters, he sees the office as “the centre of all that vast ramifying system of arteries that drained the life-blood of the State; the nucleus of the web in which so many lives, so many fortunes, so many destinies had enmeshed” (569). Having witnessed firsthand the actual violent machinations of this sprawling corporation, he decides, “Why not see, face to face, the man whose power was so vast, whose will was so resistless, whose potency for evil so limitless, the man who for so long and so hopelessly they had all been fighting” (570). Following this urge, an excited Presley enters the building, and although the hour is late, finds that Shelgrim is still working and will see him shortly.

Before Presley enters Shelgrim's office, however, we might pause to consider the symbolism of this particular scene. If the railroad corporation is a kind of steel octopus, with a limitless reach, a "vast" influence, and whose tentacles suck the life-blood from the people and the land, then there arises the difficulty of ever confronting such a malevolent force, let alone challenging it. The only solution would be to find the head and chop it off, as it were. Hacking away at the mere tentacles, the novel suggests, is a futile endeavor, as hopeless as if Hercules were to slice off the Hydra's heads without searing each of its necks with a torch afterwards. What Presley realizes while waiting nervously outside of Shelgrim's office is that he has the chance to meet with this monster in the hideous flesh and demand accountability for the traumatic events that so recently have transpired in the San Joaquin Valley. Presley is depressed by this point in the novel, disillusioned by the real-life defeat of the vaunted farmer/common man he celebrated in his successful populist poem "The Toilers." A visit with Shelgrim, then, and a discussion with the man responsible for all of the senseless violence, should be nothing short of a catharsis. It is with such a belief that Presley is ushered into Shelgrim's office and seated in front of the man's desk.

Norris makes the overarching metaphor of the novel significantly tangible at this point and transfigures Shelgrim into the octopus itself:

curiously enough, Shelgrim did not move his body. His arms moved, and his head, but the great bulk of the man remained immobile in its place, and as the interview proceeded, this peculiarity emphasised itself, Presley began to conceive the odd idea that Shelgrim had, as it were, placed his

body in the chair to rest, while his head and brain and hands worked independently. (574)

But Presley's preconceptions of Shelgrim are shattered. The man shows tolerance and charity towards a wayward alcoholic employee, and he criticizes Presley's poetry as second-rate. Presley finds that "the man was not only great, but large; many sided, of vast sympathies [. . .]" (575). When Presley tries to articulate his scorn for Shelgrim, he is silenced and instead receives an admonishing lecture on the forces unleashed by capitalism:

'[. . .] try to believe this—to begin with—that *Railroads build themselves*. Where there is demand sooner or later there will be supply. Mr. Derrick, does he grow his wheat? The Wheat grows itself. What does he count for? Does he supply the force? What do I count for? Do I build the Railroad? You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and Railroads, not with men. [. . .]. The Wheat is one force, the Railroad, another, and there is the law that governs them—supply and demand. Men have only little to do in the whole business.' (576)

Presley's reply that Shelgrim is the "head" of this business and therefore can control it elicits a similar response from the president: "I can *not* control it. It is a force born out of certain conditions, and I—no man—can stop it or control it" (576).

Shelgrim's rhetoric demonstrates a complex mix of conscious deception and unconscious revelation. Marx, for instance, would have little to disagree with in Shelgrim's assertion of the "forces" that capitalism unleashes in its transformation of

nature (itself a producer) into a commodity, and money into capital. If we were to replace “the Railroad” here with “capital,” then we would be left with a fair description of what capitalism does and is impelled to do, making it clear why no individual can halt such a force. As Marx puts it in *Capital*, “in so far as he [the capitalist] is capital personified, his motivating force is not the acquisition and enjoyment of use-values, but the acquisition and augmentation of exchange-values.” Consequently,

[o]nly as a personification of capital is the capitalist respectable. As such, he shares with the miser an absolute drive towards self-enrichment. But what appears in the miser as the mania of an individual is in the capitalist an effect of a social mechanism in which he is merely a cog. [ . . . ]

Competition subordinates the individual capitalist to the immanent laws of capitalist production, as external and coercive laws. It compels him to keep extending his capital, so as to preserve it, and he can only extend it by means of progressive accumulation. (739)

Shelgrim is right, at least in one sense, about his own impotence in the face of such overwhelming forces. To embrace the logic of capital means one must subscribe to it wholly, not in part.

However, Shelgrim’s total denial of any responsibility for the process is also a dissemblance for two reasons. First, to swear off accountability for the initial choice that subsequently binds one to the rollercoaster of capitalism is to mystify that original decision. Certainly, Shelgrim is a cog in the capitalist machine, but he is a cog larger (literally) than most, one which assures the greasing of other wheels and cogs and

institutes the most cutthroat of tactics when dealing with the farmers. Second, the methods used to defeat the farmers are defended by Shelgrim's appeal to the force of "supply and demand." But this so-called law, as Walter Benn Michaels points out, "sets rates in a free market, but the railroad, as a monopoly, doesn't operate in a free market" (209). The mythologizing of the free-market here is clearly undercut by the Trust's own actions, exposing such market rhetoric as the pure ideology that it is.

Moreover, the forces "born out of certain conditions" and the organic metaphors of growth presume that capitalism is a "natural" force, and not a force born out of historically particular circumstances—the industrial revolution, the ideology of Manifest Destiny, free-market and monopoly capitalism, for instance. To be even more precise, Shelgrim's naturalized view that "railroads build themselves," as Adam H. Wood notes, is "certainly not true [. . .]. As is well known, the bulk of the railroad line in California was laid by a predominantly Chinese workforce" (122). What Shelgrim does is to carefully elide the exploitation of (immigrant) labor in production, therefore cutting off a proper systemic analysis through the superstitious belief in uncontrollable forces of nature.

Presley's reaction to this speech is significant in that it shows how persuasive Shelgrim's words are. Even though Presley came into the office with every intention of achieving some kind of justice, he is easily swayed by Shelgrim:

Somehow he could not deny it. It rang with the clear reverberation of truth. Was no one, then, to blame for the horror at the irrigating ditch. Forces, conditions, laws of supply and demand—were these then the

enemies, after all? Not enemies; they were malevolence in Nature. Colossal indifference only, a vast trend toward appointed goals. Nature was, then, a gigantic engine, a vast cyclopean power, huge, terrible, a leviathan with a heart of steel, knowing no compunction, no forgiveness, no tolerance; crushing out the human atom standing in its way, with nirvanic calm, the agony of destruction sending never a jar, never the faintest tremor through all that prodigious mechanism of wheels and cogs.

(577)

Presley's tentative flirtation with the radical political movements of the day has not prepared him to combat Shelgrim's dogma and its curious translation of Marx's ideas. This is perhaps Norris's doing, whose Naturalist credo with its attendant "Social Darwinism" is itself an ideology ripe for use by the left or the right. If in Naturalism nature always trumps nurture, then a (mis)reading of Marx's ideas about productive forces and capital's potential to unleash ever greater forces can easily fall in line with the doom and gloom notion that man is wholly determined by his biological drives, which are ultimately hard-wired by Nature herself.<sup>10</sup> The "law of supply and demand" becomes a holy commandment that cannot be historicized or critiqued in this view, as it is by

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<sup>10</sup> It is not clear if Norris actually read Marx during his life. But being alive during the late nineteenth century would have made him privy to Marxist or similar kinds of arguments about capitalism, even if he were not to have actually read a single line from Marx's own pen. However, Norris's greatest literary influence was Emile Zola, who had indeed read Marx. It is safe to say that Norris, then, gained a kind of "reading" of Marx through his reading of Zola. Thus, when I refer to Norris's "reading" of Marx, I mean "reading" in the figurative sense—the sense that he has, at least, been *indirectly* influenced by Marx and that his own work clearly puts a spin or interpretation on that "reading" itself, offering Norris's own "reading" of Marx. Indeed, if Norris never read Marx, his work is all the more startling for his essential grasp of Marx's main arguments in volume one of *Capital*.

necessity launched to the status of a transcendental signifier through which all other (natural) signs will be interpreted for their truth value.

But Norris is doing something else here as well, something as progressive as the seemingly “regressive” reading of a too deterministic Marx refracted through Zola’s Naturalism. The suggestion of the physical scope and influence of corporate power, while it pessimistically “naturalizes” it, also prefigures the state of the corporation in the era of late capital, particularly when Presley confronts the “head” of this cephalopod. What Shelgrim tells him is that there is essentially no head or center to the railroad corporation, that such an idea is absurd. Presley’s urge to sum up the power of the corporation, or of capital, in the figure of one man is understandable but impossible. A solution like this would be too easy and would make it seem as if the logic of capital were subject merely to the personality quirks of its leading practitioners. The fact that capital is becoming more decentralized as it spreads is precisely what Norris is intimating here, and it is what makes capital in the era of multinational corporations so much more slippery than it was in Norris’s time. In short, the despair Presley feels at the end of the nineteenth century toward an ever disseminating capitalism is a kind of despair *avant le lettre*, not to come into its fullest expression until the new century saw capitalism develop into a more mature and properly global system.

Given its suggestion of an ever expanding capitalism, *The Octopus* recognizes that resisting the system is no easy task. Yet as capital incessantly restructures the world, it inadvertently creates new opportunities to combat it. Nowhere is this clearer than in the wheat farmers’ purchase of a “ticker” that connects the San Joaquin ranchers “by

wire with San Francisco, and through that city with Minneapolis, Duluth, Chicago, New York, and at last, and most important of all, with Liverpool” (54), and which figures as the key technological innovation that will bring the global reaches of capital to light. The result is that the farmers tend to the up to the minute market information as much as they do their crops, and that

[a]t such moments they no longer felt their individuality. The ranch became merely the part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant—a drought on the prairies of Dakota, a rain on the plains in India, a frost on the Russian steppes, a hot wind on the llanos of the Argentine. (54)

What is curious about Norris’s keen description of an emerging global capitalism here is that the very vastness of the world economic system with its far reaching repercussions constitutes some kind of new totality where we would expect the individual’s sense of this totality to be shattered by such a realization. Perhaps this is a result, again, of Norris’s Naturalism, which sharply diverges from the soon-to-be modernist texts that embraced, both in form and content, fragmentation, rupture, and dislocation as the century’s new aesthetic and *zeitgeist*. The new telecommunications connecting the farmers to the world economy robs them of their individuality, yet replaces that loss with some wider, and not necessarily worse, sense of collective spirit. Though they are “merely a part” and a “unit,” the farmers still form a “they” and “part of an enormous whole” that is linked by the imagery of nature. Norris falls short of the modernist



character's existential crisis in his depiction of the farmers, for the seemingly fragmented world merely morphs from prairie to plain to steppe to llano. The earth retains a sense of wholeness throughout, which is guaranteed by an enduring Nature.

This new potential collectivity blooms when the farmers' legal fight to retain their land and purchase it at the original price "promised" by the railroad is stymied at every turn by a corrupt legal system "owned" by the Trust. In response to the railroad's increasing squeeze on their finances, the enraged farmers hold an emergency meeting and establish "The League," a collective organized to combat the railroad Trust to be headed by the farming community's *pater familias*, the greatly respected "Governor," Magnus Derrick. Deciding that democracy is a fraud and corruption can only be defeated by playing the game corruptly, the League quickly adopts several dirty political tactics for its arsenal, buying the votes of the Railroad Commission and electing one of Derrick's sons, Lyman, as its commissioner.

The tragedy, of course, is that the farmers have only an inkling of how this game is played. After all, this game was partly invented by the Trust, do while "The League was clamorous, ubiquitous, its objects known to every urchin on the streets, [. . .] the Trust was silent, its ways inscrutable, the public saw only its results. It worked on in the dark, calm, disciplined, irresistible" (346). The farmers do not have the capital or the influence to defeat the enormous corruptive power of the Trust, as even the politically aspiring Lyman is bought by the railroad, leading him to turn traitor to his father, whose compromised integrity he can now ironically bring up in response to Magnus's outraged admonishments.

Not only do the farmers fail in their goals, but their reputations as respectable and honest men (particularly through the lionized figure of Magnus Derrick) are tarnished in the process. This is not entirely a surprise as Norris refuses to romanticize the farmers' plight in the novel. Norris sums up his attitude to the farmers without pulling panned punches:

They had no love for the land. They were not attached to the soil. They worked their ranches as a quarter of a century before they had worked the mines. [. . .]. To get all there was out of the land, to squeeze it dry, to exhaust it, seemed their policy. When, at last, the land was worn out, would refuse to yield, they would invest their money in something else; by then, they would all have made fortunes. They did not care. "After us the deluge." (298-9)

This cynical account of the farmers as merely petty bourgeois capitalists is startlingly reminiscent of a passage in Marx's chapter on "The Working Day" in *Capital's* first volume:

Capital, which has such 'good reasons' for denying the sufferings of the legions of workers surrounding it, allows its actual movement to be determined as much and as little by the sight of the coming degradation and final depopulation of the human race, as by the probable fall of the earth into the sun. In every stock-jobbing swindle everyone knows that some time or other the crash must come, but everyone hopes that it may fall on the head of his neighbour, after he himself has caught the shower of

gold and placed it in secure hands. *Après moi le déluge!* is the watchword for every capitalist and of every capitalist nation. (sic, 381)

With a keen environmental eye, a pessimistic view of the ranchers' ultimate aims, and a doggedly deterministic reading of Marx, Norris ends up, if not equating the ranchers to the Trust, then judging them against the same (Marxist) measuring stick.

The League, for instance, is described fairly disdainfully by Norris as “a vague engine, a machine with which to fight” (276), formed amidst

the uprising of The People; the thunder of outbreak and revolt; the mob demanding to be led, aroused at last, imperious, resistless, overwhelming. It was the blind fury of insurrection, the brute, many-tongued, red-eyed, bellowing for guidance, baring its teeth, unsheathing its claws, imposing its will with abrupt, resistless pressure of the relaxed piston, inexorable, knowing no pity. (279)

Remarkably, Norris's description of The League could almost double as a description of The Octopus itself, with its mixed machine and predatory animal metaphors. When Presley hears one steam engine that “whistled for road crossings, for sharp curves, for trestles; ominous notes, hoarse, bellowing, ringing with the accents of menace and defiance,” he imagines the railroad as a “galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean red” (51).

The failure of the League's political machinations culminates, perhaps predictably, with recourse to violence. But even here the farmers fail to reap the rewards of collectivity, as they, once again, are out-manuevered by the railroad, which moves to

repossess the farmers' lands during an annual rabbit hunt and picnic (507). Without most of the six-hundred members—who either balk at armed resistance, are unarmed, or realize the railroad has the proverbial jump on them—the farmers set out amidst confusion and in much smaller and isolated groups than they had planned. Thus, Norris depicts the shootout at Mussel Slough (the blame of which he is careful to ascribe to neither side), which ends in the deaths of eight men, five of them league members. Violence is a waste, the narrative boldly states, and, to add a typical naturalist insult-to-injury, traces how the death of the Dutch farmer, Hooven, leads inexorably to the starvation of his wife and youngest daughter, and the entry of his eldest daughter into a life of prostitution.

If Norris forecloses on the possibility of resistance through unions, essentially damning a nascent American unionism as pure militancy, he at least offers the potential of an even more radical solution—socialism or anarchism. Norris's "socialism" (Presley declares he's a "Red" at one point) is more like an attenuated anarchism, however. Nor is does this anarchism entail a kind of non-hierarchical, constructive politics, but merely the recapitulation of common representations of anarchists throughout history as mad bombers bent on causing chaos and destruction.<sup>11</sup> The "anarchist" provocateur is the

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<sup>11</sup> So, too, does *Lot 49* contain a seed or two of anarchism, though with a consciousness of the political weight of its representation. Mr. Thoth's complaint that his memory is blurred by a Porky Pig cartoon leads him to ask Oedipa, "Did you ever see the one about Porky Pig and the anarchist?" (73). Mr. Thoth is referring to the infamous 1936 Tex Avery cartoon, "The Blow Out."

In the cartoon, we are first introduced to the anarchist, who is swathed all in black—he wears a black hat and a flowing black cloak. He veritably oozes through the decrepit streets of what appears to be New York City (and the Lower East Side, no less, where such radicals would live), cackling menacingly all the while. The anarchist's project? To blow things up. We see him destroying a bank, after which a montage of newspaper headlines informs us of the ongoing terror of the bomber and a proposed reward. The anarchist returns to his dilapidated basement apartment to build another "time bomb."

saloonkeeper, Caraher, whose wife was killed by the Trust, and who espouses violence as the only way to fight the system. Merely a bitter and resentful man, and certainly no actual anarchist, Caraher inspires Dyke (the embittered train engineer turned hop farmer, who is busted by the Trust's manipulated shipping rates) to rob the Trust. But this act of guerilla-like resistance, in which Dyke kills a man, fails as he is forced to become a fugitive and is eventually hunted down and captured, leaving his mother and daughter in tenuous economic circumstances that the once-irascible, arch-individualist, Annixter (now flush with compassion due to the love for his new wife, Hilma), tries to ameliorate.

The burgeoning militancy of Presley that Caraher indirectly inspires is portrayed as equally futile. In an impassioned speech to an angry League in the Opera House after the shootout, Presley blasts the audience with revolutionary rhetoric:

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We then meet a young Porky Pig, who is staring into an ice-cream parlor, wishing he could afford an ice-cream soda. The soda jerk informs him he's five cents short, and the pantsless Porky wanders out into the street, depressed. While Porky sulks, a passerby drops his cane, which Porky picks up and returns to the man. As a reward, the man gives him a penny. Porky is delighted and performs a little jig to a nifty pipe tune and drops the coin in his pants pocket (though, again, he has no pants). Soon the little entrepreneur is performing this valuable service for various pedestrians who always reward him with a penny, which he "pockets" after his signature jig.

Thus, when Porky spies the bomber leaving a bomb outside the "Blotz Building," he hurries to collect it and return it to its owner for his rightful reward. The bomber, undoubtedly, is not pleased by this service and attempts to ditch Porky through the usual humorous cartoon chase/escape scenes. The persistent Porky cannot be shaken, however, and even after the bomber slithers into the sewer and returns to his basement, locking no less than five doors and deadbolts, he turns around to find Porky offering him the bomb. With the police clambering to get in, the bomber tears down the doors and gives himself up, though as the police wagon whisks him away, the diligent (if ignorant) Porky is sure to complete his task, dropping the bomb into the back of the police wagon to great effect. Porky receives a two thousand dollar reward for the bomber's capture. Asked by a journalist what he'll do with the money, Porky's stuttering answer segues into the ice-cream parlor where Porky slurps down ice-cream soda after ice-cream soda to triumphal music.

Created as it was in Depression-era America, "The Blow Out" is a manifestly ideological cultural production. Fears of Communism, Socialism, and Anarchism were palpable at a time when it appeared capital might have reached its ultimate crisis and the system would finally flounder. A radical politics, however, is simply an excuse for destruction and misery, as the psychotic anarchist proves. "The Blow Out" offers a renewed vision of the American Dream and the promise of capitalism. Armed with good ol' American ingenuity and Yankee know-how, Porky is the typical Horatio Alger hero, whose "luck, pluck, and virtue" afford him a chance at fulfilling his desires.

‘Freedom is not given free to any who ask; Liberty is not born of the gods. She is a child of the People, born in the very height and heat of battle, born from death, stained with blood, grimed with powder. And she grows not to be a goddess, but a Fury, a fearful figure, slaying friend and foe alike, raging, insatiable, merciless, the Red Terror.’ (552)

But Presley realizes, nearly telepathically, that the crowd has not truly understood his words: Its members respond only to pathos, not logic, and remain the same ignorant masses as ever, too indolent and uncomprehending to realize when their freedoms are being torn from them. Presley’s rallying speech becomes simply a *cri de couer* to a deaf audience. Likewise, Presley’s unsuccessful attempt to kill Behrman by hurling a pipe bomb into his house is completely pointless, as Behrman remarks later on, when Presley confesses to the deed to him, “‘Well, that don’t show no common sense [. . .]. What could you have gained by killing me?’” (626). Behrman’s comment underscores how he is merely one of many potential representatives of the railroad, and killing him would only lead to a comparable replacement as the Trust’s decenteredness makes it virtually an impossible target. Simply an instinctive lashing out at the closest target without consideration of the deeper consequences, Presley’s act is limited to that of personal revenge and is in the end nothing but destructive nihilism.

The wheat farmers, then, pass from a completely legal challenge to the system (complaints, letter writing, legal representation) to an “illegal” strategy (collectivization, bribing, committee packing) that is employed by the Trust itself, and finally to the use of violence (armed rebellion leading to the shootout). The novel, however, shows the

futility of each attempt to defeat the system, and, along with casting out the solutions of a more radical politics through Presley's and Hooven's actions, *The Octopus* takes a dark look at the fight against the corporate takeover of America.

Presley's reflection upon the shootout is telling in regards not only to the efficacy of any future resistance to the Trust and corporations like it, but also to the collective memory of such tragedies:

Make the people believe that the faint tremor in their great engine is a menace to its function? What a folly to think it. Tell them, five years from now, the story of the fight between the League of San Joaquin and the Railroad and it will not be believed. What! a pitched battle between Farmer and Railroad, a battle that cost the lives of seven men? Impossible, it could not have happened. Your story is fiction—exaggerated. (539)

Surely Presley's mildly historiographic-metafictional aside on reality and representation, as well as history and fiction, reflects some of Norris's concerns with fictionalizing what, by then, was a twenty-year-old incident. Norris, in 1901, seems already at pains to convince his audience, many of whom are quite used to travelling by the comfortable and modern steam trains, that the transportation they have come to enjoy has come at a price dearer than they know. Norris's fears may be warranted about the amnesia of public memory here, but in the violent clashes between labor and business that will continue until midway into the century, fresh scars will arise to remind people of the possibilities and perils of resistance. Presley's presentiment, however, seems entirely come to pass in

*Lot 49* where, even if memory could be stirred up (Oedipa's discovery that Beaconsfield's "charcoal filter" is made of the bones of World War II American GIs), there is still no public outlet for such painful recollections, thus further isolating those individuals seeking coherence in a baffling, broken world. In the world of *Lot 49*, as Norris feared, what should be *public memory* is interiorized or *privatized* in the individual where, because of a lack of any "objective" truth criteria, memories remain wholly subjective, mere "fictions" with no claim to historical truth. Granted, such memory can sometimes be passed on orally, such as when the aging Mr. Thoht tells Oedipa some hazy details of what his grandfather told him about his days as a Pony Express rider. Yet Mr. Thoht reports that his memories are "all mixed in with a Porky Pig cartoon," so that reality and fiction have once again blended into something ambiguous at best (73).

Norris's ultimately pessimistic views of the efficacy of resisting the system and the pitfalls of collective memory pose a problem for the novel's ending, however. Presley's miserable realization of the hopelessness of the situation comes with a hundred pages remaining. This leaves space for Presley to meet, for the final time, the shepherd Vanamee, and to reencounter the pastoral wonder of Nature that he felt at the novel's beginning. This softens his deterministic cosmology that "FORCE only existed" by incorporating it with

the mystery of creation, the stupendous miracle of re-creation; the vast rhythm of the season, measured, alternative, the sun and stars keeping time as the eternal symphony of reproduction swung in its tremendous cadences like the colossal pendulum of an almighty machine—primordial energy



flung out from the hand of the Lord God himself, immortal, calm,  
infinitely strong. (634)

Vanamee completes Presley's intimations of immortality by assuring him that "[e]vil is short-lived. Never judge the whole round of life by the mere segment you can see. The whole is, in the end, perfect" (636).

But the whole of the *novel*, at this point, feels far from perfect. The ending feels unearned, a result of a romanticism still running through the novel. It is the transcendent forces, those outside of Time and beyond human means, that will reestablish the good and equitable balance of the universe. Such a Whitmanian and Emersonian view is all the more suspicious when considering the novel Norris published not two years before, *McTeague* (1899), which ends with its titular protagonist handcuffed to a dead police officer in the "vast, interminable, [. . .] measureless leagues of Death Valley" and holding a "half-dead canary chattering feebly in its little gilt prison" (340).

In fact, it would seem that it is only the symbolism of fiction—through poetic justice, that old *deus ex machina*—that can "resist" the inevitability of capital. Any political struggle on the people's part is useless. Thus, when S. Behrman is buried and suffocated under his ill-gotten g(r)ains in the novel's penultimate scene, we can rest assured that the guiding force of the *novel* has stayed true to its last line: "The larger view always and through all shams, all wickedness, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely inevitably, resistlessly work together for good" (652).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence E. Hussman summarizes the negative critical response to Norris's ending(s) (both Presley's final vision and S. Behrman's death) in relation to Presley's earlier talk with Shelgrim (based on Norris's actual interview with Southern Pacific's Collis P. Huntington), which most critics argue influences Presley's (and Norris's) increasingly grim view of the world (148-59). Hussman argues, however, that the

The logic of this ending makes sense when we consider Fredric Jameson's comments on narrative in *The Political Unconscious*. Jameson argues that, "[. . .] the aesthetic act itself is ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (79). When we recall that Norris's novel is an historical fiction, much of what Jameson details becomes clear,<sup>13</sup> and explains why one of Norris's foremost critics, Donald Pizer, could claim substantively that "*The Octopus* is not a novel about class war or about the downtrodden, though the struggle for wealth and the realities of economic power are its subject matter. It is more a novel about man's relationship to nature than a story of man as a social being [. . .]" (121). Surely it is this very "economic power" that, in being repressed to secondary status in the novel, thus returns so forcefully to shape a contradictory ending.

One of the major "unresolvable contradictions" in the novel is the *continuing* corporate dominance over American democracy and the rights of the people, who remain blissfully unaware of this fact. Yet the novel stages this "event" (indeed, constructs it as

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reader is unable to ascribe Vanamee/Presley's views to Norris. Hussman claims that Norris points out the fallibility of each character throughout the novel, and is more of a mind with modernist despair than a regressive Romanticism, so that "[a]t the end of *The Octopus*, Norris is still without a world view consistent with his already fully developed sense that to recognize and address the needs of others constitutes a far higher moral calling than to satisfy the self" (159). Such an argument seems strained, however, considering how directly Norris's pen tips the wheat upon S. Behrman and how it so neatly "proves" Presley's earlier romantic vision. Norris may indeed remain suspicious of this vision, and even criticize it through Presley and Vanamee, but the vision nonetheless prevails, which is a semi-endorsement of it, at the least.

<sup>13</sup> Wood's excellent essay also applies Jameson's concept of narrative's symbolic function, though in a slightly different way. He argues that "Norris's 'story of California' thus animates not the particular incident of Mussell Slough but the process of myth construction necessary to the conquest of California, the form of ideological construction required in early-twentieth-century capitalism. It is only by understanding this process of myth construction that the textual contradictions of *The Octopus* may be thoroughly historicized and understood as both inherent in the deterministic novel and, more crucially, indicative, perhaps critical, of capitalism's contradictory ideology of the 'forces' and 'conditions' of humankind's fate" (126).

a time-bound event) twenty years *before* Norris publishes his novel “exposing” this event. Thus, the alarm Norris wishes to raise in his day, retroactively installed twenty years earlier as it is, undercuts by necessity the very pessimistic determinism that makes the retroactive “case” for corporate dominance over democracy seemingly unassailable. Essentially, Norris is arguing, in 1901, *this is happening now, so wake up!* But the novel, set in 1881, argues that *this has already happened, and there was no way to stop it!* The ending, then, as ideologically loaded as it is, still retains a Utopian kernel, however degraded it may be, and is an attempt to counteract this glaring contradiction, as well as the aesthetic contradictions between an emergent Naturalism and a persistent, if attenuated, Romanticism, and between a consequently deterministic reading of Marx (Norris’s own) and optimistic American outlook of the Progressive Era.

The Utopian kernel, then, is essentially the recently planted seed of an emerging global market. Cedarquist, the budding financier, tells Presley at one point “[t]he great word of this nineteenth century has been Production. The word of the twentieth will be [. . .] Markets” (305). Cedarquist’s plan to “balance” supply and demand on a global scale—“We supply more than Europe can eat, and down go the prices. The remedy is *not* in the curtailing of our wheat areas, but in this, we *must have new markets, greater markets*” (306)—opens up the Utopian hope for global capitalism. Thus is Presley converted by Cedarquist’s vision of these new and vast markets and, by the novel’s end, prepares to accompany a “humanitarian” shipment of wheat meant for the “hungry Hindoo” in India (648). Thomas Austenfeld argues that Norris’s ending—“Annixter dies, but in far distant corner of the world thousands of lives are saved” (652)—reinforces

a utilitarian philosophy by projecting its “cosmic” vision at the global level. Hence, Norris

is extending the empire of the wheat by accompanying it on its passage to India and its humanitarian mission to feed the hungry. This world-wide perspective not only transcends individual human fates through the large scale it employs, it also appropriately depersonalizes the entire issue of what the right thing to do might be. We are now not talking of individuals but ‘nations’ (41).

Such a global vision, however, is fraught with contradiction and merely pushes the unresolved contradictions of capitalism into new spaces—territories (in the sense of militaristic discourse) containing peoples who will be subject to even more brutal tactics than the farmers experienced in the iron fists of capital. As Russ Castronovo notes, Norris’s text “explores how conceptualization of the globe as a single geo-economic unit depends on a historically specific aesthetic formalism exemplified by Norris’s fiction,” and that “[t]he contradictory nature of this project—that is, a contextual history of aesthetic formalism—captures the logic that ushers an Americanized global sensibility into being” (158). This is none other than “Manifest Destiny appear[ing] on the Pacific Rim not so much as an imperial mission but as a transhistoric return in which nationality and race pale before the great idea of a new human unity engineered by world markets” (177). In short, the Utopian kernel, or grain as it were, which has proven to lie not so much fallow as destructive, seems a way out in Norris’s novel. Thus, the contradictions of capitalism are pushed outside the bounds of both Norris’s text and ultimately America itself, at least for a brief Utopian moment.

## Lasting Testaments

*The Crying of Lot 49* turns Norris's escapist/globalist vision back on America itself and recalls the erstwhile destructive grip of the Octopus's tentacles in the penultimate scene of the novel, in which Oedipa stands on the railroad tracks trying to untie the knotty mystery of the Tristero and Pierce Inverarity:

She walked down a stretch of railroad track next to the highway. Spurs ran off here and there into factory property. Pierce may have owned these factories too. But did it matter now if he'd owned all of San Narciso? [. . .]. There was the true continuity, San Narciso had no boundaries. No one knew yet how to draw them. She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America. (147)

The tracks symbolize the end of the American frontier, as Fredrick Jackson Turner warned, and the limits of capitalist expansion, an expansion already in full imperialist swing when Norris penned *The Octopus* in 1901 at the beginning of the American Century. The sheltered suburbanite Oedipa, who earlier in the novel "believed [. . .] in some principle of the sea as redemption for Southern California [. . .], some unvoiced idea that no matter what you did to its edges the true Pacific stayed inviolate and integrated" (41), changes her perception of America and the ever redemptive ocean after having visited one of America's "infected" cities," where she comes face to face with the poor and disaffected. Oedipa, finding "her isolation complete [. . .] tried to face toward the sea. But she'd lost her bearings" (146-7). That Inverarity's legacy, America, has

been “left behind” has a double meaning here. The America he has physically left behind is a corporate and consumerist nightmare. Inverarity’s real estate empire includes Fangoso Lagoons, a housing development, which is

‘to be laced by canals with private landings for power boats, a floating social hall in the middle of an artificial lake, at the bottom of which lay restored galleons, imported from the Bahamas; Atlantean fragments of columns and friezes from the Canaries; real human skeletons from Italy; giant clamshells from Indonesia—all for the entertainment of Scuba enthusiasts.’ (20)

Fangoso Lagoons has all the hokey charm of Disneyland’s submarine ride, except for the troubling fact that it is a “real” housing development. And, like Disneyland, this slice of simulacra requires a pricey ticket for entry. Fangoso Lagoons is a private, “gated” community for the ridiculously rich, whose every desire has been accounted for by privately funded urban planners. Artificially constructed with the help of American capital, which has plundered at least some authentic décor from mostly third-world countries, the result is a kind of “Pirates of Fangoso Lagoons” pastiche-experience for the select few.

However, there are *other things* that must be forgotten or left behind, in a different sense. In order for such development to occur certain things need to be destroyed, declares the proudly conservative Metzger, Pierce’s lawyer assigned to assist Oedipa in executing the will: ““Old cemeteries have to be ripped up, [ . . . ]. Like in the path of the East San Narciso Freeway, it had no right to be there, so we just barrelled on

through, no sweat” (46, sic). Metzger’s comment here—as subtle as the “meat cleaver” metaphor that the infamous Robert Moses used in describing his plans to raze entire city blocks of low income housing to clear the way for his “urban renewal” projects (the Cross Bronx Expressway in New York, for instance) from the 1930s to the 1960s—underscores the control of the definition of “rights” by private enterprise. The cemetery, which pre-exists the freeway, has no right to be there in the face of “progress” and development<sup>14</sup>. This is John Locke on property writ wild (the same logic legitimizing the seizure of Native American lands), suggesting that any and all land not given over to capitalist development is merely land in waiting, which forfeits its “natural rights” by refusing to be developed. Land not exploited by capital thereby has no right to exist for public use, and thus Metzger’s seemingly illogical statement that the old cemetery was somehow (always already) in the path of the new freeway makes a kind of twisted sense.

Oedipa’s suspicion that the bones from the demolished cemetery may account for the “real skeletons” in the bottom of Lake Inverarity (an already disturbing prospect) becomes even more troubling when the remains turn out to be the bones of American GIs killed in Italy by German bombardment in World War II. Not only that, but these bones have been ground into charcoal and used as the key ingredient in a filter by Beaconsfield Cigarettes, a company owned, in part, by Inverarity. Capital here literally turns life (and death) into a commodity that can be purchased *and* consumed (as fleeting as the “smoke” it will become), as the Marxian metaphor that capital “consumes” its workers is made

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<sup>14</sup> Even such hallowed ground holds no special consideration in the face of capital, since, as Marx writes in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, “[. . .] all that is holy is profaned” (476).

literal and extended by Pynchon, since the soldiers become the material grist (labor material as well as labor power) of production itself.

This is the America Inverarity has physically left behind, an America owned and controlled by the wealthy few—real estate developers and corporate entities, who have commodified America itself. The end result is that a city like San Narciso become “less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts—census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own highway” (24). Yet even San Narciso is merely “a name; an incident among our climatic records of dreams and what dreams became among our accumulated daylight, [. . .]. There was the true continuity, San Narciso had no boundaries” (147). In short, San Narciso is a figure for all of America.

Not surprisingly, “the whitewashed bust” that sits over Inverarity’s bed is that of Jay Gould (1), one of the most ruthless “robber baron” industrialists of the nineteenth century, responsible for stock market manipulations, cornering markets, and vast corruption. Yet he is distinguishable from most other monopoly capitalists (particularly Rockefeller and Carnegie) by his refusal ever to make the obligatory transition from wealthy industrialist to philanthropist. While someone like Andrew Carnegie created various endowments and foundations to polish (whitewash), in some sense, the tarnished reputation of his name by giving something back to the public from which he took so much, Gould merely willed his estate to his heirs, scoffing at the idea of “sharing” his wealth. That the “ikon,” as Oedipa calls it, that rests in Inverarity’s home would be



Gould speaks as much, if not more, to the notion of a “restricted” inheritance as it does to simple corruption and greed.

Yet Inverarity is ultimately less interesting as a postmodern robber baron associated with Gould than as a symbolic figure for the corporation and corporate power itself, for as John Johnston notes, “one of the novel’s central motifs: [is] that the dead never really go away or disappear, but persist as ‘signs’” (56). The break-up of Inverarity’s “estate” is thus troubling in both a symbolic and material sense. As John Dugdale writes, “Oedipa attempts to counteract this imminent dispersal [of Inverarity’s holdings] by replacing him as a source of unity, substituting connections made by imaginative investment for those of capitalist investment” (145).<sup>15</sup> Early on in her investigation, Oedipa discovers Inverarity’s interests are multi-varied and extend throughout America. He has holdings in “[. . .] Arizona, Texas, New York and Florida, where Inverarity had developed real estate, and in Delaware where he’d been incorporated” (40). Surely Inverarity’s vast real estate holdings, and his incorporation in Delaware (where he will not have to pay taxes), suggest, not merely that “Pierce’s estate is a microcosm of America” (Schaub 48), but that Inverarity *is* America, and since Inverarity is also a corporation, so too is America. Indeed, he is described as one of the “founding fathers” of the Yoyodyne Corporation (15). Thus, Inverarity’s transformation from corporeal body to corporate body is telling. In a novel playful with Greek Mythology (from Oedipa, to San Narciso and Echo Courts), it is perhaps Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (of course, a famous Roman bearer of said Greek myths) that best

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<sup>15</sup> Johnston similarly states, “Pierce represents an entirely secular order, for the unity of ‘San Narciso’ is only produced by the demands of corporate capitalism [. . .]” (69) and that “[w]ith Pierce’s death [. . .] a segment or corporate chunk is loosened from its moorings, and official reality begins to come apart” (70).

metaphorically touches upon Pynchon's greatest concern in this respect. Capital, through the transformed and transformational figure of Inverarity, is corporealized in America itself. The rights of America (or its citizens) now exist solely in its private property rights and development value, or, more accurately, for those who own the titles and deeds to the land.

### The Mundanity of Corporate Existence

Precisely because Pierce has passed on—and *into* America itself, Pynchon gives us a world where much of the corporate underwriting remains hidden or, even more troubling, blasé. This is in clear contrast to the sole evil corporation in *The Octopus*, portrayed in Norris's central metaphor as a frightening beast with its tentacles sucking the life out of the entire state. One map of California, for instance,

was white, and it seemed as if all the colour which should have gone to vivify the various counties, towns, and cities marked upon it had been absorbed by that huge, sprawling organism [. . .]. It was as though the State had been sucked white and colourless, and against this pallid background the red arteries of the monster stood gorged to bursting; an excrescence, a gigantic parasite fattening upon the life-blood of an entire commonwealth. (sic, 289)

Moreover, this bloodsucking monster is always represented by the smarmy and obese S. Behrman as a tangible reminder of that corporate power. Despite its increasingly

decentered nature, the railroad always retains a glaring and threatening physical dimension.

In *Lot 49*, though, the giant companies that we do learn about, like Yoyodyne, appear rather banal, represented not primarily by management and corporate hatchet men, but by frustrated salaried employees in their natural cubicle-habitat. One such creature, Stanley Koteks, mistakes Oedipa for a stockholder during her visit to the company. He quickly asks her if she ““can really influence policy, or make suggestions they won’t just file in the garbage,”” and if she ““can get them to drop their clause on patents”” because “in signing the Yoyodyne contract, [an employee] also signed away the patent rights to any inventions he might come up with” (67). Oedipa, bemused by Kotek’s complaint since she has recently been informed by the company’s president about the value of teamwork, is later set straight at a bar, *The Scope*, where Mike Fallopian<sup>16</sup> details some of the Yoyodyne employees’ gripes against the company:

‘In school they got brainwashed, like all of us, into believing the Myth of the American Inventor—Morse and his telegraph, Bell and his telephone, Edison and his light bulb, Tom Swift and his this or that. Only one man per invention. Then when they grew up they found they had to sign over all their rights to a monster like Yoyodyne; got stuck on some ‘project’ or ‘task force’ or ‘team’ and started being ground into anonymity. Nobody

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<sup>16</sup> There is nothing in the novel that directly states Fallopian is a Yoyodyne employee, but he hangs out at the Yoyodyne employees’ favorite haunt, uses their inter-office mail delivery to participate in *WASTE*, and knows several Yoyodyne employees by name. He may be an employee, but even if he is not, his theory about Yoyodyne workers would still hold.

wanted them to invent—only perform a little role in a design ritual, already set down for them in some procedures handbook.’ (70)

Fallopian, like Koteks before him, clearly articulates the *ennui* of the regimented corporate grind, the dull and monotonous nine-to-five, suit-and-tie, briefcase existence, outlined a decade earlier by William H. Whyte’s influential *The Organization Man* (1956), which argued a blind and unquestioning obedience to organizational structures was stifling individualism and the American character. Whyte, however, was ultimately a believer in (re)organization, contending that the individual must work with others in order to achieve particular goals. Thus, “We do need to know how to co-operate with The Organization but, more than ever, so do we need to know how to resist it” (12). Whyte, in a way, is much like the “liberal communist,” in that the system is sound, so long as creativity is allowed to tinker with that system when it becomes repressive due to its inflexibility to changing circumstances.

Fallopian might be a good potential spokesman of Whyte’s ideas, but with a more radical twist. There is a kind of libertarian philosophy underlying Fallopian’s comments. It is institutions and the government that hinder the individual’s creativity and means to wealth, which ultimately squelches individualism as well. This explains Fallopian’s membership in the Peter Pinguid Society, named after a fictional Civil War Confederate naval officer who inadvertently tangled with a Russian ship during the war. The members of the society hold Pinguid as a hero, since ““that was the very first military confrontation between Russia and America,”” and lament what they see as the country’s post-war betrayal of Pinguid through its hypocritical economic policies of wage-slavery

(36). The exchange between the conservative Metzger and Fallopian on this point is telling:

“But that sounds,” objected Metzger, “like he was against industrial capitalism. Wouldn’t that disqualify him as any kind of anti-Communist figure?”

“You think like a Bircher [John Birch Society member],” Fallopian said. “Good guys and bad guys. You never get to the underlying truth. Sure he was against industrial capitalism. So are we. Didn’t it lead, inevitably, to Marxism? Underneath, both are part of the same creeping horror.”

“Industrial *anything*,” hazarded Metzger.

“There you go,” nodded Fallopian. (36-7)

That Pinguid eventually “resigned his commission” and “violated his upbringing and code of honor” by becoming a wealthy real estate speculator in L.A. (much like Inverarity) nails down the final irony (37). Metzger complains that Fallopian is so far to the political right he has turned left. Fallopian upbraids corporate capitalism, but only in so far as it stymies “true” individualism and free-markets.

Unlike the farmers in *The Octopus*, however, there is nothing *tangible* taken from Fallopian and others like him by the corporation. There has been no physical violence perpetrated by Yoyodyne against its workers or the community. The system that exists dispossesses people nonetheless. Because of Yoyodyne’s entitlement to its workers’ patents, the Yoyodyne worker, in the era of late capital, finds himself in the classic

position of the “free laborer” in Marx’s *Capital*, who “must constantly treat his labour-power as his own property, his own commodity” (271). One can see how keenly this works in a company that thrives on technological innovation. For Yoyodyne controls the incredibly expensive and scarce resources of production that the hapless young inventor needs in order to create newer technologies, thus forcing such a worker to sell his labor to acquire access to the latest technologies and means of production.<sup>17</sup> Instead of gaining individual freedom of expression and the means of creation, the Yoyodyne employee is like an assembly line worker, though the products he works on are ideas (intellectual property), not cars or widgets. While we are no longer in the farmers’ San Joaquin Valley, we find that in Yoyodyne’s prototype of the ’90s Silicon Valley, many of the same basic exploitative economic principles of capital remain. Corporate power, having expanded well beyond the bounds of Norris’s time, has made such a sacrifice of rights *de rigueur* for the age. Losing rights to “gain” a paycheck is something that is just part of the playing field in the era of late capitalism.

Of course, there are enormous differences between starving agricultural wage slaves and middle-class tech employees in terms of wages, health, and living standards (so much so that to “complain” about the tech employees’ position seems fairly ridiculous), but in an American economy that has moved increasingly away from

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<sup>17</sup> Yet the myth of the inventor persists in the newer generation of big capitalists. Bill Gates, for instance, would seem to re-instill faith in the romantic figure of the “Edison” inventor. Gates, not content to work for a company that would constrict his individual drive, went the independent route, working out of his garage. His is another rags-to-riches kind of story (or perhaps circuits to computers) about the triumph of capitalism. However, the resulting corporation, Microsoft, then went on to become the very kind of stifling and exploitative institution (according to many of its employees) that Gates was supposedly reacting against.

traditional blue-collar work to service sector and office jobs,<sup>18</sup> these are now the conditions under which capitalism is increasingly scrutinized in American culture. The beginnings of this economic shift can be traced to the immediate post-World War II years when an expanding American economy brought unprecedented affluence and stability to American workers. At the same time, newer technologies and organizational structures utterly transformed the economy in terms of jobs and labor:

In 1940, the U.S. Census Bureau classified about 30 percent of the work force as ‘white collar,’ meaning professional, management, clerical, and sales workers. By 1950, the figure had risen to 37 percent and by 1970 to 48 percent. In contrast, the 1960 census found that blue-collar employment had declined to just under 40 percent, putting it behind the white collar category for the first time. (Zieger and Gall, 184)

It is no surprise, then, to find Fallopian and Whyte complaining about their particular kind of wage-slavery. With such a massive shift in labor demographics, “white-collar” concerns with labor seem to have trumped blue-collar ones.

This economic trend has only intensified since the 1970s. Our “post-industrial age,” as it is often called, means that not only have there been a vast changes in the make-up of America’s labor force (from collar switching to race and gender), but that this labor force finds its one-time secure jobs constantly in jeopardy as downsizing and outsourcing continue the sea-change of an American economy that deals less and less with actual

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<sup>18</sup> Today this is often due to “outsourcing,” which merely moves “undesirable” jobs overseas for cheap labor and keeps the resulting dismal labor conditions out of the American public’s view, all the while keeping a large, itinerant, cheap laboring class at the ready in (mostly Central and South American) immigrants (legal or illegal), whose tenuous position in American society makes them a more pliant and docile work force.

production, and more and more with service related industries. Thus, while “globalization” is praised by corporations for facilitating the flow of capital worldwide and expanding the global economy, the actual effect on American workers (and those in the rest of the world) has often been detrimental:

[. . .] while in the 1980s and 1990s the U.S. economy generated large numbers of jobs, the jobs were largely in the growing service sector of the economy and were qualitatively different from the family-sustaining jobs that dominated in the post-World War II era. They all too often paid less, provided poor or nonexistent benefits, featured unsavory working conditions, and lacked many safety and health protections. (Zieger and Gall, 242-3)

Existing as he is in a (fictional) 1960s before the aerospace industry crash, Fallopian is actually luckier than he thinks, considering his unfulfilling job is full-time, has benefits, and a pension plan. As corporations in the post-industrial world continue to chip away at what people once considered “basic worker rights” in the name of staying competitive in a thriving global market, suddenly the banality of an office job might seem small computer chips next to the quiet and gradual disassembly of health care and retirement plans.

In other words, if Norris showed us the monster in the process of swallowing the State, Pynchon shows us the inside of the belly of the beast—or more precisely, its acidic digestive processes that eat slowly away at whatever remains. In *The Octopus*, either the farmers join the Trust, are killed, or are broken by its demands, but in *Lot 49*, Yoyodyne



expects (to nobody's surprise) undying allegiance without any kind of physical coercion, as the songs at its stockholder meeting make clear:

*Hymn*

*High above the L.A. freeways,*

*And the traffic's whine,*

*Stands the well-known Galactronics*

*Branch of Yoyodyne.*

*To the end, we swear undying*

*Loyalty to you,*

*Pink Pavilions bravely shining,*

*Palm trees tall and true. (65)*

The comical, music-hall camaraderie of the Yoyodyne meeting is a far cry from the farmers' harvest celebratory barn dance in *The Octopus*. Set to the tune of Cornell's alma mater song (Pynchon's own alma mater), the Yoyodyne song is a thinly veiled oath of allegiance, not an organic folk song, and instead of being passed down by generations of friends and family, it has been passed down by corporate policy. That it is a "Hymn" is Pynchon's way of pointing to the religious underpinnings of devotion, love, worship, and submission—all of which Yoyodyne expects from its employees.

This conflation of religious and educational ideologies with business or corporate ideology is telling. One way to conceive of the corporation in this respect is to return to Althusser and his concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). As we recall, Althusser argues, "It is unimportant whether the institutions in which they [institutions]

are realized are ‘public’ or ‘private’. What matters is how they function” (18). In this regard, the institutions (corporations) of “private enterprise” clearly have ideological effects and are intricately tied to the (Repressive) State Apparatus (RSA), much in the same ways as schools and churches are. Indeed, government policy sets (or does not set) boundaries for finance, banking, and general business practices. Even in a world where the question of the transcendence of the corporation over the discipline of the nation-state remains a real issue, corporations can be said to function as ISAs.

In the era of late capital in America, this is more the case than ever. If, as Althusser writes, the RSA “functions massively and predominantly *by repression* (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology,” then ISAs “function massively and predominantly *by ideology*, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic” (19). Considering the lack of *physical violence* committed by corporations in America today (unlike the pitched battles between labor and industry from industry’s inception to the mid twentieth-century), Althusser’s concept rings true in that corporations often function and gain their acceptance through ideology, chiefly through advertising—from slogans, spokesmen, highly researched and expensive ads, and logos. Thus, the very “attenuation” and “concealedness,” the “symbolic” violence perpetrated by corporations, falls into line with the mundanity of the corporation itself.

Pynchon’s play with the Yoyodyne song, then, is both a humorous critique of the fraternity-type of loyalty a corporation demands and a deeper dig at how such ideology calmly and silently envelops its subjects. After all, says Althusser, “That is why those

who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology [. . .]” (49). The collegiate feeling of group togetherness (itself the result of an educational ISA) may mask the underlying submission to corporate authority (and later, in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, to Death and the Rocket) by those constituting the in-crowd, but Pynchon reveals to us the subtle workings of the ISA.

In *Lot 49*, corporate authority and its ideological veil are also directly tied to the military-industrial complex, as the song “Glee,” that follows “Hymn” makes clear:

*Bendix guides the warheads in,*

*Avco builds them nice.*

*Douglas, North American,*

*Grumman get their slice.*

*Martin launches off a pad,*

*Lockheed from a sub;*

*We can’t get the R&D*

*On a Piper Cub.*

*Convair boosts the satellite*

*Into orbits round;*

*Boeing builds the Minuteman,*

*We stay on the ground.*

*Yoyodyne, Yoyodyne,*

*Contracts flee thee yet.*

*DOD has shafted thee,*

*Out of spite, I'll bet. (66)*

It is the aerospace industry under siege here (to be joined by Dow, ITT, DuPont, and IG Farben in *Gravity's Rainbow*), and this puts Pynchon's critique of corporations very much in line with Dos Passos's in his *U.S.A.* trilogy. The arms manufacturers and war profiteers are scorned, not so much the day-to-day functions of corporate capitalism (except by implication). Again, through the figure of the corporatized Pierce Inverarity, the land speculator and developer, Pynchon is able to carry the critique of corporations into the mundane everyday, and not just the spectacular (war)—but writing in the middle of the '60s, he can only go so far. Pynchon is curiously in a position somewhat like that of one of his characters, Callisto, in his short story "Entropy": "He saw, for example, the younger generation responding to Madison Avenue with the same spleen his own had once reserved for wall street [. . .]" (*Slow Learner* 88).

Indeed, it is precisely because Pynchon reveals the fundamental way in which corporations function as ISAs as well as RSAs that his overall critique remains mired in an older paradigm of condemning corporate capitalism for funding the war machine and consequently lining the corrupt pockets of all those involved. Moreover, arms manufacturing/dealing corporations have not garnered much public attention since Vietnam, even during the second war in Iraq where it has been Halliburton (a company engaged in "reconstruction") that has garnered the most media attention due to its ties to Vice President Dick Cheney.<sup>19</sup> Much of today's corporate presence manifests itself

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<sup>19</sup> One recent film, *Iron Man* (2008), has somewhat dealt with the topic in its story of billionaire Tony Stark, whose Stark Industries makes arms for the American military. After Stark is kidnapped by terrorists

through advertising, something Pynchon rarely touches upon in *Lot 49* (with the slight exception of Beaconsfield Cigarettes). Exxon Mobil, for example, can ravage the environment, on one hand (without too much media attention), and release a commercial espousing its environmental record that depicts an eagle flying over a pristine forest, on the other. This kind of advertising puts the corporation squarely in the ISA camp, whereas the critique of arms manufacturers can more easily be traced to actual violence and destruction. Though this would still mean arms dealers can be considered ISAs too, it is important to recognize how the “secondary violence” of other kinds of corporations remains qualitatively different. Surely, Pynchon exposes the mundanity of the Corporate State in the near absence of the corporations that help produce such a world, but these days the “absence” of a corporate threat is ever more compelling since it is their very

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in Iraq and learns they are using weapons that he has manufactured against American troops, he escapes, returns home, and forbids Stark Industries from manufacturing weapons and profiting from war. Such a “critique” of arms dealers only comes after American troops are harmed by American weapons, however, not because of any underlying ethical commitment to peace, etc. The story becomes one of “true” patriotism (Stark is for the troops) against “false” patriotism (Stark’s number two man behind the illegal arms sales, who is simply selling arms to the highest bidder [good American business sense]). Besides, the genius Stark creates an armored flying suit, “Iron Man,” and becomes the super-hero who not only defeats the terrorists, but the internal threat of his number two man, the rampant capitalist. Unconvincingly, the problems of war and arms dealing can only be “solved” by the super(hero) solution of a Being outside of Law or government regulation (created by a genius entrepreneur, and thus private enterprise, nonetheless) that can “temporarily” (we hope) suspend all Law in his righteous pursuit of justice.

The latest Batman film, *The Dark Knight* (2008), is also troubling in this respect. The vigilante “employed” by Gotham uses, in one scene, a device tapping into every Gothamite’s cell phone. His butler Alfred’s chagrin notwithstanding, Batman promises only to use such wire-tapping surveillance to find the dangerous Joker, fulfilling his promise to disarm the program when he is at last successful. Each film holds up the potentially fascist “temporary suspension of Rights and Law” that the Bush administration has recently used (from Guantanamo to wire-tapping and the Patriot Act) as a necessary solution to combat “irrational” enemies (terrorists, the Joker).

The Joker also represents yet another representation of “anarchism” as nihilism. The Joker and his acts are referred to as “anarchic” several times. But it is clear he has no political project, and is simply a nihilist, engaged in wanton destruction. He is more the disorder to Batman’s order, as he tells Batman in one scene—the one cannot exist without the other. Since Batman represents the fascist drive to a completely ordered and disciplined society (unlike the perennially crime-plagued city in the films—a New York that has *long since* ceased to be), the Joker is right to conceive of himself as the irrational drive to disorder (or perhaps the Utopian drive to an emancipatory space outside of a repressive and totalizing system?). This, however, has little to do with anarchy as a politics.

unremarkable *presence* that denies or masks the fact that corporations are such powerful and dangerous institutions.

It is a very different practice to criticize Boeing than Pepsi Cola or Viacom, and yet the global influence of each of these corporations, as well as their commitment to profits, is essentially the same. And most people experience corporations not as malevolent forces or institutions, but as the everyday companies that bring them the desired necessities of life and employ them. Such is it, then, that with the rise of a white collar, service sector economy come diminished expectations, a sense of being trapped in the “rat race,” and a niggling frustration with the sense of one’s basic non-individuality—ironically, the same complaints blue-collar factory workers often make about their jobs. But affluence brings with it the illusion of a secure life (as the global economy becomes synonymous with temps, part-time workers, and downsizing), filled with the products and television shows that might help you forget your dismal job until Monday morning, and it certainly holds you back from rising up in arms against your employer, whom you are lucky enough to be employed by. So you “resist” instead by taking a slightly longer lunch than you should, messing around on the internet, and IMing (or twittering) some friends *because that’s just how it goes*.

#### The (Im)Possibilities of Resistance

Given the corporealization of capital through the figure of Inverarity in *Lot 49*, resistance in the era of late capital seems to make no sense. Resist what? Who or what is the enemy? Where is the enemy? Resistance truly is futile, in this sense. Unlike in *The*

*Octopus*, to answer the questions of what to resist and how to resist it that *Lot 49* raises asks that we rephrase or change these questions entirely because the very economic base of society that each group (the farmers in Norris, and what Pynchon often calls the “preterite” in his novel after the Puritan distinction between Elect and Preterite) would want to critique (to some degree) has been radically transformed.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it is actual *physical* land the farmers are dispossessed of in *The Octopus*, whereas the preterite in *Lot 49*, having inherited this negative legacy, have also been robbed of their memories of these prior crimes (as Norris feared) and the ability to identify the cause of their ills. As Oedipa wonders, “Surely they’d forgotten by now what the Tristero was to have inherited [. . .]. What was left to inherit? The America coded in Inverarity’s testament, whose was that?” (149).

The “other” America “left behind” or *left out* of the America that Inverarity bequeathed to those who hold a controlling interest in its stock is suggested by those people who come to lots not to bid on priceless antiques being auctioned, as in the book’s final scene, but to haggle for life’s basic necessities, as occurs in the early description of those who frequent the used car lot in which Oedipa’s husband, Mucho, once worked:

seeing people poorer than him come in, [. . .], bringing the most god-awful of trade-ins: motorized, metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like, [. . .] inside smelling hopelessly of booze, two sometimes three generations of cigarette smokers, or only of

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<sup>20</sup> Stefan Mattessich points out the paradox of resistance in the novel, arguing that, “more than simply telling a story of civil society’s sacrifice to the economic requirements of late capitalism, evokes the function of that civil society as the limit on whose transgression the capitalist machine depends in order to exist at all” (65).

dust—and when the cars were swept out you had to look at the actual residue of these lives, and there was no way of telling what things had been truly refused [. . .] and what had simply (perhaps tragically) been lost: [. . .] like a salad of despair, in a gray dressing of ash, condensed exhaust, dust, body wastes [. . .]. [. . .] he could still never accept the way each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life. (4-5)

Such a pessimistic vision of a mechanized and dehumanized society is not new to American literature—even Pynchon offers such a vision of the world in *V.*, the elusive titular character of which comes to be increasingly composed of material (artificial) objects. And, earlier still, Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939) offers a scathing critique of an America “run out of real-estate,” in which the Hollywood Dream Factory is both literally and metaphorically implicated in the degradation of a once authentic world by simulacra and grotesque fantasy. Employing a movie-screen metaphor, West divides the haves and have-nots of America (like Pynchon's “lots”) into performers and viewers. The performers, of course, herald the rise of an inauthentic and capital driven world, while the viewers compose the world of the losers, who have “come to California to die” (118) but who will be the harbingers of a societal apocalypse when their anger and resentment leads to mob violence.

But *Lot 49* is no mere rote recapitulation of the modernist theme of dehumanization. When viewed within the era of late capitalism, Pynchon's preterite



appear to have no direct recourse to revolutionary change. In *The Octopus* the shootout between the railroad's hired guns and the farmers ends dismally. Lives are lost, the farmers' cause is eventually lost, and Presley can find no final justification for such violence. Yet it could be argued that the spontaneous collective organization of the farmers and their resistance serve a particular political project with specific ends. By the time we reach *The Day of the Locust* in 1939, the *ressentiment* of "the viewers" can only manifest itself in *spontaneous and random violence*. There is no planned political project here. The violence is sudden, destructive, and ultimately serves in no way to elucidate a grievance to those in power. It is an even worse failure than the resistance of the farmers in Norris's novel, who at least are resisting a specific, if overwhelming, enemy. By the time we reach *Lot 49*, there appears to be no manifestation of direct resistance to the system at all.

Part of the problem of mounting a resistance in *Lot 49* is the failure of people to organize themselves collectively, which itself is partially a result of the exacerbated decenteredness of late capital. In fact, the two conditions are mutually reinforcing. Fredric Jameson claims that the ability to imagine oneself in relation to the totality (as the farmers can via Annixter's ticker) is virtually impossible in a post-World War II world because of a

mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—[which] has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surrounding perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. [. . .] this

alarming disjunction point between body and its built environment— which is to the initial bewilderment of the older modernism as the velocities of spacecraft to those of the automobile—can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least in the present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (44)

The farmers in *The Octopus* oddly bypass the anomie of the disconnected subject-at-sea (Oedipa) by being swept up into a larger sense of their place in a world economy. They compose a lone piece of this immense and awe-inspiring system, but they are mindful, so long as the land remains under their boots, of their place within it. There is still an idealism and possibility of collectivity for the farmers, surely the same idealism Norris must have felt in his plan to compose his “Epic of the Wheat.” By contrast, the inability to “cognitively map” herself is one of Oedipa’s major problems in *Lot 49*, as she is subject to a dizzying array of random events and chance encounters. As the default Maxwell’s Demon in this entropic universe, Oedipa learns that the “job of sorting it all out” is hopeless.

As a result, the idealism, in terms of the vision and scope that characterizes Pynchon’s works (not to mention the sheer number of pages) should be replaced by “ambitiousness,” or the ambition to write a novel that attempts to totalize a world view of what it admits, and continually draws attention to, is an untotalizable world.<sup>21</sup> *Gravity’s*

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<sup>21</sup> In other words, an inherently postmodern novel, meta-fictionally aware of its own aesthetic and representational limitations.

*Rainbow* (and most of Pynchon's work, for that matter) is set in the (more recent) historical past<sup>22</sup> and obsessed with tracing the genesis and development of various dominant and hegemonic structures of power (to put it in somewhat Foucauldian terms) at key historical moments (the end of World War II, the 1960s, etc.), when a certain set of possibilities of liberation are opened, then closed off, restructured, and reconsolidated by various economic and ruling forces (corporate entities, for instance) to suit their ends. Hence, in *Lot 49* Oedipa imagines the Tristero's waiting, as "if not for another set of possibilities to replace those that had conditioned the land to accept any San Narciso [. . .], then at least, at the very least, waiting for a symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew" (150). We might say that in *The Octopus* the individual can *act*, while in *Lot 49* the subject can only (re)act or, at best, wait.

Therefore, we pass from the (expiring) individual (with the attendant possibility of collectivity) to the isolated subject, formed in and against the structure of the system itself. This exemplifies the classic Althusserian concept of the subject who is "interpellated" or "hailed" into being. Much like the accusatory declaration of Althusser's infamous policeman, *Lot 49's* beginning perfectly captures the feeling of such a "hailing":

One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had

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<sup>22</sup> With the exception of *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon's work, while informed and informing of a deeper history, tends to take place in the twentieth-century.

once lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary. (1)

Pynchon's long and turbulent sentence here perfectly reproduces the feeling that Oedipa has been caught up in something beyond her power. She is hailed as an executor (a gendered term she is at least allowed to question) of a will that requires a good deal of work, and she seemingly has no choice but to accept (a choice that is no choice, which is pure ideology). The legal system literally names her here (as we learn her name for the first time as if it were a mere legal detail or aside), and Pynchon's passive construction of legal authority lends its decree the feeling of a foregone conclusion. The speed and decisiveness with which Pynchon hurls Oedipa into her quest suggests that the system precedes and constructs her subjectivity. Oedipa is literally subjected to the system's will.

The confused and isolated postmodern subject, then, formed amidst the dizzying complexity of the era of late capital, cannot conceive of a more cohesive totality. This is evident when Oedipa encounters the residents of the "infected city" during her journey through San Narciso's inner-city, which induces a kind of first-versus-third world effect, all the more troubling because we are still in America. Oedipa encounters all kinds of down-and-outs and sufferers during her wanderings through the city, which ends with her holding a lonely old man in her arms as he cries, ashamed that she cannot help him. What marks each of the people Oedipa meets (apart from their physical and emotional scars) is their apparent total isolation from one another, as well as any articulation of anger or resentment.

But if the flourishing of late capitalism destroys much of the efficacy of older collectives (the post-World War II decline of unions, for instance) in its fragmenting of a global working class, it opens up uncharted spaces that can potentially be used to forge resistance as well. For instance, Oedipa notices one thing about the residents of the city that links many of them together: “[d]ecorating each alienation, each species of withdrawal, as cufflink, decal, aimless doodling, there was somehow always the post horn” (100). This discovery leads Oedipa to wonder if the Tristero’s muted post horn serves as the secret symbol of a crypto-collective, whose members communicate with one another through the ambiguously named WASTE mail service:

It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum [. . .], there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world.

(101)

Oedipa’s question as to whether or not the Tristero exists and whether, if it does, it is composed of these “withdrawals” is, simply put, a question as to whether there is the potential of a collective movement against the current system, and if there is, what binds it together and what is its immediate project.

The possibility of the Tristero’s “silent waiting” could be read as an example of what Žižek has termed “Bartlebian Politics,” based, of course, on the eponymous

character, who “would prefer not to” in Melville’s short story “Bartleby the Scrivener.” Žižek articulates such a politics by demanding that in a system so constraining as to “choices,” which are “not choices at all,” that we *not* act politically. This, says Žižek, is in order to stop knee-jerk reactionary politics that do not challenge the fundamental system itself and instead play into it. Instead, we should follow a silent, withdrawal kind of politics (that Bartleby has been argued to pursue<sup>23</sup>) in which we think through political problems rather than impulsively try to solve them—in a sense, think “through” the surface gripes to the deeper, fundamental antagonisms underlying them<sup>24</sup>.

The refusal by some in *Lot 49* to communicate through the government’s mail system can be construed as their “preferring not” to participate in a kind of government-sanctioned democratic forum, or at least it can be seen as an indirect way of stating that their actual voices have been silenced or ignored. The existence of a para-mail system (instead of a para-military one), a mail system that, according to the history of the Tristero, various governments have clearly been at odds with since the sixteenth century is then a way of rejecting the framing of political voices by a corporate-dominated State.

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<sup>23</sup> Naomi C. Reed gives a fine summation of prior Marxist criticism dealing with Bartleby’s possible silent resistance, as well as offering a fresher Marxist perspective in “The Specter of Wall Street: ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’ and the Language of Commodities” (*American Literature* 76.2 [2004]: 247-273).

<sup>24</sup> Žižek’s Bartlebian reading of Jose Saramago’s *Seeing* is instructive in understanding the “withdrawals” in Pynchon’s novel. In *Seeing*, a government, suspecting political subversion when its populace refuses to vote in an election, ironically becomes more repressive in response to the non-voting, and eventually creates its own terrorist figure as a target/scapegoat for this withdrawal from politics. Žižek writes,

What happens is that by abstaining from voting, people effectively dissolve the government—not only in the limited sense of overthrowing the existing government, but more radically. Why is the government thrown into such a panic by the voters’ abstention? It is compelled to confront the fact that it exists, that it exerts power, only insofar as it is accepted as such by its subjects—accepted even in the mode of rejection. The voters’ abstention goes further than the intra-political negation, the vote of no confidence: it rejects the frame of the decision. (*Violence* 218).

Of course, the political and cultural landscape of America differs from the one portrayed in Saramago’s novel.

Indeed, by not communicating (at least through officially sanctioned channels), a clear message is sent—not an easy thing to do in a world where atomized individuals cannot communicate with one another (as we see with Inamorati Anonymous [91]), often due to the interference between sender and receiver that causes chronic miscommunication (Mucho calling Oedipa Maas, “Edna Mosh” on the radio, believing the expected distortion will correct the mistake on-air [114]). Thus, sending an indirect or non-message may be the only way figuratively to send a direct message. The injunction Oedipa reads early in the novel to “Report All Obscene Mail To Your Postmaster” (33) is telling. Whether this is an intentional misspelling by the Tristero, or a United States Postal Service typo, it serves as a reminder of how messages come to be, or not be, legitimized. The etymology of the word “obscene” can be traced to the Latin “*obscena*,” meaning what lies *outside* of representation or what is unrepresentable. The problem here is how to send a message that is unrepresentable, which cannot be represented within the system (and perhaps Pynchon’s novel itself), for by definition it represents the filth ejected outside of the system’s boundaries. Bartlebian politics appears to be the only way to solve the conundrum.

Oedipa, for instance, is intent on receiving messages, and her earlier avowed Young Republicanism (59) and faith in the government (she asks Genghis Cohen whether she should report her nascent findings to the government [79]) are shattered by the novel’s conclusion. That Oedipa should even conceive of a restructuring of American society at the novel’s end clearly shows that she gets the Tristero’s message, no matter its corruption:

How many shared Tristero's secret, as well as its exile? What would the probate judge have to say about spreading some kind of legacy among them all, all those nameless, maybe as a first installment? Obo. He'd be on her ass in a microsecond, revoke her letters testamentary, they'd call her names, proclaim her through all Orange County as a redistributionist and pinko [. . .]. (149-50)

Thus, the Tristero has at least the power to transform one person's world view, whether it tangibly exists or not. As such, the Tristero is, in a sense, the abstract possibility of resistance, the residue of a Utopian way out of the current state of affairs. And it is precisely through a seemingly negative Bartlebian politics that it effects a kind of change, its ultimate failure or success notwithstanding (are the letters of WASTE already the incinerated "Dead Letters" Bartleby dealt with?<sup>25</sup>).

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, Pynchon problematizes communication not least by stressing the influence of entropy between sender and receiver (84), but by making us privy to one of Mike Fallopian's WASTE messages, which are meaningless in terms of their content and anticipates the frivolity of today's text messages (39). Yet, as David Seed point out, "the value of the letter is as a gesture, that Fallopian's friend should be collaborating with others in their underground mail-system in a communal act" (141).

Moreover, the Tristero's post horn is muted, suggesting it makes no sound. But properly speaking, a mute changes the tone and timbre of a horn or trumpet. Such a change in frequency, a frequency out of the ordinary, could easily coincide with a coded way of communication. What seems to be nothing but noise can be understood not as being the actual corruption of a message, but as the very masking necessary for the transmission of a coded message itself. It is around this time (the mid to late 60s) that Miles Davis's muted trumpeting begins to morph into the wailing (and eventually elephant-like screeches) that would typify his late unorthodox style, which would transform jazz once again (into various kinds of jazz fusion). Jazz purists would argue Davis's late music is not jazz at all—in other words they refuse to recognize or "read" such music as an expression of jazz or proper jazz content. Thus, a muted music/message will always be (mis)read in one way by some, and (mis)read different ways by others. Noise and corruption is to some mere interference, while to others such disturbance is part of the point.

Pynchon offers a contrasting view of jazz and noise in his early short story "Entropy." At a party we encounter a "jazz" quartet "going through the motions of a group having a session, only without instruments" (94). As its leader, Duke di Angelis, explains it to Meatball, the point of the project is for the performers and audience "'to think everything [. . .]. Roots, line, everything'" (95). Thus, Pynchon suggests a kind of silence-as-communication, where silence fosters thought. This is somewhat different than the "use" of silence in Beckett's work, or even in the probable inspiration for Pynchon's quartet, John Cage's *4' 33''*, which is not, properly speaking, a silent piece (it has three movements, indicated by the



Pynchon's pained look back at the '60s in *Vineland* takes a fairly grim view of how the potential to resist and change the system panned out. Published in 1990, *Vineland* is set in 1984 during the Reagan years, and retroactively installs the CIA and black helicopters that *Lot 49*, published in 1966, leaves out. The novel unsurprisingly seems to endorse the ominous side of the debate of some of its aging, Depression-era activists who argue "whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago, and the light they thought they saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same bright colored shadows" (371). And it is a further question whether some sort of Bartlebian politics is to blame for such a state of affairs, when Jess Traverse, a one-time union organizer for loggers in the Pacific Northwest who is literally crushed (losing the use of his legs in an "accident") by industry, quotes Emerson in a supposedly hopeful tone:

"Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, the man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil." (369)

Such a belief in the transcendence of justice, while it may be initially inspiring, could easily fuel a philosophy of quietism or despair. That there exists a universal justice outside of the world, which can never be tampered with, is to put an enormous amount of

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opening and shutting of the keyboard). These works stress the impossibility of silence, which is simultaneously exasperating and exhilarating, while Pynchon's quartet appears more idealistic in its compositions (their session troubles notwithstanding).

faith into extra-worldly affairs. Political action, in this philosophy, need not come from people in the world—indeed, if the tyrant cannot change the world, how could the farmer?—but from forces outside of it. If the universe is inherently good, as it was for transcendentalists like Emerson, then one can have little doubt that future justice will come to pass. But this possibly quietist philosophy is nothing like a Bartlebian one. A Bartlebian politics is founded on a sense that the material circumstances of the world are untenable, and that there is an *immanent system*—whether political, economic, or social—that makes traditional resistance a near structural impossibility. If traditional resistance is ineffectual, then something extraordinary must take its place. Thus, *Lot 49*, in contrast to *Vineland*, appears the more hopeful novel—that hope hinging on the existence of a cautious, dispersed network of potential rebels.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps it is no surprise that the Pynchon immersed in the promise of the '60s could imagine an underground movement ready to burst into the mainstream, freak-out, and forever change the establishment, to put it in '60s rhetoric. But twenty years later,

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<sup>26</sup> A kind of anarchist politics might be said to emerge here, one certainly *different* than that of the “failed” anarchist of the novel, Jesús Arrabal, who is stunned by his chance meeting with Pierce (and Oedipa) long ago. He tells Oedipa:

‘You know what a miracle is? Not what Bakunin said. But another world’s intrusion into this one. [. . .]. Like the church we hate, anarchists also believe in another world. Where revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless, and the soul’s talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort, automatic as the body itself. And yet, seña, if any of it should ever really happen that perfectly, I would also have to cry miracle. An anarchist miracle. Like your friend [Inverarity]. He is too exactly and without flaw the thing we fight. [. . .]. But your friend, unless he’s joking, is as terrifying to me as a Virgin appearing to an Indian.’ (97)

The strange link between anarchism and corporate capitalism here seems to keep each locked in a dialectical struggle, yet admitting that one is the complement to the other. Thus, there is a sort of “religious” or “sublime” aspect to Arrabal’s politics. This older kind of anarchism, Pynchon suggests, is bankrupt in its potential to resist the “old” enemy in a constantly changing world. Like the futility of Presley hurling his “anarchist” bomb, even Arrabal’s anarchism is no longer feasible. It is perhaps an anarchism loaded down with its own anarchist ideology, still caught between Pynchon’s one and zero binary, or, as Joseph Slade puts it, “Inverarity fills some sort of void and almost in a religious sense provides an opposition against which [he] can define himself” (127).

and buried under Reagan's neoliberal policies, such lines of resistance must have seemed ill-conceived and ineffectual, as corporate dominance elevated itself to an even higher power, hitherto unimagined. But, like Norris's novel, Pynchon's earlier work is as concerned with the future as it is with the past, and *Lot 49* has proved as faithful a divining rod as *The Octopus*.

In the early 1990s, a movement against corporate power and practice arose, focusing on the branding of lifestyles and the sweatshop labor perpetrated worldwide as capitalism really kicked into global gear. Much of the military-industrial complex that Pynchon's corporate critique centered on was replaced by a scrutiny of companies like Nike, Shell Oil, or, in keeping with one of Pynchon's prediction a lá Yoyodyne, tech companies like Microsoft. In other words, those seemingly blasé corporations were suddenly the focus of people's attention, people who resented the way in which corporations were creating "lifestyles" that increasingly commodified any form of spontaneous culture.

And similar to the way Norris's novel foresaw the decentered aspect of the twentieth-century corporation, Pynchon's *Lot 49* was able to sketch a potentially new method of resistance in the Tristero—a dispersed network of individuals communicating through an "alternate" mail system—that could be argued to anticipate the ways in which activists have been able to use the internet (though it is by no means a truly "free" space) to form local and global networks of people and, most importantly, organize efforts to resist corporate power. It was, for instance, the internet that facilitated the organizing of

what came to be known as “The Battle for Seattle” in 1999, as numerous groups and people flocked to the streets of Seattle to protest the G6 and WTO talks scheduled there.

Both *The Octopus* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, then, offer keen predictions of America’s future based on the historical logic of capital. While *The Octopus* heralds the oppressive coming of twentieth-century corporate capitalism and sees resistance to this system as obsolete, *The Crying of Lot 49* hints at the subtler changes emerging in a “peaceful” post-industrial America where corporations inspire little attention and explores a new and dynamic challenge to this system. If both novels ultimately conclude with very different visions of capitalism in America, they share a healthy skepticism of the system, as well as an understanding of its fundamental dynamism that continually restructures not just the system itself but people’s ability to resist it.

These, then, are some of the major differences constituting representations of corporations in early twentieth-century and post-World War II American fiction. What we can detect in the passage from Norris’s to Pynchon’s novel is that corporations, having secured violent victories over people and democracy, have increasingly held sway in the social, political, and cultural arenas of life. However, this expansion of corporate capitalism into every fissure of American life after World War II has taken place quietly and unremarkably, but nonetheless as ruthlessly as it did before the twentieth-century. The inescapable effects of such corporate dominance are clear and visible, but at the same time obfuscated just like the shameful history of corporate capitalism has been. As a result, it is difficult to identify a cause for such a muddled state of contemporary affairs,

and, even worse, a comparable single “scapegoat” kind of solution makes little sense considering the complexities of a global economic system. Thus, systemic analysis is continually thwarted by the diversity of fragmented “surface” problems and distractions, which appear to have little in common with economic matters. This makes a *pure* foundational analysis impossible and makes the work of systemic analysis often highly theoretical and abstract, although it still needs to take into consideration those immediate “surface” dilemmas. But in the absence of any easy answers, people’s confusion and sense of defeat can grow, breeding a cynicism regarding the possibility that any kind of change can take place since the system is all-consuming. Or worse, it can lead to the inability to imagine anything *contrary* to the system as it currently exists, and the possibility of resistance is always in question.

Partly as a result, American fiction and popular culture rarely explore the inequities of the capitalist system directly anymore. Pointed economical analyses of an earlier fiction (the Muckraking and proletarian novels of the 1930s, for instance) are rarer and rarer, as more recent explorations of social and political problems in fiction are treated largely as if they are autonomous to such economic concerns. To be more precise, these “macro-economic” issues are often still at play today, but are relegated to the backdrop of stories and fictions, as we shall see in subsequent chapters dealing with Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and *Ghostbusters*. The economic base becomes the given *mise en scène* of a fictional world, similar to the way that corporate capitalism has calmly proceeded to dominate the world today. Yet with this dominance of the corporation comes its visibility and thus a kind of temporary refinement and crystallization of the

unseen “spirit” of capitalism. The corporation becomes a figure for an analysis of capital, even if it is often conceived as an autonomous construction in and of itself, essentially free from larger economic ties. It is in the openly-concealed figure of the corporation, then, that we will best find both a direct and indirect critique of late capitalism, proving that while American fiction and popular culture often may not directly or consciously criticize the system, they are nonetheless unconsciously obsessed with working through the numerous contradictions of late capitalism.

“Domo Arigato, Mr. Sakamoto, for the New Non-Union Contract!”: (Multi)National Threats and the Decline of the American Auto Industry in Ron Howard’s *Gung Ho*.

In 1986, the Mitsui Real Estate Company purchased the Exxon building on Sixth Avenue in New York City for a hefty \$610 million. Such a price for a prime piece of New York real estate in midtown Manhattan might not seem so out of the ordinary. In fact, in today’s Manhattan real estate market, inflated by various booms since the 1980s, it would be considered a bargain. But what made the purchase all the more curious was a popular story that sprang up about the sale: that the initial asking price for the building was a mere \$310 million. The Mitsui Real Estate Company had apparently overpaid by \$300 million, almost double the asking price.

What were Mitsui’s owners thinking? Hadn’t the Japanese proven themselves in recent decades to be shrewd businessmen, responsible for turning around a nation completely devastated at the end of World War II? How, then, could this seemingly reckless purchase be reconciled with such a savvy and industrious company as Mitsui, a company wholly representative of the successful Japanese business model?

The accepted explanation, as Charles P. Kindleberger tells it in his venerable *Manias, Panics, and Crashes: A History of Financial Crises*, is that the company’s president, awash in fresh capital, was looking for a trophy purchase, one symbolic of the Japanese’s newfound economic might. Certainly this piece of Manhattan held such symbolic import, though not nearly as much as would the 51% of Rockefeller Center purchased by Mitsubishi Real Estate in 1989. Yet it still constituted a sound investment,

coming as it did during New York's recovery from its economic meltdown of the 1970s. So why would the company overpay by so much?

The kernel of the legend has it that the company's president became enamored of the idea of entering into *The Guinness Book of World Records* for the largest recorded price paid for a single building. Apparently the steely-faced leaders of the *zaibatsu* had their soft spots after all. To enter into the dubious annals of a kind of alterna-history, alongside other immortals like the two adipose men on motorcycles and the man who can fit an unhealthy amount of raw hotdogs in his mouth, was apparently what swayed Mitsui's decision to buy the Exxon building well above its market value.

So legend has it. As *The Economist* points out in an article on financial myths, however, the rumor, which has persisted nonetheless, is false.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, *The New York Times* reported the sale at the time as being "at least \$100 million lower than the Exxon Corporation had anticipated" (pg#). Noting American fears in the 1980s that Japan was taking over America, and perhaps even the world, *The Economist* makes clear that specific financial rumors usually correspond with specific financial fears. Hence, the lesson to be learned from the case of Mitsui's seemingly dumbfounding purchase is that "[i]f you cannot imagine anyone believing this, you don't know anything about the financial markets" (79). In other words, when free-floating financial fears and anxieties come to a head in times of economic trouble, they are usually affixed to *perceived* pre-existing threats, for both good and bad reasons. Indeed, even Kindleberger describes the

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<sup>27</sup> Indeed, even the actual price of the purchase is steeped in confusion. The initial *New York Times* article lists the purchase at \$610 million, a later *Times* article claims it was \$620, while *The Economist* article puts the price at \$610, and Kindleberger at \$625. The supposed asking price (definitely on the rumor side), Kindleberger claims, was \$310, while *The Economist* puts it at \$375.



Mitsui rumor without challenging it, and his is a book highly critical of the kinds of financial bubbles and false promises that rampant speculation and manias inspire. Thus, even levelheaded people intent on seeing through financial chicanery can fall victim to its endless paper trails.

*The Economist* article also cites Daniel Berstein's *Yen! Japan's New Financial Empire and its Threat to America* (1989) and Michael Crichton's *Rising Sun* (1992) as two examples of America's preoccupation with the Japanese "threat" at the time, yet this burgeoning interest in, and wariness of, Japan was prevalent as early as the 1970s when Herman Kahn, a respected economist, wrote *The Emergence of the Japanese Super State* (1970), in which he explored Japan's success and asserted that "for more than one hundred years now the basic national goal of the Japanese nation has been focused on one purpose—to catch up with and surpass the West" (88). Kahn concluded his study, warning his readers that "[i]t would be a great mistake in the case of Japan to assume that the rising sun has reached its zenith" (183). Kahn (with Thomas Pepper) amended some of his bolder predictions in 1979's *The Japanese Challenge*, yet he still emphasized Japan's eventual emergence as a world superpower. The levelheaded predictions of Japan's future made in Kahn's books (which were certainly not peddling nationalistic doggerel for money<sup>28</sup>) nonetheless resounded Revere-like throughout the country, and when Americans found themselves unable to awake fully from the nightmare recession of

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<sup>28</sup> As Kahn wrote in *The Japanese Challenge*, "[s]ome Americans are concerned that Japan's economic strength might eventually be used against U.S. interests, but as long as the world economic growth continues, the prospect that a strong Japanese economy would amount, on balance, to a threat to American interests is extremely small" (152). Published in 1979, however, Kahn's analysis does not foresee the American auto industry's mounting troubles, which popular opinion will fuse to the "Japanese threat."

the 1970s that continued into the '80s, many feared not that the Japanese were coming, but that they had already arrived.

Clearly the Japanese “invasion” was not limited to the corporate world of high finance alone. Japanese pop culture, firmly ensconced in America today, increasingly began to find an American market around this time too. Hello Kitty products appeared in the malls, “Japanimation” or *anime* claimed its stake of American children’s daily six hour dose of television with shows like *Robotech* and *Voltron*, and sushi became the rage in cosmopolitan cities. When Atari (originally an American company) created a new industry overnight and video games swept the nation, it was ultimately a Japanese company, Nintendo, which revitalized the slumping industry in 1985 after releasing the best-selling console (the Nintendo Entertainment System) and video game (Super Mario Brothers) of all-time. Today, Nintendo is synonymous with video games.<sup>29</sup>

American pop culture, in turn, reflected an interest in “Japanese” things. 1983 saw “Domo Arigato, Mr. Roboto,” a song by the American band Styx, soar to number three in the Billboard Hot 100 thanks to its “futuristic” video and robotic, Japanese language chorus. In 1984, *The Karate Kid* quickly became the favorite movie of virtually every teenager in America, eventually spawning two more films and packing Karate dojos around the country with new recruits eager to learn Ralph Macchio’s Crane Kick and teach their school-bullies a lesson. Ninja costumes dotted the streets on Halloween night. The martial arts was no longer seen as merely amusing, kitschy, mystical, or weird—as it could be in its earlier (mostly 1960s and 70s) representations, whether in

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<sup>29</sup> This influx of Japanese pop culture to America has greatly increased since the 1980s. Yet, as Koichi Iwabuchi notes, apropos of the exporting of Japanese “culture,” “[t]he cultural impact of a particular commodity is not necessarily experienced in terms of the cultural image of the exporting nation” (24).

Bruce Lee's films (and any number of truly bad martial arts films), the kung fu parody film *They Call Me Bruce?* (1982), and the television series *Kung Fu* (1972-75)<sup>30</sup>—but as something an “average” American teenager could learn. Moreover, the best-selling initiator of cyber-fiction, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1985, Gibson is Canadian), offered a vision of a future “Japanified” world, as did Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* (1983). At least in America's imagination, the future appeared to be Japanese.

Released in 1986, the same year as Mitsui's historic purchase of the Exxon Building, the Ron Howard comedy, *Gung Ho*, not only offers another instance of America's newfound fascination with Japan, but also illustrates America's growing anxiety regarding Japanese economic might in the early 1980s by tying it directly to a suffering American economy, and specifically to a sputtering American auto industry. *Gung Ho* warrants closer study because it stands as one of the most influential instances of American pop culture's meditation on these anxieties, grossing over thirty-six million dollars at the box office and leading to a short-lived television spin-off by the same name. The film rehearses numerous tensions between the two nations at the time by performing various American and Japanese stereotypes in a supposedly humorous manner, attempting to show that despite their differences, the two countries and cultures can learn from one another to the benefit of all. Yet many of the issues raised in the film are easily swept away by the lighthearted tone (Howard as a neo-Preston Sturges or Frank Capra)

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<sup>30</sup> Bruce Lee was, of course, Chinese. Moreover, kung fu is a Chinese martial art, but is also used as a slangy, catch-all genre for movies involving the martial arts. My point here is that *The Karate Kid* is really the first film to “legitimate” what was (and still is) viewed by most Americans as a kitschy kind of film genre (see Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* series) by “Americanizing” the martial arts through one New Jersey boy's coming-of-age experience. It does this, not unsurprisingly, through the introduction of a Japanese-American in Mr. Miyagi, who teaches a boy the Japanese art of karate (a martial art developed by the Japanese from Chinese forms). That it is a Japanese, not Chinese, martial art taught in the film is thus telling.

and Hollywood ending, which preempts the critique of corporations and late capitalism that the film initially registers. Far from remaining an attenuated comedy of cultures, then, *Gung Ho* stages a 1980s version of capitalism that, after having gone “multinational,” returns from whence it traveled with troubling results.

### Land of the Rising Yen

Before launching into an examination of *Gung Ho* and its take on multinational corporate capitalism in the 1980s, it is necessary to describe briefly the (economic) history between the United States and Japan, from the nations’ first encounter to the Reagan years. It is an historical context the film itself occasionally touches upon, though without deeper examination, and serves to explain the underlying hostilities between the two nations at the time, which had lain dormant for quite a while.

When Commodore Matthew Perry opened up Japan to American trade in 1853 by military threat, America expected a relationship would emerge in which the markets of the East would be easily accessible not merely to the West, but to American needs in particular. Such gunboat diplomacy marked an early instance of American imperialism, which would increase as the world rapidly approached the dawn of the American Century. The military incursion of the United States, in turn provoked Japan into building an empire of its own, revealing again the ironic incorporation of imperialist ideology and tactics by a country subjected to imperialism’s insidious influence. The complex history between the two nations reached a historic crisis point on December 7th, 1941, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, drawing the United States into World War II,

and would reach another when the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945, and on Nagasaki three days later.

The defeat and dismantlement of the Japanese empire was devastating to Japan. Japan had been an empire that had controlled much of Southeast Asia. Stripped of its power and military, it could no longer subjugate its immediate, weaker neighbors. Moreover, a nation that put so much stock in honor and duty, as well as in tradition and respect for the past, was morally and spiritually exhausted after such a catastrophic end to the war. The postwar films of Akira Kurosawa (1910-1988), for instance, often depict characters with existential crises who question moral certitude and truth, which are often seen as allegories of Japan's defeat in World War II and its subsequent struggles. This is especially true of *Rashomon* (1950), where the inability of three men to reconstruct the "simple" story of a couple's murder leads to a bleak, near-apocalyptic vision of the world and inability to know anything with certainty, though Kurosawa offers a glimpse of faith in the future in the final scene in which the priest claims responsibility for an abandoned babe. *Stray Dog* (1949) serves as an exemplary instance of the shame, fear and anxiety felt in postwar Japan through the figure of a police officer whose gun is stolen and subsequently used to commit several crimes, including murder. The depiction of the war-decimated Tokyo buildings during a sweltering summer offers a post-apocalyptic worldscape where the angst of the castrated hero desperately trying to get his gun back stands, in at least one sense, as an obvious symbol for postwar, de-militarized Japan itself.

Remarkably, however, Japan re-channeled the energy it formerly used to build its military empire into building an economic one. Helped, in part, by a ban on military and defense spending, an influx of Western technologies, and benefiting from serving as a major supplier for the UN's military needs during the Korean War, Japan began to recover from the war at a rapid pace. In addition, Japan urged along fledgling industries through its *zaibatsu* system, a kind of super-conglomerate of corporations—including banks and investment firms—all working together under government direction toward the betterment of the nation. Government involvement in Japanese businesses allowed Japan to focus intensely on developing certain industries, while simultaneously offering these industries protection from a potentially damaging global market until they became strong enough to compete globally. Many of these policies and practices were either recommended or instituted by the U.S., which sought to establish an ally and a military base from which to fight communism after World War II. As Ian Inkster writes in *Japanese Industrialization*, “[w]hat is notable is that it was precisely pressure from America to further liberalize the Japanese economy that provided an institutional mechanism allowing Japan to so quickly emerge as the greatest of capital exporters” (282). Thus, there is an irony in the fact that America's greatest perceived economic threat would turn out to be an economy very much a part of its making. By the 1970s it became evident that Japan's reconstructive measures, much like those of postwar (West) Germany, were extraordinarily successful and that it had arrived, a true player, on the capitalist world stage.

This turnaround became known as the “Economic Miracle.” By the 1980s, Japan boasted the third largest economy in the world, behind only the United States and the Soviet Union (Matray 23). But such a rapidly growing economy was eventually perceived as a threat to the United States, whose trade deficit under Reaganomics was increasing daily, especially in regards to Japan:

Partly as a result of restrictive measures taken by the Japanese, during the first three years of President Reagan 1981-1983 the trade deficit between Japan and America was stabilized at a level below \$20 billion. But the trade deficit began to grow ominously and in 1984 it reached over \$30 billion, in 1985 over \$40 billion, and in 1986 over \$50 billion [ . . .]. (Togo 96)

Japan’s surplus skyrocketed, while America’s deficit ballooned, which many Americans saw as cause-and-effect. As a result, writes Inkster, “the Japanese surplus became a symbol within America of that nation’s own severe economic problems” (282).<sup>31</sup> Thus, the United States and Japan entered another kind of war, this time an economic one. And when an increasing deficit led the Reagan administration to devalue the dollar in 1985, the land of the Rising Sun became the land of the Rising Yen.

Much of this market battleground would be fought over the importation and exportation of various commodities. Japanese imports flooded American markets with affordable and high-quality goods—mainly appliances and electronic devices—whereas

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<sup>31</sup> Inkster argues that “there is little reason to believe that the one [Japanese surplus] caused the other [American deficit] in any direct fashion” and that “[t]he calibre of any causal link between the medium-term policy contributions on the one hand and the more underlying historical factors on the other remains debatable [ . . .]” (282, sic).

Japanese markets remained fairly free from American products. The United States “criticized Japan for dumping cheap goods on the American market while not providing access for foreign commodities in Japan” (Matray 22), imposed various tariffs, and struck deals to balance out its trade problems. Nowhere was this more evident than in the auto industry, where the influx of Japanese cars left an already struggling American industry in dire straits.

Yet the truth is that the conditions for the decline of the Big Three automakers were already in place before the influx of the imports and the trade imbalance of the 1980s. Just as foreign car companies began to enter the U.S. market, the 1973 Arab oil embargo hit, creating widespread panic as gas prices soared and gasoline pumps dried up. Combined with the recession and the energy crisis, as well as stricter EPA measures for mpg and emissions, the giant, gas guzzling cars of Detroit became outmoded steel dinosaurs. Customers began taking a closer look at the offerings of Toyota and Honda, whose cars were much more economical, fuel-efficient and environmentally cleaner than their Detroit counterparts. Once many customers had made the switch, they discovered how dependable and durable the imports were, and henceforth Detroit’s woes would truly begin.

While Detroit stumbled, between 1974 and 1989 Japanese production shot up from roughly seven million vehicles a year to over thirteen million (Allinson 132). American auto manufacturers, instead of evaluating their own production methods, simply lashed out at the Japanese threat. They complained about the stricter emissions standards and what they claimed were unfair advantages for Japanese auto companies.



Not surprisingly, the U.S. sought to limit Japanese car exports. In May of 1981 Japan agreed to “voluntary” restrictions on its imports to America of no more than 1.68 million vehicles a year for three years (Togo 93). Not exactly in line with Reagan’s neoliberal, free-market philosophy, however, these “measures were taken in the form of ‘voluntary’ actions to make them compatible, at least on pro forma basis, with Gatt principles of free trade” (Togo 93-4, sic).

In an ironic twist, America’s hypocritical espousal of free-trade by way of restrictive measures led to perhaps its biggest blunder in trying to save Detroit. Coerced into these “voluntary” restrictions, and pressured by the political tactics of Detroit, the Japanese companies realized it was in their interests to build factories in the U.S., thus allowing them to sidestep the voluntary tariffs and other trade barriers that were beginning to hamper them (Allinson 132). Thus, while Detroit thought it was leveling the playing field, it was in truth opening it up for the imports, which was something the imports were already planning. The imports would now have direct, unimpeded access to a huge American market. American automakers would find themselves facing the biggest challenge in their industry yet, and *Gung Ho* offers an early insight as to the effects of such a challenge.

*Sayonara, Detroit!*

*Gung Ho* introduces us to a small, quaint, working-class Pennsylvania town, Hadleyville (an obvious stand-in for Detroit), which is soon revealed to be suffering hard economic times. The auto plant that employed much of the town has recently closed,

leaving most of the blue-collar inhabitants of the town unemployed and desperate for work. Businesses are closing, families are leaving, and the streets of the town are run down and desolate. Hunt Stevenson (Michael Keaton), once foreman at the defunct auto plant, has just been elected by his former employees and friends (basically the entire town) to fly to Japan and convince a Japanese auto company to reinvest in and reopen the plant, therefore saving Hadleyville and its citizenry.

Hunt appears the perfect choice to be the man who will save Hadleyville, as he possesses oodles of charm, the ability to smooth-talk anyone, and an ever-present, easy smile—qualities all perfectly portrayed by Michael Keaton. Various people wish Hunt good luck as he rides to the airport, and nobody seems worried that he could fail, although he tacitly admits to his girlfriend, Audrey (Mimi Rodgers), on the drive to the airport that failure is a real possibility. Hunt, however, hides his doubts behind his reassuring smile as he boards the plane and waves goodbye to his buddies who come to see him off, though his doubts are to return soon after landing in Japan.

Once in Tokyo, it becomes clear that Hunt is vastly under-qualified for the job. His search for the corporation he is to pitch the plan to, Assan Motors, leads him astray, at one point impossibly landing him in the midst of the Japanese countryside, up to his knees in a rice paddy. Curiously, Hunt's journey to Assan Motors breaks from the familiar narratives of westerners traveling through the East, although, as Edward Said notes, "every interpretation, every structure for the Orient [. . .] is a reinterpretation, a rebuilding of it" (158). Instead of serving as a *mise-en-scène* in which Hunt plays out his deepest desires and fantasies, Tokyo is figured as a confusing, contradictory postmodern

space (from the rice paddy feudalism to the neon streets of the postmodern city<sup>32</sup>), whose citizens are uninterested in the lost westerner, who seems dwarfed by, and irrelevant in, the space. Nor is this space merely the “strange” or “alien” space in which Hunt’s existential crisis can “take” place, as in such texts produced during the era of imperialism (as India is in E.M Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Morocco/North Africa in Paul Bowles’s *The Sheltering Sky*). Hunt’s crisis is immediately material and in the service of Hadleyville, though it is not without its personal facets as the film goes on to show.

Moreover, against the shifting economic balance in the era of late capitalism, *Gung Ho* restructures this particular space of the East to reflect the westerner’s anxieties anew. No longer does the westerner encounter the Other in this space, so much as he is figured in and made conscious of his own Otherness within it; the bargaining table has turned.<sup>33</sup> Unable to brave the unfamiliar Japanese cuisine (and here the movie truly feels dated), Hunt finds refuge in the familiarity of McDonald’s, where the sign’s golden arches eclipse the Japanese writing covering it (since the true Esperanto of consumer capitalism is surely composed of logos and brand names) to offer a transnational postmodern Valhalla, if only momentarily. Furthermore, the only desire Hunt has is to convince Assan Motors to come to Hadleyville, and his wandering through a city hardly aware of his presence foreshadows his encounter with Assan Motors’s executives. A

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<sup>32</sup> Clearly there are no rice paddies in Tokyo. However, the film collapses space-time in Hunt’s wandering scene, so that it appears as if the two co-exist.

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the same could be said of Sophia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* (2003) as the characters play out their existential problems against an all but silenced modern-day Tokyo, though obviously Wes Anderson’s *Darjeeling Limited* (2007), in its use of India as the backdrop for three wealthy brothers touring the “exotic” land and “finding themselves” (the conquest being predictably sexual for one brother), is a familiar Orientalist trope.

postcolonial Matthew Perry, Hunt's only weapons are his charisma and persuasiveness, and he remains at the mercy of Assan Motors.

Hunt's slide-show pitch to Assan Motors (yet another Orientalist trope reversal here, as the Japanese executives view the carefully selected images and representations of the West that will eventually compel their "investment" in the plant) begins in a "nudge-wink" fashion. After blandly introducing the town and plant, Hunt presents a pin-up style image of a woman "working" on the production line, joking, "Whoa, how'd that get in there?" All obvious readings of the conflation of the woman's sexualized image within the space of the assembly line and mass reproduction aside, Hunt's quip is received by the stony-faced Japanese in total silence. Hunt stops the presentation, as it becomes clear it consists of the same pattern of imagery and off-color ribbing, and his exasperation leads him to plead with the board instead: "If you come over and open up that factory, these people will work *harder* for you. That's a promise." Hunt's burst of sincerity is met with the same stoicism as before, and Hunt retires from the meeting, defeated and cynical, registering his failure as he sits brooding in front of a temple, again reflecting his irrelevance as the representative of the American worker and industrial capitalism against the surging, postmodern Japan.

Hunt returns to Hadlyeville after apparently failing in his mission, but he is unable to face the town and admit his failure. Before he is forced to admit the truth, however, Assan Motors announces it is coming to Hadlyeville after all. The town is elated and Hunt even more so when he is offered the job of employee liaison, a promotion for him, and his first executive position. In the tide of excitement, Hunt learns that the workers

are being offered a contract well below what they are accustomed to. For the plant to open, they will have to accept wage cuts and agree not to unionize. Hunt, knowing the workers will probably never go for such a deal, assures the Japanese all will be well, and so begins his role as the intermediary between the management/Japan and the workers/America, as he tries to appease both sides, all the while preserving his own interests and job security too.

### The State of the Union

Having sold Assan Motors on Hadleyville, Hunt must now sell Hadleyville on Assan Motors. However, the union offers an enormous obstacle to Hunt's plans, as the union representative advises the workers not to enter into a deal with Assan Motors without a contract, breaking the news to them (which Hunt has kept quiet) that they will have no contract, less pay, and fewer benefits working for Assan. The workers, frustrated and desperate for employment, distrust and shout down the union representative, calling instead for Hunt to tell them the truth of the matter. Hunt steps up to the podium and delivers his All-American smile and an All-American local legendary tale about the fourth quarter of a high-school championship basketball game when he came off the bench to lead the team to victory. Using the game as an analogy, Hunt promises the workers that all they have to do is let the Japanese have their way for a while, then turn it around to the workers' benefit. Promising such a "fourth quarter comeback," Hunt responds to a friend's question as to whether he can "take these guys" the way he took

down the opponent's star player in high school with the reply, "Yeah, I can take 'em." The crowd erupts in cheers and applause.

Hunt's extemporaneous speech firmly establishes his character as a familiar one in American literature and popular culture: the trickster or confidence man. Before this point, we are aware of Hunt as a charismatic manipulator who has his own interests in mind as much as the town's. Hunt continually battles with a flight or fight mentality in regards to his loyalty to the community and his own self-preservation. After believing he has failed to convince Assan Motors to come to Hadleyville, he makes several phone calls to find new employment, afraid of giving the town the bad news. Similarly, he tries to flee town later in the film, after he thinks his lie to the workers about the deal for a raise has been exposed, rather than face his friends and the consequences. He also makes promises to both the Japanese and the workers that appear designed to keep his new executive position safe, which his girlfriend accuses him of doing. The deeper his lies become, and the more elaborate his performance, the easier it is to see him as a figure set at once within and without the community of Hadleyville.

Like the mysterious man in Mark Twain's "The Man who Corrupted Hadleyburg," Hunt eventually reveals the town's (and, by extension, America's) image of itself to be an illusion. Twain's title is ironic, since in Twain's story the "corruption" of the town predates the arrival of the man, who merely reveals the hypocrisy of the town's beatific self-projection—the "corruption" is the destruction of the absurd illusion that, once banished, reestablishes a kind of truth through self-reflection. In *Gung Ho*, when the mayor announces (all-too symbolically) at the town's Fourth of July parade that

Assan Motors has decided to close the plant and leave Hadleyville, he sarcastically introduces Hunt as “the man who saved Hadleyville” and tries to attack him. It is at this point, however, that Hunt’s trickster position within and without the community works to the town’s benefit.

As liaison between Japanese managers and American workers, and as part of the managerial class with blue-collar roots and attitudes, Hunt marks the instability between the divisions of class and labor in the film, as well as the anxieties and tensions involved in class mobility in America. His peculiar position, paralleled by that of the Japanese plant manager, Oishi Kazihiro (Gedde Watanabe), allows him the space for self-reflection instead of mere self-preservation, which, like the man in Twain’s story, turns him into a kind of deliverer of knowledge to an ignorant Eden fallen on hard times. The Biblical parallels are no surprise here, as Hunt is a kind of Christ figure. He “belongs” to the two worlds/classes, sacrifices his own reputation for the good of the community, and accepts the shame and frustration of the American worker as his own. His last temptation to leave the town, rather than face the consequences of his lies, is answered when he leads the walkout from the factory, and he is “crucified” on-stage at the Fourth of July Picnic where the mayor denounces him and the town boos him. But the All-American Jesus rises again in the fourth quarter (just as he has foretold in his union speech) and leads his believers to a last second victory when they barely meet Assan Motors’s new production quota. The question that remains for this messiah, however, is: what belief system does he espouse? On the surface, it would appear to be a reprisal of the good, old

Protestant work ethic. As we shall see later, however, there is much more to this than what is dreamed of in Hunt's philosophy.

Hunt's masterful anti-union sell to his union brothers, as well as the later scene also set in the union hall, reveals much about the film's attitudes toward labor and class in general. Set in a theater with a touch of *fin de siècle* décor, the union meeting resembles something out of the early twentieth century in terms of its depiction of the energy, raucousness, and ultimate strength of labor and unions. The theater is packed to the gills, mostly by men waving fists from the balconies and floor, chanting "Work, work, work."<sup>34</sup> It is fairly dark inside, and the noise, unrest, and sweat mark the space as aggressive, threatening, and overtly "masculine." Considering the economic war taking place outside of the theater, this makes sense. The union hall here is a kind of training camp psyching-up soldiers to go out and fight, just as the re-training course for "failed" Japanese executives the film opens with resembles a boot camp in which the "failed" executives must yell and confess their failure and shame while on their knees, whence they are beaten with cane sticks. The animalistic and violent attitudes the union provokes in the workers, and its overdetermined staging of masculinity, mark the union as a bubbling cauldron of labor's anger and discontent. In other words, this representation is a fairly nostalgic one. Or, as Fredric Jameson argues in *Signatures of the Visible* with respect to the representation of history in Stanley Kubrik's *The Shining*, "such films do not so much express belief as they project a longing to believe and the nostalgia for an

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<sup>34</sup> This appears a curious, yet apt for the 1980s, inversion of Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, where the workers at one point chant "Strike, strike, strike!"



era when belief seemed possible” (131). The longing for belief, in the case of *Gung Ho*, is a belief in the prolonged efficacy of unions.

Such a nostalgic view of the union belies the already waning power of unions in 1980s Reagan America. But since the local analysis of class and capital has been short-circuited by the impingement of the global “Japanese problem,” the union is simultaneously fantasized in the film as a powerful collective with the potential to enact change, *and* as a dangerous collective capable of generating a chaotic force, one which threatens the workers, the auto industry, and even America itself. Hence the visual coding of an older union hall and meeting space (recalling former epic and often physical battles between unions, and specifically the UAW, and capital [Ford kept a private army for such battles] earlier in the century<sup>35</sup>) that in truth becomes merely an empty sign for a collective liquidated of any real political power. However, the film must continue to perpetuate the illusion that the union still holds such power in order to accuse it of harming the auto industry, which, as we shall see, is the film’s overall message regarding labor.<sup>36</sup> To admit to the attenuation of unions would mean focusing on more local

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<sup>35</sup> A few of the more famous UAW conflicts of the time were the 1936 Flint sit-down strike, the Miller Road “Battle of the Overpass” at Ford’s Rouge Complex in 1937, and the 1945-6 GM strike.

<sup>36</sup> Rising unemployment and inflation in the 1970s left many American workers agitated and afraid for their livelihoods. Union corruption made these workers cynical about the unions’ commitment to their concerns. Paul Shrader’s *Blue Collar* (1978), for instance, depicts three auto workers’ attempt to rob their local union after their repeated complaints (from the pettiness of broken lockers to the serious allegations of racial bias in the allocation of unpopular jobs) about injustices on the factory floor go unheard (at one point, a disgruntled employee drives a forklift into a constantly malfunctioning soda machine). The three friends’ take is a mere six hundred dollars, as unbeknownst to them, their corrupt union has been making loans to organized crime, and the union uses the robbery to make an insurance claim on the twenty thousand dollars that was supposedly in the safe.

The friends eventually work this out after stealing and reading the union’s ledger. As a result, they try and blackmail the union. At the same time, the feds move in and try to turn the men into informants. In response, the union puts pressure on one of the three to give back the book and sell out the other two in return for a better job, which he does (his friends are killed as a result). The overall depiction

explanations for the industry's problems, such as the management and marketing of Detroit itself, thereby admitting that the source of many of the problems encountered in the film may have predated the global tension with the Japanese. Ironically, in a film so anxious about foreign imports, there is much in the way of deeper analysis that is handily exported.

The film's refusal to explore the conditions for the state of the union means that it must omit some interesting facts about how such a state came to be and what is really at stake when unions are blamed for the American auto industry's woes. While the United Auto Workers has traditionally been one of the strongest unions in American history since its formation in response to the labor crisis of 1935, it was greatly affected by the decline of Detroit during the 1970s and 1980s. As Micheline Maynard states in *The End of Detroit*, over the years the UAW can boast of having "won some generous benefits that white-collar workers in many professions can only dream about: fully paid health care, legal advice, child care, pensions, vacation time, education benefits and job security" (300). In addition, Maynard notes,

Current United Auto Workers contracts at GM, Ford and Chrysler require the companies to pay their workers nearly all of their income, whether they are on the job or not. Moreover, the companies are limited from permanently closing factories without the union's agreement, and must

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of the union itself, a shabby, corrupt operation holding union meetings in shabby rooms is much more "realistic" of unions at the time. There is none of the romanticizing of (former) union glory in *Blue Collar* as there is in *Gung Ho*. In that respect, *Blue Collar* functions very much as a corrective, due to its late '70s pessimism, of the regenerating America in Howard's film.

finalize any such moves during contract negotiations, a process that ensures generous benefits for workers who are losing their jobs. (14)

But when the auto industry began struggling at the end of the 1970s and the onset of the early 1980s (the time period *Gung Ho* reflects and refracts), the UAW had to make cutbacks in order to help save the Big Three, and especially Lee Iacocca's Chrysler, from bankruptcy. The UAW became "more interested in job security than in wage or benefit increases" and though "settlements differed [with the Big Three] [. . .]. It accepted a two-and-a-half year freeze of wage scales, postponement of scheduled cost-of-living increases, and elimination of paid days off" (161 Rae). Thus, the state the UAW was in during the recession of the early 1980s appeared grim. Not able to negotiate to its advantage and stripped of the threat of a strike or walkout, the UAW's policy of making concessions severely compromised its bargaining powers. Although the UAW would reestablish worker wages to their former levels years later, the scaling back of pay and benefits at the time signaled the extent of a weakened auto industry and a weakened union, a trend that continues today.

Moreover, the auto industry had no problem pointing to the UAW and its contract as being a prime reason it was losing ground to foreign companies, a habit it still practices today. It is true that Detroit faces challenges due to union contracts:

The infrastructure has become so heavy, and the burden of health care and pension costs for retirees so great, that there is not enough profit being generated to support this mass for the long term. [. . .] GM faces a \$50 billion health care liability going forward, on top of a pension fund with a

\$23 billion to \$26 billion shortfall. [. . .]. Ford's health care liability, meanwhile, is an estimated \$27.4 billion, and its pension fund is \$15.6 billion underfunded. (Maynard 231)

Yet the burden of these costs results from a lack of profits due to various factors that foreign competition is only a symptom of, not a cause. From poorly made and inefficient vehicles to an inability to listen to its customers or change its business philosophy and practices in a global economy, Detroit has created the market space for foreign companies, whether Toyota or Mercedes-Benz, to exploit. Thus, union contracts now saddle Detroit due to a series of bad choices and mismanagement combined with a changing economy.

In *Gung Ho*, then, we find that the contradictory representation of the union makes a kind of twisted sense. The film must employ the figure of the union—at once powerful and impotent, dynamic yet regressive—as an outdated and harmful organization at odds with the new global economy, mired as it is in pre-World War II history and politics. The men willingly accept the non-union contract without even attempting negotiations, which the film hints would lead to a Japanese refusal to do business with them. The unspoken message here is that American auto manufacturers, such as the former owners of the plant that closed down in Hadleyville, were saddled with weighty union contracts that made it too difficult to compete with foreign imports. The new labor policies of the global economy will be union-free, and the workers had better accept this as the new order sooner than later. Hence, what is made truly threatening about the union's power is its uncontrollable, revolutionary potential (the overdetermined

aggression and threat of violence), which is not *actual* political power here (the union has been stripped of that, and the union contract is refused), but the chaotic power to destroy itself, and by extension America, through a refusal to play by the new global system's rules.

The specter of that older, nostalgic union returns not just in the form of the union hall's décor, moreover, but also in the emptied content of the meeting itself. For although the workers have agreed not to unionize, they persist in calling a union meeting together (not, apparently, an official one) later in the film when they wish to voice their dissatisfaction with the new labor conditions. It is here that the contradiction of the union most evidently surfaces, for the men are non-union members joined as a collective, yet without any true power. Essentially, the lack of a union contract makes their subsequent walkout an unpaid one (unlike current UAW contracts) and prompts the Japanese to shut down the factory for good (at least until the ending where everyone miraculously pulls together to save the town). In the end, the union is presented as harmful and antiquated, its power not political but physical, and therefore negative and self-destructive. At the point in which the film offers a glimpse of potential rebellion put squarely in the hands of the workers, it quickly retracts that potential by casting it as self-defeating.

The reasons for the plant closing in Hadleyville in the first place are conspicuously absent from the film. They are, of course, hinted at as being similar to Detroit's problems at the time. At one point, the door handle of Hunt's car comes off in his hand, which corresponds to an earlier scene in which Japanese engineers inspecting a car model joke that the car is "American" when its wheel falls off. But beyond this there

is nothing but a critique lodged squarely on blue-collar shoulders. The film overtly presents American blue-collar workers as lazy, incompetent, and spoiled by their union contracts. In one scene, a worker complains that his shoddy workmanship is something “the dealer can worry about,” and the workers apparently clock in late and leave early, much to the management’s chagrin.

The film’s focus on the “blue-collar problem” effectively expunges any critique of the white-collar executives in Detroit, whose management of the Big Three put the industry in such a predicament. However, as Brock Yates claimed in 1986, in *The Decline and Fall of the American Automobile Industry*, “[n]othing less than a revolution in management and labor attitude, with productivity and quality as its criteria, will save the American auto industry” (252).<sup>37</sup> Detroit’s hubris and its refusal to change its perception of itself and its business structures in the global economy are what have truly brought on the crisis of the auto industry. *Gung Ho*, however, is devoid of any white-collar executives who are not Japanese, as well as any closer analysis of why the factory closed in the first place. Instead, it is the blue-collar worker and the Japanese threat that appear to be the problem and solution to America’s automotive industry dilemma.

You Say Sashimi, I Say, “So Sue Me”: Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off.

This strange mapping of class anxieties from the local to the global is one way the film jettisons such class analysis from taking place strictly at the local level—the blue-collar workers/Hadleyville/America axis—by reconfiguring such a possible analysis

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<sup>37</sup> While Yates notes numerous reasons for Detroit’s decline, he ultimately reduces the problem to a far too facile solution: “the one true lever to prosperity for Detroit” which is “new corporate leaders of sophistication and strength” (290).

against a global one—the managers/Assan Motors/Japan axis. This shift discourages a local or micro investigation by projecting all frustrations and critical inquiry outward, where it affixes to a “global threat.” The result is that an antagonism is created between the two axes based on perceived (stereotypical) cultural, racial, and national differences.

Perhaps, though, this is merely a red, perhaps white and blue-collared, herring. To ascribe the inability of the factory’s success to cultural differences and clashing work ethics— sloppiness vs. efficiency, individuals vs. team, West vs. East—between American workers and Japanese management is a thin ideological veil for the changes in production that a global economy mandates. And this is not to imply that there are not real cultural differences between American and Japanese workers of any collar, only that the film would like to essentialize such traits as the cause for any discontent. In an era when outsourcing will increasingly become the practice of multinational corporations, however, what seems more pertinent about the film is that it heralds such a version of late capitalism (long ago exported to Japan via Perry, then revived and perfected during the “Economic Miracle”) and signals a kind of return of the repressed, both historically and economically, of the darker and newer sides of this transmogrified capitalism.

In one sense, then, the Japanese form of management, its “ruthless” brand of capitalism, is nothing more than the face of global capitalism returned to its source. In terms of this newer global power structure, the blue-collar workers of Hadleyville find themselves in a situation somewhat akin to people in the third world who are compelled to accept any form of labor large corporations offer them (though for a pittance of what the workers in Hadleyville will make and in much more desperate living conditions).

Therefore, the fears and anxieties projected onto the Japanese in the way of cultural differences can be read, in some sense, as the Otherness of that returned capital investment that was always already part and parcel of that peculiar economic institution, no matter how brightly it was wrapped in ideological and nationalistic paper when exported. *Gung Ho* might be said to echo Oscar Wilde's quip in a different context that "[t]he whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people."

According to the film, it is the Japanese who have made capitalism and management into an inhuman, mechanical practice, and this is exacerbated in large part because American workers have lost their Protestant work ethic. Once the plant is reopened, Hunt and the workers find themselves subject to a whole host of new and rigorous production measures, from the introduction of morning exercises (which the men perform mockingly or not at all) and banishment of radios and smoking in the factory to stricter quality control and more Taylorized methods of efficiency on the assembly line, all of which greatly aggravates them. The workers soon begin grumbling to Hunt, who stalls them from action by promising them that things will relax after a while.

Yet the truth is that the conditions in American factories before and since the introduction of the transplants (foreign owned plants operating in the U.S.) always have been abysmal. Ruth Milkman, who views the GM-Linden plant (in New Jersey) as a



fairly representative case of the decline of American auto manufacturers,<sup>38</sup> denies any nostalgic thinking that the older factory system was any better than today's, writing that "the combination of mindless, monotonous work, unrelenting regimentation, and inhumane supervision made the workers feel like prisoners, and they routinely employ the metaphor of the plant as a prison [ . . .]" (27). According to her study, relations between management and workers in the American factories were always deeply adversarial because of "the social relations of the shop floor, especially the military-style regimentation to which workers were subjected and the insensitivity of many first-line supervisors to the basic human needs of those in their charge" (27). Indeed, in *Gung Ho* many of the tightening restrictions—the refusal to give personal days, regulation of bathroom breaks, and confiscation of reading material—that the Japanese introduce in response to early numbers showing the factory's production is well below Japanese standards were already implemented by American car manufacturers with regularity in their factories.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, an early joint venture between Toyota and GM in 1984, the New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. or "NUMMI" in Fremont, California, proved to be quite successful in instituting Toyota's methods of production. As Paul Ingrassia and

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<sup>38</sup> As Milkman writes, "GM appears to be typical of U.S. auto assembly plants in that new technology has been introduced without jobs being fundamentally redesigned or the traditional division of labor altered between production and skilled-trades workers" (159).

<sup>39</sup> Among the top grievances made by workers at GM-Linden "before 1982 concerned a few key issues: the intensity of work, discipline, health and safety problems, violations of seniority rules governing job transfers, various types of managerial harassment, and supervisors performing work contractually reserved for union members" (Milkman 55). Workers were often denied hospital passes, important phone messages, and leave of the factory for personal problems (Milkman 45-6). In addition, they were subject to periods of mandatory overtime, as one factory worker Milkman interviewed, explained: "[s]ometimes you had to work nine hours a day, six days a week. You had no family life [ . . .]" (46).

Joseph B. White write in *Comeback: The Fall and Rise of the American Automobile Industry*, at NUMMI “[t]he progress was painfully slow at first, as the workers grappled with the new system. But [. . .], GM’s quality checkers made an astounding discovery: The hard-boiled union factory hands Toyota had adopted were turning out some of the best cars GM had ever sold” (51). The NUMMI system did not work as successfully in Detroit as it did in Fremont, however, as GM’s engineers and managers seemed unable to comprehend the system adequately and implement it elsewhere. But the NUMMI experiment showed the potential benefits of properly incorporating Japanese manufacturing concepts into American plants. Indeed, the NUMMI venture in Fremont could well have been a model for the auto plant in *Gung Ho*, as the workers who chafe under the “tighter” restrictions find that there is ultimately more “freedom” and benefit in playing by the new rules instead of fighting them.<sup>40</sup>

The point here is that while Japanese methods of production were certainly an example of increasing Taylorization of the assembly line, and demanded a hard-working, disciplined worker, wholly committed to the company and turning out quality products, the toll that this took on the average auto worker was often less taxing (after a period of adjustment) and more rewarding than the older American system of auto production.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ingrassia and White also point out that The Big Three’s sales rose between 1984-88, giving them a false sense of having weathered the tsunami, and probably making them less interested in Japanese production methods (60). This may account, in part, for the film’s ultimate optimism regarding the success of Assan Motors.

<sup>41</sup> One study of a Mazda plant, Joseph J. Fucini and Suzy Fucini’s *Working for the Japanese: Inside Mazda’s American Auto Plant*, details various workers’ complaints about the Japanese system and presents the “better” relationship between American workers/management and Japanese management/owners as largely illusory. The authors’ summation of the situation of American workers laboring in Japanese plants is interesting:

As Robert Sobel notes in *Car Wars*, apropos of Japanese run plants in America, “worker satisfaction and morale were high. Production and quality control were not only satisfactory but in some cases better than those at Japanese factories,” and thus, “American management had done a poor job motivating workers” (317). While the film, in a sense, could be argued to bear out the notion that the American workers simply need time to adjust to the Japanese system, it is obvious that the more compelling critique of Detroit is forgotten by focusing on the Japanese, whose production methods are supposedly a result of binary cultural differences between America and Japan. The film suggests that even the most important of such differences (individualism vs. company loyalty, shoddy workmanship vs. quality workmanship) are somehow so deeply engrained in people that they are directly related to even the most trivial differences. Thus, when Hunt and Kazihiko discuss a juvenile “pissing contest,” we discover Americans shoot for distance, the Japanese for accuracy.

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Americans should not expect Japanese corporations to look after the long-term interests of the U.S. worker and manager. They should not be disappointed when the Japanese do not run their American plants and offices in accordance with American notions about rights and responsibilities [ . . . ]. The Japanese are not hostile toward Americans or American values; they are simply taking a management system that has worked well for them at home and exporting it to another country. [ . . . ]. If by exporting their management system the Japanese threaten to undermine American cultural values in the workplace, it is up to Americans to see that those values are preserved. (224)

There is an undercurrent of nationalism here under the “openness” of the passage. For instance, it matters little (especially in the world of multinational corporations) what “nationality” a corporation claims. American corporations have long been uninterested in American long-term interests. Moreover, the passage relies on an idea of homogeneous American “cultural values” that becomes the real site of the battle—much as it is in the movies.

Overall, the Fucinis’ study is interesting in that none of the complaints about the Japanese Mazda plant appear any different than complaints in numerous American plants, as Ruth Milkman notes:

## (Trans)National Threats

The realization that Japan was outperforming America at making cars—an original, American “Apple Pie” industry—inspired a reactionary patriotism and nationalistic pride in many Americans. The film reflects this nationalism and its tendency to essentialize cultural and racial differences between countries in a “friendly” softball game, where the Japanese show up in clean, new uniforms, in contrast to the rag-tag, “individually” dressed Americans, prompting Hunt’s friend, Buster (George Wendt), to say, “[t]hey look like the Yankees. I hate ’em already.” Such national and cultural differences appear to dictate the style of play too, as the first two Japanese batters bunt for singles—a hit and run style, “efficient” game—until the third baseman moves up to prevent another bunt, and the Japanese begin swinging the bat just as successfully. About to be shown up at their own national pastime when Hunt pops up in the infield for the potential last out of the game, the Americans win after Buster steamrolls the infielder standing in the baseline, knocking him over and preventing him from making the easy catch. No longer the result of a “friendly” game, the Americans’ victory is tinged with embarrassment.

Nationalism’s uglier sidekick, racism, enters here too, as the movie registers fears about the Japanese “conquering” America economically and “beating” Americans at what they do best—thus rewriting the outcome of World War II. Early Japanese imports were often disparagingly called “rice burners,” and the rising Japanese challenge to Detroit was usually laughed off by complacent executives. As Maryann Keller argues in *Rude Awakening: The Rise, Fall, and Struggle for Recovery of General Motors*, “[t]here was

clearly an element of racism behind GM's initial inability to see the Japanese as viable competition. The World War II veterans who held many of the managerial positions have struggled against a deeply rooted disdain for the Japanese [. . .]" (22). Keller mentions one executive's statement regarding his attempt to take Honda seriously after it opened its first plant in the U.S.: "The response I was met with was, 'Oh, don't worry about those little yellow Japs. They will never make a go of it in the United States'" (23). Such blatant and direct racism is absent from the film (it is, after all, a comedy), but one feels its sentiments in the depiction of American workers' attitudes toward the Japanese throughout. At one point a worker calls the management "the Rice-a-Roni patrol," and the workers make constant fun of Japanese, ridiculing their cuisine and use of chopsticks, and their ritual of a pre-work dip in the local river. These tamed-down instances of racism and xenophobia are, in a sense, the film's calling attention to the darker underside of such behavior.

Perhaps the most glaring, yet hidden, instance of nationalism the film evokes is in the title itself. *'Gung Ho!' The Story of Carlson's Makin Island Rangers* (1943) is the title of a World War II film about a battle in the Pacific. The film, as its title and date of release would suggest, is a fairly obvious piece of jingoistic, wartime propaganda that romanticizes war, swaddling it in nationalistic pride and a heroic storyline, all to tell the "true account" of one battalion's raid on an island. The plot follows a Marine battalion trained and mobilized seven weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The first half of the film takes place at boot camp, as men are selected to join a "special" battalion. Hailing from various geographic regions and class backgrounds, most of those selected

are former problem kids or “outsiders” in some way. They are selected for just this reason, as their Commanding Officer, Carlson, later binds these tough miscreants together through the philosophy of “gung ho” into a tight-run machine.<sup>42</sup> After training, the troop goes on its mission, which demonstrates its “gung ho” teamwork en route to victory. *Gung Ho* is, in a certain sense, the sequel to *Gung Ho!* While *Gung Ho!* champions America’s retaliation against the Japanese empire, *Gung Ho* signifies upon the earlier film by urging America to retaliate against the threat of a Japanese economic empire.

Moreover, it was Lieutenant Colonel Evans Fordyce Carlson (whose “true” story *Gung Ho!* relates) who first coined the term in 1942. Carlson, believing the phrase to be

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<sup>42</sup> Often Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* (1954) is cited as the prototype for films depicting a (military) group composed of tough individuals joined together to fight an overpowering force or to protect a defenseless group (most obviously in the western re-make of *Seven Samarai*, *The Magnificent Seven* [1960]). But clearly *Gung Ho!* is a forerunner here, minus the jingoism, of films like *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *Kelly’s Heroes* (1970), and *Three Kings* (1999) in its use of individual “characters” who put differences aside for a common cause, eventually bonding with each other as “true buddies.”

A similar tradition can be found in literature, but the combat group thrown together rarely experiences such cohesiveness or success. Literary examples are closer to the more “realistic” war films such as Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986) or Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) in their depiction of the darker aspects of individuals immersed in war—often smashing simple ideas of heroism as Hemingway, Céline, Remarque, and Trumbo had done earlier in the century in response to World War I. Indeed, the latter half of Kubrick’s film is partly based on Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, a book (by a journalist) about a war (Vietnam) that shatters any earlier form of war story/reportage.

From Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* (1978) and *The Things They Carried* (1990) to Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969), literary works often depict a harsher reality than most popular filmic representations of war. In the aforementioned literary works, soldiers are often shamed by their own ineptitude, cowardice, and inability to band together for the cause of the war or sometimes even self-preservation.

Interestingly, there appears to be some sort of link to the “success” of a war and its literary depiction. If World War One and Vietnam were simply horrific, so then are the responses to them. If World War Two “had” to be fought, it is seen as more “heroic and right,” which fits most early filmic representations of the war (see *A Bridge Too Far* (1977), *The Battle of Britain* (1969), *The Bridge at Remagen* (1969), and *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), or for a contemporary example, *Valkyrie* (2008)). Vonnegut seems an exception to this pattern, as his novel lodges a critique of the Allied firebombing of Dresden and dropping of two atomic bombs (all civilian targets). Yet Vonnegut’s novel is published in 1969, in the middle of the Vietnam War, and is thus an “anti-war” book and a response to its own immediate historical circumstances as much as it is a book about World War II.

a translation of Chinese meaning work (gung) together (ho), used it as a kind of philosophy to galvanize and motivate his Raider battalion. The term today, in American parlance,

seems to have settled down to usage as an adjective with the meanings ‘enthusiastic,’ ‘zealous,’ ‘eager,’ [. . .]; as a noun with the meanings ‘enthusiasm,’ ‘*esprit de corps*,’ [. . .]; and as a verb with the meanings ‘to move aggressively,’ ‘to bulldoze one’s way,’ ‘to plunge headlong or recklessly’ [. . .]. (Moe 30).

Howard’s film, of course, employs the phrase for the sentiment of “joining together for a common cause,” as the Americans and Japanese must learn to live and work together successfully. Interestingly enough, though, the Chinese derived term was a mistranslation by Carlson, whose mistaken translation became part of American usage anyhow. With such a confused linguistic history, rife with misreading, militarism and nationalism, it seems a fittingly ironic title for a film confused in its own cultural and class (mis)readings.<sup>43</sup>

Not surprisingly, the history of World War II lies buried just below the surface of Howard’s film and bubbles through on two occasions. The first is when Hunt and Kazihiro share a few beers at a bar in the local bowling alley and discuss their struggles with the workers and management, respectively. Kazihiro is similar to Hunt in that he is somewhat outside of his own (business) community. He is a “failed” executive, whom Hunt briefly encounters in Tokyo, and has been through the torturous re-training program

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<sup>43</sup> Paradoxically, Carlson learned the “gung ho” philosophy from the Communist Chinese Eight Route Army, of which he was an enthusiastic supporter. While Carlson stressed the “individuality” of each man, it was an individual who always had to submit to the “gung ho” ethic for the betterment of all.

shown at the start of the film. As he reveals to Hunt, part of his problem as an executive was that he cared too much for his employees' families and overall quality of life, against the Japanese business model of total loyalty to the company. This supposedly puts Kazuhiro in sympathy with the American workers. At the bowling alley, Kazuhiro again tells Hunt that the American workers have no pride in their work, and connects the Japanese work ethic to the resurgence of Japan during the "Economic Miracle," thus tacitly referring to World War II. Drunk by this point, he bursts into a patriotic rendition of Japan's national anthem in Japanese.

Kazuhiro's narrative of the phoenix-like rise of modern Japan is nationalistic in its own right, and shows a marked disregard of Japan's own imperial history leading up to the war, during which it subjugated much of Southeast Asia. The change in Kazuhiro's body language suggests the anthem is singing Kazuhiro, not the other way around, and hints at Japan's inability to deal openly with its violent past, covering it instead in the ideology of national pride. Some of this Japanese nationalism can be seen as a response to the fear and bitterness the U.S. and other countries felt toward Japan's "winning" an economic war after "losing" the military war. But this nationalism was fairly radical:

During 1982 a hit movie portrayed Japan as the victim, not the attacker, at Pearl Harbor. The minister of education infuriated Chinese, Koreans, and Southeast Asians when he authorized textbook revisions that stressed the benefits of Japanese colonialism, referred to Japanese aggression during World War II as 'advances,' and ignored Japan's wartime atrocities.

Despite his resignation and a public apology from the Prime Minister



Nakasone, few of Japan's imperialist victims accepted these acts as sincere. (Matray 23)

Kazhihiro's narrative of Japan's recovery and rise after the war, then, is a familiar Japanese cultural narrative of the time and shows that nationalism is not just one-sided. Moreover, it provides the deeper historical reservoir that feeds the beliefs of many of the film's characters (as well as those of American moviegoers) in the irreconcilable differences between the two nations and cultures, perhaps because this traumatic event has never been openly or forthrightly discussed by each nation. To underscore Japan's own nationalism in some sense legitimates the country as a "worthy" opponent of America, but it also dredges up (racist) American fears of an enemy so "sneaky" as to bomb Pearl Harbor, and so tenacious and zealous that it once praised suicidal Zero bombers and refused to surrender until two atomic bombs had been dropped on two civilian cities. In repressing such traumatic history, the economic war that played out during the 1980s was haunted by memories of the atomic bomb and World War II.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>This repression and release of the history/memory of World War II is perhaps most famously and humorously dealt with in the "German" episode of John Cleese and Connie Booth's "Fawlty Towers," where, after being hit on the head and becoming slightly deranged, hotel proprietor Basil Fawlty (Cleese) emphatically tells his staff "not to mention the war" to the arriving German guests. Due to his head injury (a device that allows Cleese to bring the repressed, unconscious anger of the British public to a "safe" because "accidental" conscious level), Fawlty continually mentions the war to the guests, one of whom breaks into tears, in a free-for-all Freudian slip-and-slide. In response to a demand to stop mentioning the war, Fawlty retorts, "Well, you started it," to which the guest replies, "No, we didn't," to which Fawlty answers, "Yes you did. You invaded Poland." The charade ends with Fawlty's impression of Hitler, perfected by Cleese's long and gangly, goose-stepping legs.

Considering the decision of many World War II veterans not to speak of the war until only recently, such moments in popular culture offered a "safe" release for built-up tensions and resentments that remained after the war (West Germany, similarly to Japan, also made a complete economic recovery after the war, more so than some of the "winners"). This response was much different from those more "high cultural" works that offered icier post-war assessments of Germany and/or Germans, such as in Walter Abish's *How German Is It?* (1980) and scenes in Jean-Luc Godard's *Masculine/Feminine* (1966) and Louis Malle's *Elevator to the Gallows* (1958). In fact, such repression-and-release appears to occur mainly regarding Germany, not Japan.

The second time the war is mentioned, however, it is used strategically as an insult delivered by Hunt to Kazihiro. Hunt asks how Japan “lost the big one” if the Japanese are such capable managers, as compensation for his own realization that America is losing the “next one.” Kazihiro tackles him, and the two wrestle for a while, until the workers finally break it up. The incident, again, shows how the trauma of history lies just under the tense relations between the countries, and how it can be used as a device to shame and anger the Japanese, as much as it can be used to buttress a false sense of pride and nostalgia for America’s preeminence in the world in Americans.<sup>45 46</sup>

This kind of knee-jerk jingoism ultimately makes little sense when it comes to the status of the automobile industry, however, whether in the 1980s or today, and the nationalistic rhetoric that often surrounds much of Detroit’s plea to “buy American” has to be set against the fact that companies like Toyota and GM have long since “gone global,” something *Gung Ho* unconsciously illustrates. As John B. Rae notes regarding American auto companies, “General Motors and the Ford Motor Company were among the earliest of the multinational organizations, and their example was followed by every major participant in the world automotive industry” (170). Even as early as 1984, Robert

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<sup>45</sup> There is surely a further irony in that Detroit helped America mobilize for the war by converting its factories to the production of military vehicles, building the very American planes that fought the Japanese empire in the Pacific. Thus, the auto industry in its evocation of American patriotism, can claim not only to be an industry invented and begun by an American, but one which heeded the call of duty during one of the America’s most trying times. The fact that this industry, perhaps the most “American” and patriotic of all American industries, could be threatened by both German and Japanese imports stung many Americans suffering through a recession in the 1970s and early 80s.

<sup>46</sup> The film also registers World War II in a scene depicting the assimilation of Kazihiro’s family to an American way of life. After being lambasted by his boss, Kazihiro returns home and is angry to find his wife serving fish sticks and Kool-Aid for dinner. His son, dressed as an American soldier, fires at him with a toy gun and claims he is “GI Joe.” The possible utopian vision of a “blending” of cultures and nations here is undercut by the consumer commodities that function merely as signs, at the surface level, for the reconciliation of memory and history that is forever deferred.

Sobel could safely state that “[t]he old ideas that there were products that might be considered American, Japanese, German or Italian was going by the boards” (314). The truth of such production is more complex than any simple, jingoistic formula that equates buying American with improving America’s economy can offer:

In the 1990s, as it shut down two dozen plants in the United States and eliminated 75,000 jobs, GM invested more than \$1 billion in new plants all around the world. During the same period, Toyota invested more than \$1 billion to expand its Georgetown, Kentucky, plant, build a truck plant in Princeton, Indiana, and start up an engine plant outside Charlestown, West Virginia, creating more than 20,000 jobs. Which decision was better for the U.S. economy? (Maynard 308).

Thus, while Detroit and its advertisements harp on “buying American” and pull at patriotic heart strings, the truth is that such multinational corporations have less allegiance to individual nations than it would seem.<sup>47</sup> As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point out,

They tend to make nation-states merely instruments to record the flows of the commodities, monies, and populations they set in motion. The transnational corporations directly distribute labor power over various

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<sup>47</sup> Some of the more recent Detroit advertisements show the persistence of such nationalistic rhetoric, particularly in the latest GM’s Chevy campaign, in which John Cougar Mellencamp sings “This is Our Country” over hackneyed images of small-town America, where families gather to see ball games and fireworks in their pick-up trucks. So too has the recent financial crisis led various Detroit companies once again to stress that buying American benefits America. While there is a good deal of truth in this, the complicated nature of the auto industry, as detailed above, makes such an assertion suspect at best.

markets, functionally allocate resources, and organize hierarchically the various sectors of world production. (31-2)

Just as transplant auto firms have affected America, so too have GM and American auto makers affected various places (labor and consumer markets, as they see them) in the world. These decentralized distributors and constructors of labor and markets, then, create flows of goods, commodities, and subjectivities that overflow traditional economic and national boundaries, which the Detroit companies try and assure the customer are still intact, all the while restructuring such boundaries themselves. In terms of economics, then, the importance of nation-states rhetorically and ideologically is growing, while their actual ability to regulate commerce is being challenged and in some cases eclipsed.<sup>48</sup>

The real transnational threat in the film (which it fails to register), then, is not the Japanese but the more and more powerful transnational corporations, newly infused with capital and freer from government regulation than ever.

#### Automatic Transmission

Thus, while portraying the characters' jingoistic nationalist attitudes as harmful, *Gung Ho* subtly reinforces a kind of nationalism, which itself is ultimately at odds with the film's heralding of the new global economy. As *Gung Ho* rigidly continues to suggest the determinism of binary differences between nations and cultures, the situation at the plant does not improve. After tensions between management and workers mount

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<sup>48</sup> Surely the quashed Dubai port security deal in 2006 shows how nationalism, xenophobia and nation-states still have a say in such matters, especially considering that the Bush administration pushed for the deal to go through, only caving-in after relentless public and Congressional outcry, from across the political spectrum, made it politically expedient to do so.

after the softball fiasco, Buster is demoted and then fired. Soon after, invited to dinner at Kazuhiro's house, Hunt is also fired, only to fast-talk his way back into employment by promising Kazuhiro that the workers can perform just as well as the most efficient Japanese workers and produce fifteen thousand cars in a month.

The workers, furious with the new working conditions, call another union meeting. It is only Hunt's magnificent hustling that once again quells the workers' rebellion. This time, however, Hunt outright lies to the workers. Having buttered up the crowd with jingoistic remarks about American workers' superiority to Japanese workers, he informs them that all their pay and union benefits will be restored if they can make fifteen thousand cars in a month, a Japanese record. When the workers balk at this deal and begin to doubt Hunt's earlier claim that he could deal with the Japanese, Hunt equivocates about the goal of fifteen thousand, and lies that they will earn part of the raise if they make thirteen thousand cars instead. The workers leave on a high note, committing themselves to working overtime without pay and weekends, whatever measures are necessary to reach the mark and earn the raise.

The speed-up in production is accompanied by a montage of devoted workers, toiling away to an unimaginative rock song, "Tough Enough." This speed-up eventually leads to an accident when one of Hunt's friends gets his hand caught on the assembly line. The film portrays the accident as an outcome of the faster production methods, but it must do so in a strange fashion. *It is only when the line is jammed and work comes to a stop that the injury takes place.* Apparently, as the worker is trying to fix the problem, the assembly line jolts into action again, and he is injured. Since there is no statistical

indication that there are any more accidents under Japanese auto production than American, the accident really has little bearing on the Japanese factory model as the film would like to suggest. Indeed, the introduction of a wire in reach of the line that automatically shuts it down is a Japanese safety innovation. Again, the film would seem to belie its championing of the new capitalism by staging the accident at the point at which the new global system comes to a halt and must start up again, *not* when it is in actual motion. In doing so, *Gung Ho* undercuts the notion that the new system is more harmful to workers than the older system.

The real danger, it seems, is in questioning, stalling, or stopping the new, fluid global economy, whether it is through unions and collective action or physically ceasing production.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> This moment has its correlation in a recent Visa ad campaign. This series of commercials features customers at the site of consumption—one takes place in a cafeteria, another in an electronics store—who form a line from the places where they browse and select items for purchase that leads all the way to the cash register. The line forms a never-ending loop of consumption, which, as soon as one customer leaves after paying, is renewed by a fresh customer. All of this occurs at a rapid pace, and it is clear that if one particular movement or step is miscalculated, the entire system will be affected. In the electronic store version, customers act as if they are robots or androids (the actors clearly have been trained to do smooth yet jerky “mechanical man” impressions), robotically break-dancing while picking out their purchases to the tune of Herbie Hancock’s “Rockit” (any early MTV hit due to its cutting-edge, all robot video). The flock of customers flows swiftly along as each customer, in robot-like fashion, approaches the register and flashes his or her Visa card and moves away. The loop is continuous, the screen a blur of well-choreographed, purposeful motion, much like those children’s toys in which marbles are pushed down plastic paths into elevated shafts where they ascend and are dropped down ramps, only to come back to the starting point again. The movement is hypnotic in its orderliness and smooth functionality—that is, until it jams or breaks down. In the commercial, the breakdown in the line of automata-customers occurs when one customer tries to pay with a check (it is cash in the cafeteria commercial). The music scratches to a halt, and the entire scene freezes as the automata hang their heads and appear to have “shut down.” Realizing his mistake, the customer whips out his Visa card and the robot dance begins again. (In the cafeteria commercial all eyes scrutinize the offender as the cash register actually has to be physically opened and change given. Once the transaction is finished, and the cash-using Neanderthal has adequately soaked up his fellow customers’ disapproving looks and tacitly registers he has learned his lesson, the offender leaves and the untroubled stream of consumption continues.)

Clearly in these Visa commercials, in which people are figured as commodity-buying machines in an assembly-like consumption line, it is credit and Visa that offer the ceaseless and smooth functionality of the global economy. “Life Takes Visa,” the commercial says, though it is clear that Visa has taken charge of life here, not the other way around. This new economy is a kind of perpetual motion machine that trades

For, although the film suggests it is the *worker* who needs an “attitude adjustment,” it is actually the new and improved assembly line—more automated with robots than ever, and sped up and functioning at high-efficiency under Japanese management (as representatives of the new global technologies and economy)—that *demands the workers to adjust to it*. The system only breaks down and “hurts” its workers (from the physical injury of one man, to the “suffering” of all production) when its smooth functionality is undercut, stalled, or interrupted. To challenge or derail this new system (which can only ever be temporary, anyhow, for the system is ultimately unstoppable) represents the real danger here, not the system itself.

The Japanese automobile industry’s innovations in assembly-line production are prime and material examples of this new global system at work. This is true especially of

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away its future reckoning for another day. Cash, that dirty relic of the past, is banished from the new cathedral of consumption. And it is the old way of doing things, the past, which disrupts the orderly flow of the new system.

Jean-Joseph Goux, tracing the relationship between post-structuralist notions of language and the emergence and dominance of credit against cash and check, notes that “by freeing us from the personal labor of writing by hand, the [credit or debit] card opens the way to all ulterior possibilities of the automatization of operations” and, thus, “the purely informational essence of money is becoming more and more apparent” (120). According to Goux,

A society dominated by banking activity, and thus by credit, makes use of time and expectation, makes use of the future (as if all its activities were totalized and accounted for in a time ahead of its own) by furnishing itself with an advance on itself in a gesture of expectation and reckoning (122).

Goux’s description here is germane to the customer lines in the Visa commercials. Their looped repetition (the commercials themselves, and the customer lines depicted within) accounts for the complete and total past, present, and future “reckonings” (in the economic sense) of their customers, the new representatives of the global economy who are admitted to this new system via plastic, not cash, since

[i]f the bank note, whose state issuance ensures that its validity is circumscribed within well-defined boundaries, clearly marked the national limits of monetary exchange [. . .], the credit card [. . .] becomes one of the no less clear signs of the epoch of multinational or transnational capitalism (Goux 126).

For Goux, “the bank, having become telematized, rapidly exceeds its secular role in order to appropriate the at-home [. . .] and the far away [. . .], the present (cash) and the future (credit, insurance, retirement) in a providential bankerization of all aspects of life” (126).

Toyota, which in January 2008 passed Ford for the number two slot in overall U.S sales, and closely trails GM for the top spot (although the 2010 recalls are resulting in plummeting sales). Toyota is known for its TQS, Total Quality Control, and its TPS, or Total Production System, which revolutionized how auto-manufacturing would take place. TPS is a system that accounts for the entire manufacturing process, down to the smallest detail, in a kind of “uber-Taylorization” of all aspects of production and emphasizing quality control (“zero defects”). Furthermore, Toyota instituted a “pull system” or “just in time” system in which products are shipped and arrive when they are needed, thus obviating warehouse stockpiling in which Detroit engaged. This particular “pull system” both speeded up production and lowered the cost of keeping stock, and is now a regular feature of all manufacturing industries. Governing all of these innovations, as Paul Ingrassia and Joseph B. White write, was *kaizen*, a Japanese concept stressing “‘continuous improvement,’ or the process of making small changes to make a job easier, or less expensive” (49). This concept also required a relationship between management and workers that was supposedly more open and fluid and encouraged workers to offer ideas about improving production.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The “freedom” and “say” in the workers’ labor is merely a kind of pseudo-autonomy, making the workers feel Toyota cares about them and listens to them, when clearly it *cares only about innovations in the system efficiency-wise*, as well as keeping its employees from unionizing. Or, as Milkman writes, summarizing some arguments against management techniques like TPS,

participatory schemes are basically strategies to enhance *managerial* control. [. . .] workers [. . .] participate mainly in the intensification of their own exploitation, mobilizing their detailed firsthand knowledge of the labor process to help management speed up production and eliminate wasteful work practices. (16)

This granting of a pseudo-autonomy and pseudo-voice, however, has been remarkably effective in recent decades, as the UAW has declined in membership and lost key battles trying to unionize workers in Nissan, Honda, and Toyota plants. A 2007 *Washington Post* article lays bare the UAW’s present state after twenty-some odd years of dealing with such companies:



*Gung Ho*, however, merely represents the Japanese innovations as draconian throwbacks, entirely ignoring the more “open” relationship between managers and workers and the revolutionary “just in time” system. Moreover, Taylorizing Taylorization is merely the improvement of an *American* system of management. There is nothing essentially Japanese about it at all. As Sobel reminds us, “[a]s early as 1911, a translation of management philosopher Frederick Taylor’s *The Secret of Saving Lost Motion* sold over 1.5 million copies in Japan” (126).

In this sense, the further Taylorization of labor in something like TPS, no matter what its benefits seem to be for the workers, is disturbing not because it is somehow “Japanese” but because it is an example of the global economic system in action. Such innovations hail the arrival of de-industrialization and the rise of the service sector economy. Cheap labor in a global market means that old manufacturing jobs in first world countries will decline, a “just in time” system means that warehouses are leaner

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The union has not organized a single foreign-owned car company that builds and sells vehicles in the United States. It has not organized BMW, Honda, Hyundai, Nissan, Mercedes-Benz or Toyota. It has little to no immediate prospects of winning representation at South Korea’s Kia, which is planning to build an assembly plant near the Georgia-Alabama border. Those and other foreign-owned car companies now occupy 50 percent of the U.S. market, and the likelihood is that their U.S. market share will top 50 percent by the end of the year. (Freeman)

Having established specific management practices that seek to ease any tensions between management and labor, foreign-owned car corporations have also made sure to make their employment packages comparable to those contracted through unions. The result has been a work force either unwilling or afraid to unionize. But considering the amount of employment and capital certain factories have brought to small, financially ailing cities, how much “choice” is involved in accepting such employment conditions is debatable. It is the auto corporations which find themselves in the driving seat, as local governments offer enormous tax breaks and subsidies to entice the corporations into opening up shop in their cities. So many plants have been opened in the South, for instance, that the auto industry now refers to it as “Detroit South.”

The irony is startling. In response to inhuman labor conditions, and in order to gain job security and livable wages for people, the unions that sprang up after 1935 offered workers protection from big business and its unapologetic brutal methods. The battles fought between labor and hired Pinkertons were deadly and nearly unimaginable today. Instead, the stage of multinational capitalism has witnessed capitalism’s repressed discontents return to one of its primary sources through foreign-owned car corporations, but with new ways of placating and controlling labor, so long as labor eschews organizing itself.

and employ less people, manufacturing workers lucky enough to find work can no longer expect union contracts, and the speed-up and better efficiency of production has given rise to new ways of disciplining workers, ways that the workers must accept in order for the system to perpetuate itself without any untoward hitches. For the global system is now so all-pervasive that it has convinced most people that if it is allowed to fail, it will take everyone with it. One must accept the new order, with its *requirement* of loose and fluid labor structures and financial regulations—and resulting permanent destabilization of life—and sacrifice an older assured stability for the “stability” of the system itself. As an economic structure, globalization no longer brings security and stability but insecurity and instability, and the threat of their increase if it is allowed to fail. The ability to imagine anything outside of such a Total System, to imagine the Empire’s new clothes, is therefore deemed impossible.

This post-industrial dilemma is precisely what *Gung Ho* depicts when the workers walk out. Without their union contract, they are without any real voice, and Assan Motors has no qualms about pulling up stakes and letting the town deteriorate again. As we have seen, though, the unconscious pull of the film is an endorsement of the new multinational stage of capitalism against an older industrial system bogged down by unions and pampered workers who, as a result, have lost their true-blooded, American/Protestant work ethic. Camouflaging this concern under the ruse of irreconcilable cultural differences and the traumatic history between America and Japan, the film rejects a closer analysis of America’s complicity in such a global system, even after it returns to its own doorstep.

A utopian moment of reconciliation and redemption is fantasized, however, in the film's ending. The wedding here between the old and new, America and Japan, is completed when management and labor work together on the line (even though the plant is officially closed), in yet another montage set to a bad rock 'n roll song (itself another remnant of Detroit's decaying legacy). The utopian montage would appear to be the blending, then, of what has heretofore been polarized: the differences between Japanese "teamwork" and American "individualism" are transcended by the fact that management works side by side with the blue-collar workers on the line; the older system or "American Way" works with the new system figured as the "Japanese Way"; and the Protestant work ethic, devotion to hard-work and quality control, meets the Japanese "total loyalty" to the company. Yet, there is not really any merging going on at all. Nothing actually changes, except that the workers give in to what the Japanese have been demanding all along. Faced with the prospect of Assan Motors leaving, the men submit to working for no pay according to the Japanese standards of production, and at the grueling pace the managers have been pushing the entire time—all to get Assan Motors to stay.

Of course, since this is the true "fourth quarter" comeback of the film, the management helps out to make the quota, and the last few cars are pushed off the line without engines and windshields. But the "victory" the workers gain when Assan's CEO, angry about the last few defective cars, relents and grants the raise, is actually no victory at all. The workers and management all cheer, obviously having pulled together as a team and ironed out their differences for good, but the fact remains that the workers will

have to keep up such an inordinate monthly production of cars from here on out (certainly putting in the same overtime and without management's help on the line), something it is clear they will not be able to do, even with their supposed reinvigorated work ethic. Moreover, although they now have wages equaling those they had under the union, they still lack a contract and collective voice. Essentially, the workers have been disciplined to accept the new global economy. The rules include being paid, at best, an equal wage to what they earned before (and most likely this wage will be lower than their prior salaries) and being forbidden to unionize, which thus compromises job security and bargaining power. And these rules come into effect only if there is a higher production rate than the workers are used to. In other words, employment hinges on meeting higher production goals, which will reward the workers with weakened salaries and strip them of any union benefits. However, the film's celebration of the workers' entry into multinational capitalism as they all enthusiastically perform the morning exercises they formerly snubbed in perfect unison while the credits roll to the song "Working Class Man" pushes all this outside of the viewer's gaze, as the happy, Hollywood ending fantasizes this new system as a kind of utopia. In truth, Hunt's continual promise that things will "ease up" if the workers just hold on a little bit longer never comes to pass, despite the fantasy ending. It is the workers who must "ease into" the new global system, and Hunt's coaxing is late capitalism's coaxing and promise that all will be well in some future utopian market-space.

This conversion to the new system takes place at the level of blue-collar work ethic, which the film suggests has disappeared thanks to cushy union contracts. The moment of revelation, in which Hunt tells the town the “truth” about America, is telling:

You don't want the truth. You know what you want to hear? You want to hear that Americans do everything better than anybody else. [The crowd cheers.] They're kicking our butts, and that ain't luck, that's the truth. There's your truth. Sure, the great old do or die American spirit. Yeah, it's alive, but they've got it. Well, I'll tell you something. We better get it back. We better get it back damn fast. Instead, we're strutting around telling ourselves how great we are, patting each other on the back.

When the workers decide to help out in the final “come-together” scene, they revive that “old do or die American spirit,” which is apparently all they needed to do from the beginning.

In “truth,” however, there has been little wrong with blue-collar performance in transplant factories in terms of work efficiency or quality, and especially as regards transitioning to the foreign companies' newer management and production techniques. As companies like Toyota with its Total Production System have proved, management that establishes close ties with factory workers, and actually listens to their suggestions for improvement, tends to be successful, resulting in a happier work force. The most successful of GM's plants, for instance, is its aforementioned joint venture, NUMMI, with Toyota.

At GM-Linden, by contrast, in which little changed in the factory despite incorporating many Japanese methods, workers remained discontent. Unlike the portrayal of the workers in *Gung Ho*, who react hostilely to the new “Japanese” system (which as we’ve seen is really a reprise of the old, American system):

[w]hat has stood in the way of change is not resistance from workers, who are ready to try anything in their desperation to escape the traditional system. Rather, management has proved itself unable (or perhaps unwilling) to implement even the relatively modest changes like those announced with such fanfare [. . .] in the late 1980s. [. . .] But what is striking is not the mere acquiescence but rather the enthusiasm with which so many workers have responded to restructuring efforts of this sort. They dislike the traditional system so intensely that they desperately want to believe in the promise of a new one. Yet GM has failed to capitalize on this opportunity, and in most of its plants, the traditional system—with a few cosmetic modifications—has been preserved intact. (Milkman 17)

Thus, the workers’ discontent is not a reaction to the new system, but precisely the opposite. It is “resentment about management’s failure to implement fully the changes it promised to make when the plant was modernized in the mid-1980s” (Milkman 14).

Toyota even used *Gung Ho* as an example of how not to manage American workers (“Why Toyota”), though it was already sensitive to management issues before the film. In other words, in reality the Japanese system of running factories (even without union contracts) has led to not only more productivity, but more contented workers. Realizing

this, American manufacturers have tried to learn from the Japanese, but have been unable to replicate the newer structures adequately.

What the success in productivity at the transplants and joint ventures like NUMMI shows, then, is that the American blue-collar worker is not the root of the American auto industry's problems. There is nothing uncommonly wrong with American workers. They have not been "spoiled" by union contracts, nor have they any less work ethic than before. While *Gung Ho* suggests that Detroit's cars are defective because of careless and lazy workers, this is simply not true. It is the white-collar, corporate structure of old Detroit that is mired in the past, whose draconian factory management is more accurately reflected in the film via the "Japanese threat." Detroit's inability to initiate change at a fundamental and structural level is what has led to a further decline in the American auto industry, not a lack of American "can-do" attitude, as Hunt suggests in his revelatory speech to the town.

Hunt, even after he chooses to remain loyal to the town and holds up the mirror to its tainted image, still remains the trickster figure all the while. He is the liaison between worker and management, between Detroit and the transplants, and, most importantly, between the older, industrial capitalism and the era of the multinationals. His smooth salesmanship is ultimately the film's salesmanship to its viewer in the endorsement of a system that America need not fear if it will simply take a deep look within itself and reclaim those national and natural characteristics that it has always had—its self-reliance, toughness, pioneering spirit, and its God-given work ethic. As we have seen, however, this messiah's gospel of work ethic is a ruse of sorts, pitched at the worker who will bear

the brunt of this transitional state of the auto industry and global economy. If capitalism might be to blame, it is because corporations like Assan Motors, in their “foreignness,” are cold, ruthless, and harbor historical resentments, but this could never be the case at home where good, simple, and hard-working people just want to lead honest lives.

#### Over the (Joe) Hill and Back Again

This takes us back to the film’s beginning, in which the multinational postmodern space of Tokyo offered that very utopia to Hunt in the form of the golden arches of McDonald’s (an “American” company gone global) and not in the nostalgic space of small-town America. Coincidentally, we see no corporate fast-food restaurants in Hadleyville, nor do we get the sense there are any, as Howard must portray this America as fairly idyllic, untainted as yet by corporations and the global economy. But corporations, like McDonald’s and Assan Motors, have transcended the nostalgic boundaries the film fantasizes in the name of the universal citizen—the consumer. That, for instance, is the reason foreign-owned car makers came to the U.S. in the first place, not for the cheap labor, but to cut out tariffs and taxes and to get closer to the consumers of one of the largest car markets in the world.

Hadleyville, too, for all its sleepy, small-town nostalgia, cannot pretend its own innocence in such a world. We need only look at that *ne plus ultra* of consumer sites, the supermarket, to see this. Central to postmodern life, as Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* registers, the supermarket encapsulates the complexity of capitalism’s grip on postmodern life. Filled with the necessities of survival, food and water, it simultaneously



remains a place for selling dreams, fantasies, and desires. Although the town in Howard's film is essentially dying—most of its citizens are jobless and moving away, and various businesses are closing up shop—the Hadleyville supermarket (aptly named “Food Towne”) is still fairly crowded, still piping anonymous Muzak through the speakers, and still well-stocked with an endless variety of goods. Hunt and Buster come to blows there, crashing into different displays until Hunt finally fells Buster, who collapses into a display of cheese curls.

That this epitome of working-class frustration, reaching a boiling point as the two old friends come to blows, should take place in the supermarket seems somehow fitting. The later fight between Hunt and Kazihiro will take place in the factory, the space of production, for it is really the battle between the old and new economic systems. But the earlier fight takes place in the space of consumption, and there can be no outsourcing this rage onto a “foreign” threat. For once, the anger takes place at perhaps the true scene of the crime, though it now tears apart those who should be in solidarity, being that they suffer under the same conditions (albeit Hunt's job now effectively puts him in a white-collar position). Yet in the destruction of goods, in the smashing of displays of potato chips, paper towels, dog food, and cheese curls, there is a satisfying feeling of release, a leaking out of the truly repressed rage at the site for which all this production and misery is in service. For how can there not be a feeling of bitterness and betrayal here? In the midst of a terrible economic depression and the desolation of an entire town, even Hunt's girlfriend, Audrey, advises the stock boy to put the rows and rows of cookies on a lower shelf so that children will see them, beg their parents for them, and the store will move its

product. The scenes in the supermarket, then, offering our only glimpse at the space of consumption in a film so critical of “Japanese” production, smash the small-town innocence of Hadleyville, revealing how much it (and America) have all along been complicit in the ever-expanding story of capital. The citizens of Hadleyville are also the citizen-consumers of the global economy and have long ago accepted its fundamental belief system.

I have attempted, above, to hold up a larger and wider mirror (the mirror of production) than Hunt offers Hadleyville to *Gung Ho* itself, but with the caveat that “objects in the mirror may be closer than they appear.” For *Gung Ho*’s use of the Japanese and Assan Motors as a screen on which to project and distort not only the American auto industry’s history and production methods, but the reputation of blue-collar workers, and ultimately the ambiguous return of late capitalism with its entourage of anxieties, cannot finally contain its own *excess* (as definitions of “gung ho” suggest) in figuring the underlying historical and economical problems of capital as essentially cultural, racial, and national differences between America and Japan.

Good Times, Bad Times... You Know I Had My Share(s): Representations of Corporations in Five Popular Films.

“Even a radical film director who wished to portray culturally important social developments like the merger of two industrial concerns could only do so by showing us the dominant figures in the office, at the conference table or in their mansions. Even if they were thereby revealed as monstrous characters, their monstrousness would still be sanctioned as a quality of individual human beings in a way that would tend to obscure the monstrousness of the system whose servile functionaries they are.”

T. W. Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture”

Representations of corporations or depictions of corporate power have become familiar tropes in and throughout the image-repertoire of popular culture. In movies and television shows, corporations are often cast as the bad guys, coldly calculating in their pursuit of profits, unsympathetic to the human cost of their business (trans)actions. The castigation of a heartless capitalism has become fairly commonplace in such media, so commonplace, in fact, that it might be useful to take a closer look at these fairly one-dimensional representations of corporations to discover the cost of such “flattening” depictions. We might argue that corporations in popular culture have become stereotyped, in a sense, and that such stereotyped tropes signify all too easily a certain emotional complex in the viewer, which can block, in its immediate stimulus, any attempt to think through such tropes. What we end up with is a kind of Manichean view of corporations wherein a temporarily aberration in capitalism is ultimately good for the system, instead of a dialectical approach that offers a base from which to examine the rise of such a contradictory view, and what seems to be a change in terms of content remains merely one of (n)ever changing form.

The satirical cartoon *South Park*, for instance, exemplifies this sort of binary trapping of thought, particularly in an episode dealing with corporate power and

influence. This episode, “Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes,” depicts the opening of a Wall-Mart (instead of Wal-Mart) in the little town of South Park, Colorado. The opening of the Wall-Mart leads to the closing of various mom-and-pop stores, due in part to South Park’s population being literally hypnotized by the store after initially having embraced its bulk-priced bargains. The store turns out to be a kind of monster, seeking to swallow the town, and the episode clearly lampoons not only Wal-Mart, but rampant consumer capitalism as well. Shoppers are like zombies, it implies, and corporations mystify, through hypnosis/ideology, the true state of things: that it is you who are being consumed, not you who are consuming.

Finally becoming aware of this threat, the town attempts to stop Wall-Mart by burning it down, only to have another Wall-Mart immediately take its place. In frustration, the children (the protagonists: Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and Cartman) travel to Wall-Mart’s headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas, to find out how to destroy the store. In yet another fictional-fantasy meeting with a CEO, the children meet Harvey Brown, who fears nothing can stop the Wall-Mart because it is running itself (the same line that Shelgrim gives Presley in *The Octopus*). However, armed with Brown’s advice to “find and destroy” the store’s heart, the children return to South Park, where they track down their target behind a plasma-screen television in the electronics department. The “heart” of Wall-Mart turns out to be a mirror, wherein after witnessing their reflections, the children are told that the true heart of Wall-Mart is themselves (the customers), but even more specifically their “desire.” They smash the mirror and the Wall-Mart self-destructs.

The moral of the episode as given by Randy, Stan's father, and earlier stated by Kyle, is that to defeat Wall-Mart the town needs to exercise "self-control and personal responsibility" in its shopping habits. After this epiphany, the town swears to shop only at Jim's Drug, which a rapid montage depicts growing as large as Wall-Mart and subsequently being burned to the ground by the town. Randy says they will be sure not "to make that mistake again" by shopping at True Value instead. Overall, the episode is a neat stab at corporate brawn and consumer culture, but its "message" in terms of what can be done to combat these problems leaves much to be desired. The system simply continues on as always.<sup>51</sup>

*South Park's* longevity (twelve seasons and a film to date), popularity, and topicality, however, make it a good barometer for noting that existing attitudes toward corporations remain essentially blasé, even in a post-Enron and post-trillion-dollar-and-counting-bailout America. Perhaps the familiar trope of the corporation in popular culture helps to maintain such an attitude, creating a kind of "Tell me something I don't know" mentality, which ultimately breeds cynicism in the viewer that any radical change to the system is a possibility. The Wall-Mart episode suggests that while corporations

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<sup>51</sup> This hesitation to launch a more trenchant critique has a great deal to do with the basic structure of *South Park* itself, which typically depicts each opposing side of an "issue" as an extreme and therefore foolish position, and then levels a critique through the innocent mouths of babes (usually the level-headed Kyle or Stan), who articulate a middling compromise/solution that shows each side the (t)error of its ways. The show is inherently conservative in this regard and tends to restrict any actual analysis of fundamental problems by uncritically defining each problem as it is framed by an already existing "public" debate, without first testing the validity of such framing. It may seem that the show, in its search for a rational Aristotelian "golden mean" between two "irrational" positions, is essentially dialectical. But this is really a kind of pseudo-dialectics, arguing for a compromise between two radically polarized opposites that seeks to make fundamental tensions disappear on the surface, merely for the time being. The show is inherently "moderate" in its politics and might stand as a kind of emblem for America's recent move to middle-ground, centrist politics, reflected in its last two closely contended presidential elections and the basic centrism of both candidates in the 2008 election: Obama, a centrist democrat, and McCain, a too-liberal republican.

may be necessary to provide important products to consumers (say, pharmaceutical drugs and foods), they are also fairly inhuman in their unchecked pursuit of profits. But since *South Park* regularly casts political activists protesting against certain institutions as mindless extremists who are so obsessed by their radical politics that they are unable to consider the problem at hand levelheadedly, there is, in the final analysis, no way to combat corporate power effectively. The corporation turns out to be evil, single-minded, and one-dimensional, but any reaction to this fact that smacks of activism or political action will be figured as equally so. *South Park*'s popularity reflects the sort of pragmatic, problem-solving American character that levels the burden of social change on the individual. This Emersonian self-reliance is echoed in Kyle's advice simply to use "self-control and personal responsibility" to fight corporate influence. That, in a weirdly Lacanian moment, the children achieve "self" enlightenment when looking at "themselves" in a mirror in the heart of a corporate giant should make *us* "reflect" on the inadequacy of this already doubled position. For if what we are really fighting here is "desire," then what a simple view of desire the episode takes, as if desire is something as easily bottled up or packaged as the products consumers shop for—which, of course, the episode continually admits *is* the case (in the sense of commodity fetishism), while offering the easy solution—a pretty, Nancy Reagan-type slogan—of "just saying no."

Moreover, we are not truly allowed to imagine the ends of any possible political project that might suggest an alternative to the system, as even violent act of burning down Wal-Mart accomplishes nothing. The system itself may not be perfect, the show suggests, but if we can practically and objectively assess the situation (hence the use of

“innocent” children to deliver the message), take a collective deep breath, and act rationally (centrist) everything will be all right in the end (the humorous repetition of capitalist growth and destruction in the final montage notwithstanding). In other words, the *real* villain here is ourselves, as the mirror suggests, for we are the ones that buy and purchase products that “produce” such corporations as Wal-Mart.

While the show’s solution to the dilemma of corporate capitalism is wanting, it at least represents a fairly self-conscious view of the role of corporations in American daily life. Such an episode stands at the end of a long line of corporate representations that similarly attempt to grapple with capitalism’s troubling contradictions. This chapter will look at five such films that also deal with corporations in a fairly straightforward manner, with one exception. The films have been selected, in part, for this reason, but also because it is helpful to read the logic of each of the films as fairly descriptive of the changes in corporate capitalism over the last fifty years. The stories these films tell of corporate capitalism in postwar America might also be seen as a microcosm of America’s popular (un)consciousness and understanding of the thrills and chills, the manic and panic of late capitalist life. *Executive Suite* (1954), for instance, speaks to the relative security felt during post-World War II American affluence. The individual and the family find themselves challenged by corporate capitalism, which is well-meaning enough in its goals to be reigned in before its destructive capabilities are fully realized. Much of this postwar stability and security is questioned in the 1960s, and by the time *Network* (1976) is released, Rooseveltian New Deal politics has been dealt its death blow. Corporations are clearly no longer the paternal organizations they were in the ’50s and

'60s. They have gone multinational, and a lingering, media-compromised '60s radicalism tries in vain to call them to account. When *Ghostbusters* (1984) hits the screen, the neoliberal agenda feared in *Network* is in full swing. With the economy surging, there is a sense of reprieve from the '70s recession, and a lighthearted embrace of the free market and all its benefits. The hurdy-gurdy economic times that followed—the market crash in '87 and the recession in the early '90s—gave way to some mild concerns with the struggles of smaller businesses as mergers and corporate takeovers seemed the order of the decade. *Tommy Boy* (1995), riding on the tail of this recession, can begin to see the economic upswing of the Clinton years as news enough to have a nostalgic vision of the renewed roots of American capitalism, somewhat akin to the vision of *Executive Suite*. Yet *Michael Clayton* (2007), released during the “War on Terror,” seems to look at the effects of the global economy as politically, morally, and culturally bankrupt. This colorless world seems in a kind of limbo, with no sensible pre-history to explain its conditions and no possibility of changing them.

Furthermore, in the interest of discovering telling continuities and discontinuities among their representations of corporations, the five films discussed span a variety of genres, from drama (*Executive Suite*) to comedy (*Tommy Boy* and *Ghostbusters*) to thriller (*Michael Clayton*), to cultural and political satire (*Network*). These films are telling in that, like the Wal-Mart episode of *South Park*, however critical or uncritical their analyses of corporate capitalism might be, none of them is able to uncover fully the systemic and structural problems in the economic system itself. As a result, the films tend to end either positively, by pushing the concerns raised outside of their frames, or



pessimistically, by reaffirming the unstoppable and malevolent forces of capitalism. We end up locked, once again, in the binary of either/or and good/evil, which merely reiterates the same views of corporations and capitalism, and offers little hope for change.<sup>52</sup>

### The Essential Goodness of Capitalism

An early film that serves as a kind of model for this pervasive view of the corporation as evil is Robert Wise's *Executive Suite* (1954). In the film, the death of Avery Bullard, president of the Tredway Corporation, leaves a power vacuum that the remaining six board members seek to fill. After some mild backroom wheeling and dealing (none of it too underhanded early on), Loren Shaw (Fredric March) emerges as

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<sup>52</sup> Obviously numerous films dealing with corporations by necessity must be left out of this chapter. Perhaps the most glaring are films that deal with corrupt corporate power by representing "true" stories. Films such as *The Insider* (1999), *Silkwood* (1983), and *Erin Brokovich* (2000) tend to present the corporation as an evil institution that the individual must fight against without compromising the pursuit of "truth and justice." Thus, whatever the (Pyhrric) victories achieved by the real-life based characters, they are always cast as ultimately heroic in their overcoming personal doubts and problems to defeat a much larger institution. In this sense, one could replace the corporation with the government or any institution that tries to crush the never-say-die individual. The fact, again, that these films are based on "real life" only underscores their commitment to presenting "true" tales of *personal* triumph and less a systemic critique (which is simply accepted as the foundation for the individual's struggle and passed over). Such films are more "bio-pics" about personal struggles than anything else.

The HBO film, *Barbarians at the Gate* (1993), a treatment of the novel by the same name about the 1987 S&L scandal, similarly focuses on characters and their struggles. We follow F. Ross Johnson (James Garner) and his attempt to buy RJR Nabisco before Henry Kravis (Jonathan Pryce), a corporate raider and junk bond king (an obvious stand-in for Michael Milken) can. The struggle is cast as Ross, the old-school CEO living lavishly and unable to give up his corporate frills, yet who "might" care about his company's long term stability, versus Kravis, representative of the hostile takeover, with its gutting of a company's assets, management, and operating costs, which benefit major stockholders in the short term and cast a company into such debt that it must eventually be bailed out by purchasing the same junk bonds that were issued to keep it afloat—a kind of form of financial heroin—and which will be passed on to the next lucky victim. In the end, Kravis wins, and Ross retires after losing a hefty sum, though he is still incredibly wealthy. The film is lightly satirical of the system in this sense, but is mostly carried by a sense that an older capitalism, with its colorful CEOs like Ross Johnson, a poor boy from Winnipeg, Canada, made good, was a safer and better bet for America and capitalism's prosperity. It is personal greed that carries the day in the film, not deregulation of the financial markets and smoke-and-mirrors investment banking.

the most likely candidate. But Shaw, the most rigorous and cutthroat of all the board members, is not well-liked by the others. They blanch at his single-minded pursuit of profit, which never tallies the human cost of business in the final reckoning. While we are given glimpses of the other board members' troubled lives (for they are "as human as you and I," the narrator promises us at the beginning of the film), Shaw is always in the office, making it clear that he lives only for and through the Tredway Corporation. Shaw is the true Company Man.

Shaw's cool-headed business strategy and extreme dedication are depicted as ultimately dangerous in the film. However, Shaw is curiously dispassionate for a "villain." In an early scene he defends his numbers, charts, and ruthless pursuit of profit as simply following the law that dictates corporations must return dividends to their stockholders. He is genuinely confused by any argument to the contrary, remaining as stoic as Spock when listening to any argument that does not adhere to the logic of capital. In the end, Shaw is less a character than the representative of the kind of corporation emerging at this time, as corporate financial restructuring and stratification led to more efficient and streamlined business models, more committed than ever to a profit first mentality. As one study has it, these changes took place in four significant areas:

First, corporate financial communication was improved by the refinement of generally accepted accounting principles [. . .]. Second, a proliferation of specialized periodicals and journals heightened investors' knowledge about current business affairs. Third, new electronic media [. . .] greatly facilitated the market's price-searching function. Fourth, finance was

invigorated by its further professionalization through the strengthening of education and the flourishing of scholarly research. (Baskin and Miranti, 226)

Shaw himself is an accountant, beholden to numbers and unarguable mathematical conclusions, and his scholarliness is apparent in his love of such data. He thus encompasses the more and more professionalized managerial class (despite his being middle-aged) with its ever-more standardized accounting practices, and its subsequent attention to its growing and more-educated-than-ever stockholders.

Shaw's foil is Don Walling (William Holden), whom we first encounter working in a furniture manufacturing shop on a special project, unlike the number-crunching Shaw perched high in his office. While Shaw is devoid of passion, Walling is bursting with it. Walling, though a board member, works with his hands on the factory floor amongst blue-collar workers. He has a love of physical labor and creation that Shaw can never know. But Walling is dissatisfied with the furniture the company is currently turning out. Tredway's products used to be of superior quality, but the pursuit of profit and mass production techniques have reduced them to cheap and shoddy commodities. One of Walling's foremen laments this at one point, complaining, like Walling, that there is no joy or satisfaction in making such commodities.

The film's logic here, in simple Marxist terms, is that Walling understands that labor itself is individually fulfilling, as well as productive. There is an immediate gratification for the laborer in creating something that is unique from other commodities because of the attention and craftsmanship that went in to its manufacture. Once such a

commodity is sold (the commodity's transformation from pure exchange-value [the seller] to pure use-value [the purchaser]), it will have a lasting effect on the world, surely greater than that of a commodity of inferior quality. In other words, the film suggests that labor engaged in the production of high-quality commodities, complemented by equally high business ideals, affords a strong bond between worker and commodity—under such conditions, the film argues, labor is *not* alienated. Since there is care and craftsmanship evident in the production of such commodities, their creation (even in a factory setting) shares more in common with feudal artisanship than mass production. It is only when efficiency and profits rule the space of production that the worker becomes entirely alienated from his labor and is himself reduced to an object as worthless and disposable as the commodities he makes. You are what you make, the film suggests.

The real tension the film reveals, then, is the one between a newer, streamlined, dispassionate corporation bent on obtaining profits (people and products be damned) and an “older” idealistic and paternalistic corporation that equates the quality of its product with the quality of American life and the good of the country in general. The former is, by law, the goal of every corporation, the latter is a belief, an ideal to which a company may or may not subscribe. As such, this dialectic remains at the core of the corporation, and is subsequently manifest routinely in popular culture by proxy of the “bad” executive versus the “good” one.

Walling eventually opposes Shaw's candidacy for company president, but he resists running himself because he believes he is too young and inexperienced. He is consumed with self-doubt because his mentor, the former president, Avery Bullard

(whom he lionizes as a kind of father figure), never made it clear who was to be his successor before he died, though Walling always expected it might be him. Moreover, Walling is a “family man” unsure of what such a sacrifice would do to his family life, aware that his quixotic business ideals would be difficult to realize without a great commitment, as they proved to be for Bullard. After failing to secure enough votes for a different candidate, however, Walling eventually decides to run for the presidency. The allegorical battle of the Company Man versus the Family Man commences.

By this time, however, Shaw has blackmailed enough board members to ensure his victory. Desperately trying to gather enough votes to challenge him, Walling tries convincing wild-card board member Julia Tredway (Barbara Stanwyk), the daughter of the corporation’s founder, to vote for him. Bitter about the fact that Tredway’s devotion to the corporation made him an unloving and absent father, Julia tells Walling that she is selling her stock and voting for Shaw and ridding herself of the whole business, literally and figuratively. Stunned to hear such a “betrayal” by Julia, Walling berates her for giving up on her father and the corporation’s values. It is at this point that Walling has totally reconciled the possibility of sacrificing personal and familial relationships to business concerns (we earlier see him too busy to play catch with his son), though it really comes by sacrificing Julia’s feelings and memories. They argue, and Walling leaves angrily, apparently without gaining her vote, and heads to the boardroom.

In a moralistic, Capra-esque ending, Walling chastises the board for the current state of the company and launches into a speech emphasizing the Tredway Corporation’s, and Avery Bullard’s, original laudatory ideals. He reminds the members of the kind of

high-end merchandise they used to make and punctuates his point by smashing a cheap piece of office furniture to pieces. The speech, of course, wins the board members over, so impressed are they by Walling's youthful passion and formidable vision. Thus the son steps into the father's re-*soled* shoes and re-treads Tredway's recently misguided path. The capitalist system has been righted once again by a reinvigoration of the system's founding principles.

Thus the film sets up a formula that will become standard for many such films dealing with a business or corporate restructuring: there is a "good" capitalism that treats its workers with care and respect, and a "bad" capitalism that is inhuman in its sole pursuit of sales and profit. This contest will always take place between two people or camps—whether executives, board members, and/or owners—and will usually be refined (as it is in *Executive Suite*) into two main characters at odds with one another. In general, the character espousing "bad" capitalism is portrayed as corrupt, immoral, and evil. To remove the offending agent is to save the day, as is the case in *Executive Suite* when Shaw is defeated.

In this sense, the film deserves mention in that its "villain," though he gets wrapped up in the play for power, is truly no villain at all. Shaw, it might be argued, is corrupted by the system itself, which explains the "it's nothing personal" attitude he exemplifies in his quest for the presidency and his desire to fulfill the corporate mission. Shaw is so imbued with the legal corporate directive that his attitude is no pose; it is the pure embodiment of this principle of the profit motive, more amoral than immoral. Even when he is defeated in his bid for the presidency, he immediately and respectfully

congratulates Walling. And while most offending agents are ejected from the company in such films, Shaw merely retreats back to his charts and graphs. Shaw is cold, certainly, but without an ounce of malice.

We might even go so far as to accuse the film's ideology itself, as embodied by Walling's character, as being the real "villain." Could it be that Walling is the true villain after all? There is something refreshingly honest about Shaw's subscription to pure capitalism and to the corporate directive. He attempts to hide nothing and breaks no business rules. Outside of his blackmailing some executives to gain the presidency, which is truly a moral dilemma for him, he merely follows the system's rules to their logical fruition. Shaw is so transparent in his aims, so absent of duplicity in his business philosophy, that he retains an odd kind of innocence, or at least naiveté, regarding his and the company's actions.

Can the same be said for Walling, however? Might it not be argued that Walling is even the more committed capitalist than Shaw is, that in his redemption of the system by injecting it with noble ideals and a sense of purpose once again, Walling does more good for the corporation than Shaw? After all, Walling tells the board members that they can make the same kinds of profits while still retaining the sense that their mission goes well beyond such mere material aims. He even cures Julia Tredway of her anger at her father by twisting Tredway's remiss parenting into a great sacrifice, that of the few for the many. Now Julia must also sacrifice her resentment (and thus her painful childhood) to purify the corporation once again. Tredway's psychological damaging of his daughter for the company's benefit (ominous scenes suggest the same could happen to Walling

regarding his son) is apparently acceptable as long as the ideals of which it is in service are lofty enough. Shaw, though he harms nobody in this way, is somehow more monstrous. His disinterest in principles that supposedly transcend the cash nexus exposes a raw truth about the corporation the other executives would like to forget.

In the end, will the only difference remain between a supposedly “bad” and “good” capitalism hinge on the quality of the product and the unexamined assumption, à la Adam Smith, that the wealth and health of the nation rely on a simple commitment by capital’s main proponents to some kind of humanist ideal? Is not this redemption of capital by such honorable intentions and ideals *ideology in its purest form*? Who, then, is more duplicitous, the transparently principled Shaw or the visionary Walling, who would have us believe that we can have our capital and share it too?

All this is to say that when considering the corporate structure itself, *it is vital to remember that this structure shapes the individuals within it*. The ideals of even the well-intentioned, such as Don Walling, are routinely twisted into their opposites by the structure of the corporation itself. Good intentions or not, the corporation will not allow such a “good” model to last indefinitely. Surely, in the 1950s this darker side of capitalism could be suppressed rather easily. As Joel Bakan writes, “[f]or fifty years following its creation, through World War II, the postwar era, and the 1960s and 1970s, the growing power of corporations was offset, at least in part, by continued expansion of government regulation, trade unions, and social programs” (20). Yet the liberalization of financial markets had also begun, and



[a]lthough the underlying basis for market valuation of common stock had already long been abstracted away from the original idea of a proportional interest in a business, in the modern era it appeared to even be divorced from the dividend stream. The new strategy became more to forecast the future price returns than to gain possession of the eventual distribution of dividends. (Baskin and Miranti 233-4, sic).

This initial shift from a commitment to more stable, long-term growth of industry and capital to the myopic chasing after short-term gains and focus on up-to-the-minute market fluctuations is a harbinger of the crises in late capitalism to come.

Nonetheless, without consciously seeking to do so, *Executive Suite*, through its depiction of one corporation's internal power struggle, exposes the structure lying beneath the board room drama. Avery Bullard's vacated presidency, his empty chair, reveals an opening through which one can glimpse the internal contradictions inherent in the structure itself. Bullard's absence is the symptom of a deeper lack of structural integrity. In the end (or the beginning), there can be no Wallings without Shaws, and vice versa. Shaw and his agenda may be repressed, he may be forced back into his office to tabulate numbers, but he is the unconscious foundation of the entire edifice, which the others would like to forget. Once a crack in the structure appears, however, the repressed returns with a vengeance, until the imaginary order is once again restored. Just as Marx said that the crises of capital are not merely singular events but instead reveal the fundamental internal contradictions in the system itself, so, too, do the crises of corporations uncover the latent inconsistencies in their own construction.

This constitutes a significant difference between literary representations of corporations in postmodern American fiction and those found in pop culture. What numerous pop cultural representations of corporations fail to address directly is the working of a corporation's structure and how this structure is integral to understanding a corporation's power and destructiveness. It is only the individuals within the company who are ever to blame—cold and calculating CEOs, or power hungry and overly ambitious executives. Never is the structure of the corporation itself analyzed. The structure, like the capitalist system, is assumed to be sound. Thus, some basic configurations play out over and over again in the stories of capital, whether in dramas, comedies, or action movies, yet all the while taking on new and dynamic forms reflecting and refracting their historical moments.

#### Corporate Seductions and Pandora's New Box

The vast changes in American society and culture during the 1960s and 1970s would see the rise of a new generation skeptical of political and economic power. No more is capital's crisis a mild one, easily assuaged as it was in *Executive Suite*. In the sputtering economy of the 1970s, such an optimistic outlook is virtually impossible, as evidenced in another film dealing with corporate power, Sidney Lumet's prescient and darkly comic *Network* (1976), written by Paddy Cheyefsky. The film follows the sea-channel change in network television's programming during the '70s, as the ruthless pursuit of ratings and profits began to dictate what shows the networks produced and aired. UBS, a failing fictional television network, has recently been purchased by CCA,

Communications Corporation of America. Motivated purely by profit, CCA guts the ailing news division, starting with the firing of longtime anchor Howard Beale (Peter Finch), in order to streamline its operations and raise ratings.

The representative of the corporate drive (he is probably UBS's CFO) is the aptly named Frank Hackett (Robert Duvall). Hackett cares little for the integrity of the news division and its one-time caché unless it brings in market shares. He is the true "company man" with ambitions of securing a seat on the board of directors at CCA. With the CCA merger, Hackett realizes that corporate restructuring can pay both personal and shareholder dividends, and he sets forth a plan to reorganize the structure of financial accountability at UBS. Aware that the members of the old guard are unwilling to embrace the new protocol, Hackett manipulates them until they all but ask for their own dismissals.

The old guard, led by the president of the news division, Max Shumacher (William Holden, now playing a man embittered by the system, instead of one rejuvenating it), soon finds itself either without jobs or succumbing to the new order. After learning of his dismissal, Beale declares on-air that he will commit suicide on the next show, and Shumacher is forced to fire his old friend. Saddened by Beale's depression and firing, and frustrated by the new protocol of the station, Shumacher becomes enraged at a stockholders' meeting when Hackett makes a speech announcing his restructuring plans meant to boost UBS's profits, which will involve compromising the autonomy of the news division. In anger, Shumacher allows Beale to return to his newscast and apologize for his behavior, and when Beale begins to rail on-air about how

life is “bullshit,” Shumacher refuses to pull the plug. Soon after, Shumacher is asked to tender his own resignation.

As he clears out of his office, Beale comes to say goodbye. Just as in the film’s opening (when we find Shumacher and Beale on the streets of New York after a night on the town, drunkenly talking about the “good old days”), the two reminisce about what Beale calls “the great early days of television” and the “grand old men of news.” The two recall their days with Ed Murrow, Marty Reasoner, Walter Cronkite, and the whole CBS gang. Here we find the distinction between the old and new guard. Shumacher’s idea of journalism and news in America comes from a time in the 1950s when media had to struggle against a highly conservative and reactionary Eisenhower Era and its attendant guard dog, Joseph McCarthy. Producing an objective analysis of the country at the time was a seemingly noble and heroic pursuit, with people like Murrow standing up to the bullying and conspiracy-mongering tactics of McCarthy. Coming from such a background, Shumacher sees himself and his work as ethically upstanding and crucial to sustaining a healthy democracy.

As a crowd gathers around to listen to Shumacher’s old stories and say goodbye, someone reports that Beale is going to be offered a new job. Beale’s ratings have skyrocketed since his last program, and the vice president (soon to be president) of programming, Diana Christensen (Faye Dunaway), convinces Hackett to keep Beale on the air for the sake of ratings. Hackett is skeptical, but Christensen convinces him that an op-ed segment with Beale would be a hit, which it proves to be. At the same time, the UBS network president Nelson Chaney (Wesley Addy), foreseeing a power struggle with

Hackett, re-hires Shumacher out of political considerations (and because with Beale back it is justified). Thus Beale and Shumacher suddenly find themselves re-hired by the rapidly changing network, complicit with the new guard's plans.

The new guard, however, is little concerned with the ethics of television broadcasting. For those who comprise it, television is all about ratings and profits. Although it seems as if Hackett leads the new guard in his role as corporate hatchet man, that position is reserved for Diana Christensen. At first Christensen's reality-based programs have nothing to do with the news until she seizes on an idea for a show, "The Mao Zse-Dong Hour," using real-life footage of a bank robbery and kidnapping sent in by the Ecumenical Liberation Army (based on the Symbionese Liberation Army/Patty Hearst affair). After UBS's CEO, Edward Ruddy, is hospitalized by a heart attack (he eventually dies), Hackett is put in charge of the company. He promptly fires Chaney and Shumacher, and puts Christensen in charge of the news as well. With the news compromised by programming, Christensen builds a tawdry news hour around Beale's rants, including segments with "Sybil the Soothsayer," "Vox Populi," and "Skeletons in the Closet." The show is a massive hit and UBS's ratings and profits continue to soar.

The film then follows the rising fortunes of UBS and CCA under the sway of Hackett and Christensen. Christensen moves forward with production on the "Mao Zse-Dong Hour" with the help of a communist organization eager to cash in on the profits. She also renews an affair with Shumacher (the two once slept together), who is now out of work and suffering a mid-life crisis. Smitten with Christensen, Shumacher leaves his wife of twenty-five years and moves in with her. But the relationship hardly lasts six

months before it falls apart, which is apparently how all Christensen's romantic relationships end.

This is partly, Christensen says, because she is too "masculine." She is a terrible lover, she claims, too uncaring, too unwomanly. Men have told her "what a lousy lay I was," she informs Shumacher at their affair's beginning. This is due to what she calls her "masculine temperament" of quickly climaxing and dropping off to sleep soon after. Indeed, we see her making love to one man while watching the television, completely uninterested in her lover, as if she were Eliot's typist from "The Waste Land" whose partner's "Vanity requires no response/And makes a welcome of indifference." In a humorous weekend getaway montage with Shumacher, she talks of nothing but her work as the two take a romantic walk on the beach, have a candle-lit dinner, and end the evening by making love. Shumacher is silent in every scene, dreamily listening. Christensen continues the chatter during sex (she is, of course, on top), reaching a rapid climax as she announces her latest successes. Silenced and sexually "used" as Shumacher is, conventional gender roles are put off kilter here. Later, when Shumacher moves into her apartment, his depression and mid-life crisis is referred to by Christensen as "menopausal decay." This "masculine" woman has clearly upset the gender roles Shumacher is habituated to, though it will take him some time to realize this.

The woman who enters the masculine world of the corporate structure, then, must at once be masculine enough to get her heel in the door, yet is damned for doing so. She must empty herself of her "natural" femininity for masculine traits, a kind of gender bending that leaves her contorted and not quite human. Women's "natural" duplicity and

inconstancy, combined with an aggressive masculine drive, can only end in trouble, the film suggests. Better to remain in the domestic sphere, like Shumacher's wife, where such instability can be contained by patriarchy, and the man can have his little affairs (as Shumacher has had with his secretaries over the years), thus reaffirming his "manhood." Loosed from such domestic "bonds," the sexually and economically liberated woman is a force that is viewed by the film as uncontrollable.

It is fairly easy to see *Network* as registering male fears of women during the second wave feminism of the 1970s as white, middle-to-upper class, educated women began to make in-roads in formerly male occupations. After all, it is the "grand old men" of news that Beale and Shumacher lament the passing of, and the hard drinking, joke telling, back slapping "masculine" world that goes with it. But such male anxiety of the influence of feminism's second wave and the ramifications of decisions like *Roe v. Wade* only remains a partial explanation of Christensen's character. There is much more to it than that, particularly in terms of what "woman" in the film is associated with.

For instance, although the film registers dismay at how corporate power reduces the news to newstainment, its critique hits hardest at the specific programming that enacts this reduction, which is Christensen's forté. But this is to emphasize the symptom over the disease. Frank Hackett is also presented as one of the villains in the film, but as the angry and ruthless force of capital, he is fully understood by the characters as well as the viewer. Hackett is straightforward about his devotion to ratings and profits, and in this sense he remains heartless but predictable. Furthermore, the news division has always been accountable to corporate oversight, though with the understanding that running it

would always entail a manageable loss of profits. Where Hackett really stands out in his evil-doing is in tinkering with the corporate structure that tears down the boundary between news and profits, and though this constitutes half of the “problem” the film investigates, it receives less of the blame. Indeed, it is this restructuring that initially worries Shumacher and the old guard. Once it has been completed, they no longer consider it a relevant issue. Shumacher is upset that his control over the news may be weakened but never is he concerned with larger economic forces at work.

Christensen, moreover, is clearly figured as the alluring and deceptive *femme fatale*. Like Hackett, she too is driven by ratings, but her creation of various shows that ultimately confuse the distinction between informative, meaningful news and cheap entertainment masked as meaningful news receives the brunt of the film’s scorn. Christensen blurs boundaries (gender roles, news vs. entertainment), and to the older generation, of which Shumacher is a part, she embodies the channel-surfing postmodern generation, content to remain giddily and schizophrenically skimming the televised waves of simulacra, wiping out responsibility and meaning. That this most villainous of villains should be figured as a woman here is no surprise.

As Suzanne Leonard argues, in an examination of representations of “career women” and adultery in popular culture,

public anxiety about female work is frequently filtered through the adultery narrative such that the narrative offers a means not only of regulating and controlling that anxiety but also of displacing it onto an easily identifiable target. Patriarchal culture’s need to keep the working



woman ‘under surveillance’ lest she get too heady with power (or lust) is also an obvious animating factor in some popular representations. (111)

In *Network*, this boundary blurring is deceptive, seductive, and ultimately a kind of *adultery* since it respects no established bounds, rules or loyalties—and who better to represent such trickery than a woman? After all, the “masculine” Hackett takes apart an older corporate structure and “erects” another that allows him to promote his objectives, while the masculine-acting-but-still-feminine-in-destructive-potential Christensen blurs and obfuscates conventional boundaries and structures. When Shumacher faces Hackett in a showdown, voices are raised, desks are slammed by clenched fists, and each man knows where he stands. Indeed, men are “men” and remain masculine and aggressive in such confrontations. But with Christensen, Shumacher is seduced by the feminine (sex), and his masculinity is consequently challenged by shifting and “adulterated” gender roles.

Herein lies the hypocritical contradiction at the core of Shumacher’s character and the film’s overall message. As much a proponent for the older paradigm of news programming (with its emphasis on moral responsibility and accountability) as he is, Shumacher renounces the secure and substantive domestic life that is attendant to that paradigm and expresses the same values: “respect and allegiance,” his wife says (we might imagine here a kind of ’50s domesticity to match the vaunted ’50s journalism). Shumacher’s inability to maintain his ideals at the public and the private level (for they both stem from the same [phallic] root) discloses his own complicity with the changing paradigm. Thus, he makes up for his impotence to halt change at the executive level by a

show of potency via the sexual act at the personal level in his affair with Christensen. This act is therefore an admission of powerlessness (with the illusion of agency by sexual “conquest”) and a tacit acceptance of the new state of affairs. For it is Christensen who openly (as she tells him) scripts the seduction of Shumacher, and as the ideological gap between them widens and the affair ends, Shumacher realizes that he has been “duped” just like the viewing public for which he apparently stands. He remains impotent in both spheres of influence and has even risked his twenty-five year marriage. Although he eventually denounces Christensen and all she stands for, he has clearly “sold out” for a quick bang. We might say that Shumacher, since he ends up choosing to compromise his personal life (adultery, the bang) rather than compromise his professional/public reputation (endorsing newstainment, the buck), receives more bang for his buck, opting to invest in a libidinal rather than monetary economy. However, since these economical spheres, like the spheres of public and private, have blurred into one another and long since lost their autonomy, Shumacher is as guilty and compromised as the programmers and public he despises.

Shumacher and the film, therefore, unleash most of their frustration and rage, which have been building throughout the movie, onto Christensen, not Hackett. Taking the moral high ground after their relationship fails, Shumacher tells Christensen that “everything you and the institution of television touch is destroyed,” and that she is “television incarnate: indifferent to suffering, insensitive to joy, all of life is reduced to the common rubble of banality. You’re madness.” Christensen is the perfect figure for “television incarnate” since she is deceptive, seductive, and surface-oriented. She can be

only a mere shell or repository for her career. She is “filled” with ideas for shows, at the price of having any inner substance or depth. We might rename the film *Portrait d’une Femme Fatale* after Pound’s “Portrait d’une Femme,” a poem also anxious about female power (a patron of the arts), which similarly endorses a fairly misogynistic view of a woman of “some influence” who “In the whole and all” displays “Nothing that’s quite your own/Yet this is you.” Better still is Laura Mulvey’s argument in “The Myth of Pandora” that “myths and images have frequently, in the history of patriarchal culture, materialized into a polarization between a visible and seductive surface and a secret and dangerous essence. This topography privileges the visible surface of beauty, while projecting onto it the instability of masquerade” (3). Typically, then, a woman’s “appearance dissembles her essence. The topography is one of binary opposition, a split between an inside and an outside, between seductive surface and dangerous depth” (5). That the film remains obsessed with form and its capacity to mask content, or the lack thereof, is thus a kind of displacement, in part responsible for its inability to wage a more effective critique of capital, to which it makes mere overtures instead.

When Marx decided to explore the commodity form in *Capital*, the analysis was meant to demystify the commodity, to remind the reader of the content of labor, history, and social relations congealed in the commodity itself.<sup>53</sup> *Network* spends far too much

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<sup>53</sup> The film finds itself in the position of William “D-Fens” Foster in *Falling Down* (1993), a film depicting an unemployed and divorced “average white-collar Joe,” who snaps one day in gridlock traffic, abandons his car, and goes on an odd and violent quest (eventually arming himself with guns) through Los Angeles to see his estranged wife and daughter. En route Foster (Michael Douglas) threatens criminals, the inordinately rich, and exposes the hypocrisies of American society. In the film’s most infamous scene, Foster enters a fast food restaurant where, upon ordering a burger that looks nothing like the picture on the menu, he lambastes the counter people and manager. He asks why the actual burger never looks like the one on the menu. Deceived by advertising, Foster’s humanistic plea for fidelity to the representation is understandable but shortsighted. Instead of turning his anger upon the system that allows and encourages

energy raging against the deceptive form at the expense of critiquing the content for which it stands: one system, under capital, with liberty and commodities for all. In *Network*, the pent-up rage does not allow for a more reasoned analysis and is released upon the most obvious and nearest target, which is never the true target itself.

In *Network* the new television programming represents the dangerous form upon which the film fixates. With its shallow inconstant images, prostituting of the cheapest shows, and seduction and pacification of the viewer, television remains the greatest threat to American democracy, perhaps greater than the capitalist system that ultimately dictates its (empty) content. But, of course, the film conflates television with Christensen, who is deemed “television incarnate,” and thus we see that the film genders television as “female.” And since Christensen, our *femme fatale*-cum-Pandora, fits into what Mulvey points out is a “series of images of femininity as artifice” (6), it should be no surprise that this postmodern Pandora carries with her a new, postmodern box, the television. As Mulvey argues, “[t]he box repeats the topography of Pandora herself: her exterior mask

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such deception, he terrorizes the customers and lets loose his fury on minimum-wage earners by (accidentally) shooting up the restaurant (admittedly a scene in which there is not a single viewer who cannot relate and enjoy some measure of catharsis).

William Foster is truly a descendent of Howard Beale in *Network*. Beale’s slogan, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore,” is acted upon by Foster with gun in hand. The film asks that we sympathize with Foster, who is “average like us” and has just been pushed too far, while stringing us along with the continual threat of violence (will Foster be another shooting-spree killer?). The violence is foreclosed upon after Foster chases his wife and daughter to the end of a pier and is shot by the policeman on his trail (Robert Duvall) after aiming a gun (later revealed to be empty) at him. At bottom the film is a conservative plea for cracking down on crime and poverty, which Foster, “D-Fens,” embodies in his tough “I’m not going to take it anymore attitude,” which even helps him to defeat an L.A. gang at one point. The film registers white, middle-class rage at an ethnic inner-city plagued with corruption. At one point Foster smashes up a Korean grocery after calling the owner Chinese and telling him, “You come to my country, you take my money, you don’t even have the grace to learn to speak my language?” The film tries to spread this anger around to all classes and colors (even Nazis at one point), but it hits harder at inner-city targets—consider the King inspired L.A. riots as a backdrop here—and there is no representation of the suburban Los Angeles from which Foster hails. This is the day of the white, suburbanite avenger who was terrified in his own home by the televised riots depicting black rage and discontent. Circle the wagons and save the decent white man’s family from these bloodthirsty savages, D-FENS and *Falling Down* suggest.

of beauty concealing an interior of combined mystery and danger. The box, then, can be interpreted as a displacement of Pandora's seductive danger onto an emblem of female sexuality described in the myth, as the source of all the evils of the world" (8). The new television, the film argues, is feminine, a neo-Pandora's box, and is the true culprit behind America's ills. It will render the public passive, empty people of "simple human decency," and eventually create a world of "dehumanized" cogs, as Beale will later put it. The seduced and pacified spectator loses the ability to act and fight back, supposedly masculine traits. Capitalism, though (as embodied by Hackett), remains corrupt but masculine in its brutal honesty and unfeeling nature. The film's true jeremiad, then, is reserved for a female gendered television at the expense of a masculine arena of capital. Christensen/television/woman stands as the ultimate seductress and pacifier of the public.

In this case it is no surprise that Shumacher's conflation of Christensen and television comes just after she challenges his sexual prowess in one of their last arguments before breaking up. Feeling conciliatory, Christensen tells him she lied about him being a "bad lay," but Shumacher laughs it off, wondering aloud why women always try to hurt a man most by trying to "impugn his cocksmanship," something about which he has long ceased to care. But the hypocrisy is tangible here, as clearly Shumacher's affairs have long attested to his belief in "cocksmanship" as a marker of masculinity. That his attack on Christensen conflates her "true" deceptive feminine nature with the dangerous illusion of a gendered television merely reinforces the gender struggle going on unconsciously. Ironically, in her inability to see Shumacher as an individual with feelings (as Shumacher rightly complains), Christensen objectifies Shumacher by

reducing him solely to his “cocksmanship.” At a deeper level, then, Shumacher’s terror is that his masculinity has been reduced to his biological sex—the penis—which is a tacit acknowledgment that it is Christensen who has the phallus. His last ditch effort to forswear the cult of the cock here only reveals, once again, that he has been rendered impotent both in his personal and professional life. His moral sermonizing and his fusing of television with woman allow him the illusion that the ’50s gender roles that have clearly been eclipsed have somehow returned through the back door via his noble ethical vision of television news, which allows him to condemn Christensen as representative of an attenuated, feminized, tele-generation.

The closest the film comes to examining the economic conditions under which such newstainment arises is through the figure of the “insane” character, the unhinged news anchor Howard Beale. What begins as a bad depression for Beale after being forced to retire soon morphs into complete mental imbalance. Beale, apparently in a manic episode, begins to believe in his own status as a “latter day prophet” and tells Shumacher he feels a kind of “oneness” with the universe, which he describes as if it were some kind of Whitmanesque-tele-vision he will broadcast to America. Under this neo-Whitmania, he is soon hearing voices as well. Despite Shumacher’s plea to Christensen to take him off the air, and a similar one to Beale himself to seek help, Beale continues his segment, becoming more fervent by the day.

Moreover, Beale’s rants eventually prove to be more than the average spiel, revealing themselves to be veritable jeremiads, as Christensen points out. The American jeremiad is a familiar trope in American literature and culture, as Sacvan Berkovitch

details in *The American Jeremiad*, which functioned as “a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting ‘signs of the times’ to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols” (xi). In the jeremiad, the speaker berates society for moral turpitude and corruption, adding a rhetorical flourish with apocalyptic overtones. After such a verbal scouring, the speaker often exhorts his listeners to change their way of life in order to counteract the destruction and desolation that their present path is leading toward. In actuality, Beale’s ongoing jeremiad is more of what Berkovitch calls the “anti-jeremiad” since “both the jeremiad and the anti-jeremiad foreclosed alternatives: the one by absorbing the hopes of mankind into the meaning of America, the other by reading into America the futility and fraud of hope itself” (191). Beale’s finest moment in this tradition of the jeremiad arrives with his infamous line, which he demands his audience members to yell out of their windows, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this any more!” Through this jeremiad, Beale expresses not just his own personal anger and frustration with the world but the public’s as well. His command is followed, and we see numerous people opening their windows and screaming Beale’s words into the night, which is filled with a similar chorus. A sudden rolling thunder sounds ominously at the scene’s end.

As a kind of holy maniac uttering God’s truths, dubbed “the mad prophet of the airwaves,” Beale appeals to the public as a divinely inspired prophet of doom. Christensen soon builds a show around him to showcase his “talents.” As we might expect, the show’s set contains religious iconography—a large stained glass window, a pulpit-like area from which Beale can preach—and Beale is let loose each night to a

cheering audience, to which he delivers a sermon and then collapses in a kind of epileptic fit.

Notably, it is the “irrational” character who is allowed to utter certain truths that the rational characters cannot or will not address. There are, of course, other characters who challenge the powers that be—Shumacher and the old guard. But the challenge the old guard offers is strictly focused on the dynamics of newscasting and is waged within the network itself. One would wonder what their reply would be to Hackett and Christensen who, in response to the critique of their new programming as being of the “lowest common denominator,” would argue that they give the public what it wants, in true “democratic” fashion. We might expect a somewhat “elitist” response from Shumacher and company, arguing that the public has been made vapid by the very vacuity of the programs it has been forced to consume. But here we would end in a chicken-and-egg dilemma in which both sides have an equal claim to certain truths.

It is also important to consider that the old guard has already fallen below its own high newscasting standards by airing as much soft as hard news. As Christensen tells Shumacher when she tries convincing him to build the news hour around Beale, UBS’s news has already been cheapened (she gives him a compelling segment by segment breakdown of the last news hour to prove her point), so “[i]f you’re going to hustle, at least do it right.” It is Christensen who understands the public discontent with Vietnam, Watergate, inflation, and OPEC’s oil embargo and calls for “angry shows,” thus seeing the potential in Beale’s jeremiads. It is unclear how much responsibility someone like Shumacher takes for this decline in viewership. The film suggests that the angry mob



that follows Beale's, hence television's, every word is somehow to blame in its mindless stupidity. The film shows a disdain for mass viewership that Shumacher (due to his disgust with Diana and her "television" generation) would probably agree with, despite his claims to believe in "simple human decency." This is apparently what is lacking in the new generation that has been raised on television, though it is unclear how a generation of people raised on television could be held entirely responsible for the tube's deleterious effects upon it.

Thus the nobility of the old guard is somewhat tarnished, and the look back to the good old days of Ed Murrow and CBS, where the unequivocal stance against fascism and Nazi Germany gave one a clear sense of moral probity, proves to be more than a little nostalgic for a world untouched by the heady years of the '60s and beyond. It is not merely a desire for a time when news mattered but also a desire for a time when a moral society felt news mattered. In a strange way, such a desire for a unified and uniform society relies upon the oppressive conformity that existed in the Manichean Cold War, pre-Civil Rights world. Honor and integrity appear more distinct when an enemy, whether abroad (the USSR, Hitler's Germany) or at home (McCarthyism), can be clearly delineated. When boundaries become blurred, so too do the distinctions between good and evil, as the film's excessive condemnation of Christensen attests. But, again, if anyone is "to blame," it would seem shortsighted to pin all of the blame on television and a generation raised upon it, however convenient it is for the preservation of the noble ideals of what Tom Brokaw dubbed the "Greatest Generation."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Brokaw's deemed his father's generation "great" for its resourcefulness and toughness in living through the Depression and for its unquestionable moral position in fighting a world war—all of which it weathered

Beale, in contrast, engages with the public directly and tries to empower his audience by revealing the manipulations and lies that are hidden from it, especially regarding the medium of television itself. His critique is external, not internal. This is what makes him ultimately the unstable and dangerous “irrational” element that threatens to remain uncontrollable. Indeed, Beale is eventually perceived to be a great threat by the network itself when he dedicates one show to critiquing something nobody else (not even Shumacher) in the film ever does: multinational corporate capitalism. After learning of some of the behind-the-scenes corporate machinations at the network, Beale spends an entire show informing the public about the power and pervasiveness of global capitalism and America’s dependence on foreign oil and Middle East investment. He exposes an impending deal between CCA and something called the Western World Funding Corporation, a global consortium of banks. WWC is about to acquire CCA without any disclosure as to the owners of WWC, who Beale reports xenophobically are “Arab” (they turn out to be a Saudi Arabian consortium). He warns that these “Arabs” now own much of America and the world. Beale finishes his jeremiad by urging that the audience send telegrams to the White House demanding the government stop the deal. The public is inspired, the White House flooded with telegrams, and the deal is halted.

This is too much for the network and CCA. Beale needs to be reigned in for his comments, and he is called to a meeting with CCA’s CEO, Arthur Jensen (Ned Beatty).

With a charismatic “personal touch,” Jensen embraces Beale and tells him that he is a

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without complaint. To call a generation “great” is one thing; however, to call it “the greatest” another. Like Shumacher, Brokaw’s “greatest generation” can only seem so against the self-hating Me, Hippie, Pepsi, Yuppie, and X generations that followed it, particularly generation X, the slacker generation, arguably in ascendancy/descendancy at the time of the publication of Brokaw’s book. Thus, in some sense Generation X, in binary relation to Brokaw’s “greatest,” makes the Greatest Generation what it is.

former salesman: “They say I can sell anything. I’d like to try and sell something to you.” In a spectacular scene set in a darkened corporate boardroom (“Valhalla,” Jensen calls it), Beale sits down as Jensen paces around and talks. Playing on Beale’s belief that he is a prophet, Jensen poses as God. In a booming voice he delivers to Beale the gospel of consumer capitalism, which is worth quoting at length:

You have meddled with the primal forces of nature, Mr. Beale, and I won’t have it. Is that clear? You think you merely stopped a business deal—that is not the case! The Arabs have taken billions of dollars out of this country, and now they must put it back. It is ebb and flow, tidal gravity, it is ecological balance! You are an old man who thinks in terms of nations and peoples. There are no nations! There are no peoples! There are no Russians. There are no Arabs! There are no Third Worlds! There is no West! There is only one holistic system of systems, one vast and immane, interwoven, interacting, multi-variate, multi-national dominion of dollars [. . .]. It is the international system of currency that determines the totality of life on this planet! That is the natural order of things today! That is the atomic, subatomic, and galactic structure of things today! And you have meddled with the primal forces of nature, and you will atone [. . .].

There is no America. There is no democracy. There is only IBM, and ITT, and AT&T, and Dupont, Dow, Union Carbide, and Exxon. Those are the nations of the world today [. . .]. We no longer live in a

world of nations and ideologies, Mr. Beale. The world is a college of corporations, inexorably determined by the immutable by-laws of business. The world is a business, Mr. Beale! It has been since man crawled out of the slime, and our children, Mr. Beale, will live to see that perfect world in which there is no war and famine, oppression and brutality—one vast and ecumenical holding company, for whom all men will work to serve a common profit, in which all men will hold a share of stock, all necessities provided, all anxieties tranquilized, all boredom amused. And I have chosen you, Mr. Beale, to preach this evangel.

Such a description of the utopian end of late capitalism, in a veritable orgy of products and satisfied customers, would make Frances Fukuyama proud. Moreover, the emphasis on “forces of nature” adopts a Marxian notion of the dynamism of capitalism (“All that’s solid melts into air,” as the Communist Manifesto informs us) but combines it with a Smith-like “Invisible Hand” that guides these forces to a fulfillment in a consumers’ paradise. Capitalism is here naturalized—it is a “primal force of nature” and an “ecology”—and described much in the same way as it is in Shelgrim’s speech to Presley in Norris’s *The Octopus*. Whereas Marx would say capitalism unleashes such forces of nature, Jensen has it that capitalism is itself the force and rule of nature.

Moreover, there is a curious “democratization” that occurs as capital continues to transform the world. The suggestion here is of a utopian world without national boundaries and wars. Thus, at one level Beale’s “Arab” fears are no longer tenable. Capital as a transcendent force apparently makes everyone an equal stakeholder, a

“citizen of the world,” unless, of course, you cannot pay the cost of admission, the price tag of which the CEO fails to mention. And since the film registers an angry public, as well as several active terrorist groups, it is clear that not everyone can afford the cost of joining this world-company. Even if such national and racial boundaries were to be theoretically transcended successfully by capitalism, there would still remain the very real issue of class.

But Jensen delivers his gospel with equal parts exhortation and majesty. He truly believes in his own triumphant teleology of capital. Beale is awestruck and left believing he has “seen the face of God.” Thus, the CEO sells this bill of goods to Beale in its entirety, and the ideologically satisfied customer indeed changes his tune on the next show. The prophet of the future is now the *profit* of the future.

The irrational factor in the film, then, is eventually contained when Beale is channeled and controlled by the system. This is really no surprise, since Beale has been manipulated step by step in his recent rise. In a world where everything can potentially be co-opted by the system, particularly through the commodification of the image, the seemingly humanistic *cri de coeur* of Howard Beale, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore,” ends up becoming not the rallying and revolutionary command that it could have been, but a mere slogan that the studio audience yells during the opening credits of his show. Yet Beale, as the irrational rationalized by the system, is the only character to show a larger understanding of the forces at play in such a world.

There are brief sparks of revolutionary potential to change the system, such as Beale’s populist letter writing campaign that gets him into trouble with Jensen. The film,

however, forecloses quickly on this possibility as soon as Jensen speaks to Beale about it. The same goes for any radical politics, or what Christensen calls “mutilated Marxism” at one point in the film. The satirical depiction of a pseudo-Black Panther revolutionary group that agrees to have its operations recorded and aired, so long as the compensation is adequate, suggests the revolution will be televised and hence commodified. Overall, the film is as pessimistic about political change as it is about the endurance of the human spirit, ending with Beale’s assassination by the network executives and offering a dark punch-line to the entire movie: “Harold Beale, the first man to be killed because of low ratings.”

Thus *Network*, through the rage and despair of Shumacher and Beale, depicts a radical and fundamental change in the economic structure of American capitalism. With the utopian potential of the 1960s thoroughly exhausted, however, it appears that the utopian vision of global capital has taken its place, even if this vision, delivered near the film’s end by its newest adherent, Howard Beale, means dismal ratings and dissatisfaction. The public’s distrust of such a vision, however, will prove to be fickle when economic fortunes become brighter. All will soon be forgiven and forgotten and faith in the system restored, and *Network* itself will prove to be a last gasp *cri de coeur* against the rise of global capitalism.

#### Neoliberal Phantoms and Fantasies

At the end of the 1970s, the troubled Carter administration, unable to enact an economic turnaround by the 1980 presidential election, found itself ousted by the upstart

Republican nominee, Ronald Reagan. The former California governor had some novel ideas about economic stimulation, and although the early years of his first term saw a continued economic downslide, by the time *Ghostbusters* (1984, written by Harold Ramis and directed by Ivan Reitman) was released, America was undergoing an economic upswing. Thus, while at first glance this supernatural comedy seems to have little to do with Reaganomics, *Ghotstbusters*, as we shall see, is a telling fable of corporate capitalism's relatively quiet, "glorious" revolution. Set in the midst of the neoliberal Reagan era of wild privatization and deregulation—the decade where pure capitalism was unleashed in all its fury—*Ghostbusters* captures the social and cultural dilemmas that capital promised to solve if only it were set free to do its work.

The key to understanding the economic backdrop in *Ghostbusters* is to focus on its setting—New York City in the early 1980s. At this time New York was beginning to recover from the dismal end of the '70s when the city faced its worse fiscal crisis to date, crime ran rampant, and President Ford and the federal government turned their backs on Mayor Abraham Beame's pleas for financial assistance. As the now-famous New York *Daily News* headline read on 30 October 1975, "Ford to City: Drop Dead." Much of the modern gritty lore of New York emerges during these years in films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Warriors* (1979), and *Escape from New York* (1981). The city is often depicted as a crime-infested, post-apocalyptic wasteland, and not without good reason. Even Woody Allen's nostalgic, Gershwin-scored love-letter to the Big Apple, *Manhattan* (1980), though it portrayed a safe and secure Upper East Side existence (moral decline notwithstanding), admits to the gestalt of the city, when the narrator complains, "I don't

care what anyone says, I love this city.” Such a line in the fully gentrified, post-Giuliani New York City makes absolutely no sense today—unless it is used, ironically, to *defend* the corporate and wealthy takeover of much of the city.

*Ghostbusters* has been rightly identified as a film championing “urban renewal,”<sup>55</sup> the more positive sounding phrase used for the darker aspects of gentrification. Max Page, for example, argues in *The City’s End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears, and Premonitions of New York’s Destruction*, that the film “is a camp takeoff on a disaster movie, playing on the tropes of urban crisis and New Yorkers’ emotional need for heroes” due to the fact that “the city had survived the worst and was about to enter two decades of robust economic development and resurgent wealth” (16, 17). But to see the film as merely embedded in the logic of urban renewal is to miss the impact of the larger economic forces at work in the redevelopment of New York City and America during the 1980s. As William K. Tabb makes clear in *The Long Default: New York City and the Urban Fiscal Crisis*, the eventual assistance from the federal government came with the caveat that New York City adopt strict financial “austerity measures.” These resembled “the sort of budget the International Monetary Fund imposes on third world countries as a condition for renewed borrowing,” which meant that “New York City lost control of its affairs and was forced to accept a debt-restructuring program that left it, by 1980—after its ‘rescue’—using 20 percent of locally raised revenues to service its debt” (21). The

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<sup>55</sup> I use this term generically. More strictly, “urban renewal” refers to the sort of redevelopment that brutally razed entire city blocks (Robert Moses’s projects, for instance), which was superseded after the 1960s by a combination of liberal commitment to historical preservation and promoting the arts, and new local and federal policies. See the chapter “From Urban Renewal to Historic Preservation” in Reichl (21-42).



city also bowed to a pro-business agenda that was reflective of nationwide economic and political policies and trends. In *Remaking New York*, William Sites writes

[a]fter the late Carter administration began to cut direct assistance to cities and to refocus federal urban policy on stimulating private investment, Reagan policies went considerably further. Enacting sweeping tax cuts, deregulation measures, and decreases in federal aid to cities, national policy makers helped create an economic environment that reinforced the need for cities to cater to investors, developers, and mobile corporations.

(42)

With this larger economic picture of neoliberal, free-market capitalism as a backdrop, we can enter into the political intricacies lurking behind such apparently laudatory projects of “urban renewal” as they play out in the film.

At the film’s beginning we meet Dr. Peter Venckman (Bill Murray) and Dr. Ray Stantz (Dan Akroyd), who are Columbia University-employed “parapsychologists.” As their official titles suggest, their research area is dubious at best, and Venckman spends his time falsifying experiments in order to try and sleep with certain attractive female subjects. A sudden university budget crisis gives the university’s president the final leverage he needs to close down the program, and Venckman and Stantz find themselves jobless and without research facilities. Down and out, the two muse over what to do, and Stantz pitches Venckman an idea to start a company, a company that will deal with paranormal problems and disturbances—the Ghostbusters. Using a second mortgage on a

house he inherited from his parents as leverage, Stantz secures a large loan, and the Ghostbusters are in business.

What the Ghostbusters actually are, of course, is a corporation. They are a private company that is highly paid to deal with certain “disturbances.” At first this seems a relatively benign service, as the Ghostbusters are merely another small business struggling to cover operating costs. A cheesy television advertisement shows them rather stiffly announcing the services they provide, while a phone number flashes at the bottom of the screen. It’s a low-budget affair and casts them as exterminators of a sort. They may as well be spraying for roaches as for ghosts, since their job is essentially pest control. Business is excruciatingly slow at first, though the film would seem to champion small businesses and their savvy entrepreneurs as a way to stimulate economic growth.

However, as the number of ghosts begins to increase, the Ghostbusters’ service becomes essential to the city and its citizens. There is simply nobody else to turn to. The Ghostbusters subsequently become heroes and celebrities. We see them on the cover of newspapers and magazines, and appearing on talk shows. Business becomes hectic and they are forced to “expand” and hire another member. Since they form a kind of monopoly, the Ghostbusters are increasingly called on to take care of the city’s problems. As Stantz predicted earlier, “ghostbusting” has become a lucrative business and opened up an entirely new industry, in a sense.

Although we see a montage of the Ghostbusters’ jobs (including, for humorous effect, a restaurant in Chinatown that rewards them with several ducks), most of the Ghostbusters’ clients appear to be fairly affluent. The crew’s first job is to capture a

ghost terrorizing an upscale hotel. Though they cause a large amount of damage that the hotel's manager complains about in a bid to deny payment, the Ghostbusters' threat to set the ghost free quickly earns them their fee. So too is a later client, Dana Barrett (Sigourney Weaver), comfortably well-off, ensconced as she is in a large apartment building in Central Park West. In any event, if the Ghostbusters' rates are the same from job to job, it would appear that this increasingly necessary service is one that only certain people can afford.<sup>56</sup>

As the threat of Gozer (a Sumerian god bent on destroying the earth) and the apocalypse grows, the city finds itself unable to cope with the problem. Gradually, the Ghostbusters become more and more integral to "solving" it. In other words, as fear and confusion reigns, the city turns to a private company to "save" it from disaster. This is precisely the place in which New York City found itself in the 1970s and '80s, when redevelopment resulted in ceding large amounts of real estate to corporations and businesses, along with the attendant subsidies and tax breaks, in order to stimulate "urban renewal." This meant selling off large chunks of Manhattan to (often international) corporations for next to nothing, as the city tried coaxing businesses into putting money into redevelopment. As one study points out, "[w]ith the new federalism, New York City

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<sup>56</sup> This is an important point and one that separates the Ghostbusters from merely being a kind of gang of superheroes. The Ghostbusters are almost "superheroes," but they come with a price—literally. Whereas Gotham's three most famous superheroes—Superman, Spiderman, and Batman—all "work" *pro bono*, as it were, the Ghostbusters work only for cold, hard cash. The crew's, and particularly Venckman's, newfound independent spirit, moreover, is not that of the vigilante (Batman and Spiderman) working outside of the law for justice and the betterment of society but of the private company out to provide the best services available for its customers. Even after the Ghostbusters "save" the city for no *apparent* charge at the end of the film, there still exists a hidden receipt for their particular brand of services that will have to be reckoned at a later date. That Gotham's populace sees them as superheroes, however, is both troubling and a telling reminder of the times.

government depended increasingly on private developers and public/private partnerships for the provision of new and rehabilitated housing” (Harloe, Marcuse, and Smith 194). The result was that people in the lower economic strata, often minorities, found themselves uprooted and cleared out of an increasingly corporatized city.

The Faustian bargain that New York (and other American cities) made with capital, then, is much the same as the one the mayor and the city make with the Ghostbusters in the film. Before the crucial meeting with the mayor, we have already seen the police delivering the possessed Louis Tully (Rick Moranis) to the Ghostbusters instead of taking him to jail, admitting they have no idea how to handle his curious ramblings and that the Ghostbusters would probably know best what to do with him. Likewise, in the face of impending disaster, the mayor gives total power and authority to the Ghostbusters to do whatever they must to save the city. What each of these scenes portrays is the failure of local, city government and municipal services to deal with a crisis. Whether it is the police or the local officials, the city is helpless to solve its own problems and must look to a private company to bail it out. Hence, the Ghostbusters, a private corporation, essentially trumps the capabilities of New York City itself.

Consider the main “problem” of the film, for instance, which ostensibly is the ghosts. What are these ghosts supposed to represent? They do little actual damage throughout the film—they scare people, crash cars, steal food, read books, and fly around. *Ghostbusters*, when one considers it, is not much of a traditional ghost story, wherein a specific haunting takes place that is metaphorically charged (the return of the past/history, whether public or private). It is essentially a comedy, and the ghosts are not

really meant to be frightening, as Page has written. It is tempting to write them off as mere phantoms of the problems—crime, poverty, decaying infrastructure and city services—of that older, more troublesome New York. The Ghostbusters, in a pre-Giuliani New York, are heroically cleaning up the city, getting rid of those despicable beings that infest its streets. But it is important at this point to pause and recall precisely what such “cleaning up the streets” and urban renewal meant to various minorities and lower income people living in New York City at the time.

The revitalization of Times Square and Forty-second Street can serve as one example.<sup>57</sup> The area had been the symbolic center of the deterioration of New York City for a while. Throughout its history, it had been associated with vice and shadiness, and in the 1970s such a notion reached its zenith. The scene in which Travis Bickel drives through Times Square and sermonizes about the scum of the earth in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* captures this feeling perfectly.<sup>58</sup> After the end of New York’s fiscal crisis, Times Square and Forty-second Street became the nexus of a huge redevelopment program (led by the Forty-second Street Development Corporation) that furthered its pro-business agenda by playing on such images of a desolated city.

Like many development projects in New York that, as Sites notes, “served to subsidize businesses and developers and to exclude the wider public” (“*Public Policy*”

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<sup>57</sup> The area should, by no means, be wholly representative of the different areas of New York that underwent gentrification around this time. This gentrification continues, though the recent financial crisis has stymied such “growth” and will have an interesting effect on the largely untenanted, pricey real-estate ventures that have rapidly expanded into “changing” neighborhoods.

<sup>58</sup> This image of Times Square is so strong it still resonates in Penny Marshall’s *Big* (1988). When Tom Hanks escapes to the city, he books himself a room in a seedy Times Square hotel where he cowers in fear on his bed to a chorus of sirens, gunshots, and Spanish-speaking voices screaming outside his door. The fact that Hanks is, at this point, literally a child ensconced in an adult’s body and registering the typical white suburban fear of the inner city, is quite suggestive.

197), the Times Square and Forty-second Street transformation benefited a certain class at the expense of others. The proponents in the city government and media were happy to play off of the historically media-fed, (white) public's view of the area as a veritable war zone. In *Reconstructing Times Square: Politics and Culture in Urban Development*, Alexander J. Reichl writes that

Public reports emphasized concerns about crime, drugs, violence, and pornography in the area; but the language of urban decline derives much of its potency from racial anxieties, and lurking beneath the surface of redevelopment proposals was the persistent theme that West Forty-second Street had become the domain of a menacing population of young African-Americans and Latinos. (2)

And yet, “contrary to widely held perception, especially among suburbanites, that Forty-second Street had become a ‘ghetto street,’ studies found that whites constituted a ‘numerically dominant group’ of persons on the street at almost all times of day” (62). Thus, much of the rhetoric of redevelopment, as it often does, adopted carefully coded racial messages, as well as military metaphors, to make its case. Territory needs to be reclaimed; a certain “element” needs to be removed or contained for the safety of “everyone.” Most of the homeless in the area, for instance, were “ship[ped] to the South Bronx” (Davis, 391). Yet, as Reichl writes, “[t]here are certainly important misconceptions at work when racial integration is perceived as a minority takeover, but these anxieties are deeply rooted in a society that continues to be characterized by racial segregation and inequality” (62). Added to this, writes Sites, was a tendency to blame

New York's fiscal troubles mostly on "the unworthy and dependent poor, the misguided generosity of social reformers, the unreasonable demands of racial minorities, [and] the irresponsibility of free-spending politicians" instead of on "developers who had overbuilt, [and the] financial institutions that encouraged and profited from irresponsible municipal borrowing [. . .], let alone the corporate decisions and federal policies that long favored suburbanization at the expense of urban centers" (*Remaking* 39).<sup>59</sup> Such scapegoating thus tapped into long-held American beliefs in self-reliance and a strong (Protestant) work ethic, and traditional (white) fears of a racial or ethnic "other," who is simultaneously a burden and a threat to American prosperity.

As the film transfigures it, the "problem" of minorities and the poor, who must be swept out of the way for the good of all, becomes the ghosts themselves. Although they used to be human, they no longer are seen as such. They are vaporous, easily blown away by the winds of economic change. Yet they also remain and resist, haunting their former streets and neighborhoods in protest. "Uprooted" from their "rest," much as many people were uprooted from their homes, the persistence of such phantoms attests to the fact that this "problem" can never be fully solved by the thoughtless and callous machinations behind gentrification (perhaps, in part, the reason for *Ghostbusters II* and the soon-to-be-released *III*). As H.V. Savitch writes in *Post-Industrial Cities*, "[t]he CBD [Central Business District] boom, gentrification, and the displacement of working-class households have worsened existing imbalances. The CBD is saturated with investment,

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<sup>59</sup> Even these "objective" policies were highly suspect, writes Mike Davis, helping to ghettoize further the very same neighborhoods they that would later back for "renewal": "Banks and S&Ls, [. . .] pumped capital out of the inner city but refused to loan it back, especially to Black-majority neighborhoods. Instead they drained Northeastern savings to the Sunbelt, where they stoked a massive speculating building boom" (389).

the remainder of the urban core is overcrowded [. . .], and [. . .] falls deeper into poverty” (48-9). In short, writes Sites, “displacement was an inevitable consequence of private reinvestment” (“*Public Action*” 199). These displaced people do not simply disappear, however (as the ghosts do in the urban renewal championing of the film, where they are “contained” in a storage unit—yet burst free again), but are merely pushed into less desirable neighborhoods or “contained” in ghettos. Much like the scene in which Louis Tully collapses against the window of a luxurious restaurant in Central Park, whose elegant diners pay him hardly a second of interest, such people may as well exist in another world—and in a sense, like the ghosts, *they do*.

Reichl sums it up nicely, writing that “[i]n the transition from the Great White Way to the Dangerous Deuce, whites saw the decline of their civilization and its subordination to an alien culture that threatened to displace them from the central areas of the city” (117). This puts a “neighborhood watch” twist on the Ray Parker Jr. hit theme song, which opens, “If there’s something weird in your neighborhood/who you gonna’ call?/Ghostbusters/If there’s something strange, and it don’t look good/who you gonna’ call?/Ghostbusters.” If the people who are likely to call the Ghostubsters are, as we have seen, the wealthy and an ailing city eager to stimulate private enterprise whatever the cost, then it becomes clear who probably comprises the “weird” and “strange” disturbances.

In the end, the “problem” of Times Square and Forty-second Street was solved without too much difficulty. Through several economic downturns, the Forty-second Street Development Corporation eventually did its job. As Reichl writes, “[i]t took two



decades to transform Forty-second Street and Times Square from a symbol of urban decline into a thriving Disney-space” (17). Likewise, the ghosts themselves are shown to be easily “containable” in the Ghostbusters’ Containment Unit, and even their leader, Gozer, who is intent on destroying the earth, is eventually defeated.

So what, then, is the film’s deeper problem, if the ghosts pose little actual threat? Tellingly, it is not until the ghosts are released that the real trouble begins. And this is where we find our true villain. It is, of course, Walter Peck (William Atherton) of the Environmental Protection Agency, which turns out to be the main culprit behind Gozer’s success. From his first appearance, when he clashes with Venckman and demands to inspect the Ghostbusters’ Containment Unit, Peck is shown to be the most troublesome element in the film. But why is he so suspicious and untrusting of the Ghostbusters? A sympathetic voice might say it is because the Ghostbusters’ Containment Unit is run by nuclear power, as are the weapons they regularly use to capture ghosts, meaning the Ghostbusters operate a modest nuclear device/reactor in their basement that nobody but themselves knows how to work, smack dab in the middle of New York City. And all of this is completely unregulated. Most people would find this quite troubling, particularly in the 1980s when fears of nuclear war, as well as nuclear accidents (think *Fail Safe*, Three Mile Island, the Star Wars Defense System, and the soon-to-be Chernobyl) were high. But oddly enough, we cannot but hate Peck and the EPA for their intrusive and meddling ways. In a wonderful ideological sleight of hand, the film’s test audiences

found themselves cheering when the mayor has Peck arrested and puts his faith in the Ghostbusters to save the city.<sup>60</sup>

There is no clearer parable of the 1980s love affair with privatization and deregulation than this scene in which the mayor must choose between the EPA and the Ghostbusters. The Ghostbusters now hold a sole monopoly on a service we would expect the city or federal government to provide, since it is now necessary to the safety and well-being of America. And the only real threat to the Ghostbusters providing such a service is regulation and government red-tape. The accursed EPA with its regulations and restrictions is not only limiting the potential of capital to grow exponentially, but is undercutting the very fabric of American society, putting us all in danger by tying up our only possible savior. The incredible power the Ghostbusters hold at this moment, a power that eclipses that of local and state government, is the obvious analogue to the preeminence of the corporation in the 1980s, as Reagan's economic policies increased capital's control over essential public services (to which Reagan had slashed funding) and limited government's role in the well-being of its citizens. "These federal policies," writes Sites, "provided a new set of carrots and sticks for cities seeking to right themselves. Reinforcing vulnerability to market forces, such measures reduced most national urban commitments and actively spurred the mobility of footloose corporations" (*Remaking* 43). That the Ghostbusters headquarters is housed in a renovated fire house in a neighborhood that one of the crew describes as resembling "a demilitarized zone" underscores this point, as does the fact that their vehicle is an outdated ambulance. As

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<sup>60</sup> As reported in the audio commentary of the DVD.

basic, underfunded public services meet their demise, it is the private sector that rushes in to take their places.

So who eventually foots the (Ghostbusters') bill? What is the outcome of such economic policies? What are the dreams and desires of such policies? The central desire is, of course, for that same consumerist utopia that *Network's* Arthur Jensen espouses. After all, the Ghostbusters defeat Gozer and her minions, thus saving the city. The parable of private enterprise to the rescue seems complete as the film ends with a citywide parade of gratitude for its saviors. If we carry the film's logic from New York City to the rest of America, we might be flooded with visions of a Ghostbusters franchise, with the Ghostbuster as well-known as the Orkin man. Yet, there is one intentionally humorous crack in this laudatory façade, which occurs in the final battle between the Ghostbusters and Gozer atop a skyscraper. When the Ghostbusters fail to harm Gozer with their nuclear-powered lasers, a playful Gozer announces that she will allow the group to choose its own form of death. In defense, the Ghostbusters form a huddle and agree to keep their minds clear of any thoughts to frustrate Gozer's plan. But after only a few seconds Gozer claims the choice has been made, and, punctuated by the sound of earth-rumbling footsteps, Stantz admits he could not help thinking of something. This something appears soon after as the infamous Stay Puft Marshmallow Man.

Should we be surprised here? Is not this mild satirical swipe at the monstrosity of consumer culture also an instance of the return of the repressed—the film's unabashed embrace of the new free-market economic policy and its consumerist utopian ends? That with the "freedom to choose" Stantz is unable to resist thinking of not merely

marshmallows, one of the most trivial of commodities (sugar, water, and gelatin), but the mascot of the brand-name version? The foreshadowing of the marsh-monster in the glimpse of the bag of marshmallows on Barrett's counter early on in the film, then, is also the revelation of this (unconsciously) supposed consumer paradise.<sup>61</sup> Is it any wonder, too, that Gozer's portal into the world exists in Barrett's refrigerator, the space in which many such commodities will come to rest? The real battle occurs, then, between the Ghostbusters as private industry-entrepreneurial heroes and the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man, representative of the commodity-driven culture that such private enterprise gleefully creates. This final showdown realizes the core contradiction in the film's unconscious embrace of Reagan's free market and its conscious and light lampooning of rampant consumerism. Here emerges the true dark underside of the world that *Ghostbusters* unconsciously glorifies. The logic of late capital would like to project such economic policy and consumer imperative as complementary, as achieving the perfect balance between lucrative supply and fulfilling demand, but the apocalyptic fears actually stem from the original repressed contradiction, which erupts in full force regardless, like the marshmallow that bursts all over the crowd when Stay Puft is defeated. For the actual effect of such neoliberal, free-market economic policy, even in the late 1980s, was a forced dependence on corporate America that resulted in an increased income inequality between rich and poor, particularly for racial and ethnic minorities. Such income disparity continues to grow today in New York, as well as in America itself. As the

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<sup>61</sup> Need it be mentioned that Coke and Cheez-It also appear to be instances of product placement in the film, a burgeoning practice in the 1980s?

current fiscal crisis continues to plague America and the world, one might be tempted to ask, once again, “Who you gonna’ call?”

The subsequent transformation of public space results in a world not so different from the Hollywood set on which the Ghostbusters blast Stay Puft to pieces—it is a simulated and surreal one, simultaneously creating and attempting to satisfy consumer desire. This remains a disturbing prospect for other areas targeted for such “renewal,” which seems no more than privatized public space, complete with signs, logos, and fabricated shopping “experiences.” In this sense, *Ghostbusters* figures as one of the most subtle and disturbing films depicting corporations and their discontents. For while it champions the renaissance of New York City, it disregards the larger price paid for this rebirth, as well as the macro-economic forces that all but necessitated these costly and specific methods of renewal at the local level.

#### Rebirth of a Salesman

Even as innocuous a film as the late *Saturday Night Live* alumnus Chris Farley’s comedy *Tommy Boy* (1995) represents corporations in light of the economic climate of its own production. *Tommy Boy* follows a bumbling son, Tommy (Chris Farley), as he attempts to save the family business, Callahan Auto Parts, from financial ruin. Tommy, a recent college graduate (surprisingly, for he is a shade darker than dim), has just come home to blue collar Sandusky, Ohio, to work for Callahan when his father dies. With “Big Tom” no longer at the helm, the company and its employees see grim days ahead. To make matters worse, Big Tom’s widow, Beverly (Bo Derek), whom he had recently

wed, only married him for monetary gain. She and her “son” Paul (Rob Lowe) (who is not Beverly’s son but her husband), conspire against Tommy the entire film to advance their plan of selling the factory to a competitor since Beverly was left with Callahan-preferred stock instead of cash when the estate was settled.

Moreover, since, as Big Tom puts it, “In auto parts you’re either growing or you’re dying,” Callahan had been in the process of manufacturing a new line of brake pads with hopes of revolutionizing the industry. Having sunk all of its capital into the project, the company is cash poor. Before his death Big Tom was in the middle of negotiating a large bank loan to help open a plant devoted solely to fabricating the new brake pads, but without Big Tom in the mix, the bank refuses the risky loan, which hinged on Tom’s convincing his clients to sell the new brake pad line. Callahan’s board of directors decides that, without this loan, selling the company while its stock is still high is the only option to avoid bankruptcy, although it will mean shutting down the plant, putting three hundred workers out of work, and essentially destroying the entire town.<sup>62</sup> This potential industrial waste land has already been glimpsed when Tommy is driven home from the airport, and he notices several auto parts businesses have long since closed up shop. The remaining industry in the town is in jeopardy of shutting down and Sandusky with it.

But Tommy, distraught by his father’s death and desperate to prove he deserves to run the family business (thus fulfilling Big Tom’s wish that “[t]his always has been, and

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<sup>62</sup> Ohio is not only a major automobile manufacturer after Michigan, but is the major auto parts supplier in the U.S. Ohio was also once dubbed “The Rubber Capital of the World,” and was home to numerous major tire manufacturers until the industry tanked after World War II. In other words, much of Ohio’s industry is tied to the fortunes of the automobile industry, and thus its ups and downs have been on par with Detroit’s and the kind evidenced in *Gung Ho!*

always will be, a family firm”), offers his entire inheritance as security for the denied bank loan. With this equity, the bank grants the loan and Tommy attempts a last-ditch, on-the-road sales trip with his childhood friend and Big Tom’s trusted executive, Richard (David Spade), to sell the new line of brake pads. A party animal and confidence-lacking ne’er-do-well, Tommy turns an ill-fated trip into a successful one (with Richard’s help) by learning the “personal” side of business—he gets the customers to like him (just like good ol’ dad did) by stressing the quality of his products and the special bond of trust any company is sure to form with his family-run operation. As Richard counsels him, “People are buying you, not the brake pads.” In other words, Tommy sells his awkward, but homely, personality, as well as the image of a Main Street, U.S.A., mom-and-pop store rather than the image of the small (but growing) factory-owning company that Callahan actually is.

Tommy is able to do this, in part, because Zalinsky’s Industries, the rival company, is a larger and more media savvy company than Callahan. We see several of Zalinsky’s commercials and billboard advertisements throughout the film, and Zalinsky’s is clearly growing and moving into the territory Callahan is losing. Moreover, Tommy must continually deal with the fact that Zalinsky’s auto parts is profitable enough to offer a guarantee on each of its products, a guarantee Callahan claims it provides but does not display on its products’ packaging. Zalinsky’s canny advertising campaign, as well as its carefully constructed image and packaging, have propelled it to the forefront of auto parts manufacturing.

But once Tommy figures out the “personal” side of business—that sales can be achieved through a smile, dogged persistence, and earnest straightforwardness—he is able to use the nostalgic Main Street, U.S.A. image to his advantage. When he hears a potential client complain that his customers like to see a guarantee on the box, Tommy taps into the sales wisdom that his father espoused earlier in the film: “A guarantee is only as good as the man who writes it.” Tommy’s screwball sales pitch, delivered in a “confidential” tone, echoes his father’s homespun wisdom. Tommy argues that a guarantee on the box may make the buyer feel secure, but that this feeling has little to do with the merchandise itself, since it is possible that “[a]ll they sold you is a guaranteed piece of shit. That’s all it is, isn’t it?” However, as everyone knows, Callahan means quality, so a guarantee on the box is wholly unnecessary. Much like Don Walling’s vaunted well-crafted commodity in *Executive Suite*, Tommy can play on his customers’ similar desire to idealize the commodities they purchase. That a guarantee should be more a cause for suspicion than reassurance is a stroke of sales genius that Tommy adapts from the repertoire of his father, whose salesmanship is legendary, much like Arthur Jensen’s in *Network*. As Richard tells Tommy, Big Tom “could sell a ketchup popsicle to a woman wearing white gloves.” Indeed, Big Tom’s most famous line that he uses to convince on-the-fence clients to buy from him without further scrutiny is, “I could get a helluva’ good look at a T-bone steak by sticking my head up a bull’s ass, but I’ll take the butcher’s word for it.” Such a folksy “anecdote,” with its small-town vision of butchers and farmers, provides a sense of an open pre-capitalist marketplace (an actual physical market) where exchanges are made person to person by trusted “experts” in their fields.



Because each consumer is also an honest producer, he thus respects the autonomy and status of those with whom he bargains. The anecdote of the bull simultaneously claims that there “is no bull here,” and is as fine an example of ideological mystification in its purest form.

Tommy turns the guarantee around by evoking small town suspicion of the “guarantee,” which is surely nothing but some big city lawyers’ and ad men’s huckstering words. In place of this suspect legal-speak, he reaffirms his father’s tradition of meeting with clients face to face, armed with a firm handshake and an honest smile. There is no double dealing here, such a sales pitch suggests, just trustworthy products from a real-life trustworthy guy. Thus the film evokes a nostalgic vision of an era of sales that took place before corporations had put together niche marketing teams that strategized by the numbers, a bygone time before twentieth-century media brought the most powerful sales pitch yet into every living room in America via television. *Tommy Boy* suggests a kind of sentimental re-birth of the salesman. Gone is the rage and suffering of Willy Loman, gone is the desperation and the “fuck or be fucked” hyper masculine morality of David Mamet’s *Glen Garry, Glen Ross*. Callahan is a “family firm” run by people, not capital. Instead, we are back with Willy’s esteemed salesman, who “sat around in his socks and made his calls,” a Horatio Alger type, whose “luck, pluck, and virtue” will always carry the day’s sales.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Against such nostalgia, postmodern filmmakers extraordinaire, the Coen brothers, depict the disaffected rage of the salesman circa 1943 in *Barton Fink* (1991). Here Charlie, a.k.a “Madman Munt” (John Goodman), embodies the fury and disillusionment of a permanent, isolated underclass, “the common working man,” whose inability to articulate its rage is further enhanced by being co-opted by social realist authors like Barton Fink (John Turturro), whose character is modeled on playwright Clifford Odets.

In distinction to Callahan, Zalinsky's empire has apparently grown too large for such one-on-one salesmanship. Zalinsky's Industries is a major corporation, one well known to the public, and its level of business includes buying out companies like Callahan in order to use each company's name and reputation to increase its own sales. Zalinsky himself is everywhere via his commercials, but as spokesman in his ads he has become as much of an image as he is owner of the company. While he establishes a familiarity and fame for the company, it comes at the sacrifice of the person-to-person business model that Tommy and the smaller Callahan can exploit. Everybody knows Zalinsky's, but nobody *knows* Zalinsky. What they do "know" of him comes from his reassuring ads where he claims, "I make car parts for the American working man because that's what I am, and that's who I care about."

As different as Callahan and Zalinsky are in terms of size and business philosophy, they are not exactly set at odds in the film. Zalinsky serves as a foil to Callahan throughout, but the real danger to Callahan comes from within—from Beverly and Paul, the scheming widow and her husband, who would gain from the company's sale. Paul's efforts to destroy Tommy's sales success eventually work, and Callahan will have to go forward with its plans to sell the factory to Zalinsky. But on seeing another Zalinsky commercial, Tommy decides to confront Zalinsky (Dan Akroyd) in person about the impending sale of Callahan. The naïve Tommy, unable to separate signifier (Zalinsky's image) from the signified (Zalinsky's Industries), believes in the ideology of Zalinsky's commercials, and banks on the fact that Zalinsky knew his father and will understand and help out Callahan. The destination of this trip is, of course, Detroit, with

its literal and symbolic ties to the American auto industry and blue-collar workers (whom Tommy, beloved by the Callahan workers, is trying to save).

Not surprisingly, Zalinsky turns out to be the antithesis of what his ads project him to be. Zalinsky scoffs at Tommy's attempt to beg for financial mercy, claiming, "That's life. America's in a state of renewal," and that capitalism is based on the bigger fish swallowing the littler fish, which is nothing but a necessary duty of large companies like Zalinsky's, whose job it is to "thin the corporate herd [. . .]. The weaker animals always go." Zalinsky's social Darwinist (and Naturalist) vision of capitalism turns the tables on the extortion and violence of corporations like his own, and sees them as saviors of the system itself. Such free market ideology must have worn a little thin considering the S&L crises of the late '80s that cost the government, i.e., the taxpayers, billions of dollars, which were used to bail out large banks and investment companies on the verge of bankruptcy, a practice in direct violation of a free market, *laissez faire* ideology. But Zalinsky pitches such callous business tactics as simply going along with the nature of how things work in America. When Tommy asks about the promise to the American worker in his ads, Zalinsky replies, "What the American public doesn't know is what makes it the American public." Here private capital and media propaganda help to create a mass public ripe for manipulation.

Tommy, now enlightened to the power of images, (re)presentation, and salesmanship, realizes that if the medium is the message, it must also constitute the means of challenging that message. Strapping some flares to his chest to resemble dynamite, Tommy forces his way into the boardroom where Zalinsky is about to purchase

the Callahan company. Armed with the recent knowledge of Paul and Beverly's bigamous relationship and a local news camera crew, Tommy puts Zalinsky on the spot on a live "breaking news" broadcast by informing him of the consequences to Callahan and Sandusky if Zalinsky buys the company. Tendering an order for enough brake pads to save Callahan, Tommy urges Zalinsky to purchase the products, thus saving the company and the town. With the cameras rolling, Zalinsky must perform his carefully constructed media role, and signs the order, believing that his impending purchase of the company will soon make the order moot anyway. But after Tommy next exposes Paul and Beverly's bigamous relationship, it becomes clear to all involved that Beverly's inheritance (the preferred stock that gave her a controlling stake in the company) will become Tommy's. Thus, Tommy becomes Callahan's principal stockholder, and Zalinsky's debt-saving order is legally binding. Callahan is saved.

The film's underlying message regarding corporations is thus relatively conservative and not a little idealistic. Where we might expect to see a protracted struggle between a failing company and a rapidly growing company concerned only with increasing profits by squelching its competitors, instead we witness a wedding of the two. Zalinsky congratulates Tommy on his clever maneuvers and wishes him luck. After all, Zalinsky was once the "little guy," too. As the sole owner and individual face of the corporation, he can remember his own embodiment of rags-to-riches capitalism and thus respect his old rival Callahan. After all, is it not the free market and competition that only makes us stronger? And are not both Callahan and Zalinsky pure products of the

immigrant's American dream, as their Irish and possibly Polish (or Eastern European) surnames suggest?

Poised at the point of exposing the rapaciousness of capital, in which the shark gobbles up the little fish, the film (to some degree) re-humanizes Zalinsky's Auto Parts through the figure of its founder. Zalinsky, for all his camera time and glossy ads, is still a fair player in the arena of capital, who enjoys a tough adversary. It is the purging of Beverly and Paul that truly saves Callahan. Beverly and Paul, then, become the real reason (after Tommy's initial incompetence in sales is overcome) that Callahan is foundering. The internal struggle is what held the company back, not the state of the market or the ravenous competition (though the industrial wasteland at the film's beginning lingers). Competition, in the end, is good for Callahan and Tommy, who will now use such success to help Callahan grow. Tommy, as the good CEO, will ensure that Callahan also acts as a trustworthy and benevolent company. With such sound business principles subscribed to successfully, there is no reason, the film suggests, that a company should not flourish.

Yet this seeming binary between the small town, "honest" Callahan and the corporate, image-driven Zalinsky's Industries, is no binary at all as much as it is two positions on the "ladder" of capital. Callahan may be several rungs lower than Zalinsky's, but as the natural metaphor of either "growing or dying" endorsed by Big Tom suggests, Callahan will be moving up this ladder. In other words, if Callahan continues to grow, it will be subject to the same business and advertising strategies as Zalinsky's. Tommy may be the beneficent owner and CEO at the moment, but there is

nothing to suggest that an expanding Callahan would be able to maintain such “small town” business sense and practices as it grows.

#### Corporate Agenda/Corporate Gender

The continued ignorance of the basic structure of the corporation means that the Morality Play of good and bad capitalism will continue indefinitely, as it does most recently in *Michael Clayton* (2007), though with some interesting twists. In the film, Michael Clayton (George Clooney) is a “fixer,” a lawyer who cleans up after corporate messes. Clayton appears to be existentially flat-lining through middle age. His job is ethically questionable, he is a single father with no love life, and he has a large amount of outstanding debt due to a failed restaurant venture with his junkie brother who ripped him off and disappeared. Moreover, since his creditor is a shady, underground source who demands payment on his debt immediately, Clayton has a renewed gambling problem.

However, Clayton’s request for a loan from his firm is granted when he agrees to see through another mop-up job for a corporation. Clayton’s good friend and mentor, Arthur Edens (Tom Wilkinson), a corporate defense lawyer, has recently suffered a manic episode in Minnesota during the deposition of a case he has been working on for eight years involving a multi-million dollar lawsuit alleging that U/North, a chemical company, knowingly dumped harmful contaminants into a populated area. Eden’s breakdown threatens to lose the case for U/North, and Clayton is called in to settle down the worried U/North and establish whether Edens is well enough to continue the case.

Clayton has helped Edens, who is a classic manic-depressive, through such an episode years before. But when he encounters Edens in the hospital, he finds the man still at the zenith of a manic episode. Edens excitedly tells Clayton about the case, particularly about some information he has—a paper signed by U/North’s CEO that recognizes the danger of certain chemicals—that proves U/North is guilty. Not wanting to get involved in the case since his firm is in the midst of a mega-merger and his loan hinges on getting Edens back to normal, Clayton argues with Edens and tries to convince him to forget his recent crusader rhetoric. But the savvy older lawyer has apparently gained a conscience during his breakdown, and he questions the ethics of what he and Clayton have been doing for years by defending the interests of powerful corporate clients. After escaping from Clayton’s stewardship, Edens returns to his apartment in the meat packing district to build his case against U/North, all the while maintaining an insane love affair via telephone with one of the plaintiffs, whom he eventually convinces to visit him in New York.

Although the film attributes Edens’s new outlook on life to a mental disorder, his breakdown, like Howard Beale’s in *Network*, figures as more than one individual’s mental imbalance. Edens’s “insanity,” however, one ups that of the one-dimensional Beale, who functions as one tine in a two-pronged attack on television and capital that is eventually recouped. Through his manic episodes, Edens is released as the voice of honesty and passionate concern in *Michal Clayton*, and like a Shakespearean Fool, he can speak the truth to power, especially in legalese. Set against the Prufrockian pallor of Clayton (whose name suggests a heavy, dull, moldable lump, while Edens suggests his

quixotic and utopian temper) and the gloomy dispassionate tone of the film itself, Edens functions as the sole figure embodying the repressed conscience of those complicit with a corrupt system, and his crusading drive to expose the truth functions as a kind of (literally) suicidal death-drive, in which either he or the system must be destroyed. In a sort of paradox, Edens's mania makes him the only passionate character in the film. U/North's PR person and designated evildoer, Karen Crowder (Tilda Swinton), shows an intense drive in terms of establishing a good image for U/North and climbing the corporate ladder, but she is more driven *by* a goal, than *she* is driving *toward* one. The "insane" Edens can transcend the ethical quandary of the film (the inability to find an "outside" from which to resist the system effectively), and devote himself to the goal of changing it, but the "rational" Crowder, immersed within the logic of capital and the system, can only be driven by the concerns of the system itself.

Clearly, the film suggests that to support the system actively—whether as corporate lawyer, "fixer," or executive—one must become hollow, empty of any moral and ethical considerations, and devoid of any drive or passion not in service of the system itself. For not only is Clayton existentially wiped out and compromised (he is a former prosecuting D.A., who gave up the pursuit of justice and ended up using his connections to become a successful "fixer"), but so is his nemesis, Crowder, whom we witness early in the film (unbeknownst to us) as a reflection in the mirror in which she rehearses a PR speech for U/North, signifying the liquidation of her own "self" by the corporate speak and corporate face she has adopted, a mask that we later learn has long since ceased to be a mask.



The depths of Crowder's commitment to U/North and its CEO are exposed after Edens goes missing. Clayton, under pressure from U/North and his firm to find and neutralize the now legally dangerous Edens, is unable to bring his friend back into the corporate fold(er). Crowder, who is aware that the information Edens holds can crush U/North, has Edens killed to look like suicide. Suspicious of his friend's suicide, Clayton begins to look into the U/North case, which leads the assassins and Crowder to believe Clayton has been helping Edens and has the documents for which they have been searching. Eventually discovering a box of reports damning U/North that Edens was holding at a local Kinko's, Clayton decides to finish the case his friend began. This leads to an assassination attempt on his own life—a car bomb that detonates while Clayton is out of the car, causing his would-be killers to believe he has died in the explosion. With such a cover, he is able to set up a successful sting operation, luring Crowder into admitting her guilt, all with the help of his brothers and old police buddies, marking a kind of resurrection of Clayton's character—his ethics, personal integrity, old friends, and family are restored in serving justice. U/North will lose the case and Edens has been avenged.

*Michael Clayton* follows the model set by other films that blame corporate malfeasance on particular executives (here the CEO and Karen Crowder), but it does so in a curious fashion. The damning evidence of U/North's responsibility for its misdeeds is the paper signed by the CEO, Don Jeffries himself. Thus, in terms of the highest level of accountability, we would expect Jeffries to be the main villain of the film since he has knowingly initiated an illegal and dangerous business practice that has directly harmed a

number of people. But the majority of the blame and condemnation for this act is deflected from Jeffries and U/North and redirected onto Karen Crowder.

That the film's true villain turns out to be a woman at first seems odd, considering the imbalance in terms of gender at the executive level of corporate America. Yet Crowder is the one who orders the two murders (one of which is successful) and who schemes, unbeknownst to Jeffries, to save U/North's image and case by hunting down the compromising documents. Several times we see Crowder in the position of shielding Jeffries from knowledge of her illegal activities, all to maintain the image, even to him, that U/North is having no difficulties with the lawsuit. Yet it is clear from the beginning (and from the signed document) that Jeffries is aware of his illegal activities and thus somewhat unclear as to why Crowder continually covers for him. She apparently enjoys her power and reputation to such a degree that she will murder in order to secure it, but, again, Jeffries is the party guilty of the "original sin." That she somehow comes to bear the brunt of all the illegal activity in the film by committing a murder is strange. Yet Crowder is clearly the main villain in the film, even though it is Jeffries and other executives who have caused the sickness and potential deaths of many more people, as well as the destruction of the environment. But the "vulgar" murder and selfish scheming of Crowder is somehow supposed to put the more massive crimes of the corporation and its CEO out of our minds.

Certainly Clayton sees it this way. Like the typical film noir anti-hero (the film has noir-like elements in tone and style, as well as in Clayton's character), he is drawn against his better judgment into something larger than he imagined. His sympathies are

at odds with his desire to remain true to his own ethical code, a tough, ultimately selfish attitude (combined with his particular moral exhaustion) that is only breached when his friend is killed (à la *The Maltese Falcon*). Moreover, Clayton's mission is never anything more than a personal one. He does not pretend to care about the U/North case or its victims much. That he will ultimately help the victims win their case becomes just a byproduct of his true aim. Instead, he wants solely to avenge Edens's death and the attempt on his own life. The last scene of the film is telling in this regard. Clayton does not wish to speak to the CEO about the company's transgressions, but to Crowder concerning hers. Granted, he is wired and must get her verbal confession, but it is telling in that Crowder tries convincing the confused Jeffries to go back to the board meeting, safe from the lurking danger of Clayton, and receives the full force of Clayton's vitriol.

Clayton and Crowder have, of course, met once before when Clayton tries to reassure her in Minnesota that Edens will do no more damage to the case. The meeting takes place at a bar and ends quickly and disastrously with a furious Crowder berating Clayton about his failure to contain Edens, who represents the irrational, the libidinal. That a client should rage at him is common in Clayton's job (as the film's opening scene shows us), but here it takes on an edge, since it eventually leads to Crowder's despair and decision to kill Edens. Had Clayton succeeded in his mission, Crowder probably would have had no need to silence Edens. Hence Clayton's emasculation in this scene must leave a particular sting.

This failed meeting feels like a blind date gone horribly wrong. That the two should meet under potentially romantic circumstances, which the film rapidly forecloses

on, cannot liquidate its own libidinal investment so easily. Mixing the handsome Hollywood darling, George Clooney, into a spy thriller/noir genre in which viewers expect to find a *femme fatale* but instead find de-sexed and empty characters forces the film to find some kind of outlet for such raging libidinal seas. Or perhaps Clayton's miserably failed "pseudo-date" is yet another reason why his pent-up anger and frustration must be vented on a female character? In any event, it is Crowder who must fill this vacant position.

As a kind of *femme fatale*, Crowder becomes the repository for all of the corporation's deception. For if the corporate image pretends to be a kind of soul when it is really nothing but exterior image—a sort of mask—then the *femme fatale*, with her alluring deceitfulness and beauty that "masks" an inner corruption, serves as the perfect figure to dramatize this threat, especially in a noir-ish film that lacks any female love interest. Again, we first see Crowder as an image in the mirror, fixing her make-up, putting on her "corporate face" that will represent the image of U/North. As she inspects her body in the mirror, the seduction to follow will not be a physical one, as was Diana's in *Network*, but a seduction by the corporate image and rhetoric.

For there can be no traditional *femme fatale* character who literally seduces the hero in *Michael Clayton*. None of the film's main characters appears to have any kind of respectable love life. Clayton is divorced, Crowder is married to her job, and Edens has recently left his wife of over thirty years, though he professes a "love" for one plaintiff, which, like his mental balance, the film presents as a product of his insanity (thus true love in the film is also irrational). So we are introduced to an unconventional *femme*

*fatale* in Crowder instead, one who fuses together the corrupt corporation with the familiar trope of the two-faced woman. This conflation successfully channels the libidinal currents of the film that otherwise would remain frustrated. The “climax” of the film, then, occurs when Clayton “exposes” Crowder and verbally excoriates her, not in wrapping up the U/North case. It is one of the rare moments of emotional expression we receive from the stoic Clayton, and the moment is a catharsis for him, as well as for the viewer.

This is to say that Clayton and the film’s rage at the corporation is not aimed at the logic of capital and the corporation but on the false image it maintains, as evidenced in the squeaky-clean U/North commercial Edens maddeningly plays over and over at maximum volume in his apartment during one scene. Thus, if the corporation is a fairly masculine space where men in boardrooms puff on cigars and exemplify a kind of rapacious and aggressive pursuit of capital, then there is nothing much wrong with this. Such a (war)game can be understood by all the participants equally, and if the playing field is never exactly level, that is simply because part of the game is to manipulate the field itself. But in the case of the corporate image and public relations, the game is complete deception, and this is, as the single Clayton knows, surely a woman’s game. Competition that is acknowledged as competition is fine, but competition that masks itself as something other than it is, that requires not brute strength or force to defeat it, but the ability to dissemble, shape shift, and carefully read the nuances of others is unfair. Such competition is anathema. As a result, even Clayton must engage in these “weak”

tactics to defeat such an enemy, arming himself with a hidden wire and goading Crowder into a confession.

Clayton's real enemy is never the U/North guilty of the destruction of the environment and human lives—the logic of the corporation—but the deceptive image of U/North embodied by Crowder. Clayton and the film, like the prisoners in Plato's cave, remain fixed on the shadows playing upon the wall. Or, to be more precise, the freed prisoner, Clayton, is not interested in escaping from the cave so much as he is with confronting his captors, the puppeteers. Why the cave should be as it is, and what could possibly be outside it, are of no concern to him. Thus, in *Michael Clayton* the dominance of corporations in the era of late capitalism is so pervasive and unquestioned that even attempting to imagine something outside of such a system is irrelevant or results in madness.

As we have seen, to embrace irrationality is apparently the only way to act freely within such a system. Since the rational, which the system has converted into its opposite, is now the irrational, the real irrationality lies in the “rational” system itself. But this can only be signified in the excess of madness, either by the freedom of Edens's mental instability or through Crowder as the overly ambitious executive who resorts to assassinating her rivals in cold blood rather than in frigid legalese or cold hard cash settlements. Such a fantastic, international spy thriller motif is fairly ridiculous in the world of *Michael Clayton*. It is more a throwback to the days when capital and labor exploded into actual violent struggle (such as the California farmers' riots against the railroads in the nineteenth century as depicted in Frank Norris's *The Octopus*), or at least

is closer to what occurs today in many Third World countries where corporations, often working closely with authoritarian governments, hold sway.<sup>64</sup>

But we are no longer in a time when such bloody confrontations occur over corporate misdeeds in America. Having won such battles, corporations in the era of late capitalism have settled down to a seemingly mundane existence. The contradictions of capital and labor have been “resolved” at the surface level, although not fundamentally. This, in part, explains the pervasive cynicism of the film that change can never truly be effective. More so, it proves that the *excess* of violence (of irrationality)—the exploding cars, the stealthy assassins—is the only way to represent *the actual everydayness and dullness of corporate violence*. This kind of violence is what Slavoj Žižek calls “‘systemic violence,’ or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (*Violence 2*). Such systemic violence, “must be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’

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<sup>64</sup> This is where a film like *The Constant Gardener* (2005, based on the titular John le Carré novel) distinguishes itself from *Michael Clayton* in its exposé of corporate violence. Taking place mainly in Africa, the film draws together the corrupt political ties that assist a multinational pharmaceutical company with its deadly testing of newly developed drugs on an unknowing and expendable Kenyan population. The corporate killings in the film take place in Africa, a space in which, because of corrupt political regimes and police, such violent acts do actually occur. Moreover, the film is careful to point out how the killings have been sub-sub-sub contracted out in a way that divorces direct corporate authority from the hits. *Michael Clayton*, on the other hand, has Crowder meeting with the assassins in person. Even in a world where such killings take place, *The Constant Gardener* makes clear, this is not the way things work. The sub-contracted killings are thus related to the film’s “message” about global capital—who’s to blame? Corrupt governments and corporations? Yes, but let’s remember the hostage Third World “test subjects” and how they contribute to the health care and drug benefits we enjoy in the First World. In other words, let us see how this capitalist structured global society necessitates such a relationship. Let us re-think the fundamentals, the film suggests.

Furthermore, Clayton is drawn into the U/North case because of Edens’s murder and does not appear to care so much about the case itself—he goes after Crowder for the murder, not so much U/North itself. Similarly, when Tessa (Rachel Weisz) is murdered by the pharmaceutical company for her activism against the dangerous testing, her husband, Justin Quayle (Ralph Fiennes), continues to work on her case. But he ultimately is drawn into the cause as much as by a sense of justice as he is merely for the love of his late wife. Indeed, the film and he fuse these concerns together, and his final “suicide” is a kind of sacrifice for the cause, whereas Clayton’s is the fulfillment of personal revenge.

explosions of subjective violence” (*Violence 2*). The slow poisoning of the water in the Midwest by U/North, for instance, cannot be represented directly (or visually) in the film. There is nothing shocking and spectacular about the act of pollution; it is essentially boring. Such violence is invisible and quiet, *but it is violence nonetheless*, and this banal form of violence must be converted into the unbelievable and impossible to function as a credible threat to viewers.

In having to resort to such a representation of the unrepresentable (no shades of Lyotard here), *Michael Clayton* simultaneously downplays the threat of corporate power (its everydayness or naturalization in our world) and exaggerates it. In the end, it is the corporation, not the shady loan shark of the underworld, which participates in brutal and spectacular violence. Who would not denounce such corporate misdeeds, on the right or the left? Such an attenuated view of corporate violence becomes less a critique of corporate power than an inverted denunciation of a potential revolution against the system. After all, if legal maneuverings will never fundamentally change the system, and if violence (as in its pre-late capitalist forms) is represented in the film as an irrational and dangerous method used by malevolent forces (here the corporation, but perhaps revolutionaries one day), then there is nothing effective that can be done to alter such an untenable state of affairs. *Michael Clayton* offers a bleak vision of late capitalism where real resistance to corporate power is futile, or worse, unimaginable. Even as the seemingly rehabilitated Clayton leaves the U/North building victoriously, his last act of getting into a cab and telling the driver to give him fifty dollars worth of driving signifies the continuing aimlessness of his, and everyone’s, life in such a world.



Corporations have long since won a quiet and secret conquest of the earth in *Michael Clayton*, and there is no possibility of changing the system as it is. *Network*, appearing twenty years earlier, can at least register rage at this burgeoning situation. By the time we reach *Michael Clayton*, the one-time rallying cry, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore,” becomes “I’m exhausted as hell, and I’d rather not take anymore. . .even though I know I’ll have to.” These bleak visions of the world offer little compensation in the way of hope or a glimpse of a more utopian future radically different from the one proposed by the likes of Arthur Jensen.

While corporations remain prevalent in a variety of American films and television shows, they often function only as a rudimentary way of commenting on the underlying economic system. There is always a tension, whether heightened or relaxed, when a corporation is figured in popular culture because, whether consciously or not, some kind of comment is being made about capitalism itself. In times of economic prosperity, when enough of the corporation’s profits trickle down the economic ladder, popular culture tends to view the corporation with suspicion but ultimately finds that the capitalist system can be redeemed with a sensible nudge in the right direction—usually through the possibilities inherent in the small-business owner and his cutting-edge ideas that will reinvigorate the system. In times of crisis, however, when the economy is bleak, representations of corporations are much more likely to begin to uncover the political machinations behind corporate power. There is an attempt to grasp more fundamental and systemic issues regarding capitalism, yet these analyses always seem to be coated in

an apocalyptic pallor and an inability to see any brighter future. Nevertheless, the corporation retains its grip as a perennial “bad guy” in popular culture, now somewhat benign, now hell-bent on profits, but always to be viewed with both awe and suspicion.

Capitalizing Death: Technology, Medicine, and the Care of the Self in Don DeLillo's  
*White Noise*.

“What I’d like now is to speak of the things that are left, say my goodbyes, and finish dying. They don’t want that.”

Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

In its humorous depiction of one post-nuclear family’s mundane day-to-day in a media-saturated world where the strange is rendered familiar and the familiar strange, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* has long stood as a perfect primer on postmodern American life. The unspectacular “hero” of the novel is angst-ridden Jack Gladney, who frets daily over the myriad possibilities of death threatening his safe suburban existence, and gropes for answers to the meaning of life in the spiritual dark. His fear of death is so great it appears to have partially influenced his latest marriage and his career choice as chair of “Hitler Studies.” What makes Gladney’s obsession with death especially interesting, however, is not his overwhelming fear and anxiety (which would merely signal neurosis) but the terms under which he comes to see himself suffering. Gladney discovers a new kind of death, what we might call a “postmodern death,” and he struggles to comprehend it throughout the novel.

Equipped with a modern, existential view of life and death, Gladney is unprepared to deal with death’s newest guises. In a discussion of the human understanding of death with Gladney, his colleague Murray Jay Siskind alludes to Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, noting that “Ivan Ilyich screamed for three days. That’s about as intelligent as we get” (282). Things are not so “easy” for Gladney, however. Even the possibility of an Ivan Ilyich-like horror-stricken scream (which echoed far into the modernist’s existential

void) has been subsumed by the white noise of postmodern life, “a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension” (36). For, as Gladney states, the ways and means of death are constantly changing: “Man’s guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death” (22).

Gladney’s comment here is shrewd because it underscores the workings behind the event of what we normally think of as “death.” As science and technology evolve, so too does “death,” which in turn changes the way people come to understand mortality itself. *White Noise* reveals this complex interplay among science, technology, and death as Gladney searches for a style of dying he can come to terms with, a kind of “death-style” to match the unobtrusive life-style he has chosen. Through his quest, the novel evinces the shortcomings of medical science in an age of simulation and uncertainty and points to its failures in dealing with death by suggesting that some of its preventative methods may be as harmful as they are helpful, especially in terms of their effects on people’s comprehension of health, illness, and mortality. Yet this critique of science, technology, and medicine is not limited in its scope and truly takes on weight when it is set within the context of the novel’s greater concern with exposing the problems and paradoxes of a simulated postmodern world, a place of confusion and contradiction where the arbiters of truth are those authorities bearing the latest information, and a place where authorities gain and hold power by generating, purchasing, storing, retrieving, and disseminating such information. In short, it is a world in which corporations help create and “solve” such seeming chaos. *White Noise*, then, situates the discourse of death in

relation to other social discourses to show that, far from being a universal condition, “postmodern death” is a highly particularized cultural construct, ultimately subject to corporations, the market, and capital.

### Choosing A Death That’s Right For You

Gladney’s attempts to quell his fears of death uncover a host of assumptions he holds about death and indicate some of the greater narratives that have informed his views.<sup>65</sup> Tellingly, none of these narratives is explicitly tied to the narrative of late capitalism and its most powerful representatives, corporations. As we shall see, many of Gladney’s narratives offer transcendent or “natural” views of death that are somehow outside the realm of what the novel shows is an increasing “corporatizing” of life under late capitalism.

Gladney’s first imagining of death occurs early in the novel. After awaking suddenly one night from a “muscular contraction known as the myoclonic jerk,” Gladney wonders, “Is this what it’s like, abrupt, peremptory? Shouldn’t death, I thought, be a swan dive, graceful, white-winged and smooth, leaving the surface undisturbed?” (18). This Romantic image of death recalls Rilke’s poem, “The Swan,” in which an “awkward walking” swan enters a pond,

And death, where we no longer comprehend  
the very ground on which we daily stand,  
is like the anxious letting-himself-go

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<sup>65</sup> In a similar fashion, Mark Conroy explores various narratives that Gladney clings to in an age that lacks stable, authoritative narratives in “From Tombstone to Tabloid: Authority Figured in *White Noise*.” The first part of my reading is concerned specifically with particular discourses on death.

into the water, soft against his breast,  
which now how easily together flows  
[..... ]  
while he, infinitely silent, self-possessed,  
and ever more mature, is pleased to move  
serenely on his majestic way. (71)

Here, life merges into death harmoniously, and the swan figures as a beautiful and heroic emblem of this meeting, which is nothing short of the culmination of a natural process. Gladney's image of death as a swan dive evokes the same effortless passage, the same nobility in bearing. The aesthetization of death turns death into an artistic technique (perhaps a "death d[r]ive") that can be practiced and mastered, not merely by Rilke, but by Gladney as well. The diver's art is one of precision, the dive itself a triumph of form over materiality. The diver slips under the water's surface as smoothly as possible, and the act becomes one of beauty. The myoclonic spasm, however, is a profound belly flop: "I seemed to fall through myself, a shallow heart-stopping plunge" (18).

Death as a sudden fall that cannot be rehearsed, where one plummets through the self as through a void, is a fine example of a modern, existential notion of death. Gladney's fanciful wish for a kinder, gentler death is antiquated and absurd in the face of the randomness of postmodern death. Gladney even goes so far as to idealize Attila the Hun's death "as in some internationally financed movie epic [. . .]. No weakening of the

spirit. No sense of the irony of human existence [. . .]. I want to believe he was not afraid. He accepted death as an experience that flows naturally from life” [. . .] (99, 100). As John Frow points out, Gladney’s “Attila” fantasy allows him to valorize “a heroic lack of self-consciousness, [and] a naive immediacy to life and death” that paradoxically offers a “vision of nonmediation” through cinematic mediation itself (42, 43). What appears as romantic and nostalgic yearning in the chapter’s beginning (“I want to believe”) turns to despair by the end, when Gladney has effectively written himself into the scene he was merely a spectator of earlier: “Don’t let us die, I want to cry out to that fifth century sky ablaze with mystery and spiral light” (103). Gladney’s attempts to romanticize and aestheticize death are hopeless and inevitably sink into the existential abyss. If that were not enough, the metaphor of passing into death via calm waters is effectively smashed when Dimitri Cotsakis, another colleague, drowns in a surfing accident (168).

The modern, existential vision of death is, then, what Gladney most embodies. For, as Leonard Wilcox argues, Gladney “is a modernist displaced in a postmodern world. He exhibits a Kierkegaardian ‘fear and trembling’ regarding death and attempts to preserve earlier notions of authentic and coherent identity [. . .]” (99). This is most apparent in Gladney and his wife Babette’s ongoing conversation over which of them should die first:

She claims my death would leave a bigger hole in her life than her death would leave in mine. This is the level of our discourse. The relative size of holes, abysses and gaps. We have serious arguments on this level. She

says if her death is capable of leaving a large hole in my life, my death would leave an abyss in hers, a great yawning gulf. I counter with a profound depth or void. And so it goes into the night. These arguments never seem foolish at the time. Such is the dignifying power of our subject. (101)

This despairing one-upmanship uncovers the influence of existentialist discourse on death from Heidegger to Camus.<sup>66</sup> Death here can only (not) be imagined as nothingness, and the more massive, the more gaping the void, the more anxiety of death one has. Thus, the sober existentialist taking stock of the meaninglessness of existence—the heroic Nietzschean gaze into the abyss—becomes *devoid* of any metaphorical power. And although Gladney realizes that the conversations with Babette are ridiculous, he obviously can find no other way to broach the subject of death; the language of existentialism and the modernist moment it is part of restricts the articulation of a “postmodern death” and results in simply a humorous contest about whose void is bigger.

In Wilcox's reading of *White Noise*, Gladney's modernist consciousness puts him at odds with the postmodern world in several ways, especially in regards to “heroism.” Since modernism's “‘heroic’ search for alternative, creative forms of consciousness” has failed, DeLillo depicts “moments of ‘heroic’ vision and imaginative epiphany as parody

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<sup>66</sup> Existentialism is a slippery term, one that is often used rather broadly (as I have been) to denote many modernists' sense of man's isolation from God and the absence of objective values, the (consequently) utter meaninglessness and absurdity of life, and man's ability to freely choose and determine his fate. Yet, as Jean Wahl has written regarding the definition of existentialism, "It is [. . .] a problem to define this philosophy satisfactorily. [. . .] may we call Kierkagaard an existentialist, or even a philosopher of existence? He had no desire to be a philosopher [. . .]. In our own times, Heidegger has opposed what he terms 'existentialism,' and Jasper has asserted that 'existentialism' is the death of the philosophy of existence" (4).



and pastiche—as he does in the climactic ‘showdown’ between Gladney and Gray [. . .]” (Wilcox 99, 100). Frank Lentricchia similarly claims that Gladney’s plot to kill Gray “embodies his dream of existential self-determination” (94). Gladney’s plan, a hack version of any number of bad revenge movies, not only backfires (as he is literally shot) but leads him to further despair and confusion when he ends up in a church hospital only to find that the nuns’ religious faith is a simulation. For Gladney is even willing to cling to the life-saver of religious faith—“Why shouldn’t it be true? [. . .]. Why shouldn’t we all meet, as in some epic of protean gods and ordinary people, aloft, well-formed, shining?” (317)—until one of the nuns tells him that their belief is a sham, but that “[s]omeone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief” (319). This postmodern version of faith as simulation frustrates Gladney’s grasping for a new (old) narrative to structure his life (death).

Gladney’s desperate search for a suitable death is thus complicated as this existentialist discourse overlaps with other discourses, as each narrative strains, unsuccessfully, to articulate the new form of “postmodern death.” The result is a smorgasbord of “death-style” choices, as if seeking an understanding of life and death were the same as shopping for a new shirt at the mall. Murray hocks Tibetan Buddhism early in the novel, yet even the supermarket tabloids offer comparable spiritual comfort, highlighting the connection between shopping for goods and spirituality. Babette, an avid follower of them, reads Gladney a story entitled “‘Life After Death Guaranteed’” that, after detailing several incredible stories of persons remembering their “former lives,” becomes a sales pitch: “‘The no-risk bonus coupon below gives you guaranteed

access to dozens of documented cases of life after death, everlasting life, previous-life experiences [. . .]” (143-44). In this hodge-podge of postmodern “faiths,” various narratives compete, intersect, and replace one another—particularly as all have been reduced to commodities and carefully marketed by corporations in the age of late capitalism.

At one point, Gladney even slips into a medieval conceptualization of death when he awakes early one morning to find a white-haired man in his backyard. Gladney approaches the man, certain that

[h]e would be Death, or Death’s errand runner, a hollow-eyed technician from the plague era, from the era of inquisitions, endless wars, of bedlams and leprosariums. He would be the aphorist of last things, giving me the barest glance—civilized, ironic—as he spoke his deft and stylish line about my journey out. (243)

Gladney’s personification of death, with all its “allegorical force” (243), is a combination of various media-and-artistically-fed fables about man “playing against” Death for a longer life, a trope perhaps best employed by Ingmar Bergman in *The Seventh Seal* (though with a modernist’s touch of existential despair). In such cases, Death is figured as a doggedly-determined gamesman, linked to a higher cosmic and spiritual order, who willingly gives his opponent a (seemingly) sporting chance to defeat him. Defying death becomes a game or competition in this way of thinking (and one that can never be won, thus the heroic potentiality), as it is for Jack’s son, Heinrich, playing chess-by-mail with

the imprisoned serial killer, Tommy Roy Foster (25), and Heinrich's friend, Orest Mercator, sitting in a cage full of snakes (207-8).

This notion is undercut when the white-haired man turns out to be Gladney's father-in-law. But the gamesmanship, the attempt to "cheat" death, is never far from Gladney's thoughts. In fact, this trope of gaming with a "civilized Death" moves from the medieval rhetorical tendency toward personification and allegory into the postmodern preference for synecdoche and metonymy, most noticeably in the figure of the doctor, who stands in for science and technology. The doctor, like Death personified, is also a "technician," but a technician of the postmodern world who has mastery over the latest science and technology, someone who can understand the latest computers, machines, and data, someone who "knows the symbols" (281). It is precisely Gladney's loss of a symbolically ordered Death in a postmodern world, in which symbols are merely signs to be interpreted, that puts him at the mercy not of the religio-spiritual order, but of a techno-scientific one instead.

And that is what a "postmodern death" entails, living (dying) amidst the strangeness of new technologies. Gladney tells Murray near the novel's end that "[t]here's something artificial about my death. It's shallow, unfulfilling. I don't belong to the earth or sky. They ought to carve an aerosol can on my tombstone" (283). Technology is what finally makes Jack realize his impending death. It both "infects" him with death (his exposure to the toxic cloud) and "diagnoses" him when he visits the SIMUVAC technician (Keeseey 146). The computer data confirm it for Gladney:

Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all. It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. [. . .] It makes you feel a stranger to your own dying. (141-2)

The televised, computer-screen death is a simulated one that lacks the authentic intimacy and immediacy of “real” death, in much the same way that the media’s coverage of tragic events spectacularizes large body counts and/or massive devastation, emotionally distancing the viewer from the event. The Gladneys actually root for new and improved disasters when watching them on television (64), and Gladney tries “not to feel disappointed” when media coverage of a supposed mass grave in someone’s backyard yields only one body: “The sense of failed expectations was total” (222).

Thus, for Gladney, an unmediated death is a natural one, and it is a death always imaginatively staged in the past, where death apparently held true to the natural order of things. Murray later offers an evolutionary argument for death, casting it as essentially a kind of ever-morphing disease:

This is the nature of modern death, [. . .]. It has a life independent of us. It is growing in prestige and dimension. It has a sweep it never had before. We study it objectively. We’ve never been so close to it, so familiar with its habits and attitudes. We know it intimately. But it continues to grow, to acquire breadth and scope, new outlets, new

passages and means. The more we learn, the more it grows. Is this some law of physics? Every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain. Death adapts, like a viral agent. Is it a law of nature? (150)

Murray's questioning of whether death might be a law of physics or nature is a little more skeptical than Gladney's view of death as having once been a "natural" event because Murray is willing to accept that as the world changes, so does our understanding of death. This questioning lays the groundwork for seeing the ways in which death is culturally and historically negotiated. If Gladney's search for a "death-style" reveals the social and cultural discourses surrounding death, then Murray's refusal to romanticize death creates a space from which to interrogate the concept of the "natural death" Gladney yearns for, and what the ramifications of such a concept might be.

#### Because We Cannot Stop for Death

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Jean Baudrillard maps the relationship between political economy and death. For Baudrillard, political economy in late capitalism<sup>67</sup> has been reduced to the political economy of the sign, as he puts forth in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. In that work, Baudrillard argues against what he sees as an outdated and complicit form of Marxism. He attacks the concept of fetishism, claiming that "[i]f fetishism exists it is not a fetishism of the signified, a fetishism of substance and values (called ideological), which the fetish object would incarnate for the

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<sup>67</sup> Baudrillard himself would not use the term "late capitalism," a Jamesonian/Mandelian formation, but it essentially refers to the same economic phase as Baudrillard's critique of the sign.

alienated subject. [. . .] it is a *fetishism of the signifier*” that “is the *passion for the code*” which “delivers them [objects and subjects] up to abstract manipulation” (92). Thus, the process of ideology takes place “not in the projection of alienated consciousness into various superstructures, but in the generalization at all levels of the structural code” (92). Hence, a commodity “is the fetishization of a product emptied of its concrete labor and subjected to another type of labor, a labor of signification, that is, of coded abstraction” (93). This equals a reduction and liquidation of any possibility of a (former) symbolic order or value, as exchange value effectively trumps use value, collapsing older Marxist critiques of capital, and heralding the new “political economy of the sign”: “it is the semiological organization itself, the entrenchment in a system of signs, that has the goal of reducing the symbolic function. *This semiological reduction of the symbolic properly constitutes the ideological process*” (98). One example of the “semiological reduction of the symbolic” that Baudrillard gives is “the sun”:

The vacation sun no longer retains anything of the collective symbolic function it had among the Aztecs, the Egyptians, etc. It no longer has that ambivalence of a natural force—life and death, beneficent and murderous—which it had in primitive cults or still has in peasant labor. The vacation sun is a completely positive sign, the absolute source of happiness and euphoria, and as such it is significantly opposed to non-sun (rain, cold, bad weather) [. . .]. Thenceforth, from the moment it functions as ideology and cultural value registered in a system of oppositions, the

sun, like sex, is also registered institutionally as the right to the sun, which sanctions its ideological functioning [. . .]. (98-9)

In other words, for Baudrillard, the ideological triumph of the sign, the image, the simulacrum, or exchange value gives rise to a late-capitalist system in which free-floating signifiers empty out the possibility of depth or symbolic meaning (and of an older Marxist critique of ideology as well) by creating a strict binary code governing all meaning. DeLillo plays with this triumph of the sign in a similar way when Gladney listens to Steffie talking in her sleep and expects her to mutter a revelation, which turns out to be “Toyota Celica.” In frustration, Gladney complains that Steffie “was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida.

Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounced” (155). Indeed, each car’s name signifies something that has nothing to do with driving (Corolla, flower petals; Celica from the Latin *coelica* for “heavenly” or “celestial”; and Cressida, a satellite of Uranus or Trojan lover of Troilus in medieval romances). Thus DeLillo humorously strips Gladney of yet another symbolic dimension of meaning by replacing it with a pure sign or code, the cultural code that he recognizes as not merely ad-speak, but the truly transnational postmodern Esperanto (as when Hunt clings to a McDonald’s in Japan in *Gung Ho*)—corporate images.

Expanding on this concept of the “semiological reduction of the symbolic” in a reading of political economy and death in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard writes that in postmodern times, “little by little, *the dead cease to exist*. They are thrown out of the group’s symbolic circulation. They are no longer beings with a full role to

play, worthy partners in exchange” (126). This “out of mind” phenomenon is mirrored by an “out of sight” one too, since, in contrast to former times when cemeteries “remain[ed] in the heart of the village or town,” now they “prefigur[e] every future ghetto, [. . .] are thrown further and further from the centre towards the periphery [. . .]” (126). *White Noise* offers a scene somewhat akin to Baudrillard’s comments on cemeteries and the dead. When Gladney stops to visit “THE OLD BURYING GROUND” of Blacksmith Village, he finds the

headstones were small, tilted, pockmarked, spotted with fungus or moss, the names and dates barely legible. [. . .]. Embedded in the dirt before one of the markers was a narrow vase containing three small American flags, the only sign that someone had preceded me to this place in this century (97).

Like the dead that Baudrillard suggests are symbolically silenced, so too are the dead in this graveyard essentially silent and forgotten. Gladney somberly reflects that “[t]he power of the dead is that we think they see us all the time. The dead have a presence. Is there a level of energy composed solely of the dead?” (98), but it is hard to see how much presence and power the dead have in such a rarely visited, dilapidated graveyard.

Gladney sees the fact that he is “beyond the traffic noise, the intermittent stir of factories” (97) as indicating how well-placed the graveyard is with respect to mourning, yet this location obviously functions to keep the all-but-forgotten dead well away from the living as well, both literally and figuratively. Ye olde village burial ground, now accessible via the expressway (ominously so, when we recall the cemetery razed by Inverarity in *The*



*Crying of Lot 49*), also signals the change from the small-town atmosphere and life Gladney so desires from Blacksmith, whose original and historical burial ground is now nearly entirely forgotten.

With the dead silenced and removed, so to speak, the ability of the dead, and death itself, to function symbolically is lost. Primitive societies,<sup>68</sup> according to Baudrillard, have a symbolic understanding of death that postmodern life lacks:

We have de-socialised death by overturning bio-anthropological laws, by according it the immunity of science and making it autonomous, as individual fatality. But the physical materiality of death, which paralyzes us through the 'objective' credence we give it, does not stop the primitives. They have never 'naturalised' death, they know that death (like the body, like the natural event) is a *social relation*, that its definition is social. In this they are more 'materialist' than we are, since for them the real materiality of death, like that of the commodity form for Marx, lies in its *form*, which is always the form of social relation. (131)

Gladney's and Murray's earlier comments about death being "separate" from the self, how it is subjected to "objective" study by science and medicine and remains ultimately a doomed individual experience, all resonate with Baudrillard's summation of postmodern attitudes toward death here.

Unlike the individual's fatal and lonely expiration (date), death treated as a social relation retains, for Baudrillard, symbolic value, which "is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a 'structure', but an act of exchange and a *social relation which puts an end*

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<sup>68</sup> Baudrillard uses the terms "primitives" and "savages" not without irony.

*to the real*, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between real and imaginary” (133). With Lacanian overtones, Baudrillard argues that our binary life/death, which leaves no room for symbolic exchange proper, creates an “*effect of the real*” that is only a “structural effect of the disjunction between the two terms, and our famous reality principle, with its normative and repressive implications, is only a generalization of this disjunctive code to all levels” (133). Whereas for the primitives, “[t]he symbolic is what puts an end to this disjunctive code and to separated terms,” our “reality principle is never anything other than the imaginary of the other term” (133). Therefore, “the price we pay for the ‘reality’ of this life, to live it as a positive value, is the ever-present phantasm of death” since “death is our imaginary” (133). In a sense, death is our/life’s Other, which props up our ‘reality’ against the imaginary binary opposite that is death. The result is that life ends up as “positive,” while death must always remain “negative.”

Death for the primitive, though, is always an “exchange [that] does not stop when life comes to an end. Symbolic exchange is halted neither by the living nor by the dead [. . .]” (134). In effect, the primitives’ symbolic exchange with death short-circuits the binary of life/death (and thus of positive-happiness vs. negative-anxiety) by proposing a continual *exchange* between the living and dead. Death, in this case, is not an imagined end (or even a “real” beginning as in many religions) but a reciprocal exchange, always rife with social significance. As Baudrillard claims, this symbolic exchange persists in postmodern times, only instead of actually exchanging with the dead, “[w]e simply pay with our own death and our anxiety about death for the rupture of symbolic exchanges”

(134). Gladney is the perfect example of the customer in such a political economy of death because he cannot accept the terms and conditions that apply to his situation, the very terms and conditions that have underwritten his condition (life) as something that will one day be reckoned and expire, and so he pays and pays and pays.

What Baudrillard has done, of course, is offer the possibility of an economic model different from the multinational global economy of late capitalism, where exchange value has reduced all things to free-floating signs, bereft of symbolic value. Symbolic exchange returns that which cannot be integrated into an economy and remains outside of mere calculation and function (something like Bataille's "accursed share," though the excess here takes on a different social dimension), working instead at a social and symbolic level (as with gift giving) to reconcile certain tensions in a society. Such an economy is a direct challenge that late capitalism, in its reduction of all things to a general equivalence of the sign, is unable to incorporate. So, too, is the primitive respect for the dead, which is a social relation replete with symbolic value, and one completely at odds with the way that the dead and death are feared, forgotten, and ignored in postmodern life. Stripped of such social and symbolic significance, death becomes the individual's solipsistic obsession, as it is with Gladney: "In the capitalist mode, everyone is alone before the general equivalent. It is no coincidence that, in the same way, everyone finds themselves alone before death, since *death is general equivalence*" (*Symbolic* 146). Having neatly tied late-capitalist economics to the economics of life and death, Baudrillard can map out the true social reaches of this political economy of death,

something *White Noise* goes about doing in its meditation on the strangeness of contemporary America.

### The Pre-Scribed Life

The binary construct of life/death lends itself to a linear (capitalist) time-scheme, so that people like Gladney often feel they are “running out of time” or that an early death “shortchanges” them. Life, extended out like a credit line, eventually expires. Hence, says Baudrillard, “[o]ur whole culture is just one huge effort to dissociate life and death, to ward off the ambivalence of death in the interests of life as value, and time as the general equivalent” (*Symbolic* 147). Under such linear time constraints, people come to expect a “natural death” the way they might expect a service to be fulfilled, and barring any accidents, this death should be deferred as much as possible by medicine, science, and technology.

Yet the idea of “natural death,” as Baudrillard writes,

signifies not the acceptance of death within ‘the order of things,’ but a systematic denegation of death. Natural death is subject to science, and death’s call is to be exterminated by science. This clearly signifies that death is inhuman, irrational and senseless, like untamed nature [. . .]. The only good death is a death that has been defeated and subject to the law: this is the ideal of natural death. (*Symbolic* 162)

Gladney’s belief that his death will be “artificial,” “alien,” or unnatural may be a consequence of the technology he is unable to put his faith in, but his longing for a

“natural” death reinscribes the very conditions of death that science sets out to eradicate. “Natural death” is as much a societal construction as “artificial” death. “Natural death,” Baudrillard makes clear, becomes a simulation of natural death: “[a]s if everyone had their own little print-out of a life-plan, their ‘normal expectation’ of life, basically a ‘contract of life’; hence the *social* demand for a quality of life that makes up part of a natural death” (162). The result is that “[e]veryone is dispossessed of their death, and will no longer be able to die as it is now understood” (162). In preparation for such a death, with all its attendant fear and emphasis on preventative medicine, “natural death is the equivalent to the neutralisation of life” (*Symbolic* 163).

Hence, Gladney’s desire for a “natural death” is no longer possible because postmodernism’s simulated death implodes the distinction between “artificial” and “natural” death. Artificial death is now natural death in the sense that it is the postmodern mode of death, and thus it is a natural death that would truly be unnatural in this world. At one point Gladney comments, “I recalled with a shock that I was technically dead” (158). His comment is more astute than he realizes, for although Gladney speaks figuratively here, he literally (and inadvertently) refers to his death as simulated by the SIMUVAC worker on a computer screen. We are far from the refined, artistic “technique” of Romantic death here, and have entered the screen of the simulated, scientific “technical” postmodern one.

Thus, the only possible way to cheat death is to cheat the system itself. Gaming with Death is replaced by being disingenuous with one’s doctor. The doctor as postmodern technician holds the key to life or death in his wealth of superior knowledge.

He, like Death, metes out life or death sentences according to a higher authority (science instead of God). The authority of the doctor causes patients to adopt a simultaneously fawning and duplicitous manner, since, as Gladney realizes, “[o]nce you’re shunted from the older doctor to the younger doctor, it means that you and your disease are second-rate” (179). On the way to taking Babette’s son Wilder to the doctor for his incessant crying, Gladney and Babette

anticipated questions the doctor would ask and rehearsed our answers carefully. It seemed vital to agree on the answers even if we weren’t sure they were correct. Doctors lose interest in people who contradict each other. This fear has long informed my relationship with doctors, that they would lose interest in me, instruct their receptionists to call other names before mine, take my dying for granted. (75-6)

Gladney’s idea of a visit to the doctor becomes a worrisome, rehearsed performance, and one that reveals the importance placed on the authority of the doctor, who is there not so much to cure the ill as to tend to the (living) dead or dying. Such a view of doctors and medicine is alarming because life itself becomes little more, as Baudrillard suggests, than the attempt to fit the model or contract of a life that society perceives is owed or granted to us. As Dr. Chakravarty explains to Gladney during a visit,

“People tend to forget they are patients. Once they leave the doctor’s office or the hospital, they simply put it out of their minds. But you are all permanent patients, like it or not. I am the doctor, you the patient. Doctor doesn’t cease being doctor at close of day. Neither should patient. People

expect the doctor to go about things with the utmost seriousness, skill and experience. But what about patient? How professional is he?" (260)

This, in part, helps explain why Gladney is so terrified of doctors' offices. The distinctions between doctor and patient are rigidly enforced here, and the doctors are happy to keep it that way. Indeed, remarks Mark Conroy in an essay that maps the transmission of cultural narratives and figures of authority in *White Noise*, "authority, at least in the world of this text, is above and before all positional" (158). If the doctor plays the role of the doctor/authority, then the patient is subsequently forced into a role of patient/subject.

In Foucauldian terms, Gladney's body has been made "docile" or "normalized" in these interactions with the SIMUVAC technician and Doctor Chakravarty. As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, "the body is [. . .] directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, emit signs" (25). Gladney's array of tests, benign as they seemingly are, nonetheless subject him to the ceremonies and signs of postmodern medicine. Medical techniques and practices also encapsulate perfectly Foucault's notion of "bio-power," a sort of mutation of power that, Foucault argues, arose during the shift from classical to modern society, so that "[t]he old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life" (*History* 139-40). Thus, "it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body" (*History* 143). The extension of this notion of bio-power to postmodern times leads to

the “professionalization” of the patient (like the encouragement of victimhood that Jack’s daughter, Steffie, signals in her desire to play a victim in a disaster simulation [206-7]), which takes medicine from the realm of merely treating the sick and ailing to administering life itself.

Consequently, when Gladney lies to his doctors about his medical history, it constitutes his way of disrupting the medical system and its mediation of life and death. By imparting false facts about his history, Gladney hopes to receive a clean bill of health in return, an extended warrantee on his life. However, his lie to Dr. Chakravarty about not being exposed to chemicals is ineffectual since medical science has itself become a simulation. In feeding “false” signs into the system, Gladney thinks he is separating the signifier (his exposure/symptoms) from the signified (the effects/his death). His question about whether “the numbers show some sign of possible exposure” is countered by Dr. Chakravarty: “If you haven't been exposed, then they couldn't very well show a sign, could they?” (261). Gladney’s response, “Then we agree,” is formed as a statement (not a question) to which Dr. Chakravarty does not respond. Nothing is agreed upon, and whatever the signs on Dr. Chakravarty's chart indicate, they are clearly already circulating free of their “real” referents.

A nearly identical scene occurs when Gladney visits a specialist on Dr. Chakravarty’s referral (276-81). Gladney lies three times during his tests, and matches his answers to the doctor’s questions with what the doctor tells him most people’s responses are:

“What about appetite?” he said.



“I could go either way on that.”

“That's more or less how I could go, based on the printout.”

“In other words you're saying sometimes I have appetitive reinforcement, sometimes I don't?”

“Are you telling me or asking me?”

“It depends on what the numbers say.”

“Then we agree.” (278)

Again, nothing is agreed upon here but the tacit acknowledgment that Gladney's answers should coincide with the data displayed on the printout. The simulated symptoms take precedent over the (lack of) “real” ones. Moreover, it is not because Gladney tries to lie about his exposure to Nyodene D that the system founders. When Gladney slips up and is forced to admit his lie, the results of the diagnosis do not change. The doctor tells him, “[w]e have some conflicting data that says exposure to this substance can definitely lead to a mass” (280). The oxymoronic “can definitely” attests to the inability of medical science to draw conclusions about the chemical's effects. Gladney learns nothing here that the SIMUVAC technician did not already tell him at the evacuation center (140-1). The “diagnosis” is *virtually* meaningless: “[t]his doesn't mean anything is going to happen to you as such, at least not today or tomorrow. It just means you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that” (141). Here, DeLillo gives Sartre's contention that “[m]an is [. . .] nothing else than the ensemble of his acts” (47) an ironic postmodern twist. Life as data, death as data. Life, death, and medicine—all are emptied of their power to signify under the weight of technology and simulation. The final absurdity is

that it may take approximately fifteen to thirty years to discover if Gladney is indeed in danger from the exposure, at which time Gladney will be anywhere from sixty-seven to eighty-two years old.

DeLillo also calls attention to the limitations of modern science in a postmodern world during the evacuation prompted by the Airborne Toxic Event. When Steffie psychosomatically (re)produces the symptoms of exposure she hears on the radio broadcasts, Gladney wonders,

What if she was developing real symptoms by natural means? [. . .] Which was worse, the real condition or the self-created one, and did it matter? [. . .] Is a symptom a sign or a thing? What is a thing and how do we know it's not another thing? (126)

If suggestion and simulacra are able to create the “real,” then Gladney’s frantic questions unveil a disturbing problem inherent in modern medicine. As Baudrillard describes it in *Simulacra and Simulations*, “if any symptom can be ‘produced,’ and can no longer be taken as a fact of nature, then every illness can be considered as simulatable and simulated, and medicine loses its meaning since it only knows how to treat ‘real’ illness according to objective causes” (3). “Real” medicine in *White Noise* is reduced in the end to a lone question—How do you feel? (which is the question all three of Gladney’s doctors ask him)—while the seemingly “unreal” spread of *déjà vu* warrants a “toll-free hotline” with “counselors on duty around the clock” (176). In *White Noise* medicine falters in the face of simulation, which separates the symptom from its referent. Diagnosis is endlessly deferred, and therefore we are always already patients.

This is not to say, in a kind of instigative Baudrillardian way, that modern medicine and health care *are in reality ineffective*. Obviously, modern medicine works for millions of people on a daily basis. Although new diseases have been discovered in recent times, some formerly fatal diseases and conditions have been all but expunged from the world, and life expectancy in developed nations is higher than ever before. New surgical technologies have made transplants fairly common and successful, as well as having ushered in the regular use of artificial organs, lasers, and miniature cameras. DeLillo's aim is not a ridiculous dismissal of medicine-as-simulation (similar to Baudrillard's purposely provocative insistence that the first Gulf War didn't "take place" in *The Gulf War did Not Take Place*), but to expose, through Gladney's exposure to Nyodene D, how the "creeping daily false-hearted Death" has its partner in a speculative and preventative idea of medicine, a kind of mundane view of medicine as a regulated, daily, truthful life-guarantor.

Dr. Chakravarty sees his and Gladney's developing relationship framed by such an idea of medicine: "Together, as doctor and patient, we can do things neither of us could do separately. There is not enough emphasis on prevention. An ounce of prevention, goes the saying" (261). Indeed, the old adage "an apple a day," which through its employment of a "natural" symbol of wholeness and health (banished today, yet reinvented in various health food and organic food crazes) attempts to offer the key to health and happiness, ultimately fails to give assurance in the postmodern world as compared with Tylenol—an aspirin a day, not an apple, keeps the heart attack away. Here we perhaps find an odd postmodernized parable where the knowledge resulting

from tasting the aspirin leads to the fall from the garden with its old apple of common, folk knowledge, and banishment to a world of authoritative, scientific knowledge with its daily administering of life. For the result appears to be an ironic one: life is not exactly lived so much as it is administered and pre-scribed (that is, pre-written, modeled, and simulated, as well as “ordered” for one’s health) by modern medicine in daily doses. Slavoj Žižek lists some of the features of a world where virtuality reigns supreme in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*: “[o]n today’s market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol, [. . .] virtual sex as sex, [. . .] warfare without warfare, [and] the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration, that is politics without politics [. . .]” (10-11). Medical science is no exception to this trend. It must banish death from the scene, as Baudrillard states, and thus it must banish “life” as well. We are always already patients, always already preventing a death that will (not) come, by pre-scribing a life that will (not) be lived.

### The Ever-Patient Customer

More than just a humorous depiction of the collapse of certainty in a simulated world governed by signs, *White Noise* asks the question: what, given such dilemmas of the postmodern world, is the ultimate goal or end to science and medicine, particularly in light of the practice of preventative medicine, and what are the effects of the pursuit of such an end? Douglas Kellner and Steven Best argue that to understand science in postmodern times, it is important “to reflect on the science/society nexus; the coevolution

of science, technology, and capital; and the ways that social relations, discourses, and metaphors shape scientific understanding” (114). The answers to the above question, therefore, will not be grounded in a simple cause-and-effect analysis, since it is apparent that cultural and social beliefs inform science and technology, which in turn inform cultural and social beliefs, and the total sum of such beliefs affect and are affected by late-capitalist economics and the influence of corporations—more specifically the pharmaceutical industry in the case of health care and medicine.

One starting point for such an exploration might be the recent work of Damien Hirst that, much like *White Noise*, explores the intersections of science, medicine, and mortality. Hirst’s 2007-08 exhibit at the Lever House in New York City, *The Archeology of Lost Desires, Comprehending Infinity, and The Search for Knowledge* provides just such a model. Walking into the single-room installation introduced the viewer to a bizarre, yet familiar, world. Inside, a series of skinned and headless calves (their decapitated heads lying at their footless front limbs) each rested in an aquarium-like construction filled with formaldehyde. The tanks sat atop wheeled, stainless steel gurneys, which were carefully ordered into rows. IVs stood at attention, tubes slithering out of each tank and into pouches of liquid above. An ashtray rested under each gurney, a steel bucket at its front. In the back of the room, behind the calves, was a tank holding a small, dead shark, with several rusty tools (and a syringe) resting on top of the tank. Behind this hung a chalkboard with some scribbled equations and words (including the exhibit’s title), and next to this a birdcage containing two live and twittering budgies. Lining the room and surrounding the tanks with their morbid contents (which strangely

resembled newborn babies in incubators as much as dead calves) were several closed metal cabinets displaying boxes and boxes of various pharmaceuticals. The cabinets resembled those seen in a doctor's office or a pharmacist's shop. A clock hung over each cabinet, some of which ran forward at impossible speeds, some of which ran backward, while one didn't run at all. Ambient music washed out from hidden speakers, an amalgamation of static-laden voices and soft drum rhythms. The *pièce de résistance* consisted of a large formaldehyde-filled glass case at the head of the room, containing a cow's carcass cut in two, so as to form the grim and meaty wings of some kind of Angel of Death,<sup>69</sup> each of which flanked a birdcage with a white dove, wings splayed to echo the surrounding carcass's wings. All this was "garnished" by strings of sausages, intertwining the umbilical-natal theme with an "unnatural" processed death. A chair rested in the water below, a lamp sat atop it, as well as a bowler hat and cane (Hirst's nod to Magritte, as well as Bacon).

Hirst's mixing of the moribund and technologically banal—calf carcasses next to medicine cabinets—calls attention to the very products employed to stave off, deny, or give lie to the very grisly, corporeal nature of mortality and existence. The clocks running backward and forward suggest the promise of medicine both to slow down time's ravages and to increase one's allotted time on earth. The series of dead and headless calves recalls the nature of experimentation itself, animal and genetic, which often seeks to test and develop pharmaceuticals on animals, ironically needing such bodies/corpses in order to conduct the research that will result in the very drugs locked away in the

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<sup>69</sup> The cow carcass and sausages are a near perfect rendition of Francis Bacon's "Painting" (1946), proving that nightmares can indeed come to life.

pharmacist's cabinets, which themselves promise increased human life (at the expense of animal life).

These cabinets, the contents locked away from idle hands, double as display cases. The rows of different drugs, their serial and repetitive nature, call attention to their status as mass-produced commodities on display to the consumer, who will buy into the notion of the "impossible time" circling above each cabinet in the symbol of the broken clocks as much as he does the drugs themselves. Just as Marx's commodity is religiously fetishized, its labor history and marker of social relations subsumed under its shiny surface, Hirst's exhibit suggests that the products of medical science and pharmaceutical companies are fetishized to an even greater degree (after all, *lives* are at stake here, not *lifestyles*, the drugs seem to say). What kinds of research went into these drugs no longer matters; likewise, the fact that laboratories such as the one the exhibition's viewer now stands in might exist to create these drugs is also a moot point for the consumer. Yet in creating an installation in which laboratory, horror-show, drugstore, and physician's office coexist as one, Hirst effectively reveals the connections between the supposedly separate spheres of science and technology, capital, and our conceptions of health and mortality.<sup>70</sup> Overall, there is a kind of dangerous giving over to the smooth functionality

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<sup>70</sup> At the same time, however, the Angel-of-Death carcass overlooking the entire surreal scene may indeed be an Angel-of-Life. Hirst's project is meant to do more than merely denounce modern medicine and its market underpinnings by exploring the human reaction to such a postmodern state of affairs. Even his early work (too easily written off as mere "shock art") critiqued our (in)ability to comprehend death, as evidenced by his infamous shark suspended in a tank of formaldehyde, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of the Living*. Hirst's recent work has transcended such an effective, yet ultimately one-dimensional, look into our understanding of mortality. Hirst's work, much like DeLillo's *White Noise*, takes the subject of death and mortality out of some timeless realm of philosophical contemplation where it is stripped of all its contingencies and applies it directly to our postmodern daily life instead. *This* is how we come *not* to think of death in our particular historical circumstances.

of this glistening, techno-promise, but it is a promise in which many nonetheless persist in believing, and thus serves at once as a source of both dread and wonder.

This same terrible beauty appears in the toxic sunset that Gladney and his family admire at the end of *White Noise*, a techno-sunset probably induced by the Airborne Toxic Event itself (Boxall 113), or some similar technologically triggered environmental degradation. Thus we are left with a world beholden to a technological sublime via the fetishized Warholian car wrecks Murray gleefully shows to his students (a theme directly explored in J. G. Ballard's *Crash*), and the "MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA" that may offer possible new wonders of the world, new spaces for community and togetherness, yet which also bring with it the attendant danger of enslavement to the image/sign that is so easily manipulated by those in power.<sup>71</sup> However one looks at it, postmodern American life is lacking some of the traditional moorings that helped subjects of earlier eras not only cognitively map its now virtual terrain, but also deal with the resulting free-floating anxiety.

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Moreover, since this inability to confront or to be able to confront mortality persists, it is not by ideologically bashing the viewer/reader that Hirst and DeLillo call attention to this curious dilemma, but through the stressing of the individual's experience of such conditions. For DeLillo, this means following Gladney's desperate search for certainty and the strange turns it takes; for Hirst this means confronting the viewer with a kind of postmodern or technological sublime, where science and medicine's promises of immortality and utopia persist through their stainless steel exteriors, their cold, but beautiful drugs, fluids, and machines, all captured in the static-infused soundtrack at once distant, dissonant, oddly familiar, and soothing. Much as the crowds depicted in *White Noise* oscillate from fearful to amazed (from the Airborne Toxic Event to the MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA), so too does Hirst's viewer find himself scared and lulled by the corpse/fetus, by the horrifying suspension and experimentation of life, and the hopeful amelioration of pain and suffering once and for all.

<sup>71</sup> Lentricchia entertains the potential for a new and positive kind of postmodern collective, while Paul A. Cantor calls attention to DeLillo's meditation on the continuing influence of fascism from modern to postmodern times: "However troubling it may be, DeLillo is concerned with showing parallels between German fascism and contemporary American culture" (51).



Not surprisingly, this climate of confusion and fear governs the world of *White Noise* and compels the characters to cling with a religious fervor to anything that will give them assurance or allay their anxieties. To live one's life in the novel is to be on the lookout for one's possible death, thus turning people who would otherwise be considered healthy into patients of sorts. The professional and perpetual patient's job is always to be preoccupied with disease and death, and take every precaution necessary to protect herself from infection. Indeed, numerous characters in the novel constantly attend to the health of their bodies. Denise reads the *Physicians' Desk Reference* (36, 132), Babette tries a health food diet of "yogurt and wheat germ" (7), Steffie and Denise perennially police Babette's eating habits (43), and Alfonse Stompanato expounds on the necessity of having a "good internist" when living in New York (217). It is no wonder, then, that a drug like Dylar (purported to extinguish the fear of death) is developed. Science and technology design the strategies for dealing with the very problems they have helped create. According to Murray's advice, one of Gladney's last options for dealing with death (in a statement that might sum up Hirst's Lever House exhibit) is "to put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out. This is the point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens extinction on the other" (285). Or, as Arnold Weinstein comments on the novel, "[s]ociety's greatest weapon for warding off death is technology, but we have here a vision of technology gone amok: [. . .] medications such as Dylar that are intended to eradicate the fear of death but instead give rise to death plots of their own" (309). Ambivalent as Gladney is about technology and postmodern life, he too succumbs to the allure of Dylar and its promise to expunge

the anxiety of death when he searches madly through the trash for the bottle of pills (259).

With the emergence of a self-conscious, ever-patient customer, which Gladney embodies to a tee, there is thus born a vast, new market. Such a market would quickly be tapped into during the 1980s by the pharmaceutical industry, which was suffering a crisis of sorts in the early years of the decade and was searching for new inroads to consumers. Winnie, a neurochemist and colleague of Gladney's, exposes the corporate underpinnings of the Dylar project to Gladney after she reads an article in *American Psychobiologist*: “Such a group [studying the fear of death and developing Dylar] definitely existed. Supported by a multinational giant. Operating in the deepest secrecy in an unmarked building just outside Iron City” (299). The multinational aspect of the corporation is important here too, as it gestures to the exploitation of Third World countries in terms of natural resources. Earlier, Denise's listing of Third World nations in terms of their minerals and exports clearly shows the United States' regard for these countries: “Peru has the llama, [. . .]. Bolivia has tin. Chile has copper and iron” (81). Cultural imperialism is signaled in the “rogue scientist” and Dylar creator, Willie Mink, an immigrant and patchwork of American culture in appearance and speech. Though Gladney cannot identify Mink's ethnicity, it appears to be either Asian or Southeast Asian, revealing Mink's adoption of a Western understanding of death and science's positivist project of conquering it (307). Not only is a multinational corporation behind the Dylar scheme, but its secrecy—“To prevent espionage by competitive giants”

(299)—implies that there is indeed a fertile market to be harvested here, and one of which other companies are surely aware.

Clearly, *White Noise* is prescient in its treatment of the pharmaceutical industry and prescription drug use during the 1980s (and especially the '90s), which would soar to unprecedented heights under the Reagan administration's deregulatory economic policies<sup>72</sup> and with the passage of the Bayh-Dole Act (1980) and Hatch-Waxman Act (1984).<sup>73</sup> As Linda Marsa puts it in *Prescription for Profits*, "the Reagan White House encouraged government researchers to forge ties with industry, which transformed the once pristine laboratory into a hotbed of commerce" (7). In 1988, two years after the publication of the novel, and perhaps fittingly amidst the Iran-Contra scandal, Prozac would be approved by the FDA for use against depression. This would herald a new age in the pharmaceutical industry in regards to the treatment of depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, and anxiety.

Moreover, Dylar is very much a forerunner of Prozac and, like Prozac, is distinctively different from the kinds of barbiturates (Seconal, Nembutal, and Valium) that may well have inspired DeLillo's fictional drug (Valium was the number one

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<sup>72</sup> The refusal on the part of the Reagan administration to insure even basic regulations (the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs made sure of this) led directly to the deaths of 1,470 children from Reyes syndrome, an illness triggered in some children when taking aspirin for chicken pox or influenza. In 1982, the Department of Health and Human Services, following the FDA and other notable medical groups, urged a regulation that aspirin bottles carry a warning about the risk of Reyes syndrome, but the administration squashed it at the time (it was finally instituted in 1986). The deaths of 1,470 children needlessly resulted.

<sup>73</sup> The Bayh-Dole Act came to be at the end of the beleaguered Carter administration. It allowed universities and small businesses to patent their NIH-sponsored discoveries, then license them to the drug companies of their choice, thus creating a lucrative *quid pro quo* cycle. This led to the rise of biotech companies, which, like universities, ended up doing most of the research for drug companies. The Hatch-Waxman Act was intended to help the generic industry, but to do so lengthened the patents for brand-name drugs for five years (with the possibility of a thirty month extension if a drug company sues a generic company for infringement, no matter what the result of the suit.

prescription drug from 1969 to 1982, its sales spiking in 1978 [Sample 29]). At the time, the popularity of barbiturates that had helped fuel industry profits in prior decades was waning due to the drugs' often deleterious effects on users. In *The Cult of Pharmacology*, Richard DeGrandpre writes that sales of such drugs peaked in "1973, when over eighty million prescriptions were filled. By 1986, this number had fallen to sixty-one million. As the number continued to decline, a hole in the domestic drug market began to widen" (52). Essentially, this "hole" would be filled by SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) drugs, led by the neural-trailblazing Prozac—a new drug for a new age.

Dylar qualifies as such a technologically innovative drug in search of a fresh market. Earlier in the novel, Winnie describes Dylar as "not a tablet in the old sense" but "a drug delivery system. It doesn't dissolve right away" (187). She identifies it as "some kind of psychopharmaceutical. It's probably designed to interact with a distant part of the cortex" (188-89) and calls it "a wonderful little system." Dylar, then, is a state-of-the-art designer drug, and, as such, can be seen as representing the new kinds of SSRI drugs that would begin to flood the market after Prozac led the way (the most successful being Paxil [1997], Zoloft [1999], and [Celexa]<sup>74</sup>), at a time when "drug discovery became based on an understanding of processes at the molecular level. Molecular and computer-driven models of chemical structure drove 'rational drug design' and 'combinatory chemistry'" (Kaplan 45). The complex chemical make-up of these newer drugs ironically made them more dangerous than their discredited barbiturate

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<sup>74</sup> Also, in 1997, the FDA relaxed its standards for direct-to-consumer advertising by the pharmaceutical industry. The result has been a deluge of drug commercials since then. As of 2005, the industry spends more than \$3 billion a year on such advertising (Moynihan and Cassels 101).

brethren and exemplified the enormous effects that modern chemicals could have on the brain. Considering *White Noise*'s entertainment of Heinrich's deterministic brain theories that so upset Gladney, it comes as no surprise that Dylar is not merely a mind-numbing drug like Valium, but *a drug meant to interact and chemically alter one's state of mind*. Even Winnie is impressed by the *technological prowess* of the drug. Though Gladney fears the possibility that "[w]e're the sum of our chemical impulses," the fact is that Dylar's success as a neuro-chemical drug relies on such a hypothesis. Gladney's hope that the drug might work is thus pinned to a theory of human behavior that he is unwilling to accept.

The fetishization of Dylar is the perfect symbol for science and technology's quest to destroy death or the next best thing—the fear death instills in people. In a world in which the media spectacularizes death to the degree that "[e]very disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (64), technology and television function to promote fear and to channel it. Fear is thus the underwriter of every program and commercial, which advertisers can then tap into, as Babette realizes: "It is all a corporate tie-in, [. . .] The sunscreen, the marketing, the fear, the disease. You can't have one without the other" (264). Dylar, under these conditions, is hardly a drug created for the betterment of human life. It is the ultimate product, the commodity *ne plus ultra*. In Dylar the already intersecting lines of media and consumerism are fused. The drug's effects on Willie Mink (he cannot separate words/suggestion from reality) make clear the conflation of media suggestion and belief (which the novel interrogates throughout its course) with a purchased, anaesthetized consciousness. Yet

“consciousness” is a misnomer, for the state Mink is in resembles in part the “mediated deaths” of the television-watching zombies, the Thanatoids, in Pynchon's *Vineland*.

Such media saturation/suggestion can help “produce” symptoms (as in Steffie’s re-production of the symptoms of exposure to Nyodene D that she hears on the radio) and thus helps in producing the kinds of conditions it hopes to treat. Later in the novel, Denise also begins to experience *déjà-vu*, despite her religious reading of the authoritative *Physicians’ Desk Reference*. Denise’s susceptibility to media suggestion, however, is quite different from Steffie’s reproduction of symptoms and illustrates the pharmaceutical industry’s direct blurring of “education” and marketing that helps spur on the neurosis of the ever-patient customer. Denise’s views of disease and disorder are filtered not only through the mainstream media, but through a seemingly “official” medical book, the *Physicians’ Desk Reference* (PDR), which is commonly consulted by physicians. Yet, as Leonard J. Weber point out in *Profits Before People?*, “[the] information in the PDR is written by drug companies and the companies that support financially the distribution of free copies to 500,000 physicians, hospitals, and libraries.” Thus, “the information in the PDR does not come from independent sources” and its “free distribution every year effectively prevents independent references from competing successfully for physician attention and use” (93). With no effective outside regulatory system (the FDA notwithstanding) or non-partisan group with the resources to rival the PDA, much information about drugs and disorders comes to physicians and patients with a definitive corporate influence. Denise’s book may be consulted by objectively-minded physicians, but it has not been written by them.

## To Market, to Market, to Sell a New Drug

The point here is that Dylar is not some beneficent medical/scientific project untainted by ulterior motives. The corporation that can develop a drug like Dylar stands to make an immense profit, and the pharmaceutical industry is one of the most profitable industries in the U.S.: as late as 2002, “the combined profits for the ten drug companies in the Fortune 500 (\$35.9 billion) were more than all the other 490 businesses put together (\$33.7 billion)” (Angell 11). Thus, drugs are a major commodity and are carefully developed for certain markets. The race to create new wonder drugs, like Dylar in *White Noise*, is one driven purely by profit motive, not good will. As Joel Lexchin writes, “the industry [. . .] is looking for drugs that will generate annual sales in the order of at least US \$500 million and preferably US \$1 billion” (12).

Although the public is not the true, literal shareholder in the pharmaceutical industry, it nonetheless has its health and lives invested in it. Yet, in truth, it is the shareholders of Wall Street who hold the real stake in the industry. Their investment is pure capital, and they expect a like return on such an investment. With capital leading the way, drug research, development, production, and advertising must all be viewed with a critical eye. Furthermore, since markets are heavily influenced by the media and its promotion of fear and death, *sometimes markets can be created for certain drugs*. Babette is right: it is all a corporate tie-in and a knotty one at that.

In *The Truth About Drug Companies*, Marcia Angell, a former editor-in-chief of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, exposes many of the pharmaceutical industry’s (or “big pharma”) ethically dubious practices. When drug companies create new drugs,

for instance, a majority of them are “me-too” drugs (74-93). “Me-too” drugs are copies of other companies’ blockbuster selling drugs, as Zoloft and Paxil are to Prozac. Companies develop these drugs not because there are people suffering from disorders that only these drugs can alleviate, but because the markets for these kinds of drugs are enormous, and there are huge profits to be made by tapping into them. Moreover, since “the market has to be large to accommodate all the competing drugs. [. . .] me-too drugs usually target very common, lifelong conditions—like arthritis or depression or high blood pressure or elevated cholesterol” (83). Thus, the pharmaceutical industry’s interests lie primarily in feeding more of the same sorts of drugs into the biggest markets and promoting them with aggressive marketing (more than \$3 billion a year in advertising), rather than in developing drugs that might truly help a fewer number of people, but which will not ultimately be as profitable. Considering that Gladney, and many in the West, see death as a lifelong disease, Dylar is a drug that, like Prozac, could reap billions of dollars in profit. It also represents a true condemnation of life. Life or the fear of “losing” it, in effect, becomes the disease. It is a *lifelong condition* that requires medication, and that is something the pharmaceutical industry likes to see. This is one way of laying the foundation for the professional patient.

This reminder that the pharmaceutical corporations are beholden first of all to their stockholders, and not to the general public or its health, is sobering. Not only is research and development of new drugs skewed, but so is the direct-to-public advertising as well. Angell points out that “[o]nce upon a time, drug companies promoted drugs to



treat diseases. Now it is often the opposite. They promote diseases to fit their drugs” (86). Thus,

Markets can be created, as well as enlarged. Some of the normal accompaniments of aging are now treated as diseases. Over the past few decades, hundreds of millions of women have taken hormones for postmenopausal symptoms. Now many older men are being treated with testosterone patches for “testosterone deficiency,” and sometimes with growth hormone, as a sort of all-purpose tonic. (Angell 86)

In *Selling Sickness*, Ray Moynihan and Alan Cassels agree, stating, “[s]ometimes [. . .] the most natural and normal processes of life are being sold as medical conditions to be treated with drugs” (40). Thus, the pharmaceutical industry is in the habit of medicalizing what are common ailments of life or aging (the most recent and amusing is “restless leg syndrome”<sup>75</sup>) as “lifelong conditions” by expanding medical definitions, by promoting sales of brand-name drugs over generics or older drugs that may work just as well, and by sometimes outright creating a “new disorder” and “educating” (marketing) the public about it.

This is precisely the allure that Dylar has in *White Noise*: it is essentially an anxiety reducer that is in part a response to the very anxieties it seeks to assuage, but which it also helps fuel. Perhaps the pharmaceutical industry’s biggest triumph regarding such anxiety medication is GlaxoSmithKline’s Paxil, a me-too version of Prozac that was advertised as a treatment for “social anxiety disorder.” But this disorder, while severely

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<sup>75</sup> And could funding and marketing for such an “ailment” have been given a little boost from the *Seinfeld* episode in which Kramer complains that the woman he is dating has the “jimmy legs,” which is causing him to lose sleep at night?

disabling to some, was advertised as a common and general one. As Paxil's product director told Barry Brand in an interview for *Advertising Age*, "[e]very marketer's dream is to find an unidentified or unknown market and develop it. That's what we were able to do with social anxiety disorder'" (qtd. in Vadantam). After gaining approval for use against general anxiety disorders and running an ad just after 9/11 that "showed images of the World Trade Center Towers collapsing," it is quite clear how a drug can tap into people's fears; define, medicalize, and treat them; and further exploit them against newer and greater fears. Paxil was an enormous success and stands as the perfect example of how social and cultural anxieties are carefully tapped, channeled, marketed, administered to, cashed in on, and sent back through the spin cycle. The resulting escalation of "patient-customers" also raises questions as to the legal status of any drug and the subsequent moral dilemma and confusion among users. For instance, after Denise learns that Babette is taking Dylar, Gladney must tell her on two separate occasions that Babette is not a "drug addict" (210, 250). The issue as to the legality of certain drugs is complex, but clearly DeLillo calls attention to the fact that any *dependency* on a drug, whether it is regulated or not, is alarming when the prescription for such a drug is promoted by capital.

In the confusion and fear of a media-infused world, like the one depicted in *White Noise*, it seems near impossible to pin down where such problems are manifested. In its marketing of drugs and disorders like "social anxiety disorder," write Moynihan and Cassels, the pharmaceutical corporations'

suggest[ion] that the "cause" of this condition lies within the individual, whether for biological or psychological reasons, clearly distracts all of us

from a broader understanding of the complex sources of social anxiety—whether it is defined as a mental disorder or not [. . .]. The messages coming from the pharmaceutical industry’s marketing machinery try to keep the public focus on a narrow range of chemical *solutions* to health problems. But they also keep the focus on a narrow range of *causes*.

(137)

In promoting drugs that easily “solve” problems like anxiety (or, extrapolated, anxiety of mortality itself), the pharmaceutical corporations cover up their own manipulation of fears and social and cultural beliefs (about medical science and death), which is part of the problem. *White Noise*, however, in its playful juggling of “causes” allows us to see the way the spheres of culture and capital overlap and inform one another. The novel’s exploration of the larger cultural and social forces at work in creating certain problems strips away the promise offered by such simple, cause-and-effect solutions as popping a pill to cure one’s ills.

This dubious nature of the pharmaceutical industry and its motivations for the development of certain drugs are most prevalent, in *White Noise*, in the figure of Willie Mink. Mink is termed ““a controversial fellow”” by Winnie, who relates to Gladney Mink’s dismissal from the company that created Dylar and his subsequent illicit research. Furthermore, Mink’s sketchy research methods and his peculiar insider/outsider, marginalized status also makes him perhaps an early figure for the rise of biotech companies, which now conduct much of the research and development once carried on by big pharma, in response to the changing structures of the pharmaceutical industry during

the 1970s and '80s (Kaplan 41-7). In any case, Winnie believes that the industry's problems are singular (Mink's fault) not systemic, telling Jack that the multinational corporation Mink once worked for has a "code of ethics, just like you and me" (300). These "ethics," however, are no more than the corporation's covering itself legally due to Mink's irregular researching techniques (his tabloid ads and hotel interviews). At first Mink is "reprimanded" and "they [the corporation] put all their resources into computer testing," yet even after Mink "is kicked out, the project goes on without him" (300). Mink's illicit research can be conducted at the edges of legitimacy in an industry that may well want to keep such potentially dangerous research at arm's length, putting its energies into marketing, production, and distribution instead—the business side of pharmaceuticals.

Corporate "ethics" are hardly concerned with the effects of a drug that, as Winnie puts it "is totally [. . .] untested and unapproved, with side effects that could beach a whale," unless it entails the testing of a dangerous prototype on a human subject who has recourse to the legal system if something goes wrong. Premature testing leads to lawsuits, and that is what the company is most concerned with, though many companies find ways of sidestepping such unfavorable results.<sup>76</sup> The "further computer testing" on the fear of death combined with the "death profile" that Mink creates for each of his subjects can easily account for SIMUVAC's electronic "file" on Gladney: "I wondered what he meant when he said he'd tapped into my history. Where was it located exactly? Some state or federal agency, some insurance company or credit firm or medical clearinghouse?" (140). There is a fair possibility that SIMUVAC is (part of) the

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<sup>76</sup> See Lexchin (14-5), Weber (119-139), Angell (99-109), and Moynihan and Cassels (5-10).

corporation that has been researching Dylar. As Douglas Keeseey reminds us, SIMUVAC is also a company with commercial interests invested in disaster and death (143-4). Just as the company researching Dylar is interested in creating “death profiles” to assist its research and plot its marketing strategies, so too is SIMUVAC engaged in inputting the profiles of its potential “customers” (victims). To suggest that the companies are one and the same would not be too fantastic. Regardless, the Dylar project is ongoing and Mink's premature and failed prototype is not the last that will be seen of this type of drug. And when the breakthrough is finally achieved, when Dylar 2.0 hits the pharmacist's shelves and thirty-second spots on television, it will not be long until the copycats, the me-too drugs, abound.

Gladney's refusal near the novel's end to respond to Dr. Chakravarty's calls represents both the continuation of his fear of death and his refusal to play the perpetual patient that modern medicine demands: “He [Dr. Chakravarty] is eager to see how my death is progressing. [. . .] He wants to insert me once more in the imaging block [. . .]. But I am afraid of the imaging block. Afraid of its magnetic fields, its computerized nuclear pulse. Afraid of what it knows about me” (325). To resist becoming the permanent patient is in a sense symbolically to resist reification, but it is far too late to reverse the process. Nor can this process be reversed if one still holds the belief that “[e]very death is premature” (283), for then it is subject to medical science's machinery, which ultimately blurs the distinction between health and illness, turning life into a neo-Kierkegaardian “sickness unto death.” By now, Gladney has already become a

computer image, and the machine boasts the very qualities of human life that technology denies him—knowledge and “a pulse.”

Screaming in horror like Ivan Ilyich, thus, would do Gladney no good. That would mean believing in the terrifying otherness of death and its power to shock, when such is not the case with a pre-programmed death. Besides, what else are the bracketed stars next to one’s name on the computer print-out if not the indication of an electronic scream? Postmodern death for Gladney is ineffable in the end, and rightly so since it is computerized, a binary code of ones and zeroes, as he recognizes at the novel’s conclusion: “The terminals [at the supermarket] are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. This is the language of radiation, or how the dead speak to the living” (326). The exchange between life and death, no longer symbolic as Baudrillard reminds us, is now a computerized, binary economic transaction, banking on the here and now at the expense of a bankrupt and insolvent future.

Tom LeClair reads this ending as “uncertain,” even though Gladney’s “words imply he may be ready to accept the uncertain activity below the surface of our perceptions, activity that may—and only may—mean that the world of the living and the world of the dead are not wholly separate, closed off” (229). As we have seen, however, the dead and the living are completely separated not because of the imposition of any subjective belief system about death, but because of the structures of late capitalist society itself. The scientific, technological, and economic principles that mediate lives also mediate deaths. Modern medicine, because it cannot “heal” death, must turn life into

a constant preparation for it, essentially killing life before death can. If Gladney were to believe in the interconnectedness of life and death, it would be yet another faith he has “bought into.” Perhaps this is what Gladney finally learns in the supermarket: that his choice of death can be purchased too. Whatever conclusion Gladney may reach, however, it can have no effect on the fact that his death is technologically accounted for, or promise him that when the next Dylar comes along—extensively tested, safe, and FDA-approved—he will not reach for its bottle on the nearest supermarket shelf.

## Family Incorporated: William Gaddis's *J R* and the Embodiment of Capitalism

The chaotic and discordant world portrayed in William Gaddis's *J R* is one against which not even the family can offer comfort or safe haven. In a novel composed mainly of fragmented speech, where people break promises, ethical codes, and hearts, it is hardly surprising to discover the various families in *J R* frequently broken or breaking-up as well. While novels published after *J R* (1975), such as *White Noise* (1985) and *Gain* (1998), have had time to absorb and adjust to the shocks a thoroughly postmodernized family, the family structure in *J R* appears to be fractured beyond repair. Indeed, Dan DiCepahlis's crumbling house is a metaphor for all the "houses" or families in the novel. Their construction is tenuous, and they are all either falling apart or are in danger of doing so.

The only family that truly thrives in the novel, regardless of its ultimate disassembly, is J R's—not, of course, J R's actual family but his "Family of Companies." Thus a curious relationship can be established between the growth of J R's Family of Companies and the dissolution of the "traditional" nuclear family in the novel. By adopting the discourse of the family and family relations, J R Vansant's business model effectively conflates the "public" world of business with the "private" world of the family. This intertwining of business and family is hardly new to capitalism—it is vital to it—yet young J R's crossing of the discourses between these two usually separate spheres indicates something remarkably novel in capitalism's ongoing expansion. For in adopting the discourse of the family, capitalism is itself adopted into a newly imagined



family, given a metaphorical body, and all legal rights pertaining to it. *J R* suggests that the use of this family discourse by corporations is a way in which capitalism incorporates or embodies itself, and that this incorporation comes at the expense of individuals and individual social relations. At the same time that capitalism is embodied in and imagined as a family, individuals themselves are disembodied and social institutions, such as marriage and the family, find their bodies or structures dismantled and reconfigured.

### (Dis)Functional Families

A family's like a loaded gun,  
You point it in the wrong direction someone's going to get killed

Belle and Sebastian, "I Could be Dreaming."

In the broadest terms, the novel deals with the struggle to secure controlling interests in two family-run companies, each of which comes into "contact" with the *J R* Corporation, a fast-growing company started and by the adolescent *J R* from a telephone booth at his elementary school. As such, the diverse and complicated bloodlines extend into the multiple and complex plotlines of the novel, making it helpful to establish a short synopsis of each before proceeding. The novel begins with the death of Thomas Bast, who, along with his ever-absent brother James, owned the modest General Roll Company. Half of Thomas's shares are inherited by his daughter Stella, making her and her husband, Norman Angel (owner of a chunk of shares), near to being controlling owners in the company. Yet there are a few "loose" shares that could tip the balance of ownership toward the ambitious Stella or the elusive James. The two most important holders of these shares are Edward Bast (James's "illegitimate" son by a different

mother), and Jack Gibbs, Stella's former lover. Stella machinates throughout the novel to acquire these securing shares, and she gains controlling interest in General Roll by the novel's end. The Montcrieff family is similarly embroiled in business concerns, though at a much higher level—that of a transnational corporation, Typhon International, which owns numerous companies that appear in the novel. Monty Montcrieff is Typhon's owner, but the company is essentially run by his uncle, Governor John "Black Jack" Cates. In order to avoid taxes and other such "impediments" to its countless transactions, Typhon establishes two foundations in the names of Amy Joubert, Montcrieff's daughter, and her son, Francis.

With such a mix of business with familial interests, perhaps it is no surprise to discover that there is not a single family depicted or mentioned in *J R* which does not have its share of problems, the result of which always entails the family's breaking-up, emotionally if not physically. Jack Gibbs, a failed writer and elementary school teacher, is divorced and argues on the telephone with his ex-wife throughout the novel about his lack of child support payments, frequently having to cancel visitation dates with his daughter, whom he claims to love. One of Gibbs's best friends, Thomas Eigen (corporate executive by day and struggling playwright by night), is also no stranger to familial discord. His wife, Marian, leaves him by the novel's end for a number of reasons, many stemming from Eigen's resentment at having to earn a living to support his family at the expense of working on his writing (270-1). Then there is Dan diCephalis, a harried school counselor who suffers constant criticism from his sexually and creatively frustrated wife, who ignores her children as much as he does. The diCephalises are so

estranged from one another that each believes the old man living with them to be the other's father. Not to be outdone, Stella and Norman Angel sleep in separate beds, have no plans to start a family since Stella cannot bear children, and appear at times to be competing with one another for the shares of General Roll (357). Adding to this is Stella's seduction of Edward Bast, her possible lesbian affair, and Norman's physical abuse of Stella (348). Finally, Amy Joubert and her husband, Lucien, are virtually separated, and Amy rightly fears Lucien is going to try and abduct their son, Francis, and take him to Geneva. Moreover, the Bast family is heir to, in addition to the General Roll Company, a long-standing family dispute between brothers Thomas and James Bast, which reaches its apex in a family split when Thomas's second wife, Nellie, leaves him for James, although James and Nellie never legally marry (even though a union in a Cherokee Indian ceremony is suggested (11)). This quasi-incestuous act by James and Nellie (later echoed by Edward and Stella) results in a son, Edward, who, because of his parents' dubious legal standing as husband and wife, may be able to lay claim to parenthood with Thomas instead of James. This "paternal shift" would entitle Edward to half the shares that his cousin/sister, Stella, is eager to secure after Thomas's recent death.

Edward's questionable lineage makes him, as his name suggests, a bastard child. Certainly his playing second piano to James's figuratively adopted son, Reuben, illustrates the degree to which Edward is cast off. Yet as Anne and Julia, Edward's senile aunts, tell Stella regarding James's "adoption" of Reuben, it was "not the boy [. . .]. It was the talent James loved" (64). Despite not being blood-related, Reuben, who is treated

like a son by James and even takes on the family name, is able to claim the parenthood that Edward so desperately wishes he could. Hence, Edward's artistic struggle to compose a symphony is in great part a way establishing a paternal bond with his "illegitimate" father through the medium of his talent and art (141).

James as the absentee father and conductor not only casts a troubling shadow over Edward's self-esteem but casts the Bast family into discord too. The novel itself begins with the recent death of one father and the absence and total silence of another. The "Law of the Father" founders here as the lawyer Coen's exasperated efforts to settle the matter with Anne and Julia fail to assert the legal status of Edward's paternity. Accused by the sisters of stirring up old gossip and rumors about the family's troubles, Coen exclaims, "There's no question of justice, or right or wrong. The law seeks order Miss Bast. Order!" (8). But without James's physically being present to "defend" his half of the company, and with Edward's paternal ties in question, the state of General Roll and the Bast family is thrown into complete disorder. In the absence of the father, even Edward's adulthood mistakenly comes into question, as Coen discusses with the aunts the possible benefits of Edward's being able to claim infancy in the event of General Roll's financial ruin (13).

Joining James Bast in the ranks of absentee fathers are Gibbs, Monty Montcrieff, and J R Vansant's unnamed father. Gibbs, as we have seen, never visits his daughter, and suffered a similar kind of abandonment in his childhood, spending most of his youth in a boarding school (247). And Montcrieff, Amy's father, has rarely given his time and attention to his daughter or his retarded son, Freddie, whom he has shunted away in some

kind of hospital. Amy says to Beaton regarding her father, “He couldn’t take a moment to speak to me to, even to ask how I am there’s always a meeting an important meeting he hides in meetings” (211). As for J R Vansant, the implication is he may never even have met his father. His mother, he tells Bast, is a nurse working irregular hours (134), and J R’s disheveled appearance and threadbare clothing indicate a less than satisfactory home life. As Amy tells Jack, “he looks as though he lives in a home without, I don’t know. Without grownups” (246).

What is so unique about *J R*’s fractured families, however, lies much deeper than in the mere representation of various dysfunctional family models. What distinguishes the most compelling families in the novel are their significant relationships with big business. The Basts and the Angels are brought together in General Roll, and Montcreiff, Cates, and the Jouberts meet in Typhon International. This should not come as a surprise since roughly 80 to 90 percent of all businesses in the United States are “family owned,” which generally means, as W. Gibb Dyer, Jr. writes, that “decisions about their [businesses’] management or ownership are influenced by family” (3). Gaddis’s choice, then, to bring together family and business in *J R* is a shrewd one, intended in some degree to uncover the relationship between social and economic structures in an explicit way.

This connection partially frustrates an easy condemnation of capitalism because a social and human face is offered in place of the usually faceless and monstrous economic forces that capitalism unleashes. *The Octopus* and *The Crying of Lot 49* offered some not-so friendly human faces supposedly in charge of such forces, and *J R* has its share of

those, but the novel also introduces us to the case of Norman Angel, whom Christopher J. Knight argues “is a good man” (99). Along with the co-owner of General Roll, Thomas, Norman “never lost interest in what they were doing, so that profits were never the first interest, especially for Angel” (Knight 99). In terms of family run businesses, Angel represents the second generation (not by blood but by marriage) that must take over after the passing of the first generation—in this case Thomas. This is a common occurrence in family businesses, and a time in which the business finds itself in a moment of crisis. Dyer writes that “[t]he founder’s departure from active participation creates a power vacuum in the business and in the board that family and nonfamily members eagerly rush to fill” (81). In *J R* this power vacuum is made all the more intense by James’s absence. He is, of course, still alive, but uninterested in General Roll and unwilling to offer it support. The race by several characters to fill this void, though it may seem motivated purely by greed, is a necessity if the business is to survive this crisis.

Dyer asserts that the family’s battle over control of the business, such as the one dramatized in *J R*, “begin[s] to emerge during these transition periods. Often latent conflicts that had been suppressed for years come out into the open. The founder created a common vision for the firm and family, but after his departure the diversity of interests and values within the family comes to light” (87). This helps explain the emergence of the latent hostility that Stella has toward Edward and James due to the latter’s relationship with Nellie, which most likely fuels her quest for control of the company, as Steven Moore suggests (95). Furthermore, it vindicates Norman Angel’s position *vis-à-vis* securing as many shares of General Roll as possible. Understood in this context,

Angel's explanation of his motivations in keeping General Roll from going public appears legitimate:

Coen God damn it can't you see what I mean? Can't you see this is what's going to happen right here, after all it took to put all this together. Can't you see you go public and all these people owning you want is dividends and running their stock up, you don't give them that and they sell you out, you do and some bunch of vice presidents [. . .], they spot you and launch an offer and all of a sudden you're working for them [. . .].  
(359)

Angel's fear is that the company will have to go public and that, if so, he will eventually lose control of it, becoming a mere shareholder instead of a co-owner with the authority to make crucial decisions. As one study of family businesses puts it, "[i]f a family-controlled firm is not incorporated, it is not legally required to have a board. In this case a good number of family-controlled businesses either do not think about creating a board or shy away from setting one up. One of the reasons for this reluctance is the owner's fear of losing some of his or her independence" (Neubauer and Lank, 98). So what is really at stake is the passing of the private family business to the public arena, or making the private public.

Again, as Knight makes clear, Angel's running the family business is not entirely motivated by profit. He wants, echoing the sentiments of the would-be artists in the novel, "to keep it [the company] doing something that's, that's worth doing" (359). At this stage of its development, General Roll is not a multinational corporation, and Angel

and other family members have invested not only capital but creative energies into making the business a success. Angel's experience of the family business is one in which social (family) relations are a key aspect, and the making and exchange of commodities is less important than the autonomy to make decisions and the immediate gratification of creative labor. Certainly, in his role as capitalist entrepreneur, Angel perpetuates the exploitative capitalist system as a whole, but not nearly to the same degree as ruthless multinational corporations such as Typhon. More importantly, he still retains a sense of ethics in business, as many small business owners and family run businesses are able to do (which is not to suggest that General Roll is a "mom and pop" store, however). But to go public with the company is to open up the General Roll Corporation *exclusively* to the bottom line. Investors demand a steady and profitable return on their capital when investing in a company, and they are unconcerned with the ways in which a business must make returns on their capital (whether through the restructuring of management, production, or labor), so long as those returns are the highest possible.

This does not let Angel off the Marxist hook, however. It could be that his plea for keeping the business "in the family" represents merely a rhetoric of sentimentality and nostalgia that masks self-serving ends (which is precisely how J R employs such rhetoric of the family, as we shall see). While he appears to hold the belief that what he and the business stand for is more than profit, Angel may well have reduced Stella and himself to commodity status by their very marriage. This marriage, a proven failure, could well have been initiated in order to "keep the business in the family," a central



concern of Angel's.<sup>77</sup> Marrying Stella for her shares in General Roll would indicate Angel has turned people into commodities subject to the tyranny of exchange-value. Nor can Angel's ethical stance towards business ensure the fair treatment of others. Since businesses change over time in terms of their leaders and objectives, and capitalism itself is amoral, there is nothing to ensure that today's benign company cannot become tomorrow's Enron, just as the "family-run" Callahan Auto Parts may become the next Zalinsky's in *Tommy Boy*. Indeed, if the "play to win" philosophy of capitalism so prevalent in *JR* is not ascribed to, then the only remaining options for a growth-stalled company are bankruptcy or being purchased and incorporated into another. As the arch-capitalist Pierce Inverarity puts it in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the trick to capitalism is to "[k]eep it bouncing, [. . .] that's all the secret, keep it bouncing" (148).

Typhon, unlike the smaller, privately-owned General Roll, is a publicly-traded multinational corporation, and those who run it make sure to "keep it bouncing" purely by a tenacious pursuit of profit. Montcrieff sums it up, telling J R and his classmates, "as long as you're in the game you may as well play to win" (107). Typhon has, to pluralize an Adam Smith term, its "invisible hands" in the government and has gone so far as to incite a revolution in Gambia. Yet Typhon International, while it wields much more power and influence than General Roll, nonetheless retains the features of a family-run business, though this appears to be the result of nepotism and cronyism. Governor Cates is Montcrieff's uncle, and before Montcrieff steps out of the world of business and into that of politics, his daughter, Amy, signs for power of attorney over his holdings in order

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<sup>77</sup> Steven Moore suggests, quite plausibly, that the opposite may be true: that Stella marries Norman for his allotment of shares (95). Nor would it be surprising if both married each other for similar reasons.

to cover him and the corporation from accusations of creating a conflict of interest. Even Zona (a chief executive), although she is not blood-related, is an old friend of the family and holds a top executive position because of it. She is basically “part of the family,” as is Beaton, the company’s lawyer, whose father once worked for Cates.

Not surprisingly, Typhon and the J R Corporation’s business strategies also involve the exchange of people as goods. Montcrieff and Cates encourage Amy to marry Dick Cutler solely for business purposes. Early in the novel, Amy claims, “that would be like, like marrying your issue of six percent preferreds” (214), but Cates and Beaton imply, probably rightly, that Lucien married Amy for her financial assets (102). Yet even Amy submits and marries Cutler in the end for financial and emotional stability. And, not to be outdone by his teachers, J R tries (unsuccessfully) to convince Bast to marry Boody Selk, Zona’s spoiled daughter, for her holdings in a merger-marriage that would ironically wed J R’s Family of Companies to Typhon International (657).

As human beings are reified and exchanged in marriage as a means to financial ends, it becomes impossible to distinguish genuine human emotion from calculated business strategy. As Amy complains to Beaton, who tells her not to “make an emotional issue” of Typhon’s using her for a tax avoidance scheme, “[w]ell it is! It is an emotional issue it simply is! because, because there aren’t any, there aren’t any emotions it’s all just reinvested dividends and tax avoidance that’s what all of it is, avoidance the way it’s always been it always will be there’s no earthly reason it should change is there?” (212). Amy’s statement (in the form of a rhetorical question) that her involvement with Typhon is and is not emotional unveils how capitalism promotes the idea that the domestic sphere

is separate from the economic sphere, while in reality the two are inextricably bound up with one another.

Knight identifies this attempt to separate social institutions from one another as a key problem in capitalism, which the novel lays bare:

it is the belief that society's components can be bracketed, so that its ethics and religious beliefs are assigned one space, its culture and arts another space, and its laws and business a third, that makes it possible [. . .], for the more aggressive of these components to infiltrate the others. Certainly this is the case in *J R*. The society has willfully chosen to compartmentalize its workings [. . .]. It is a pragmatic decision, reflective of the community's plural antecedents. While the decision itself is well intended, the consequence is that one order—exchange value—begins to hold sway over others. (86)

Thus, what *J R* does, in part, is challenge the concept of the family as a “natural” social institution where members can share genuine feelings of love and support—and which is supposedly a separate sphere from the world of capital—by showing how it is ultimately subject to the rules of the market itself. The “private” world of the family and human emotion is always already subordinate to the public world of capital. Gaddis, by focusing on families that are involved in building companies and corporations (and not merely working for them), is able to gain a more complex and nuanced view of capitalism's merging of these spheres and its disavowal of doing so. In regards to representing the family, then, Gaddis is concerned with the ways in which ideas of the family are socially

constructed, in addition to how and why those constructions fail. Marx once claimed that the bourgeoisie had “torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and [. . .] reduced the family relation to a mere money relation” (476). The same could be said of *J R*'s treatment of families, though it also heralds the arrival of a new kind of family on the block.

#### From Family to Family Inc.

In creating his Family of Companies, for instance, *J R* realizes the socially constructed aspect of a family and applies it directly to the world of capital. *J R*, in one sense, creates the *J R* Corporation because he has no real family. Early interactions with Bast show *J R* searching for a kind of father figure, a potential relationship that by the end of the novel has been somewhat inverted, with *J R* playing a more paternal role to the hapless Bast. *J R* constantly strings Bast along with promises of future gains and by playing on his sense of guilt: “I mean like I have to do practically everything myself, like I set all this up to try and help you out so you can do your work and all and you don't even. . .[. . .]” (466). Davidoff, a corporate PR man, tells Bast that *J R* “really looks after you” (538), and while one can construe this paternal metaphor as entirely ironic, it nonetheless contains a degree of truth. Although *J R* is always looking to use Bast to his advantage, he attempts to keep him happy in more ways than just throwing money at him. Setting up a foundation so that Bast can pursue his music shows at least some thought and affection on *J R*'s part.

J R soon comes to understand his paternal role as founder of the J R Family of Companies, expressing a certain pride in fatherhood to Bast: “the paper’s always saying the parent this the parent that I mean that’s me the parent!” (654). Earlier in the novel, J R hears the lore surrounding Cates during his class’s visit to Typhon where Davidoff proclaims that Cates is “one of your country’s outstanding Americans” whom “presidents come to for advice” (91). This image apparently sticks with J R, and, after recognizing his new fatherhood, he borrows another page from the business playbook of Montrcrieff and Cates by hiring Davidoff to create an image of J R-the-Man. Always canny when it comes to business, J R realizes the importance of creating an image of the company’s founder that projects the kinds of qualities he wants associated with the J R Family of Companies as a whole, since, writes Dyer, “charismatic founders are generally seen as claiming supernatural or other transcendental qualities that are almost magical in nature” (60). Building the image of a founder, then, constitutes the first step in building an image of a corporation.

The image of J R that Davidoff constructs is a very precise one and is tailored mainly to J R’s specifications. J R highlights some of its features as he reads articles about “himself” to Bast. J R is “a man of vision “ with a “bulldog jaw” (650), and “[m]en who have worked with him [. . .], for years say his chief characteristics are enormous powers of concentration and dogged persistence in attacking a problem” (651). Yet he also embodies “a mysterious thing which is hard to identify, the vital creative force of the whole J R Family of Companies” (651). In a women’s magazine, he embodies “this masculine image for this here feminine reader” (651). Such

mythologizing successfully deifies J R by emphasizing traditional masculine and paternal ideals—ruggedness, determination, physical strength, virility, and potency—and melding them with suggestions of mystical and seminal energies.

Davidoff's creation is highly indebted to the popular understanding of various wealthy industrialists, from Carnegie to Ford, who, in their Horatio Alger-like tales of triumph, seem to radiate such hard-nosed and God-given "American" qualities. In typical fashion, however, J R reverses the established order of such mythologizing. As Davidoff says, J R "thinks his own success story may rub off on the company and vice versa" (516). A Captain of Industry of old would have, so to speak, *made* a name for himself through his business success—first the triumph, then the recognition and retro-mythologizing/whitewashing. J R, intuitively aware of how such images have functioned in the story of capitalism (and needing a fictional body to serve as a founder, since he is literally a child), completely fabricates an image that will function, ideologically, *as part of the corporation itself*. True, J R's dealings have been lucrative, and he has created a formidable (though dangerously leveraged) corporation, but he is hardly a well-established, venerable name in the business world. Yet, in an America increasingly obsessed with images (especially of success), there is an audience hungry for such reassuring and inspirational stories of personal triumph. Such classic American success stories appear to redeem the troubling present by promising that the future is as limitless as it was for those in the past, who simply applied themselves *in ways that you too can learn about and apply to your own life*. It is no mistake, for instance, that in a literature

course Gaddis taught at Bard College on failure in America, he assigned the forerunner of all self-help books, Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.<sup>78</sup>

More importantly, the audience for such stories is composed not merely of the American public, but of the business world as well, which has increasingly come to rely upon a CEO's "image" as a kind of barometer for the fortunes of the corporation itself. As Robert B. Reich notes in *Supercapitalism* apropos of the changes in the role of CEOs since the 1970s,

[a]nnual shareholder meetings were [in the '50s and '60s] perfunctory affairs where CEOs offered well-scripted little presentations, took a few questions, and departed. Today's CEO engages in an ongoing effort—in person, on the phone, in meetings and formal presentations—to reassure major investors, impress Wall Street analysts, and assuage any worries of bankers and credit-rating agencies. (75)<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> The image savvy Carnegie actually changed his name from Carnagey to Carnegie to suggest a relation between himself and the renowned, wealthy industrialist, Andrew Carnegie. Clearly, the idea of "success" is tied, in the popular American imagination, to wealth, as Gaddis argued in his course and eventually penned in the essay "The Rush for Second Place," (1981) in which he examines the current gloomy cultural climate. Responding directly to Solzhenitsyn's bemoaning of America's failures (and indirectly to a host of other commentators on American values that Gaddis cites), Gaddis retorts that "the main body of American literature and [. . .] novelists [. . .] have been struggling with the bitter truths of conflict and failure in American life since, and well before, he was born" (41).

<sup>79</sup> Some of the more memorable moments of recent years include Steve Jobs hocking Apple's newest i-things (popular enough to spawn an *Saturday Night Live* parody), and Ken Lay's and Jeff Skilling's repeated attempts to ensure Wall Street and the press that Enron was fine: "On the day the company's sale was announced, Lay denied it was the product of desperation. [. . .]. During the week, Enron publicly insisted that it had plenty of cash, that its trading business was doing fine, and that it was paying all the bills. In fact, none of these things was true" (McLean and Elkind, 395).

Of note in the recent financial crisis, as reported in the February 17, 2009 episode of *Frontline*, was Bear Stearns CEO, Alan Schwartz, who, in attempting to quell rumors of the company's demise in a live CNBC interview, inadvertently stoked the financial fires, sending the company's stock plunging even further.

In a postmodern world where the sign often trumps what is signified, *J R* heralds *the importance of a CEO's image to the corporation itself*, anticipating the sort of superstar CEO of the past twenty-five years or so, from Steve Jobs to Ken Lay and Michael Eisner.

This particular masculine-gendered construction of J R-as-CEO is the perfect image not only because it projects a charismatic figure more and more essential for investor confidence, but also because J R needs this figure to be perceived as a “father” of a “Family of Companies.” As Davidoff remarks to Bast at one point, “[b]oss is pushing the family image” (538). What J R hopes to “rub off on the company” is the image of a strong and virile patriarch in charge of his family and able to increase and maintain it. For the family image—modeled after the “traditional” nuclear family in its patriarchal hierarchy—is the *overall* image J R strives to create for his corporation. Thus, while the image of a driven and trustworthy CEO suggests a company’s toughness and reliability, to retain these qualities while allying them with the warmth and security that a family offers something else entirely.

J R is not the first to use the rhetoric of family to create an image of the corporation as a kind of paternal and benevolent being, however. In *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*, Roland Marchand traces the genesis of corporate image construction in advertising from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of World War II. As Marchand demonstrates through a close reading of an array of advertisements and corporate propaganda, the twentieth century saw corporations more image-conscious than ever, eager to sweep away the negative reputations they had rightfully earned during the



previous century by creating a “soul” for what the public perceived as a soulless institution. Indeed, images, such as the one Frank Norris appropriated in *The Octopus*, appear to have been on the minds of corporate leaders at the time. For example, one GM executive asked, in 1922, whether it was possible to represent the company “not as resembling an octopus, but as being the parent of a large and creditable family?” (qtd. in Marchand 103).

The GM executive’s question makes clear the prevalence of the family image that corporations chose to put forth around this time. Companies as widespread as Alcoa (The Aluminum Company of America), Caterpillar Tractors, Met Life, Ford, the Pullman Company and General Motors employed the rhetoric of family in either their public advertisements or company newsletters, or both (Marchand 104-5, and 138-40). The family image, however, found an equal competitor in military or army metaphors that stressed the efficiency, discipline, and collective effort of both a company’s business strategy as well as its relationship with, and constitution of, its work force (103). As Marchand points out, though, the family image “was used far more self-consciously. While it certainly could claim valid descent from the origins of most corporations as small family businesses, this metaphor only became more popular as the reality of family-like scale vanished” (104). Not surprisingly, in response to the growing social unrest and labor disputes of the 1930s, the military metaphors in corporate rhetoric became scarce. In its place, the family metaphor spread as “public relation officers began to cultivate a new kind of family image for the corporation—one that stressed identifiable individual employee families, real or fictional” (107). Ultimately, “[t]he family’s

relations were more intimate than a team's, and its bonds of loyalty deeper and less situational, while the father's moral authority was greater than that of any coach" (107).

In regards to image-making, then, J R is one step ahead of Cates, Montcrieff, and Typhon International. Montcrieff, whom Davidoff earlier fashions into an "an aggressive competitive team player" (95) in a bio piece, relies upon a sports metaphor to convey his image.<sup>80</sup> In the "play to win" business world of *J R*, a sports metaphor stressing teamwork and competition seems quite apt, but J R goes out of his way to avoid using this metaphor in his company's rhetoric. Davidoff instructs Beamish not to "try the team player image no play with this family of companies angle divisional autonomy" (529-30). By promoting a family image, J R keeps the companies he buys and controls feeling a certain (false) sense of autonomy, as well as a sense of security in relation to the Family of Companies as a whole. A "family" of companies headed by a reliable patriarch creates a far more alluring image than the sports metaphor with its potentially negative aspects of over-competitiveness and victory at all costs. A team can be held together by familial-like bonds, but it is always fighting another team, whereas a family can forever grow and extend itself, incorporating others not by beating and humiliating them but by "wedding" them.

Moreover, J R's use of the family image is no mere resurrection of an earlier advertising strategy. Just as the family image that corporations once projected was

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<sup>80</sup> The sports metaphor might be seen as a newer and more palatable replacement for the military or army metaphors that corporations once used. Both metaphors play on collective unity, discipline, toughness, and execution. Football, of course, remains the closest sport in terms of military comparisons. A team (army) consists of various offensive and defensive units, each with a coach (sergeant) answering to a head coach (Commander in Chief), who gets the play calls from his offensive and defensive coordinators (generals—like Cates himself) and their staff, who oversee the game from the stands above, planning strategies. Football is always about "executing" plays. That we encounter Cates, a former general, and Major Hyde, an investor, en route to learning of Typhon's military contracts makes the connection clear.

subject to change amidst shifting economic conditions in the 1930s, as Marchand argues, so too do the economic particularities of the 1970s (*J R* was published in 1976) affect the *kind* of family image that *J R* constructs. For instance, when pre-World War II corporations employed the images and rhetoric of the family, there was often a kind of commitment to a paternal ideal behind the obvious façade. In an age in which “welfare capitalism” sought to atone for much of the brutality of nineteenth-century industrialism, writes Marchand,

[a]ny given corporation might offer a few benefits or many, from medical care and organized recreation to pensions, company housing, and profit sharing. [. . .]. Whatever they may have thought of the company’s motives in subsidizing these activities, many employees readily incorporated them into their lives and thus accepted at least this degree of paternalistic nurturance as part of their image of the company. (116)

Such paternalistic ideals lasted, in one form or another, into the decades following World War II, though combined with a new age of American prosperity, the corporate family dream seemed a much realer possibility to many. As Reich notes, before the mid 1970s corporations existed more in a kind of oligopoly type of environment. There were fewer corporations, and “[t]he size of such enterprises became an almost impregnable barrier for smaller firms that might wish to enter the market. They [large corporations, such as U.S. Steel, GE, and GM] dominated the American, and much of the world’s economy [. . .]” (19). As a result, a less competitive capitalism was maintained: “[r]egulation stabilized industry, maintained jobs and wages, and protected the economic

bases of communities where regulated industries were headquartered or did business. It also sought to weigh industry's need for profits against the public's need for safe, fair, and reliable service" (25). Under such conditions, labor was able to work with business, in a way hitherto unparalleled, to establish secure jobs, wages, and benefits for many workers—concessions which corporations saw as ultimately benefitting their own stabilized business expectations. Thus, corporations often functioned as if they were citizens somewhat beholden to the communities in which they existed—they not only employed entire towns but paid a fair amount of taxes that benefited the communities in which they put up stakes. Corporations could use the rhetoric of family and strive to create a family image, and, in a limited sense, there was still a kind of reciprocity and paternalism in the relationship between business, on the one hand, and labor and the public, on the other.

Thus, when the upheavals in social and economic conditions during the 1970s—such as the failure of Keynesian economics, the rise of “stagflation,” and the Arab oil embargo in 1973—drastically changed American businesses, corporate paternalism (whatever its actual merits) became largely a thing of the past. Nicholas Spencer explores the historical particularity of 1970's capitalism as it bears primarily on the aesthetics of *J R*,<sup>81</sup> in an essay employing a close reading of David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*. I would like to use Harvey's main ideas here not only

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<sup>81</sup> Spencer applies a close reading of David Harvey's ideas on postmodern culture and economics to *J R*, concluding that “[i]nstead of being simply mimetic, *J R* literally mirrors the attributes of postmodernity to produce a critical mimesis” and that “Gaddis's emphasis on historical transition and interconnected economic and cultural tendencies creates a narrative whole that is stable” (149). Spencer uses Harvey primarily to grapple with aesthetic issues, whereas I will return to some of Harvey's main premises regarding the economic changes of the 1970s mainly as they relate to *J R*'s specific business tactics and corporate image-building.

because they offer a detailed analysis of the economic sea-change of the decade, but particularly since they help to explain the genius and timeliness of J R's image constructions—from the CEO/founder to the Family of Companies—in the novel.

David Harvey argues that during this period a new kind of economic structure, which he calls “flexible accumulation” (essentially his term for the shift to a post-industrial, global economy), arose, marking the end of mass-production, or “Fordism,” in “developed” nations, such as the U.S. and Great Britain. Harvey links this transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation with certain resulting “postmodern” social and cultural formations. In short, as flexible accumulation (we might comparably say globalization or neoliberalism) takes hold, resulting in a further fracturing and fragmentation of various social and cultural structures, such as the decline of working-class labor movements, the growth of suburbs, and the decentralizing of corporations and capital from nations (175-9), which left a large amount of people without the safety nets of earlier decades—jobs that were well-paid, secure, and provided good benefits, for instance—and gave rise to anxiety and fear for the future. Yet, Harvey writes, “as Simmel [. . .] long ago suggested, it is also at such times of fragmentation and economic insecurity that the desire for stable values leads to a heightened emphasis upon the authority of basic institutions—the family, religion, the state” (171). In a postmodern world, however, *images* of such “basic institutions” function even better than the changing institutions themselves. As Harvey writes,

[c]orporations, governments, political and intellectual leaders, all value a stable (though dynamic) image as part of their aura of authority and

power. The mediatization of politics has now become all pervasive. This becomes, in effect, the fleeting, superficial, and illusory means whereby an individualistic society of transients sets forth its nostalgia for common values. (288)

The invention of J R's Family of Companies, then, is one of J R's most innovative capitalist strategies because it radically "capitalizes" on the structural changes occurring in the American economy during the 1970s. It resurrects an older corporate image-construction (the family) at a key transitional moment in capitalism and revitalizes it. Just as an increasingly unfettered capitalism continues to give rise to greater social instability, J R seizes on an image, perhaps *the* image, of "traditional values" that promises to stabilize and counteract this crisis.

J R's purchase and dismantlement of Eagle Mills in the aptly named town of Union Falls, for instance, is entirely symbolic of both the economic shift from Fordism to flexible accumulation *and* the resulting shift in the rhetoric and image of the corporation as a family. Eagle Mills is "[o]ne of the oldest textile mills in the region and mainstay of the Union Falls economy for more than a century," and has been run by men such as "president Fred Hopper, who has [. . .] served on Eagle Mills Board of Directors since nineteen twenty-eight" (293). The town also holds picnics on company property, and the company softball team's weekly games comprise one of the town's favorite social functions. Union Falls represents the classic one-company town that, as we have seen in *Gung Ho's* Hadleyville, has had a long and involved relationship with a corporation.

Thus, when J R institutes the first of several measures aimed at gutting the company to increase profits and cash flow elsewhere, which leads to the destruction of the town (660), Bast chastises him: “these are real people up there [. . .]. A lot of them who owned the stock still can’t believe it’s not worth anything and even the ones who owned bonds, a lot of them are old and when they first bought the bonds it was almost like they were lending money to, to someone in the family [. . .]” (296). Bast’s defense of the people of Union Falls uncovers the assumptions that honest people could, at one time, make about companies they believed were trustworthy and ethical in their goals. For the sense of a company being a family is one that capitalism has always perpetuated at the local or community level where smaller businesses stay in touch with their clientele (not to mention the more “paternal” corporations noted by Marchand [Pre-World War II] and Reich [mainly Post World War II to the 1970s]). What is remarkable about the people in Union Falls is their capacity to believe that a large corporation was looking out for their best interest and nothing more.

For these people Eagle Mills *is* like a family. But believing a company is *like* a family is not the same as its actually being one, which the employees tragically learn after J R’s takeover, which is representative of the predominance of the new economy stressing flexible accumulation. Sleepy Union falls, still dreaming of post-World War II prosperity, receives a rude awakening at the dawn of a new era of deregulated capitalism. Ironically enough, Bast’s speech may be the moment that the perceptive J R realizes the power of the family metaphor, and this “almost like” is what J R will exploit in his Family of Companies in a way that no corporation before the 1970s could have imagined.

Furthermore, the case of Eagle Mills illustrates how, as deregulation and privatization increasingly became government policy, the resulting tsunami of capital fostered the kind of cutthroat capitalism of the '70s and '80s (so meticulously depicted and predicted in *J R*), wherein companies began to swallow one another up in an age of increasing corporate monopolies spurred on by corporate raiding, LBOs (leveraged buy outs), and mega-mergers, all of which would play a part in triggering the S&L crisis and stock market crash of 1987. Poised at the onset of this new age of corporate cannibalism, *J R* shows that old advertising strategies take on new and ever more dynamic and troubling facets in the age of global capital. Thus, where earlier corporate images of the family may have had some modicum of truth to them, *J R*'s is *wholly* an image. And where corporations once projected such images mainly to change *the public's* perception of business and ensure worker loyalty, *J R broadens* his audience to include shareholders and other companies too.

Considering that *J R* will, as a sign of the times, utterly destroy many of the companies he "adopts" into his Family of Companies, he cultivates the family image to assuage any fears of such an occurrence *at the corporate level itself*. To be sure, *J R*'s business tactics are as brutal as Typhon's, but they are well-disguised. The family image actually helps win *J R* support from Mister Brisboy and his mother, owners of a chain of funeral homes. Mister Brisboy confides in Bast that "it's all so exciting [. . .] being asked to join your family of companies Mother feels that's what we need and she's never really been one for family [. . .]" (544). For the Brisboys, the allure of independence and familial safety clearly woos them to "join" *J R*'s family. Hence, *J R*'s use of the family



image not only projects a warm and friendly image to a confused and frightened public, but also to an increasingly guarded and suspicious business world, wary of just the kind of hostile takeovers regularly engaged in by corporations like J R's and Typhon International.<sup>82</sup>

### Corporate Imagi-Nation

By offering companies, employees, and customers the image of a Family of Companies, J R is creating an "imagined community" in Benedict Anderson's sense of the term. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson argues that the nation is "an imagined political community," and such imagined communities "are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). J R's Family of Companies, as false and abhorrent as it may be, can be seen to function in a similar

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<sup>82</sup> Hostile takeovers of the kind perpetrated by Michael Milken (the junk bond king whose "financial innovations" created the supposedly viable junk bond market that toppled at the end of the '80s) and his friends show the degree to which companies battled it out with one another and what a "friendlier" image might gain in such a climate.

Benjamin J. Stein makes an interesting comparison of the "white-collar" crimes of Milken and co. and the "blue-collar" crimes of the mafia in *License to Steal: The Untold Story of Michael Milken and the Conspiracy to Bilk the Nation*:

After all, what were the greenmail raids of Milken [. . .] and others except the old protection racket writ very, very large? What were the threats to subvert the finances of target companies except a shakedown, with plenty of immoral complicity by target company management. What was the cleverly planned pillage of the federally insured S&Ls except the familiar criminal tactic of buying a business for pennies [. . .] and then simply stealing its assets instead of operating it as a long-term entity? (183-4)

The ruthlessness, then, went beyond merely purchasing and selling companies: it was a way to extort as much money as possible through the flexing of financial muscle. As Stein notes,

Drexel and Milken [. . .] borrowed far more from the captains of crime than from the captains of industry and finance like Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, and J.P. Morgan. That is, while J.P. Morgan and the steel barons [. . .] enriched themselves wildly [. . .], at the end of the line they left the largest and best and most profitable steel-manufacturing facilities in the world. Milken and his entourage [. . .] had enriched only themselves, leaving vast sectors of American business and industry reeling (184-5).

J R, too, with his "paper empire," is not in the game for any reason having to do with profit *and* creating long-term, sustainable companies and industries that form the bedrock of a healthy capitalist economy.

way to such a community. It is surely an imagined community/family for the companies it owns (as seen in Eagle Mills and the Brisboys' funeral homes), as well as for its employees, which even Eigen admits to when he complains that "these companies are so damned paternalistic with their deferred stock options retirement plans insurance medical benefits they finally have you tied hand and foot [. . .]" (261).

If corporations can foster an imagined family relationship with their employees, entire towns (such as Union Falls), and other companies too, then the potential of J R's imagined family could be, or, according to the logic of capitalism, *must* be limitless. And the remaining element in such an expansion is the consumer, whom Davidoff considers a stockholder or stakeholder (even if she actually holds no stock) in the company.

Davidoff mentions how affixing each of their companies' goods with the "parent company logo audience knows it's dealing with a reliable outfit builds your stockholder relationships see it someplace and they feel a nice warmth like somebody in the family just died [. . .]" (536). His reasoning here is telling in that logos and brand-building do as much ideological work, if not more so, on consumers as they do stockholders.

The implied conflation of consumer and stockholder here recalls the booming lecture given in *Network* by the CEO, Arthur Jensen, in which he describes a utopian capitalist world comprised of "[o]ne vast and ecumenical holding company, for whom all men will work to serve a common profit, in which all men will hold a share of stock [. . .]." Davidoff's vision, like Jensen's, conveniently mystifies the (purse)strings of power. In this case, the "stock" that all men hold is not of the common or preferred variety, it is a *figurative stock*, meaning the stockholders/public must "serve" by necessity a system or

corporation that has complete influence over all aspects of society—it is a “holding company” indeed—but against which they have no individual say in any decision-making process, socially, politically, or culturally.

The direct appeal to these potential consumer-citizens underscores this point. One of the ads for a J R company reads as follows: “Alsaka Development working day and night to bring the American family its full share of the world’s energy. Alsaka. A proud member of the J R Family of Companies. When you see a product. A service. A promise of human betterment for all. If it’s J R. It’s Just Right. J R. An American family of American com. . .” (578). The conflation of nation and corporation here rightly signals the growing power of corporations like J R’s that now proclaim their nationality (to a specific national audience) in a global context/market and make themselves appear necessary for the allocation of basic goods and services, which government, that toothless, old flag-waving patriot, cannot properly insure.

The unspoken claim is that what is good for America is that American businesses succeed, even if all else fails. Gaddis himself was keenly aware of the commonly held assumption that what is good for American industry is good for America.<sup>83</sup> In his work for various corporations as a script and copywriter, writing pamphlets and “screenplays” for corporate films (such as the kind Arthur Edens watches over and over in *Michael Clayton*), Gaddis studied and employed some of this very rhetoric, giving him a true

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<sup>83</sup> The infamous quotation, “I thought that was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa,” was uttered by Charles Erwin Wilson, president of General Motors, at his 1953 Senate confirmation hearing after which he would become secretary of defense in the Eisenhower government. (This “revolving door” separating capital from government is touched upon in several of Gaddis’s characters, particularly Governor Cates.) However, when Erwin said this in 1953, the statement made much more sense than it does today in the era of outsourcing and multinational corporations (Reich 28-9).

insider's view of the work that images and signs do in such advertising. The cover and first few pages of one pamphlet, "The Growth of American Industry" (1959), reproduced in *The Rush for Second Place* (27-9), for instance, stands as a perfect example of Gaddis's understanding of advertising, corporate power, and America. One picture in the pamphlet depicts a little boy staring at a bible, a key, a pencil, and a voting ballot. The text below explains the symbolic significance of these objects in a specifically American context. Gaddis clearly sees that, for many Americans, American industry must be "sold" as peculiarly American. Free enterprise (let us not invoke that French phrase *laissez-faire* in this context) is successful because of America's democratically insured freedoms, which ultimately means freedom from government regulation: "the United States has not developed as it has merely because we are a people free *from* undue government interference and restriction. Opportunity *to* is the second essential." What Gaddis is playing on here, and what remains unspoken, is that opportunity is linked to non-governmental interference.

Thus, Major Hyde (the Endo corporation man attempting to capitalize on grammar schools) asserts that "the only place left for loyalty if you got any's the company that's paving your way, when my company says jump I jump!" (455) it indicates that the conflation of nation and corporation that J R's Family helps to bring about is perhaps mainly a *replacement* of national identity with corporate identity, unbeknownst to the consumer-citizen. Here, then, arises another dynamic aspect of J R's family image amidst the mutation of global capitalism: imagining America becomes imagining J R's Family.

In other words, *J R* represents an early fictional representation of the apparent power of corporations eclipsing that of nation-states. This notion is given a fresh turn in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, in which the authors theorize "Empire," a concept tracing the decline or changes in the sovereignty of nation-states that "has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under one single logic of rule" (xii). They and contend that

[t]he activities of corporations are no longer defined by the imposition of abstract command and organization of simple theft and unequal exchange. Rather, they directly structure and articulate territories and populations. They tend to make nation-states merely instruments to record the flows of commodities, monies, and populations that they set in motion. (31)

This is certainly true of the corporations in *J R*, with Typhon International leading the way. The J R Family of Companies, in contrast, never quite reaches the status of a multinational by the time it collapses, but its advertisements and business strategies are clearly treating America itself as a map on which to record various potential economic flows.

Moreover, the movement of the J R Family by the novel's end is toward a complete control over life and death. Hardt and Negri, employing Foucault's notion of bio-power, explain how economic powers, like corporations, "within the biopolitical context [. . .] produce needs, social relations, bodies, and minds [. . .]" (32). So deep does biopolitical production run that "the whole social body is comprised by power's machine and developed in its virtuality. [. . .] Power is thus expressed as a control that extends

throughout the depths of consciousness and bodies of the population—and at the same time across the entirety of social relations” (24).

The tendency toward biopolitical production can be seen in two ways in the J R Family: first, in the J R Family’s scheme to create, in Davidoff’s words, “A Personalized Plan from Nave to Grave” (519); and second, via the extension of the imagined J R Family onto an imagined America. One of J R’s last business deals is to acquire a string of nursing homes, which he hopes to tie in to the Brisboys’ Wagner Funeral Homes (516-7). Davidoff calls the plan a “Health Package,” evidently because the pharmaceutical company Nobili will be brought on board to supply prescription drugs to customers. Davidoff sums up the package as a “funeral right through the cemetery with the drug line nursing home tie-in” (519). J R’s “health package” is even more insidious in its cool calculation than is the pharmaceutical industry’s influence on people’s concepts of life and death in DeLillo’s *White Noise*. Davidoff and J R’s scheme takes corporate power and applies it *directly* to the bodies of individuals, but in such a subtle way—it is for the care and benefit of one’s own body and life—that it makes the individual’s “choice” to join the plan a “necessary” one.

If this were not chilling enough, J R reveals to Bast the full implications of his plan: “I mean like banks we could have these different kind of banks like this regular bank and these blood banks these eye banks these bone [. . .]” (654). The dismemberment of bodies, and subsequent investment of them in a sort of bio-economy, illustrates, once again, the desire of capitalism to commodify life itself. Gaddis, however, takes the idea of the commodification of life even further than Pynchon’s play on

capital's literal *consumption* of life (and death, via Beaconsfield Cigarettes) in *The Crying of Lot 49* by stressing the commodification of the *production* of life itself.<sup>84</sup> This notion goes further than the idea of human beings being replaced by the inanimate, as evidenced in Governor Cates's various surgeries,<sup>85</sup> because here blood *is* capital and it must be made to circulate in a bio-economy that will *produce* life-as-commodity. Bodies will be banked on, invested in, loaned out, and financed.<sup>86</sup> From birth to the grave, the J R Family of Companies will father and take care of its own.

The institution of such a health package, therefore, would represent the J R Family of Companies' final conversion of the citizen to the citizen-consumer. In such a case, the care of the individual body is sustained not by the body of the State, but wholly by a corporate body. But since the corporate body is concerned only with the expansion of capital, individual bodies must become capital as well. This is where the literal and figurative elements of a corporation come into play. Corporations have been legally treated as persons since Justice Marshall declared, in 1819, that a corporation is "an artificial being, invisible, intangible" (qtd. in Donaldson 3). Thomas Donaldson summarizes the outcome of this legal declaration, writing that "[w]ith the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, U.S. corporations acquired full status as

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<sup>84</sup> Joseph Tabbi has argued that Gaddis's *Agape, Agape* can be read as a kind of cybertext. The seeds of this cybertext could be said to lie in *J R* in J R's idea of body banks. Here, Gaddis could be argued as falling in with such company as Philip K. Dick in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and William Gibson in *Neuromancer* (1984) in terms of exploring a radical and complex relationship between the body, the commodity, and artificiality.

<sup>85</sup> Steven Moore, for instance, reads Cates's body as a symbol of dehumanization, akin to Pynchon's mechanized Victoria Wren in *V.* (83).

<sup>86</sup> What would repossession look like in such a world? Marx's frequent allusions to capitalists as vampires might find a fresh angle in a metaphor drawn from a body-snatching or zombie film.

abstract persons, complete with rights to life, liberty, and state citizenship (Most U.S. corporations are citizens of the state of Delaware<sup>87</sup>)” (3). Thus did the invisible hands of Adam Smith find an invisible body in the corporation.

Corporatizing is, in *J R*, a way in which capitalism incorporates or embodies itself in the guise of a person/body. *The Crying of Lot 49* similarly calls attention to this merger of the corporate body with the human body in the figure of Pierce Inverarity, but Pynchon’s novel focuses its critique of capital mostly on America, and the massive global economic changes in the 1970s have yet to occur. The emergence of a “tighter,” more interconnected global economy, however, allows Gaddis to take this notion of capital’s embodiment and *extend it through the family metaphor*. With the adoption of the family metaphor, an incorporated capitalism in *J R* clothes its supposedly invisible body (and the bodies it now encompasses), which retains similar rights to the ones American citizens are granted. Through incorporation—literally, the creation of a corporeal being, a body—capitalism creates an imagined body (or the bodies/members of the J R Family), which is then mapped onto the body of the socius (citizen-consumers), thus becoming the socius itself.

Incorporation, from the point of view of investors, is a way of ceding personal liability or responsibility in a capitalist enterprise to a fictional body (as the law sees it). As *J R* explains this process to Bast, “[g]etting incorporated all it is is then you don’t get screwed on taxes like everybody else and like for this here limited liability and all if something happens” (345). Yet, as Donaldson notes, “[m]odern corporations are created by persons, but they are created in the image of their creators” (3). The result is that the

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<sup>87</sup> This is to avoid paying taxes. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pierce Inverarity is incorporated in Delaware.



corporate body appears to transcend its creators' control, but it is driven by the *same desire* to increase capital that governs its creators' and investors' actions. So whereas for Justice Marshall, writing in the early nineteenth century, this invisible body exists "only in the contemplation of law," in the latter half of the twentieth century, the era of multinational capitalism, this invisible body not only finds metaphorical and imaginary weight, but exists literally "outside" the law, and with drastic consequences to many. Once America itself has become synonymous with J R's Family (or that of any corporation), comprised by a "nation" of consumer-citizens, this imagined corpora-nation attempts to replace the less and less stable structure of the nuclear family (traditionally capitalism's basic unit of production) with one at the global level. Nations are like families in the global community, and since nations are increasingly eclipsed by corporations, corporations have no trouble presenting themselves as the families of the future.

#### Same as it (N)ever Was

And you may tell yourself  
This is not my beautiful house!  
And you may tell yourself  
This is not my beautiful wife!

Talking Heads, "Once in a Lifetime"

Considering the success of the family image for J R's Family of Companies, occurring as it does amidst great economic and social shocks, it should be no surprise to discover that so many of the families in the novel are crippled or broken apart. Gaddis's interplay between family and capital is strategic, intended to call attention to the inverse

relationship developing between the two spheres—the expansion of capital and the relative “fractionation” of the family. The ideology of the nuclear family, which a corporation like J R’s perpetuates, eventually falters as the private and the public merge in the imagined J R Family of Companies. J R’s corporation is able, literally, to produce blood-ties (through bio-power) between the socius and its own Family, while it helps to sever the (older forms of) kinship and blood-ties that constitute such constructions as the nuclear family. Thus does Gaddis call attention to the fact that, as Pauline Irit Erera writes, “[t]he family is not simply a social institution. It is an ideological construct laden with symbolism and with a history and politics of its own” (2)

As we might expect, then, Gaddis’s fractured families are also indicative of actual changes in family structures around this time. The rapacious capitalism emerging during the 1970s found its counterpart in the radical changes occurring in “traditional” families. In *The State and the Family*, Anne Héline Gauthier writes that, since World War II, “[f]ertility, marriages, cohabitation, divorce, and the participation of women in the labor force, have all been on the increase and have changed the dynamics of family formation and dissolution” and that “[i]f the 1960-1975 period witnessed the onset of some of these transformations, the period from 1975 witnessed their deepening and extension to all countries” (146). Undoubtedly, many of these changes in family structures were a direct result of the social and cultural movements of the 1960s, the legalization of abortion, and the popularization of the birth control pill, but economic factors played just as much a role in these changes as social ones.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Thus, I am not arguing that the capital/family relationship operates under a simple cause/effect model, which would remain a rather vulgar Marxist analysis. It is clear, however, that economic changes have

*J R*'s critique of the global capitalist dream—a world united as one harmonious family—makes sense here considering that changing familial structures since the mid 1970s are an *international* phenomenon. In a similar fashion to the way that nation-states used (and still use) constructions of the family (the basic unit of production) to perpetuate various ideologies, capitalism adopts the family mantle in an effort to subsume even the nation-state's image of the family. After all, writes Paul Gilbert, "[t]he social agents responsible for the family's discursive formation are those who hold political power—the power to control government in their interests [. . .]" (141). Since corporations, like Typhon, often influence government decisions, they also have the power to effect how the family is constructed discursively, as *J R*'s company shows. Hence, when capitalism's myth of the separate spheres of business and family breaks down (as Gaddis especially demonstrates in the Bast and Montcrieff families), the rhetoric of family merges with capital's master narrative and the "play to win" capitalist ethic gives birth to a new kind of family and new kinds of social relations. We have only to look at the behavior of two of the children in the novel to find evidence of capital's ethic on some of this new breed: *J R Vansant*'s (trans)actions, of course, and *Eigen*'s son, David, who (as Moore notes, 76), expresses his love for his mother in quantitative, monetary terms and who cheats at children's board games (263, 267).

It is important to understand that Gaddis's portrayal of families in crisis is no mere nostalgic and reactionary call for "family values." For such radical and abrupt

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their counterpart in changing family formations. As Erera writes about earlier changes in American families, "[i]n some ways, the decline of the 1950s family grew out of the trends and contradictions of the fifties themselves. The main reason for family change was the breakdown of the postwar social compact between government, corporations, and workers" (4).

changes in family structures and values at the time led to the perception that the family was in “crisis” (a perception that still persists). Gauthier remarks that “it is evident that family issues have received increasing attention [since 1975], and moreover, that support of families has emerged as a major political winner” (148) and that “initiatives launched by governments since 1975 have revealed an increasing interest in family issues” (150). In America, for instance, 1980 saw the “White House Conference on the Family” that had to be changed to “Conference on Families,” writes Gauthier, since “[t]here was no longer one single family type but a plurality of family types” (153). Even the European Union and United Nations put family issues on their international agendas in the mid 1970s (148).

Such politicization, however, while a response to a perceived “crisis,” further legitimizes this perception through the very nature of politicization itself. The resulting crisis of the family, of course, was the despair at the dissolution of the nuclear family, often considered the “traditional” family structure by many in the West. Yet as Caroline Wright and Gill Jagger point out in discussing a century’s history of the discourse of family values in Britain, “there is nothing new in today’s talk of a crisis in the family” (18), and that “the narrative of family crisis accompanies a primarily ‘moral’ or ‘moralising’ state, concerned with inculcating the ‘right’ sort of values and cultivating individual responsibility to meet needs” (22). Thus, whenever family configurations are radically altered, a familiar *discourse* of crisis concerning these changes arises. As Stephanie Coontz notes in *The Way We Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, “[h]istorically, Americans have tended to discover a crisis in family structure and

standards whenever they are in the midst of major changes in socioeconomic structure and standards” (257).

Furthermore, what such alarmists of this perceived crisis fail to take into account is that the nuclear family is not a “natural” familial structure. Many critics of the nuclear family (Cheal (18-23), Thorne and Yalom (1-20), Gilbert (141) Wright and Jagger (10-14), etc.) have called attention to its historic specificity and constructedness. As Edward Shorter argues in *The Making of the Modern Family*, “[t]he nuclear family is a state of mind rather than a particular kind of structure or set of household arrangements” and “[w]hat really distinguishes the nuclear family [. . .] from other patterns of family life in Western society is a special sense of solidarity that separates the domestic unit from the surrounding community” (205). Gaddis, for example, is no alarmist *per se*<sup>89</sup> and acknowledges the socially constructed nature of the family through Eigen, who defends his sorry actions as a husband and father to Marian thusly: “[h]ow many husbands do you think come home from work all smiles come on Marian, it’s the oldest God damned story there is putting up with the same crap day after day trying to make a living and then coming home to I’ve been slaving all day over a hot stove while you’ve been down in a

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<sup>89</sup> One would be hard pressed to ascribe to Gaddis a conservative or nostalgic plea for an earlier, more “traditional” family. Gaddis’s text does not suggest that there is any uber-family structure that suits people best (i.e., the nuclear family), but that family structures and social relations are often adversely affected by capital and the relations of production. Re-production is tied up with production.

In *Reconstructing the Family in Contemporary American Fiction*, Desmond F. McCarthy explores family relations in several American novels (*The World According to Garp*, *The Color Purple*, Updike’s *Rabbit* series, and *Ragtime*) and argues that these works vary in their pessimistic (Updike and Irving) or optimistic (Doctorow and Walker) responses to family crises—newer familial/kinship structures (blood ties or no) are either represented as troubling or hopeful. Gaddis, more a purveyor of anger than nostalgia, does not fit neatly into either category in terms of representing new/old familial structures. He shows pessimism in terms of capital’s victory and calls attention to its effects on families, but he offers nothing in place of these shifting relations, nor does he necessarily suggest that these changed relations will be any worse in terms of establishing social relations with others (unless capital continues to rule the day), but that these changes are painfully experienced by people nonetheless.

nice cool sewer [. . .]” (270). To be sure, Eigen’s gripe is self-serving (artistic failure has embittered him), but his story nonetheless comprises a critique of the entire history of work under capitalism—where the traditionally gender-determined public-work sphere and private-domestic sphere are separated—in addition to a critique of the supposed “happy” nuclear family.

In *J R* Gaddis thus anticipates the call for “family values” that will become the rallying cry of many politicians and pundits (mostly conservatives) during the Reagan era. Gaddis’s *Carpenter’s Gothic* (1985) will take this patriotic bluster and ideological rhetoric to task in the hideous character of Reverend Ude, a jab at the Moral Majority, as Nicholas Brown notes (157).<sup>90</sup> The novel also continues the trend of broken families with binding business ties in Elizabeth and Paul Booth’s childless marriage, an extremely dysfunctional relationship in which Paul sometimes beats Liz. In effect, Paul (an aspiring PR man) turns Liz (whom he may have married for her corporate connections—her father owned a profitable mining company) into his secretary, who spends her days answering the ever-ringing telephone. Moreover, Paul turns the carpenter’s gothic home they have rented up the Hudson into a virtual office, another node in the network of various multinational dealings (as in *J R*, these “center” over mineral rights in Africa). Gaddis collapses family and business, public and private, as well as home and office in *Carpenter’s Gothic* even more neatly than he does in *J R*. But what *J R* foresees, in 1976, is this very state-of-affairs and the political capital that traditional images of the family will gain in such a world, as evidenced in Reverend Ude’s popularity.

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<sup>90</sup> Brown’s analysis of Gaddis’s problem of how to represent African/global political problems and their connections to an ignorant America through postmodern means is interesting to note here. Brown gives much of the political backdrop to what Gaddis (through McCandless’s character) gestures toward.

For *J R* fits Deleuze and Guattari's description of capitalism, in *Anti-Oedipus*, as a "twofold movement of decoding or deterritorializing flows on the one hand, and their violent and artificial reterritorialization on the other" (34). In some sense, then, the "decoding" of older family narratives and their "recoding" in a global capitalist enterprise unleashes vast amounts of energy and capital, yet much of this energy is immediately rechanneled into the "imagined family" of J R's corporation. For, as Deleuze and Guattari write, "[c]apitalism institutes or restores all sorts of residual and artificial, imaginary, or symbolic territorialities, thereby attempting, as best it can, to recode, rechannel persons who have been defined in terms of abstract quantities. Everything returns or recurs: States, nations, families" (34). Indeed, in *J R* everything returns, from the faux global family, to the corpora-nation, to the "failed" ideal of the welfare State.

If families and the nuclear family structure are irreparably fractured, so, in the end, are the individuals who try to make these families. Stephen H. Matanle, in an essay tracing Gaddis's use of Empodocles in *J R*, notes that, in the novel, "[t]he body is incoherent, fragmented into a variety of parts, deprived of stability and balance" (109). The novel's final image is exemplary of this, although the image is of no image at all: it is merely J R's voice incessantly speaking from a dangling telephone receiver. This completes, Peter Wolfe writes, "the process of his [J R's] abstraction from a person to a corporation" (159). Likewise, it also completes capitalism's incorporation from abstract entity to social body. If all speech in *J R* involves, as John Johnston contends, "not a human being talking, but money itself [and] not just the language of money but the

speech of money, the flux of capital as it enters into and becomes part of verbal communication” (204), then the construction of J R’s Family of Companies is the perfect social body for that voice. J R, a natural spokesperson for capital, is not so much speaking for capital as capital is speaking through him. Not really an orphan after all, J R is capitalism’s child, and a grim reminder of the consequences of the breakdown of any kind of family or social structure that, however it may be composed, promotes values based on love, trust, and understanding, values that find their worth in human interaction and in not the marketplace.



Your Loss is Their Gain: The Corporate Body and the Corporeal Body in Richard Powers's *Gain*.

While *J R* traces the way the corporation's fictional personhood can be marshaled into a familial structure, thus granting capital not only a body but placing a potential "global family" within its reach, Richard Powers's *Gain* is a novel that directly engages with the legal and fictional aspects of this personhood by exploring the corporation *qua* corporation and analyzing corporate history in light of American history. It is the first novel to do so explicitly and thoroughly, and thus differentiates itself from works that are either too "vulgar" in their outright condemnation of capitalism (not that such critiques are necessarily wrong to point out the inequities of the system) or simply do not grapple with the peculiarities of its most powerful institution.

In this way, *Gain* outdoes even *The Octopus* by offering a full anatomy of the corporation at the end of the twentieth century, dissecting its organizational structures and decoding its "genetic" make-up. Whereas Norris, appropriating popular representations of the Trust, depicts the railroad corporation as a kind of beast or monster, Powers, after extensively researching corporate history, takes for granted the legal construction of a corporation as a kind of person, and thus treats it as such with compelling results. In other words, Powers's novel explicitly *historicizes* the corporation itself as a kind of corrective to the fact that the corporation has become so *naturalized* that it appears as if it has always existed and, therefore, always will. What we end up with from Powers, a writer always interested in the aesthetic and practical possibilities of science, is a fairly scientific account of corporate evolution and the simultaneous

devolution of the individual. Thus *Gain* is the logical postmodern postmortem to the figuration of the corporation. Outside of non-fiction, no representation could possibly approach the corporation so self-consciously. Whatever figurations of corporations remain to be mapped, it is difficult to see how they could further an exploration of the legal, physical, and metaphysical aspects of the corporation; that is, until capitalism itself undergoes yet another structural mutation or transforms into something altogether different.

Anytown, U.S.A. <sup>TM</sup>

As in many of the texts we have seen, Powers's *Gain* introduces us to a world beholden to multinational corporations, typified by the Clare Soap and Chemical Company, whose entire two-century history Powers recounts in detail. But while Gaddis emphasizes the entropy and confusion of a world where unfettered, free-market capitalism entails devastating consequences (even reproducing such chaos at the narrative level), Powers introduces us to the humdrum life of the suburban Midwest in the mundane town of Lacewood, Illinois. We pass from the hectic rush of New York City, Wall Street, and the back room wheeling and dealing by corporate officers and financiers to a quiet and modestly growing suburb, a place of well-tended gardens, communal bonfires, and town picnics. Worlds apart from the besieged suburbia of DeLillo's *White Noise*, a novel which itself takes on the glow of the hyperreal in its re-presentation of Simulacra, U.S.A, suburb of Lacewood, in *Gain*, is rendered as uneventful and "normal" as we might expect to find it. There are no near-plane crashes, Airborne Toxic Events, or

infamously photogenic barns. Moreover, the amusing exposure of Gladney to Nyodene Derivative is replaced, in *Gain*, by the sobering diagnosis of Laura Bodey's ovarian cancer.

What *Gain* does different from these other novels is to examine the seemingly calm and ordered surface of late capitalist society in search of its hidden cracks, its spackled and slipshod repairs. Gone is much of the mirth and play with which Gaddis and DeLillo inform their views of postmodern life, and this allows Powers to concentrate on drawing the complex and multifaceted relationship between corporations and individuals. The people of Lacewood live mostly unexamined lives, and yet, Powers's narrative makes clear, they are still worth living.

Similar to Eagle Falls, which JR devastates in *JR*, the dying Hadleyville in *Gung Ho*, and the precarious Sandusky in *Tommy Boy*, fast-growing Lacewood (it is "dying" by the novel's end [354]) fits the classic image of the one-company town:

The town cannot hold a corn boil without its corporate sponsor. The company cuts every other check, writes the headlines, sings the school fight song. It plays the organ at every wedding and packs rice that rains down on the departing honeymooners. It staffs the hospital and funds the ultrasound sweep of uterine seas where Lacewood's next of kin lie gray and ghostly, asleep in the deep. (6)

Such an all-encompassing influential power might well merit attention, but the corporate presence has become so *naturalized* in Lacewood that it seems hardly worth a second thought to the townspeople since it appears to pose no threat:

There must have been a time when Lacewood did not mean Clare, Incorporated. But no one remembered it. No one alive was old enough to recall. The two names always came joined in the same breath. All the grace shed on Lacewood flowed through that company's broad conduit. [. . .] And Lacewood became the riches that it made. (4)

History here is subsumed by capital and the corporation, much as it is in *The Octopus* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, as the existence of Clare becomes synonymous with the birth of Lacewood. What came before Clare, therefore, is of no interest and has been swept away by capital, "the riches," that have replaced it. The insistence that "there must have been a time" before this corporate time—despite the novel's chronicling of Clare's history—becomes merely an ironic echo of the failure of individual memory and collective history in the Janus face of late capitalism.

Even the town's story about having "tricked its way into fortune" when it convinced the "fifth Mr. Clare" to choose Lacewood for the construction of his newest plant is nothing but a self-serving myth. The image the town tries to project—that of being a homely but bustling community—by setting up plaster facades on Main Street and fixing up an old train engine is seen by Clare for the cheap cosmetic job that it is. Clare, who "glowered throughout the length of the inspection" and "shook his head continually," is in complete control of the negotiations all the while. Clare is revealed to be the huckster *par excellence* as he agrees to build the plant just before returning to Boston: "[s]ighing, he accepted the massive tax concessions proffered him in perpetuity, and closed the deal" (5). Excited by the prospect of joining the industrial age's daily

grind instead of having “dozed forever” and “stayed a backwoods wasteland until the age of retrotourism,” Lacewood enters into a true devil’s bargain without considering the future costs of its endeavor.

This Faustian union between Lacewood and Clare serves as a microcosm of America’s relationship with business as a whole and allows Powers to investigate this relationship dialectically. By further refining the terms of this dialectic down to the history of Clare’s birth and growing pains set against Laura Bodey’s declining health and eventual death due to cancer, Powers calls attention to the extent to which corporations and individuals are entangled in the era of late capitalism. It is the complexity of this dialectical relationship that makes the novel more than a mere condemnation of corporate capitalism.

#### On Company Time

Clare’s history is rigorously recounted throughout the book in a linear fashion that doubles as a history of American capitalism itself, similar to what Immanuel Wallerstein has called, borrowing the term from Fernand Braudel, the *longue durée* of capitalism. Wallerstein, adapting Braudel’s views on time as both “the *longue durée*, or structural time, long but not eternal, and that of the *conjoncture*, or cyclical, middle-range time, the time of cycles *within* structures,” applies these concepts specifically to the history of capitalism (“The Heritage” 236). Such a history is further complicated since Powers presents Clare’s maturation as an analogue of an organism’s or person’s growth, which bolsters the view of capitalism as a time-bound, historical economic system with a

beginning, middle, and, at some time in the future, an “end” or transformation. As Wallerstein writes, “[t]he world is in transition. Out of chaos will come a new order, different from the one we know. Different, but not necessarily better” (“The ANC” 33). Indeed, *Gain*, by its end, is caught up in the uncertainty of what the capitalist world system will bring next.

Clare’s *longue durée* is traced back to Jephthah Clare, who flees England and comes to America in 1802 after some insider trading puts him afoul of a business associate, which leads to Clare’s house being burned down in retaliation. Jephthah quickly secures himself a ship and begins a shady trading business with both Britain and France, who are at war, until Jefferson’s Embargo Act of 1807 bans any such trade in foreign ports. Turning smuggler, Jephthah makes a steady income, eventually trading in Oregon furs and Cantonese teas, for “Clare was, from the first, transnational” (8). Thus even early on, Powers registers an even longer view of capitalism than the early nineteenth century “birth” of Clare will allow, for, as Wallerstein points out, “[i]n the real world of historical capitalism, almost all commodity chains of any importance have traversed [. . .] state frontiers. This is not a recent innovation. [. . .] Moreover, the transnationality of commodity chains is as descriptively true of the sixteenth-century capitalist world as of the twentieth” (*Historical Capitalism* 31).

Such transnational trading affects Jephthah’s imagination in a telling way:

The world had to be circumnavigated before the humblest washerwoman could sip from her ragged cup. The mystery of it all sometimes visited Jephthah at night. [. . .] He, the Oregon trapper, the Chinese hong:

everyone prospered. Each of them thought he'd gotten the better end of the deal. Now, how could that be? Where had the profit come from?

Who paid for their mutual enrichment? (10)

Jephthah's mystical (and already global) vision of capital—nothing more than Adam Smith's wonder at the magic of enlightened self-interest—is interesting in its simultaneous expression of awe and confusion at the economic workings of capitalism. The question as to how this seemingly contradictory endeavor works to the benefit all is never answered and instead is forever deferred. For it would be naïve to believe that anyone making a deal always thinks he has gotten the better end of it (as Jephthah's soured sugar beets deal in England proves), or that “everyone” prospers equally. Indeed, Jephthah prospers to the degree that he can afford to tithe to charity as a kind of spiritual insurance, but the very fact that he enlarges his consideration of the system to the point of asking, almost despite himself, “who paid?” is a tacit admission that someone has to foot the bill. Of course, the traders in commodities Jephthah deals with may be as wealthy as him, but those doing the actual trapping or picking of tea leaves are certainly not. Jephthah's amazement doubles as a mystification of production. The profit (Marx's concept of surplus-value never seemed so obvious) clearly comes from the backs of those Jephthah need not see or deal with as he walks around the exchange floor and views figures and prices instead of people and things. His wonderment at how the system works is, if anything, frightening in its disclosure that the forces that men like Jephthah wield—with influence the world over—are not only merely assumed to be beneficial to all but are even misunderstood by those who attempt to wield them. Such sublime,

though essentially mystifying, visions punctuate the first half of the novel (the second half offers more troubling visions), occurring when various characters have epiphanies in some way related to the scope and power of capitalism, as seen in two of Jephthah's sons, such as when Samuel ponders the transformational forces of industrialism (155) or the anonymity of his workers as Clare grows (165-6), and when Ben conceives of a link among chemistry, nature, and capital (79).

Powers, however, as he indulges the philosophy of free enterprise in this way, simultaneously works to historicize it and show its tenuous underpinnings. Jephthah, our representative capitalist, is, from the start, an unethical and rapacious businessman, given to delusions of the grandeur of his works. It might seem easy at this point in the novel simply to claim that Jephthah is a morally corrupt man and thus creates a morally corrupt company (much as the film *Executive Suite* argues for a good versus bad capitalism through individual agents), but this is far too facile a defense of the capitalist system. Powers quickly moves past the founder of Clare to the second generation of owners, Resolve, Samuel, and Benjamin. This tripartite ownership immediately undercuts the solution of vilifying one figure for the business' wrongdoings. The three brothers become different facets of one company, foregrounding the structure of the corporation Clare will eventually become. Resolve represents the pure business aspect of profits and company growth; Samuel embodies the concern with God and morality as it pertains to the work(s) the company is doing; and Ben, through his love of botany and disinterest in business, is an early figure for research and development, the power science (specifically chemistry) will come to have in transforming the world. Yet however individually



disinterested (Benjamin) or interested in business (Samuel partially, Resolve fully), the three collectively show how free enterprise marshals different forces or fields to do capital's bidding.

Three more essential keys to Clare's success come in Resolve's wife, Julia, Anthony Jewitt, the British mechanic, and Ennis, the industrious Irish immigrant. Julia is essentially an early PR representative. Her work as a political propagandist is key to Clare's profiting through several wars. Once again, as in *Network* and *Michael Clayton*, it is a woman who is the figure of deception and illusion (later it will be the less ideological prototype of today's PR/ad man, Hiram Nagel).<sup>91</sup> Julia's fanatical propagandistic tracts and boosterism of britches-itching Expansionist America is delivered via the vitriolic rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. Her work views American history—past, present, and future—from the steely eyes of industry, even helping to instigate the Mexican-American War and taking political stances on issues such as abolitionism (in this case pro), not out of moral or ethical considerations, but only if they benefit business itself (93). Jewitt, in the meantime, stands for the mastery of technology and engineering that will construct the machinery needed for the mass production of commodities. Similarly, Ennis's toil and ingenuity as a soap-maker pays off in the free enterprise system and proves the superiority of capitalism and democracy, which allow the conditions from which anyone with determination and perseverance, regardless of class and ethnicity, can become a success—that is, so long as capital decides to back you,

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<sup>91</sup> Like the women in the two films, who sacrifice various relationships to further their careers, Julia, after Resolve's death, "never remarried [. . .]. She needed no warm body other than the corporate one." Further, "[s]he neglected her [. . .] children, tending to the welfare of her youngest, William, only as a worst-case insurance policy" (182).

as the Clares do Ennis. Ennis's story might have been penned by Horatio Alger (although his story's grisly end by Norris [142]).

It is this "extended family" that brings Clare through tough economic times into "the Fiduciary Age" (166), where, flush with capital, it is incorporated under Peter Clare, the last surviving offspring of Julia and Resolve Clare. The rest of Clare's history marks the Clare Corporation as outgrowing its "familial" roots. CEOs come and go, and Clare weathers financial storms during various panics, the Depression, and even the social movements of the 1960s and '70s, through a combination of careful and prescient management and pure luck. With the passing away of the second Clare generation, however, the history of Clare turns from an exciting venture with a leading cast of characters to a whirlwind tour of the history of capital, with an electric, but ultimately cold and inhuman, charge.

Much like the family firms in Gaddis's *J R*, *Gain* charts the falling away, or impossibility, of continuing familial ownership of corporations as they grow. Clare begins as a family run business that goes through the "humiliations" of turning from a merchant company into a manufacturer (70), of becoming incorporated (154), and finally of taking its stock public (238). Despite some of the family members' being disturbed by these changes in business, they find themselves compelled to follow capital's logic, which eventually leads to Clare passing out of the family's hands altogether. For *Gain* is the story of the corporation, to which capital, not so much a particular family, gave birth. A similar point is made regarding such an outmoded ownership schema (in addition to showing how individuals are merely cogs in capital's self-perpetuation) in William

Gibson's *Neuromancer*. In the novel, Gibson figures the decaying Tessier-Ahspool family (one of whose members, Lady 3Jane Marie-France, is a clone, and whose patriarch, Ashpool, is cryogenically frozen and "resurrected") as Victorian, and portrays its attempt to hold onto power (which the family correlates with life) in a world where multinational capital and new informational systems have given rise to AIs, computer systems that can essentially run themselves—self-referential or autopoietic systems. These systems, like capital, outreach and outlast their human creators (the Tessier-Ahspoos develop the AIs that eclipse them). It is the AIs that are "evolving," while the humans, seemingly "devolving" by contrast,<sup>92</sup> have no choice but to become post-human by adapting to a more fluid and less physically important "world" through technological means, such as bionic body parts or subcutaneously embedded microchips. One goes the way that computer, information, and late-capitalist systems are going, the novel suggests, or one becomes the caretaker of the Bates Motel on the information superhighway of "progress." Family ownership and management, in both novels, is shown to be merely a phase in a corporation's growth, which must fall by the wayside as economic and technological systems continually expand.

Powers, without engaging in future shock, shows that capital's self-perpetuation—itsself the very trigger of technological innovation that leads to advanced information technologies—and freedom from human control has long since occurred.

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<sup>92</sup> However, to establish some kind of evolutionary chart—from human to posthuman—risks reproducing a similarly racist, or in this case "speciest," system of classification of "mankind" such as arose in nineteenth-century European pseudo-scientific discourse. This is surely the warning Philip K. Dick registers in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in which he suggests a similarity of the rogue androids' position in post-apocalyptic earth to that of nineteenth-century slaves in America.

The mechanism that has made this possible is the concept of limited liability, which, as we saw in *JR*, frees investors from being held liable for a corporation's actions. Powers even goes so far as to claim that incorporation was the most powerful invention of the nineteenth century, as he sums up the Chicago World's Fair: "[i]t compiled an anthology of those inventions that had cracked open the globe's buried wealth: steam, electricity, telegraph, telephone, chemistry, internal combustion, dynamo: and surpassing them all, the limited-liability corporation" (247). Here Powers signifies on Henry Adams's dynamo a hundred years after the fact, suggesting that today it is the corporation that inspires the true awe and dread of the twentieth century. Thus, "[h]ere, in Chicago, four hundred years after Columbus's landfall, America could see itself for what it truly was: less a nation than a collective outfit for the capitalization and development of its endless hinterlands" (247). The true dynamo is the limited-liability corporation, that new machine which will drive the hitherto most dynamic economic system known to man, since, as David C. Korten writes, "[t]he marvel of the corporation as a social innovation is that it can bring together hundreds of thousands of people within a single structure and compel them to act in accordance with a corporate purpose that is not necessarily their own" (74).

The limited liability corporation, once it has been set free of human responsibility, becomes the perfect vehicle for capital's perpetuation through a very special kind of body—a body that aspires to a kind of immortality. Powers, therefore, is careful to leave Samuel as the last remaining "original" core family member running Clare. Not quite as devoted to, or savvy at, business as his brother Resolve, Samuel's religious fanaticism (he

is a Millerite, at one point selling his shares in the company to stand on a hill with his wife and other believers to await the apocalypse [82-3]) and dedication to work, which reads as Weber's classic diagnosis of the Protestant Work Ethic (80), makes him more *prophet* oriented than *profit* oriented. Thus it is he that oversees Clare's incorporation, which seems to Samuel, at first, to entail a loss of status for the company. But soon Samuel's once-deferred rapture becomes the rapture of incorporation, since "incorporation could live forever. It carried on beyond the span of any owner's life. It passed itself down through the generations of those assembled thousands who would, in time, work its engines. Its dynasties surpassed the longest family" (156-57). Samuel's speech to the workers is telling. He calls incorporation "the beast that gave them all eternal life. They heard him speak of an aggregate giant, one that summed the capital and labor of untold Lilliputians into a vast, limbered Leviathan" (158). Caught up in the ecstasy of "eternal" corporate life, Samuel forgets that such a heaven comes paired with apocalyptic destruction. Ironically, then, while he misses the end of the world, his part in the Clare Corporation helps to end the world as it was before the Industrial Revolution: "[t]he world's end had come after all, invisible, secret, snickering, some time after that promised night when he had stood waiting for it" (154). So it is that Samuel, against his better religious sentiments, comes to unleash "the beast" upon America.

### Bodies that (Don't) Matter

As in Gaddis's *J R*, *Gain*'s depiction of capital as attaining a body through incorporation is explicitly tied to people's dis-embodiment through the loss of rights and

“individuality.” Yet *Gain* goes even further as Powers traces the onset of disease and death in Laura Bodey. Regarding the financial rhetoric Powers uses to describe characters and their feelings, Paul Maliszewski writes that “[i]f people in *Gain* resemble small corporations, companies in turn become like people” (179). Moreover, as in *White Noise*, medicine and the pharmaceutical industry come into play too, not in regards to the medicalization of everyday life, but in the even more troubling problem of adequately treating serious, terminal illnesses, such as cancer. By foregrounding both the dis-embodiment of the individual and the difficulty of obtaining effective and affordable drugs to treat serious illness, *Gain* offers a troubling assessment of the corporeal being versus the corporate one.

The Clare Corporation is described throughout the novel in terms of an evolving organism. Even from the first description, Clare’s genetic make-up is key to understanding it: “[b]usiness ran in the Clares’ blood long before one of them made a single thing” (8). This business-driven blood leads the family to settle near “ports, always ports. They thrived in tidal pools, half salt, half sweet. Brackish, littoral. They lived less in cities than on the sea routes between them” (8). Clare’s genesis recalls the first form of life crawling out of the sea or tide pool, suggesting the beginning of the corporation is just that—the emergence of a new form of life. Its second-generation owners mark Clare’s adolescence, which is characterized by awkward growth and incorporation: “[t]he law now declared the Clare Soap and Chemical Company one composite body: a single, whole, and statutorily enabled person” (158). After this embodiment, the second-generation runs the company until it “turned fifty in 1881, to

great public fanfare of its own generating. As a corporation, it was but a scant teenager” (221).

Passing on to the third generation of ownership, Clare experiences yet another maturation: “[i]ts revenues now solid, the firm prepared to take its inevitable next step into young adulthood. A national firm, with national advertising, fighting national competitors, required nation-sized capital. There was but one place to secure the needed sums: America herself. In 1891, Peter, Douglas, and their families, and associates took Clare public” (238). And thanks to Hiram “Hy” Nagel’s advertising schemes, Clare even develops a “look” in its Clara logo: “[i]n this, her first incarnation, Clara simply gazed gratefully at the golden cake [of soap] that let her recapture an unblemished purity” (223). Thus begins Clare’s long obsession with its public “body image,” as one of its modern-day advertisement illustrates: “[a]s corporate bodies go, ours has grown beyond belief in this short century. But however big a body gets, there’s still no place like home” (140).

Yet this adulthood also marks a “monstrous transformation” (238). Around the same time that Clare is embodied and reaches adulthood, its body mutates significantly. Able to employ the governing figure of Clare the fictitious person-as-corporation for a time, *Gain* falls back into a familiar array of corporate figurations—such as the beastlike (Leviathan, octopus) and mythical (Colossus, Frankenstein)—for the rest of the novel.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Norris, of course, describes the Trust as an octopus, a Leviathan, and a Colossus in *The Octopus*. Justice Louis Brandeis, in a 1933 Supreme Court decision, called corporations “Frankenstein monsters” (qtd. in Bakan 19). Surely, Atlas could be added to this list, as Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* suggests that creative entrepreneurs are akin to the mythical Titan holding up the world (which in a capitalist society they surely are). From corporeal beings—entrepreneurs, CEOs, etc.—to the corporate body in which they function, and without which their abilities would be severely limited in today’s world (whether a Bill Gates or a Ken Lay), it is not too much of a stretch to see such figures in metonymic relationship to corporations.

Having, for the first time, self-consciously presented the corporation as a legal person, *Gain* also self-consciously sums up all prior representations, scraping the bottom of the metaphor-making barrel for good and all.

A massive restructuring of the company, for instance, is described as a “[r]evamping [that] simultaneously strengthened the core nervous system and increased the number of [Clare’s] limbs” (273). After such reorganization, “Clare had become a vast man-of-war, if not a small armada” (274). The metaphor of the corporation as a man-of-war, with its hierarchy of crew, serves not quite so well here as the “small” armada of semi-autonomous agent-boats still answerable to a flagship.<sup>94</sup> The corporation is slowly becoming more decentralized in each metaphor. Samuel conceives of the corporation as a Leviathan (Hobbes’s sort, in which the State is composed of a number of individual bodies) binding together numerous Lilliputians, but increasingly, as Clare “grows” up, these separate beings find partial autonomy. Moreover, the man-of-war metaphor cannot help but recall the Portuguese Man-of-War, a poisonous jellyfish-like sea creature whose tentacles average around thirty feet in length, but can reach up to one hundred and sixty five feet. In a strange way, then, we return to Norris’s figure of the

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<sup>94</sup> It would not be too far out of Nantucket to suggest that Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, that most famous of Leviathan novels, finds its true Leviathan in another boat, the *Pequod* itself, which, as initial twentieth-century critics have pointed out, can be seen as a microcosm of America in all its multifarious parts (or an ideological construction of early American nationhood, as clearly issues of race, ethnicity, and gender prove these critics’ microcosm to be drastically shortsighted). The *Pequod*, however, is also a kind of corporation in this respect, from its initial economic launching as a player in the whaling industry, to its owners and investors, CEO and executive officers, to its middle management and even “janitorial” staff. Its risk-taking CEO, Ahab, drives his “ship” to ends even the ship’s owners (board members) and investors would balk at. The capitalist crash, like Ahab’s fate, can and cannot be avoided. Of course, *Moby-Dick* predates the limited-liability corporation, instead being concurrent with its forerunner, the joint-stock company. For an excellent cultural materialist reading of labor, capital, and the marketplace as it relates to Melville’s use of language in the novel, see Paul Royster’s essay “Melville’s Economy of Language” in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*.



octopus, but with an improvement: the Portuguese Man-of-War is not actually a single animal, but a “siphonophore,” a creature comprised of several organisms working as one (*National Geographic* [1-3]). With its truly monstrous proportions, poisonous nature, and constituent parts that work together toward one goal, the Portuguese Man-of-War seems an even more insidious metaphor than Norris’s. In short, after creating Clare’s corporate body, Powers returns to the typical “monstrous” and inhuman metaphors to suggest that the evolving Clare has become something much more than a legal person. Hence, when “[e]ver-larger institutions began to spring from the corporation’s brow, giving birth to one another: the Federal Reserve System. The consumer Price Index. The first national income tax” (290), we recall Athena springing from Zeus’s head and recognize the god-like power of the corporation.

The maritime metaphors continue, however, in a more horrifying cast later on. The price of so having many limbs in times of financial troubles, thinks Clare’s modern-day CEO, Frank Kennibar, Jr., could be amputation: “[c]hopping up the firm will horrify the board; it may choose any other fate over such an end. Sprinkling the bloody pieces on the waters may make the sharks even hungrier. Or the move may prove a kind of starfish solution: each severed limb regenerating a whole new body” (350). Corporate dismemberment has been one of Clare’s driving fears since its incorporation, turning it, too, during the era of mega-mergers and Leveraged Buy Outs, into the very kind of predator over which Kennibar now worries. Yet the Hydra-like “starfish solution,” and the possibility of regenerating limbs, seems the more likely outcome of Clare’s dilemma. Indeed, as a kind of legal person dedicated to the endless accumulation of capital and the

endless “expansion” of itself following the creed of “enlightened self-interest,” the Clare Corporation is incredibly solipsistic. If capital begets capital, then Clare begets Clare. Or, as Kennibar imagines it in the final, and perhaps most apt, image of the corporation, “[i]n reality, there is nothing but a series of little Clares, each with its own purpose, spreading down the fiscal quarters without end” (349). Such an endless succession of “selves” underscores the fiction of the corporate self and personhood for what it is—an endlessly deferred identity contingent upon an endless accumulation of capital.

Powers, however, challenges this smoke and mirrors conception of the infinite expansion of corporate capitalism. Without directly hitching tenor and vehicle together, Powers suggests that corporate capitalism is a kind of cancer. Clearly, the details of Laura Bodey’s struggle with cancer could double as a description of the Clare Corporation’s and capital’s expansion throughout the novel: “[s]omething is loose in her system, a runaway growth. They can try to gun down the criminal, but not without firing into the innocent crowd” (229). Laura’s body has been “invaded,” in a sense. As one specialist tells her regarding the possible causes of her cancer, “[t]here’s also some evidence that provoking agents, either combined with or inducing an alteration in the immune system” (99). The suggestion is that chemicals from the Clare Corporation have “invaded” Laura’s body/system, infected her, and turned her own immune system against itself/herself. In turn, these descriptions eerily fit the way that the Clare Corporation and capitalism have been mapped throughout the novel, as runaway, monstrous, “cancerous” growths that cannot be stopped by anyone, even those deeply involved with assuring their success, and certainly not without the entire economic

system (thus the world because of the expansion of global capital) coming to a halt. Therefore the system, already perpetuating itself like cancerous cells, is ultimately destroying the world as we know it.

Powers's figuration of capital as cancerous should come as no surprise. As Susan Sontag points out in her analysis of representations of disease in *Illness and Metaphor*:

Early capitalism assumes the necessity of regulated spending, saving, accounting, discipline—an economy that depends on the rational limitation of desire. TB is described in images that sum up the negative behavior of nineteenth-century *homo economicus*. Advanced capitalism requires expansion, speculation, the creation of needs [. . .]; buying of credit; mobility—an economy that depends on the irrational indulgence of desire. Cancer is described in images that sum up the negative behavior of twentieth-century *homo economicus* [. . .]. (62)

But as Sontag reminds us, the use of such rhetoric can trivialize disease and the pain and suffering of the ill. Sontag hopes that, with the advent of new treatments, the metaphors of cancer will change and become “partly de-mythicized” so that one day “perhaps it will be morally permissible, as it is not now, to use cancer as a metaphor” (84). Powers avoids merely exploiting the cancer metaphor, however, not only by indirectly suggesting that corporate capitalism is a sort of cancer, but by directly dealing with the disease in his dignified and unromanticized depiction of Laura's rapid deterioration and death.

Powers ultimately uses the cancer metaphor in order to draw the Clare Corporation and Laura together in the most intimate, if devastating, of fashions. Part of

Powers's point here is to explore the deep ties that people have to corporations in the age of late capital. Laura realizes, at one point, that "[e]very hour of her day depends on more corporations than she can count" and "[. . .] wasn't she born wanting what they were born wanting to give her?" (304). Laura eventually comes to accept this relationship as symbiotic, though Powers is careful to show that while this appears true from one vantage point, a larger view (the novel itself) shows a kind of parasitism that is much more one-sided.

If the Clare Corporation has "invaded" Laura's life, Laura is complicit in corporate America too. Early on, she, like Oedipa Maas, is buffered from the destructive elements and painful facts of the world around her. She is a "woman who has heard, yet has not heard" (8). Moreover, she is a successful real-estate agent at the ironically named realty company Next Millennium. Considering how the novel charts capitalism's devastation of people's lives and the environment, the name signifies on both the early messianic edge to Samuel's and Julia's vision of capital, as well as on the (im)probability of a "next" millennium, since the imminent, religious apocalypse has been replaced by an immanent, secular (environmental) one. Laura's work is directly tied to capitalist expansion through land ownership, development, and the American Dream/myth of home ownership.<sup>95</sup> And so she is very much part of the answer to the questions Don, her ex-

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<sup>95</sup> The recent "sub-prime" mortgage crisis underscores the perpetuation of the "ideology" of home ownership (Harvey, "Interview" 38-39). As an ideology, such a vision of owning one's home involves predatory lending practices and the capitalist myth that "owning" a home is an investment that will always pay off in the future (and is *always* better than renting): either you have your "own" home or you can sell it for profit later. Thus, in our current short-term-profit-oriented system, "flipping" houses has become immensely popular. The housing market is just that, a market, and thus is rife with an ideology that taps into America's collective imagination of home ownership that arose post-World War II, when a new suburbia, GI bill, and postwar economic boom time led to a record number of home owners in the U.S. As Kim McQuaid writes, "[i]n the 1930s, only about 45 percent of U.S. families owned their homes, a

husband, asks himself as he drives through the town: “[w]hat happened to that manageable, mid-sized town they used to live in, where everything still worked the way it was supposed to? The one with the intact tax base, where they fixed the potholes, where you could drive anywhere in ten minutes?” (62). The ideological stock of small-town nostalgia is a sure bet in a world where capital must abolish the long trumpeted Main Street either through growth or dereliction, and most likely through a combination of both.

Furthermore, the fact that Laura has “heard” suggests, à la Max Weber, that venerable Protestant Work Ethic, according to which one “hears” one’s calling. As Weber puts it:

The idea, so familiar to us today and yet in reality far from obvious, that *one’s duty consists in pursuing one’s calling*, and that the individual should have a commitment to his ‘professional’ activity, whatever it may consist of, irrespective of whether it appears to the detached observer as nothing but utilization of his labor or even of his property (as ‘capital’), this idea is a characteristic feature of the ‘social ethic’ of capitalist culture.

(13)

Yet what she has not yet heard—and later literally cannot “hear” when she is unable to help her son, Tim, with his homework assignment (a gloss on Whitman’s “Crossing

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percentage almost unchanged since the 1890s [. . .]. Not until the late 1940s did over half of all American families become home owners. By 1960, that number had risen to 60 percent; and from 1970 to 1993, to about two-thirds” (80). With such visions and desires to “own” assets and investments, people are easily given credit where credit, in stancher financial times, would not be due. In short, the cliché “home is where the heart is” might be better subscribed to than the belief that “home is where the investment is.” More and more, “homes” have become “houses,” and houses are strictly commodities. Or, as David Harvey puts it, “it turns out that housing finance is not that safe—it was destined to run into trouble” (“Interview” 40).

Brooklyn Ferry”)—is any narrative counter to late capitalism’s. Unable to comprehend Whitman because he is “long-winded, a total mystery” (88), Laura remains, early on, deaf to the poet’s “barbaric yawp,” a yawp that, even in “Crossing,” frequently champions American industrialism (the constant evocation of trade in the poem’s descriptions of ships, the “white-sail’d schooners, sloops, lighters!/Flaunt away, flags of all nations” [117-18]) and ingenuity with an idealism that seems incredibly naïve today, considering the outcome of such “democratic” expansionism.

Laura’s failure to understand Whitman comes with another price: the death of the sovereign, embodied individual. Whitman’s pluralistic vision always meant *e pluribus unum* and *e unum pluribus*, and was attendant on a radical idea of the body put forth in “Song of Myself”—“I have said that the soul is not more than the body,/And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,/And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s-self is” (1262-64 *Leaves*)—that “Crossing” stakes out as well: “I too had receiv’d identity by my body,/That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew should be of my body” (63-64). But the body and identity are at odds in Laura’s world. As the junk mail Laura receives daily illustrates—“[s]he’s not being singled out. It’s the same old list. The master database. The mass mailing to everybody” (283)—“individuality” is a mere marketing scheme, spawning “[a] whole new art form: the protectively disguised bulk envelope” (283). Under these conditions, Laura’s inability to understand Whitman takes on symbolic resonance. Thus Laura’s presentiment that “[a]t day’s end [. . .] we’ll all be disembodied. Mobile microcomputer puppets doing our shopping and socializing. Human heads pasted onto modem bodies. Insert your face

here. Like those billboards that Next Millennium post everywhere around town” (30) is truer than she realizes.

Mild Luddite-like concerns with technology and disembodiment aside (myspace and facebook have surely triumphed as electro-appendages to the social without ending it, in this respect), Laura’s grueling battle with cancer shows the very real, physical toll of the Clare Corporation’s actions. Of course, the link between Laura’s ovarian cancer and the contaminants from Clare’s factory can never be fully proven (something akin to the missing scientific link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer), but Clare’s eventual settlement (even if it is merely because it is “cost effective,” as Laura realizes [333]) is still an admission of sorts. Yet the effect of Clare’s poisonous chemicals upon Laura’s body is telling. After several chemotherapy treatments, Laura expresses a kind of painful alienation from her own body:

[h]er body scares her now. Alien infestation. A pink, bare, cave newt, bald down to her plastic pubes [. . .]. No one can tell her how much of the changes come from the cancer, how much from the chemo [. . .].  
Whatever the cause, she no longer recognizes the scraps of person left to her. (227)

Laura’s disembodiment is far from the free-floating “fun” postmodern kind offered by technology and computer systems. It is, instead, a harsh reminder of the limits of mortality.

Clare’s line of products, however, has always shown a concern with the body, from the company’s early obsession with cleanliness and the “natural” healing properties

of its “Native Balm” soap (116-18, 131-32) to its late twentieth-century expansion into all areas pertaining to the body, as one of its advertisements clearly shows:

*Are you the unwitting victim of harmful B.O. (Body Odor)? You may not be able to detect it yourself. And your closest friends may be too polite to tell you. [. . .] Science tells us that a full 83 percent of all cases of detrimental B.O. can be cured by simple preventative hygiene. Don't let your body tell people more about yourself than you want. (313)*

Clare perpetuates the idea, at an unconscious level, that one is divorced or alienated from one's body. The body is *something else, not me*, and it will embarrass you if you do not take the appropriate steps to keep it in check. Your body needs the products developed by science and technology in order for you to control it because it is something that you *own*, something that requires upkeep, as would a garden or a house.

Thus, “owning” your body comes with a certain “responsibility.” This responsibility requires the costs of maintaining one's health in the face of death/expiration. Whereas in *White Noise*, Jack Gladney yearns for an unmediated, authentic death that is *his own*, *Gain* demonstrates that in the wild world of privatization, you can own your own death, indeed. You, however, will be held personally accountable for it, because no matter what troubles you encounter, the social is no longer a space that accepts or cares for the individual. Hence the success of self-help healing books that promise recovery through the power of positive mental thinking. In the passage in which the dying Laura takes to reading one of these books, she reflects on its message: “[e]ven now, she is responsible for her own, ultimate cure. And if she dies it'll be her own fault.



It'll be because she doubted, took her eyes off the road, let negative thoughts poison her" (317). Laura does not become a true believer here, but her half-hearted attempt to buy into this brand of New Age spiritualism shows the allure of these kinds of books and how they tap directly into the ideology of late capitalism's world of indiscriminate privatization.

Such privatization also leaves one at the mercy of the health care industry, something *White Noise* takes for granted in Gladney's obsessive testing for the effects of exposure to Nyodene D. The everyday medicalization of life is one thing, the diagnosis and treatment of ovarian cancer quite another. Laura's dwindling savings shows the toll that a for-profit health care industry takes on its patients/customers, particularly those with incurable or chronic diseases. The treatments for Laura's cancer are expensive, and though she is lucky enough to have excellent health insurance (189), she learns, at one point, that there are better drugs she could be taking to deal with the intense pain caused by her treatments, but that due to their higher costs, she is barred from using (152). The hospital nurses and orderlies alert her to these facts about the health care industry, as well as telling her about the benefits for someone in her pain of (illegal) marijuana. As in *White Noise*, the business aspect to drug development comes off as shady at best: "[t]he ingredients multiply without limit, most of them less than a month and a half old. How we live, now: a new set of doses every day. From experiment to established practice, even before the first round of guinea pig can sicken or get better" (113). The *coup de grace* comes when Laura learns that the Clare Corporation provides many of the raw

materials (thanks to its earlier vertical, as opposed to horizontal, integration<sup>96</sup>) that the pharmaceutical companies use to make the drugs that treat Laura. Clare, then, very likely gives Laura cancer and, in turn, helps to provide the costly drugs that will futilely fight it.

The structure of a for-profit health care sector also affects the actual quality of the care, the novel suggests, since doctors are worried about malpractice suits. When teenaged Ellen, Laura's daughter, learns over the phone that the doctor is "ninety-eight percent sure" of her mother's diagnosis, her anger details the problem. She

[c]an't explain to him [her father] why doctors stoop to saying such crap. They say it because they think it comes across as some kind of professional reassurance. Cheerful, meaningless, and unprosecutable. That's what you get when your whole health care business is driven by fear of malpractice. He can't say *Shut up and relax*, as in the old days, because Suzy Homemaker has become Susan Health Care Consumer, and won't accept a professional's word as answer. (38)

Thus it is that only the nurses, orderlies, and other patients seem to form a supportive community while Laura is in hospital. The doctors and specialists, those who fear being sued in their role as doctor/provider, must keep a "professional" distance, which can easily become an emotional distance as well (the same is true of the experts Gladney encounters in *White Noise*). The thing to fear, for the patient who "owns" her disease and

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<sup>96</sup> Horizontal integration, companies merging with or swallowing up other companies, leads most obviously to monopoly—the state all corporations, despite their espousal of the "free market," aspire to. However, government trust busting is a danger, and vertical integration, the commanding commodity chains leading to what a company produces, is a way of keeping costs and prices down and controlling the market without "monopolizing" in the horizontal sense. Clare's vertical integration is mentioned by Powers (219).

for the doctor who treats it, is the acceptance of *personal* responsibility—the very thing that the limited liability corporation is able to elude thanks to its clever legal structure.

As David Harvey sums up in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, the latest phase of late capitalism, neo-liberalism, means that “we live [. . .] in a society in which the inalienable rights of individuals (and, recall, corporations are defined as individuals before the law) to private property and the profit rate trump any rights you can think of.”

This entails the championing of

individual responsibility and liability; independence from state interference [. . .]; equality of opportunity in the market and before the law; rewards for entrepreneurial endeavour; care for oneself and one’s own; and an open marketplace [. . .]. This system of rights appears even more persuasive when extended to the right of private property in one’s body (which underpins the right of the person to freely contract to sell his or her labour power [. . .]) and the right to freedom of thought, expression, and speech. These derivative rights are appealing. Many of us rely heavily on them. But we do so much as beggars live off the crumbs from a rich man’s table. (sic, 181)

Where corporations are not liable, people are, and yet the rights of individuals apply to corporations as well, the rights of which, when contested, are brought before the rule of law, the legal decisions of which, writes Harvey, “tend to favor rights of private property and the profit rate over rights of equality and justice” (177).<sup>97</sup> If one is lucky enough

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<sup>97</sup> The novel also registers how individuals gain even more social responsibility while increasingly losing their privacy when Laura is disturbed by a phone call during dinner:

even to secure the financial resources to follow through on a lawsuit with a company that can endlessly spin out litigation for a mere pittance of its holdings, the legal system is still weighted against her.<sup>98</sup>

The only resistance to the corporation, therefore, is through legal recourse.<sup>99</sup> Ironically, this is also the only element of collective action that seems to have any effect, since the class-action lawsuit that Laura joins affects the company to a greater degree than the protests outside its factories in the 1960s. But even when the company agrees to settle, as small an admission of guilt though it may be, Laura realizes it only “means that the common stock has fallen to unacceptable levels. It means an offer is the more cost-effective solution” (333). Corporations merely see such legal battles, like the nearly settled lawsuit in *Michael Clayton*, from a cost-ratio perspective. From their point of view innocence or guilt is never really an issue. The bottom line is how little it will cost to make the problem go away.

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[e]verything costs money, even doing good. Especially doing good. How else are you going to compete in this marketplace? The money has to come from somewhere. And that means private people. Nobody wants the government telling you what charities to support. And the only time you can catch the private person at home anymore is dinner. (186)

Even not-for-profits and charity organizations are compelled to adopt the techniques of advertisers and telemarketers to secure funding from private individuals. Thus, they too find themselves entangled in and complicit in the very capitalist system from which they hope to offer succor.

<sup>98</sup> Corporations, after gaining the rights of the individual under the fourteenth amendment, have benefited from legal decisions mainly “between 1880 and 1900—the so-called Gilded Age—or since the late 1970s, when transnational corporations sowed their oats across the globe and cemented their constitutional equivalence to individuals. Legal scholar Carl Meyer explained, in the March 1990 *Hastings Law Journal*, ‘Twenty years ago the corporation had not deployed the Bill of Rights provisions successfully [...] as an historical matter, the Supreme Court only recently conferred Bill of Rights guarantees on corporations’” (Court 29).

<sup>99</sup> Thus the “genre” of whistleblower films that show heroic individuals standing up to the system, such as *Michael Clayton*, *Erin Brokavitch*, *The Insider*, and *Silkwood*.

Don's reflections on Laura's first refusal to join the class-action lawsuit bring together neoliberal hegemony and the hopelessness of the individual in the face of its most vaunted institution. At first Don is near-evangelical in his attempt to persuade Laura to join the suit and earn justice, but soon he realizes that

[s]he is due nothing. No more than anyone else with a body. No more than anyone who will get sick, which is everyone. As bad as she has it, millions will have it worse. She is on her own. She has always been on her own. Everyone who lives here is on her own. And anyone who promises otherwise is selling a bill of goods. (286)

This pessimistic vision of alienation and isolation, with an attendant "market" responsibility (no remnants left of Gladney's existentialist angst here) is troubling. The "individual" here is thrust into a hostile marketplace, where, instead of Adam Smith's notion that Enlightened Self-Interest will rule the day for the benefit of all (as it does in Jephthah's utopian vision early in the novel), we encounter a marketplace based upon mistrust and fear, one composed of individual agents out to bilk the next rube out of her life/savings. Yet some of these "individuals" are massive business organizations.

Don keeps pushing Laura to join the class-action lawsuit, however, because he realizes it comprises the only way to fight Clare—that is, before the law, the neoliberal way. He has already recognized the true decenteredness of multinational capitalism and the Clare Corporation when he visits the company, hoping to find some information to help prove the company's hand in Laura's cancer:

[r]opes click against the four flagpole stands. [. . .]. The Stars and Stripes in position one. It strikes Don as a bit of handy nostalgia. How transnationals love to play the citizenship card whenever they're looking for a protective break. But Clare is just like elites everywhere: the company keeps so many residences that it has no fixed abode. (253)

And here we find that the violence foreclosed upon in *The Octopus* with Presley's failed attempt to blow up S. Behrman to be a mere fading memory from a high school history class:

[o]ne bomb, it occurs to him. One little envelope of plastic explosive slipped into a portfolio while court was in session. The anarchist's dream: fifteen feet away from being able to change things forever. Then the imaginary dust settles, and it dawns on him. The board? The board's not even close to ground zero. Nor is the CEO's office, or the CFO's, or the majority stockholder's, or any other target that Don will ever be allowed to walk past. (256)

The system is too widespread. It is everywhere and nowhere, unchartable, unmappable: "real commerce went on ebbing and flowing, out there, scattered, pressed thin past finding, in the shape that shared life has taken" (257). Worse yet, unlike even the ambiguous Trystero-in-waiting in *The Crying of Lot 49*, even the dream of resistance is dead, "[t]he truth of the matter is: there is no ground zero. Nothing the anarchist could ever hit, even in imagination" (257). As Žižek puts it in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, "[i]n contemporary global capitalism, ideological naturalization has reached an

unprecedented level: rare are those who dare to even *dream* utopian dreams about possible alternatives” (77). Thus it is that due to the failure of the imagination to conceive of any different world to the capitalist one in which we find ourselves, we are only able to replay the same old fables, as Laura’s son, Timothy, illustrates in his incessant playing of simulated computer games where players build up ancient and modern civilizations with the sole intent of dominating the world (200-02), or as the novel’s final paragraphs suggest, as Timothy takes the never-touched and maturing settlement from his mother’s lawsuit to help launch a corporation with some friends in order to develop a cure for cancer, a move that takes Timothy and Co. into the future of bioengineering.

Laura’s coming to terms with her dying also constitutes a version of the familiar and home-grown ideology of American transcendentalism. Laura experiences

a weird dream of peace. It makes no difference whether this business gave her cancer. They have given her everything else. Taken her life and molded it in every way imaginable, plus six degrees beyond imagining. Changed her life so greatly that not even cancer can change it more than halfway back. (320)

Laura accepts the “deal” that she and Clare have struck, though, of course, she had no actual say in it at all. Her initial refusal to join the class-action lawsuit against Clare because she wants a “real” apology, not monetary compensation (which is to continue capital’s game), changes when she considers her children’s future. Thus, Laura, if not the text, expresses another naturalizing discourse—a kind of “family preservation”

motherhood gene—a “natural drive” to which Laura submits, against her stubborn, and arguably truly Whitmanian, refusal to take part in capital’s zero/tidy sum game. As Joseph Dewey writes, “Laura evolves into an organic creature who finds, finally, her way to union within the process that keeps the system around us in motion. The vaster Clare becomes, the deader it grows; the deader Laura becomes, the vaster she grows” (126). As such, he argues, “Powers nevertheless fashions a difficult act of affirmation, one that echoes what transcendentalists in their giddiest moment declaimed: only dying confirms humanity’s oneness and justifies the greedy embrace of every moment” (114).

Clearly, Laura is no Hollywood romanticized, heroic individual; yet the “woman who has heard and not heard” gains her own peace at the novel’s end. The final “transcendental vision,” moreover, is Laura’s, not necessarily the text’s: “Life is so big, so blameless, so unexpected. Existence lies past price, beyond scarcity. It breaks the law of supply and demand. All things that fail to work will vanish, and life remain. Lovely lichen will manufacture soil on the sunroofs of the World Trade” (344). Laura’s transcendental vision, quite Whitmanesque after all, requires an incredible *longue durée* of the imagination. But the literal deification of “Life” here hinges upon conceiving of it as a better producer, or “manufacturer,” than capitalism itself. But what of the potential of economic catastrophe? Moreover, nature-as-producer eventually falls to the same logic as the conquering “force” as the Wheat in *The Octopus* is: it is only the possibility of an emergent market (the global/India in Norris and the bioengineering in Powers) that, as David Harvey puts it in *The New Imperialism*, creates “spatio-temporal fixes that absorb the capital surpluses in productive and constructive ways” (135). Such



transcendental visions do little for the here and now of capital, or even for conceiving of a future for *human beings*. Lichen will do just fine, we are assured, but this vision does not bode well for human life.

Calls for these kinds of conceptions—imagining a reality/possible world outside of the current system—seem even more absurd when confronting the expiration of human life and the continuance of nature. All such visions paradoxically require us to imagine that which, by definition, cannot be imagined, and, worse, to imagine a world in which observation and imagination themselves no longer exist. It brings back the throes of Bishop Berkeley’s kind of Idealism—the tree falling in the forest becomes the earth free of humans. But this impossible imagining is never the intention of these kinds of visions. Instead, one is secretly supposed to imagine that one is the sole perceiver/survivor in such a world. The horror inspired by this image is then meant to inspire people to change their habits and/or to inspire environmental change in the world. The transcendental vision, however, sinks into quietism if it only seeks to assuage the problems of human reality by subsuming them under the indomitable force of nature, which is imagined to be eternal and positive. The conception of nature as Nature or a god-like force itself is a human projection. The challenge, instead, is to imagine a world not of silence, exhaustion, and devastation, but of voices, intensities, and creativity.

Ultimately, Powers takes capitalism’s “naturalization” discourse seriously in order to subvert it. Thus, in both form and content, Powers employs capital’s own naturalizing aesthetic against itself. By offering a “linear” and “progressive” history of capital in the Clare Soap and Chemical Corporation, and setting it against the *biography*

of an individual organism in Laura Bodey, Powers suggests that life adheres to a different and separate concept of Time than does capital. This gives rise to, as Joseph Dewey argues, a kind of neo-Emersonian or neo-Whitmanian vision of life and the force of nature, a vision we have seen as troubling in both Norris's *Octopus* and Pynchon's *Vineland*. Yet Powers's "romanticism" (if we can even call it that) is qualitatively different from these earlier romantically infused views of the world. While offering a guarded transcendental view of nature and the universe, Powers remains a stubborn materialist in his investigation of corporate power and malfeasance, and in his tracing of how capital co-opts the concept of time.

## Conclusion: Corporate Hegemony, Cubed

If Richard Powers's *Gain* can be said to be as thorough and compelling as any fictional representation of a corporation could possibly hope to be, how then might corporations be dealt with in the future? Certainly, there will always be the familiar Morality Play representations of corporations, as many popular films demonstrate. There has been, however, another trend in corporate figurations, one that has taken a more "inside out" approach, though always with the feeling that there is no way out of such a maze of cubicles. The post-industrial shift of the U.S. economy to "white collar" and service sector, and away from blue-collar jobs, has created a large workforce/audience susceptible to this type of corporate critique. Much like the disgruntled Stanley Kotelks in *The Crying of Lot 49*, there have been a number of texts that have prodded the soft insides of the corporate underbelly in a rather benign fashion. Chief among these are some of Matt Groening's *Life is Hell* comic strips (particularly those strips of the 1980s and early '90s collected in *Work is Hell*), the Dilbert comic strip and now defunct cartoon, and the British and American television series *The Office*. Concentrating on the cubicle-prisons of the office, these texts probe issues of boredom, resistance, and the existential meanings of being a white-collar professional in a post-industrial society, even if they ultimately lack the sharpened teeth of focused critique and tend to remain "soft" in registering complaint at the ubiquitous enemy, often called "corporate." Rage or anger is bypassed for the ennui of Post-It note complaints. The popularity of such texts, however, has been recently appropriated by literature as well, especially in Joshua Ferris's bestselling *Then We Came to The End* and Ed Park's *Personal Days*. These novels,

while playing off of the soft corporate critique of popular texts, deepen their explorations of corporate life in compelling ways that highlight the expanding scope of the pseudo-communities that white-collar life gives rise to and the formation of their troubling collective voices.

Appearing in the early to mid 1980s, Matt Groening's *Life is Hell* comic strips satirically skewered Reagan's America, conservatism, and corporate capitalism. The strips collected in *Work is Hell* is one of popular culture's early instances of cataloguing the dreariness, conformity, and anonymity of (mostly) office life through the ever-suffering bunny-character, Binky, evidenced in "chapters" such as "The Nine Types of Bosses," "The 81 Types of Employees," "How to Get Along with All the Jerks at Your Crummy Job," "Just How Bad Is Your Job?," "The Game of Work," and "How to Kill 8 Hours a Day and Still Keep Your Job." As their titles suggest, these comics depict Binky's office life as one of alienation, fear, paranoia, and complete unease. In the ironically titled "How to Tell Everyone Off and Go Into Business for Yourself, Be Completely Fulfilled, and Starve to Death," for instance, Binky's expression hardly changes in each of the nine panels as he fantasizes about rebelling, quitting his job, and starting anew (a couple of "worry lines" appear in panels three and four, and a very slight expression of anger/dissatisfaction appears in panel five), subtly reinforcing the idea that nothing ever changes in the day-to-day of corporate life. The time must be filled and wasted, as Groening's other strips humorously advise, by office gossip, coffee breaks, and fashioning an eraser into a "pig" with the addition of several pushpins.

While *Work is Hell*'s critique of corporate life might hit a dead end of sorts, it hardly panders to the world it is lambasting. Scott Adams's *Dilbert* (begun in 1989), however, was able to capitalize on the white collar world's burgeoning dissatisfaction with office life by focusing upon one office drone, Dilbert, who is essentially an office conformist (unlike *Work is Hell*'s Binky, who is desperately isolated and clearly out of place in the office). Dilbert's success was partly a matter of timing, for although "[i]nsecurity was creeping into the office by the mid-'80s," as Nikil Saval points out in "Birth of the Office, "on or around October 19, 1987 everything changed" (114). The market crash ushered in a new economic climate in which even office workers' jobs were at risk. Apparently this worried white-collar audience helped to insure *Dilbert*'s rise to fame, which included a spin-off television cartoon and plenty of merchandise. Dilbert's corporate "critique," however, is harmless to nonexistent. Pointing out the little absurdities of office life through one of its worker-drones leaves little room to expose the futility and despair underlying much of the corporate life, which Groening did so well. In the end, Dilbert's success is dependent upon the very corporate life it pretends to make fun of—the strip is less humorous than humoring, including such tired gags as a talking dog, Dogbert.<sup>100</sup> Dilbert, for instance, has appeared on several *Fortune* magazine covers, something it would be hard to imagine Groening letting happen to his *Life in Hell* characters.<sup>101</sup> As Norman Solomon points out in "The Trouble with Dilbert," Adams is

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<sup>100</sup> *Life is Hell*'s main characters are, of course, "crudely drawn" rabbits, as Groening calls them. Yet this is no mere gag, but a sort of visual image of the alienation and awkwardness these characters experience. They are confused rabbits in a strange world. The world of *Dilbert*, however, does *Garfield* one better. The world is "normal," only the dog can actually talk (Garfield the cat can merely think).

<sup>101</sup> *The Simpsons*, of course, has become an industry unto itself, and has long since left its creator's ink-stained fingers. *The Simpsons*, also, was chiefly a parody of sitcoms (as when it first appeared as a series of

merely pandering to the corporate world he appears to be lampooning. Citing several interviews in which it becomes clear that Adams, a business school alumnus, lauds the benefits of downsizing for the good of productivity, Solomon points out the paradox of the cartoon strip: “Dilbert has become schizoid by design—both a cherished mascot of oppressed office workers and a valued marketing tool for companies oppressing them” (Chapter 1). The gentle pokes at mismanagement and corporate carelessness that make *Dilbert* a champion to many office workers were easily co-opted by system.

Somewhere between these two poles of corporate critique stands the Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant British television program *The Office*, which spawned an American version of the show that I will address here. Following the “straight” couple of Jim and Pam, *The Office* plays on the “family” aspect of the work place (Dunder-Mifflin, a paper company), which is full of quirky characters working under the continual threat of downsizing. In order to eclipse its British counterpart in length, however, the American show, now in its highly successful sixth season, has had to make some strange plot twists. The once-troubled paper company suddenly offers Pam a position of saleswoman (she was a receptionist) and promotes the “ambitious” Jim to co-manager (he was a salesman). The truth of the protagonist couple, however, is that they are the safest and most boring characters in the show, as their near-interchangeable and “normal” names suggest. Their average lives, confined to the office, belie the aspirations they obviously had to surrender to keep working for such a modest company in stifling small-

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shorts on *The Tracey Ullman Show*) that has since become a self-parody and satirical take on topical issues, while *Life in Hell* has always kept its critical teeth, whether dealing with AIDS, homosexuality, or various wars. Groening, moreover, still pens *Life is Hell*.

town Scranton (Pam drops out of a graphic design program she attends in New York; Jim leaves a bigger branch to come back to the smaller Scranton one). While earlier in the series Jim and Pam's practical jokes and time-wasting appeared to be mildly rebellious, their sudden advancement in position shows them to be less interested in resistance than in a better paying or more challenging job. The show, in order to continue beyond the point of the British version, must make the two more comfortable in what initially was supposed to be a workplace/life from which to escape. In short, all corporate critique, even at the existential level of the nine-to-five meaninglessness, is completely lost. Instead, the show is now arranged around the protagonist couple who give the viewer a shared vantage point from which to watch the ridiculous, yet ultimately frail and human, co-workers the couple is meta-aware of (through dry looks at the camera at key moments) and must daily suffer. In this respect, it is not unlike the Super Bowl commercials from some years ago depicting a man in an office working with a bunch of screaming and violent monkeys. Everyone is an idiot, except me, such ideology suggests.

Mike Judge's *Office Space* (1999) takes this soft-critique a step forward by indulging in a kind of "revolutionary" fantasy regarding corporate life. The film depicts three friends who are stuck working at a downsizing Silicon Valley-like company in an office park, living in cookie-cutter apartments, and eating lunch in strip malls at TGI Friday-like franchise restaurants that boast "flair" and a simulacra fun-time entertainment atmosphere. The protagonist, Peter Gibbons (Ron Livingston), hates his dead-end job updating code for the upcoming Y2K non-apocalypse, has relationship problems with his girlfriend, and consequently indulges in a good amount of self-loathing. Peter's self-

hatred arises from the fact that he plays the perfect lackey, unable to stand up to his dreary and annoying boss, who constantly requests that Peter come in on weekends. In addition, he is repeatedly harangued for small oversights by two other bosses, who treat him as if he were a little child. Like Milton Waddams, his unhinged and muttering co-worker, who eventually burns down the company, Peter cannot satisfactorily articulate his dissatisfaction and frustration with the system, finding himself powerless against the excruciating boredom and blandness of corporate life. In short, he is unable to resist the corporate hegemony in any fashion.

Yet Peter and his two friends are filled with rage at the stupidity of office protocol, malfunctioning equipment, low wages, and their suddenly fragile job security. Resistance to this corporate and suburban nightmare, however, comes in the release of pent-up anger via the relatively newly popularized music genre Gangsta' Rap. The film humorously points out that it is an inauthentic appropriation by a (mostly) white middle class of legitimate black anger at social conditions when one white friend of Peter's blasts rap in his car while stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic, until he rolls up next to an immigrant selling bags of oranges, after which he quickly shuts his windows, locks his door, and sinks down in his seat. Yet the film goes on to endorse this view of the "resistance" of Gangsta' Rap itself, playing the Geto Boys' "Still" in the film's most famous scene where the three friends take a baseball bat to a recalcitrant fax/copy machine. White "corporate" rage needs to be registered by popular culture's current system-smashing music of choice, which, at the time, could hardly be the ultimately apolitical grunge of Nirvana and its ilk, but the newly outrageous Gangsta' Rap groups,



such as the seminal N.W.A that boasted songs like “Fuck tha Police.”<sup>102</sup> Indeed, when Peter begins to rebel against the system, he comes in to work to the tune of the Geto Boys’s “Damn It Feels Good to Be a Gangsta.”

True to their white-collar roots, however, Peter and his two friends engage in an accounting scam lifted from the plot of *Superman III* that will potentially make them rich. Resistance to the system in this case merely reinforces the system, for no fundamental value or values are questioned here. The primary “value” of the system, capital, is embraced. Only the means for obtaining it, those that the system deems illegal, have changed. This is also why Gangsta Rap seems so appropriate to many of the scenes of “resistance.” Just as in mob films from *Scarface* () to *Scarface* (), Gangsta Rap (though it may, at times, raise issues of social [racial, ethnic] justice) ultimately argues that the way to “equality” is through an inverse and spectacularly violent pursuit of the American Dream. The fundamental system is fine, but because of structural disadvantages, illegal means must be pursued in order to partake in it.

The real possibility of resistance, however, is played out through Peter. Peter begins the film as a spineless and unimaginative office flunky, enticed only by a waitress who works at a restaurant he and his friends eat lunch in and by a construction-working neighbor who offers Peter both sympathy for his white-collar troubles and a potential life of freedom outside of the office (such as fishing). This all changes with the film’s key plot twist. On visiting a hypno-therapist with his soon to be ex-girlfriend, Peter is

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<sup>102</sup> Chris Rock’s film *CB 4* (1993), however, offers an excellent skewering and exploration of rap music, authenticity, marketing, and the music industry in this light, at one point parodying N.W.A’s infamous and instigative “Straight Outta Compton” video. Also interesting in this light is David Foster Wallace and Mark Costello’s *Signifying Rappers*.

hypnotized to believe he can do anything he feels like, no matter the consequences. When the psychologist who has hypnotized him dies of a heart attack before awaking Peter from his fantasy, Peter remains in this state of euphoric hypnosis. Under such influence, Peter decides he will do whatever he feels like doing, such as sleeping in the next morning, skipping work, and finally asking out the waitress he's been quietly eyeing for months.

That Peter's new cavalier "I'll do whatever I feel like" attitude is a psychologically induced state and not a deeply considered personal choice to change is telling. In one sense, of course, Peter's new attitude is a deep wish-fulfillment, not just for Peter but for the film's entire audience—he comes into work dressed in casual attire and flip-flops, tells the boss he doesn't feel like working, tears down one of his cubicle walls, and admits to the consultants hired to lay off workers that he has no motivation or desire to work harder. Who wouldn't like to follow such whims with complete self-assurance, composure, and contentment? Peter has become pure pleasure principle here, flowing on with endless unimpeded access to happiness, and we go with him, enjoying his newfound power to tell the boss off and not give a damn about the consequences, as if we too were able to do so if we simply *felt* like it.

Yet we "know" that such a wish-fulfillment really *is* a fantasy. Peter has been hypnotized to believe *his* fantasy is reality, whereas we all "know" that it's the other way around. Could we find a better definition of ideology even in Marx? The film suggests that the "real" world consists of dull, corporate slavery. Since, moreover, it would be impossible to imagine Peter's kind of resistance—a classic Thoreauvian self-reliant

individualism with a twist of California cool and Gangsta' swagger—occurring in our “real” lives, the resistance must be staged as fantasy—both Peter's fantasy and the fantasy of the film that we watch. Yet the “real world” we live in, of course, is ideological as well. Capitalism asks that we get up, go to the office, follow orders, earn a paycheck, leave work, and purchase commodities, watch tv, go to bed, and repeat. The well-oiled system promises a slickness unto death. At a much deeper level, it asks that we accept this as the way things are, have been, and always will be.

But to release the force of the pleasure principle means to release, also, that other drive, the one set towards disintegration and annihilation. This comes, of course, in Milton Waddams, Peter's co-worker and secret Other. It is Milton's murmured, yet ignored, threats and continual dispossession (his ever-missing stapler) and alienation (as he is moved from smaller office to smaller office, and finally to the symbolic basement where he sits under a sign warning “Danger: High Voltage”) that eventually causes him to erupt in a way that Peter's anger, due to his hypnosis, will not allow. Milton stands not so much for the bottled-up rage of the dispossessed proletariat (or bourgeois '90s increasingly insecure office worker), but as the “real” of Peter's anger that psychoanalysis/therapy is unable to master. Milton's weird and incessant mumbling literally enters into Peter's head at one point, as his cubicle-neighbor calls him on the phone to complain about the way he is being treated. His burning down the office is no revolutionary statement (indeed nobody even knows he's done it since he is, and always

was, invisible), but the fulfillment of the death-drive, the darker underbelly to Peter's wondrous and dreamlike pleasure principle.<sup>103</sup>

The problem with the film, however, is that the fantasy never ends. It seems as if the hypnosis-effect eventually dissipates as Peter shows concerns for his friends' jobs after they are fired. But the truth is that Peter is *never actually brought out of his state of hypnosis*; he is enthralled by it. By the end of the film, Peter has shrugged off the corporate life for a blue-collar job. We see him in his own Hollywood Ending, happy, the girl gotten, wearing a hard-hat and engaged in construction work with his romanticized neighbor. This return of the repressed, to a nostalgic vision of authenticity via blue-collar labor, is the most fantastic element of Peter and the film's dream of resisting capital, akin to the portrait of the disciplined workers at the end of *Gung Ho*. In other words, Peter never snaps out of it, and neither does the audience. The film merely replaces one ideology with another.

While *Office Space* thus remains a cult classic for its canny and engaging anti-corporate fantasy, it ultimately indulges in as much capitalist ideology as it challenges. It is no surprise, then, to find that Mike Judge's latest film, *Extract* (2009), which follows the struggles of a small business owner to keep his business afloat, suffers from a similar wistful vision of blue-collar capitalism (not without a critique of the working man's work ethic), and especially small business entrepreneurship, that makes its underlying logic fairly nostalgic in a Reagan or Goldwateresque fashion. Clearly Judge and the film register anger over the uncertainty of the current economic times, with their post-trillion-

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<sup>103</sup> It should be noted that the initial germ of *Office Space* came from several animated shorts depicting Milton Waddams's office oppression. Thus Waddams's rage can be seen as the repressed traumatic kernel of the film, literally and symbolically.

dollar-bail-outs, siding with small businesses over large corporations in the protagonist's decision at the film's end not to sell the company he has built from the ground up. Yet to merely critique big business at the behest of small businesses, as we've seen in *Tommy Boy* and in Norman Angel's struggles in *J R*, is to ignore the underlying logic of capital, which pushes companies to grow ever bigger, ever larger, and onward toward the state of monopoly, no matter their size. The call for cutting off big business from tax breaks and subsidies in order to help out smaller firms is a classic Goldwater and Reagan belief, an ideology that pushes for a "freer" market, a Wild West capitalism in which the forces of true grit and individualism that "made this country great" are marshaled and unleashed once again. Reagan's economic policies, while they did indeed aim to assist small businesses, ultimately benefited big business above all else, to the detriment of a majority of the citizens of America. It would be fair to say the deeper logic of *Extract* is more conservative in its attack on neoliberalism than it would at first seem.

Two recent literary examples of this corporate "inside out" trend offer a different dynamic to popular culture's soft-critique, suggesting and exploring the possibilities of a collective "we" or, more troubling, a corporate collective "we." Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came To the End* and Ed Park's *Personal Days*, like the aforementioned comics, television shows, and film, present an office world of quirky, bored "characters" given to gossiping and worrying about the instability of their jobs in an era of downsizing. Each novel charts the slow disintegration of a business/office while showing the absurdity of white-collar office life in *Catch-22* style—each story circles around a core of "sadness" (in Ferris's book it is one character's secret cancer, in Park's it is one character's secret

crush, and in both it is the fleeting relationships formed in a ever-changing environment) meant to legitimate its cataloguing of the employees' petty bickering, time-wasting activities, and prank playing. As for the characters (who are truly "characters" or "types"), they could easily take a metafictional romp from one novel to the other (or for that matter into *The Office* or *Office Space*) without upsetting the tone, atmosphere, or ontology of each world. In a sense, the characters do just this. As the lay-offs in each story increase, characters disappear, many are eventually forgotten by the dwindling few, and some are never seen again (the latter more so in *Personal Days*), which gives each text a mildly despondent feel, a kind of melancholy halo to the aforementioned core of sadness. As one character complains to a coworker in *Personal Days*, "you're all interchangeable," and it is markedly true (238).

The prominence of these interchangeable character-parts explains, to some degree, the curious narrative voice employed in each text. Both Ferris and Park adopt a third-person plural point of view, an impossible "we" form of "limited" omniscient narration for the majority of each novel. This point-of-view suggests that the company's employees form a collective, a kind of family, and that the "we" speaks for their universal experiences and feelings. As the "we" says in *Personal Days*, "you form these intense bonds without realizing it" since "[y]ou see co-workers more than you see your so-called friends, even more than your significant others [. . .]" (14). Yet the point-of-view is impossible to defend at the narrative level since it cannot be pinned down to any

one individual, which creates a very special sort of “we,” one very much defined, confined, and refined by the corporate structure out of which it arises.<sup>104</sup>

At first glance, this would seem to be true for Ferris’s and Park’s novels in terms of the small social worlds they construct—that of the office or, to be more precise, a certain department or floor of an office. In such a reduced environment the collective “we” appears to make sense. The incessant water cooler gossip, time wasting, e-mails, and socializing would answer to how this impossible “we” seems so omniscient. Park’s *Personal Days* uses the “we” until its final section, offering a possible answer to its impossibility if one were to reduce the “we” to the character of Jonah. At the novel’s end, Jonah remains inside the corporate whale, so to speak, awaiting rescue in a stalled elevator and typing a “tell-all” letter about the company to a former co-worker and crush, Pru. Told in the first person, Jonah’s letter allows Park to escape formalistically the

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<sup>104</sup> The collective “we” in literature can work in without too much trouble in closed or local conditions. Take William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” in which a small town passes gossip and judgment upon one of its more peculiar residents, Emily, who is described as being “a sort of hereditary obligation on the town” (119). Faulkner’s town in “A Rose for Emily” is small enough that the gossip surrounding its central characters can spread easily and widely through word of mouth and hearsay. Unlike media events today, there is no visual spectacle being channeled through a television set; instead, the suggestion is of a more organic way of storytelling and gaining knowledge, which (it should be added so as to defend against nostalgia), is often as fallible as media-generated stories. Faulkner’s collective “we,” then, is believable within the small social world of his text. Emily, the antiquated missing link to the Old South, is the body against which the collective “we” of the New South forms its own social body by observation, speculation, gossip, and story telling. The collective “we,” however, entirely misreads Emily. When it comes time for the town to break down the door of Emily’s house after her death and validate its hypotheses, thus shoring up the collective township’s body of knowledge against the magnetic pull of the now surely dead past, there is literally *nobody* home. Faulkner would seem to be suggesting, contrary to his modernist aesthetics of radical subjectivity evidenced in *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom!, Absalom!*, that the collective “we,” even if reduced to a lone voice or narrator, would essentially tell us the same story. The collective “we” forms a conforming consensus, while it is Emily who plays the nonconforming Other or the traumatic Real of a past unable to be properly integrated into the Symbolic terrain of the Subject that is the New South. Such a nonconformist, then, is granted an individual voice/body, but one that is subject to mortal and individual privation. Thus it is that the absent individual narrative voice/body in “A Rose for Emily” is figured in the absence of Emily’s body by the novel’s end, as well as by the presence of Homer Barron’s corpse—both are bodies that are simultaneously not bodies. The social body, however, lives on, making the collective “we” believable within the small social world of the text.

limiting and impossible “we” of the novel. Moreover, as the Jonah/Ishmael prophet-survivor (everyone else has been fired by this point), his intimate knowledge of the company’s recent changes, spearheaded by the imposter and clinically insane Corporate Restructuring Officer Gordon Graham Knott (a.k.a Grimes), makes him the sole character privy to all of the information that Grimes gathers en route to his corporate restructuring. Since Jonah uncovers the mystery of Grimes, he is the only real survivor/writer/detective able to write the “we” sections. But Jonah’s letter feels more like a cop-out, a sudden Patricia Highsmith twist that offers a truly insane Ripley-esque Grimes (who, like Milton Waddams’s in *Office Space*, Tom Mota in *Then We Came To the End*, and, to a certain degree, Ted Warburton, the “Mad Memo-ist” in *Americana* [21, 99-100], represents the now familiar unhinged, disillusioned employee) to mop up the attenuated mystery running throughout the novel (that is, whether or not there is a conspiracy to fire certain people). This ultimately serves as the excuse for the cold corporate hatchet decisions, even though the new Californian owners would have probably implemented a fairly similar restructuring plan to Grimes’s. The “irrational” Grimes is a figure of capital’s irrationality, but it is a figure that needs no literalizing in this context. The switch to first person in the final section/letter remains not only dissatisfying but formally suspect.

Ferris’s *Then We Came To the End* raises even greater concerns with its use of “we.” As in *Personal Days*, when characters are laid off or quit, we begin to wonder who will be left, or who could be possibly left, to tell the story. Yet we are not left with a Jonah/Ishmael survivor as a potential narrative candidate. Ferris’s use of “we” is also an ideological sleight of hand, making more generalized pronouncements revealing the class



make-up and assumptions of this “we”: “[w]e believed that downturns had been rendered obsolete by the ingenious technology of the new economy” (18); “[w]e were corporate citizens, buttressed by advanced degrees and padded by corporate fat. We were above fickle market forces of overproduction and mismanaged inventory” (19). The novel, a supposed wake-up call for these comfortable “corporate citizens” during harsh economic times, is largely muted because of the privileged position of such individuals whose sufferings are cushioned at best.

As Ferris acknowledges, the title of his novel, *Then We Came To the End*, is an allusion to the first line of Don DeLillo’s *Americana*. To compare the two novels in terms of their portrayal of corporate life and the advertising industry, however, leads to radically different conclusions. In fact, the conclusion of each novel might offer a good starting point in the analysis of each. *Americana* ends with the narrator, David Bell—who has stopped in Texas on his way back to New York after a rollicking and unfulfilling cross-country road trip through the U.S. and as far west as Arizona (falling short of the symbolic Phoenix)—engaged in a violent and sordid orgy. He emerges from this dark encounter and finds himself at a racetrack where he watches the cars looping endlessly around before making a symbolic trip down Elm Street in downtown Dallas (the site of JFK’s assassination) en route to the airport where he books a flight back to New York. The linearity of the supposed soul-finding road trip ends symbolically in the closed circular track of boredom, violence, and decadence.<sup>105</sup> *Then We Came To the End*,

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<sup>105</sup> There seems to be, however, a possibility of redemption/renewal through mythical cycles as Bell tells his story from a deserted island, similar to Ulysses. David Cowart argues, “Bell is a postmodern Ulysses, returning not to triumph but to the spiritual emptiness of New York before ending up in solitude on a nameless island that would seem to have nothing but its remoteness in common with Ithaca” (610).

though its title suggests what DeLillo's novel enacts, ends with the remaining employees of a company that has seen an economic downturn trigger a mass of firings. Seeing a company through tough economic times, however, merely leaves the reader caught up in capitalist business cycles.

The novel attempts to transcend this cyclical trap through art itself in the figure of a one-time employee, the forgotten Hank Neary, who publishes a novel some years after he has been let go. At the novel's end, the company's employees, current and erstwhile, gather together at a reading of Hank's novel. In a mild metafictional move, the chapter that he reads appears to be an earlier chapter in *Then We Came To the End*, the sole chapter that explores an individual character, the boss, Lynn Mason, through third-person omniscient narration, temporarily abandoning the impossible corporate/company omniscient "we."<sup>106</sup> Art, then, is able to bring together this one-time "family," many of whom have lost contact with one another. The metafiction-lite also suggests that Ferris's novel, as art object, is able to transform and transcend the meaninglessness of white-collar corporate life through the structure and forms of literature. But, again, this is dishonest. DeLillo's "ending" is apocalyptic, Dante's day at the races, but Ferris's ending is more the Marx Brothers' *A Day at the Races*. We, like Groucho, end up getting a fine tutsi-fruitsying, as in Ferris's novel the same old cycles of capital, like that of

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<sup>106</sup> Art figures in *Americana*, too, through the Godard influenced film Bell works on during his road trip. It does not offer transcendence, however. As Cowart writes, Bell's film is itself structurally a closed loop, thus suggesting "the impossibility—of determining the truly authentic subject among its own proliferating masks" (605). Neither does the failed novel that one character works on in *Personal Days* called *Personal Daze*, or the ambiguous satirical send-up of how-to-succeed-in-business books penned by a fired employee that is subsequently discovered by the office and called *The Jilliad*, succeed as a kind of redemption from corporate life.

Chico's nearly endless sales of code books to the hoodwinked, horse-betting Groucho, softly reestablish themselves: many of the once-anxious employees get new and similar jobs to the ones they lost and nothing much changes. As the narrator states regarding the former employees' new jobs once their company has gone under: "the colors of the corporate logos were all new and different, but the song and dance remained the same" (359). *Americana*, while its ending might appear cyclical, is redeemed by the fact that David Bell, the narrator, tells his story from a desert island, suggesting a possible space outside of the known and disintegrating world. In other words, we never really "come to the end" in Ferris's novel. Capitalism's *longue durée* still happily rules the day, whereas in DeLillo it rues the incipient end of it.<sup>107</sup>

Not surprisingly, American-style transcendentalism makes a small appearance in the novel as well, through the character of Tom Mota, an older, disgruntled employee who is fired. Aware he is close to being axed, Mota mourns the changing business climate—"Didn't General Motors, [. . .] IBM, and Madison Avenue establish postwar American might upon the two-martini lunch?" (116)—and takes to sending cryptic and violently suggestive e-mails to his co-workers, as well as quoting Whitman, and especially Emerson, to them. After being fired and sending a few more e-mails suggesting a possibly deranged mind, Mota returns one day wearing a clown suit and pelting his former co-workers with a paintball gun, which leads to his jailing. Mota sees himself as a tough, self-reliant individualist, but while in jail, he confesses to his former

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<sup>107</sup> I would argue that DeLillo's *Americana* gave symbolic schizophrenic birth to the toothless *Then We Came To the End* and the overbite that is Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*.

boss and nemesis, Joe Pope, that he was wrong. He calls Joe the arch individualist, who is somehow able to rise above the corporate life:

“I thought *I* was up there, but no, that whole time, I was down *here*, with everybody else—churning, spinning, talking, lying, circling, whipping myself into a frenzy. I was doing everything they were doing, just in my own way. But you [. . .], you stay here, Joe. You’re up here.” (344)

Thus the novel would seem to offer the possibility of the sovereign individual transcending the mundane world just as Norris, Pynchon, and Powers have suggested. Pope, as Mota says, ignored the catty gossip and insults hurled his way and concentrated on his work, the very reason he survives being laid-off. This casts the novel’s heroic epigraph, an Emerson quotation from “The American Scholar” in an ironic light:

Is it not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be a unit—not to be reckoned one with character;—not to yield that particular fruit which each man was created to bear, but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party, the section, to which we belong [. . .].

In *Then We Came To the End*, the Emersonian individual need not abandon his white-collar roots for a blue-collar utopia, as in *Office Space*, because, apparently, the office worker—more specifically the committed corporate ladder climber like Joe Pope—is the neo-Emersonian self-made-man. If the rest of the corporate drones could simply be as serious and responsible about their work as Joe Pope, they too could truly taste the Emersonian fruits of their labor, instead of grumbling with Willy Loman that a man is not a piece of fruit.

While *Personal Days* eventually escapes the awkward and tiresome “we” by shifting to the first person, *Then We Came To the End* irritatingly hangs on to its impossible narrative voice throughout the novel. Thus it is that “we” arrive at the curious last line of the book: “[w]e were the only two left. Just the two of us, you and me” (385). Suddenly the reader is also implicated in this “we,” which apparently has been assumed all along (and correctly, judging by the novel’s sales success and National Book Award nomination). Such a cloying narrative switch feels unearned here.<sup>108</sup> *Then We Came To the End* makes the jump from an impossible “we” to an impossible “you.” In short, you, the reader, have been part of the “we” all along. You too are part of the family.

In the 2007 Back Bay paperback edition, a “Conversation with Joshua Ferris,” records his answer to the question about the use of the narrative “we.” Ferris’s response is interesting:

Companies tend to refer to themselves in the first-person plural in annual reports, corporate brochures, within meetings and internal memos, and, in particular, in advertising. What used to be the “royal we” might be thought of as the “corporate we.” It’s not just a company’s way of

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<sup>108</sup> It constitutes a pale imitation of a master practitioner of the third-person plural narrative voice, Donald Barthelme, whose mingling of melancholy, mayhem, and wistfulness has surely, along with Heller’s *Catch-22*, influenced Ferris (The 2007 Back Bay paperback edition of the novel includes a list of “Some of Joshua Ferris’s Favorite Books,” which include Heller’s *Catch-22*, DeLillo’s *Americana*, and the Barthelme collection *Sixty Stories*). Barthelme’s whimsical “we,” however, works well within the bounds of his metafictional flights of fancy. Small “communities” are given voice, or situations are reported on, by a representative, often sly, narrator. Moreover, Barthelme’s slippery narrators, even when they are not speaking for others, are often hidden or disguised. They leap out from behind giant balloons, peek through broken-backed sentences, reveal themselves at story’s end (as in “The Balloon,” “Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning,” “The Indian Uprising,” and “On the Deck,” to name but a few) to be playful metafictional ruses, a kindly reassurance against the chaotic dreck-text or drect that they reveal to us.

showing unity and strength; it's also a way of making everyone feel as if they're a member of the club. [. . .].

In *Then We Came to the End*, you see who this “we” really is—a collection of messy human beings—stripped of their glossy finish and eternal corporate optimism. It returns the “we” to the individuals who embody it [. . .]. 4-5

But it is the “corporate we” that ends up having the final say. The workers who sometimes consider themselves a “kind” of family are only brought together under the aegis of the corporation. In other words, contra Ferris, individuals (if we can still call them that) do *not* embody the corporation, *the corporation embodies them*. The fact that the employee “family” loses contact with its “members” once they are terminated or leave to do other things shows that the bonds created under such conditions—corporate capitalism—remain more contractual than social. The analogy Ferris would like to make between a family and a “family” of co-workers is thus: we don't pick who the members of our family are, but we have to learn to tolerate and live with them, just as, since we don't pick who our co-workers are, we similarly have to learn to tolerate and work with them. Therefore, both are, in a sense, families, communities that can voice their beliefs, histories, and hopes for the future.

But if the bonds holding the company-family together are in no way social, but contractual, then it is the corporation and capital that keeps this “family” together, as *JR* clearly shows. This does not mean that co-workers cannot become good friends, date, perhaps even marry and start families. Indeed, these kinds of relationships emerge from

workplaces all the time, although based upon the literature's and popular culture's representations of officer worker life, this is a rarity and something to be avoided. What this does mean is that the communal "we" has no basis outside of the bonds of capital. It can only be the corporate body, and thus corporate voice, that survives its rotating cast of "family-members." The "collection of messy human beings" proves itself, by and large, incapable of having a communal voice because it *has no space or body of its own*.<sup>109</sup>

In the decentered, no-place of corporate capitalism, upon what stable ground can such a communal "we" be based outside of the advertising and "corporate we" that Ferris mentions? Who, we might ask, echoing Foucault's reference to Beckett in "What is an Author?," is speaking? I would suggest that the answer is the corporation itself, surely not the monological, if highly scripted, voice of its advertisements, but the dialogical one that emerges from Ferris's attempt to give the impossible voice back to the privileged "oppressed" office workers. What results is a corporate voice that *seems* to speak to corporate capitalism's irrationality, yet is merely a co-opted version of it. In the end, this "we" is little more than an *esprit de corporation*.

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<sup>109</sup> To return, briefly, to Faulkner, his impossible "we" was planted within a community and history, within a particular time and ethos. Even Faulkner's work as a whole, which so often is suffused with a style and verbiage that seems to reduce and seduce many of its characters into speaking a similar kind of impossible impressionistic rhetoric, is historically-materially grounded. This is most evident in *Absalom, Absalom!*, where narrators Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve appear more to be spoken by the tenebrous brooding history of the South than *they* actually speak *it*. Thus, what some critics have called Faulkner's "voice of the South" arises from some kind of contested, yet shared, common history and persists through those who are much obliged to speak it.

Shreve, of course, is Canadian, but it is this exception to the rule that offers an "outside" perspective to afford Quentin the space from which to imaginatively step out of/reconstruct the possible story of Thomas Stutpen and Charles Bon. Quentin is precisely, like Faulkner, that imaginative subject who, although caught up in the collective "we," understands its social, political, and cultural underpinnings—those very structures that form the space of this particular "we."

The literature of the inside of the corporation becomes merely a vehicle for capital's voice. Since capital cannot truly "have" a voice, it compels those that work for and within it to speak for it, seemingly as a ventriloquist does his dummy; but, somewhat like the famous *Twilight Zone* episode, it is now the dummy controlling the ventriloquist, only the ventriloquist is completely unaware of this and chatters mindlessly on. The petty complaints about management, the gripes about labyrinthine and mindless corporate bureaucracy, the anxiety experienced during economic downturns, even the desire to escape into a life of "real" blue-collar work—none lodges an effective critique of corporate capitalism itself. The "we" is not so much those employees, who, one by one, are laid off or fired, but the "immortal" voice of the corporation itself, that which survives its individual owners or employees, as Samuel Clare realizes in *Gain*. Such literature gives a voice to the corporation in the guise of its workers, the same corporation that has, through incorporation, been granted a body, a set of rights based on the law, and an "ethical" position based on limited liability and its commitment to its shareholders. So it is that this voice is even more disturbing than the "voice" the corporation has gained through advertising. Rather than speak for itself, the corporate "we" now compels others to speak it, to speak for itself. Thus it is that such "inside" views of the corporation are ultimately even less able to offer an effective critique or resistance to corporate power.

### Selling (Out) Futures

"You know what's good for him?"

"To win."

"For whom and for what?"

"For what makes the world go round. For money, and for glory."

"You didn't answer my first question. For whom?"



“All right. Today for me, tomorrow for himself.”

“No, there’s no tomorrow. Not with you. You own all the tomorrows because you buy them today, and you buy cheap.”

“Well, nobody has to sell.”

*The Hustler*

What a study of representations and figurations of corporations shows is the ways in which even corporate bodies themselves are not quite as sovereign as they would seem. Outside of a few weak government regulations, corporations find themselves as bound to the logic of capital as are its highest practitioners, whether they are entrepreneurs, investment bankers, or CEOs. If it becomes necessary, but fundamentally useless, to blame the Jeff Skillings, Bernie Madoffs, and Raj Rajaratnams of the financial world, then the same might be said of the corporations, hedge funds, or investment banks such persons might be running. In the end, even corporate bodies thrive on the life-blood that is capital, and it should be clear from the previous chapters that the story of twentieth and twenty-first century representations of corporations is really the story of the various and ongoing mutations of late capitalism. Corporate bodies become merely the vehicles for capital’s drive for endless accumulation and self-valorization, just as particular characters come to embody various aspects of corporate capitalism in the texts critiqued in this study.

Many today distinguish the “good” corporations from the “bad” ones. Starbucks is “good” because it pays its workers well, offers benefits, and deals in Fair Trade coffee. Nike, in the late ’90s was “bad” because of the revelations of its use of sweat-shops, wherein workers received little pay and labored under excruciating and exploitative conditions to produce sneakers that sold for absurd amounts of money (little of this practice has changed). In this sense, Target and Wal-Mart can be seen as comprising a

kind of dialectic of “savings stores,” with Target as the democratically run “good guy” and Wal-Mart as the conservatively controlled “bad guy” that runs mom-and-pop stores out of business.<sup>110</sup> The truth, however, is that all such distinctions are specious. Underneath their surface differences, each store’s target remains essentially the same—earn capital. Both Target and Wal-Mart remain popular with shoppers for their affordable goods that undersell and drive away most of their competition. Wal-Mart, even if it does destroy Main Street competition, ends up offering rural communities—that have been much harder hit economically in the neoliberal era than their urban counterparts—the only outlet for affordable goods and (dead-end) non-union jobs. Target (also non-union) and even the “socialist” Ikea do the same to their competition and provide similar unpromising, low-level jobs.<sup>111</sup> Thus while the rumors of Wal-Mart’s impending arrival in New York City circulate against horrified New Yorkers’ outcries (Massey), one can be sure that these voices will eventually be silenced, and that K-Mart, Target, and Costco will eventually have some more challenging competition. What the Virgin Music and Trader Joe’s “political shopper” belies is that shopping is *not* as political as it seems, and that spending one’s dollar as a kind of “vote” for a certain kind of capitalism does nothing to change the fact that this is merely a vote *for* capitalism

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<sup>110</sup> For more on the slight differences, see Kari Lyderson’s “Target: Wal-Mart Lite.”

<sup>111</sup> The Ikea in Red Hook, Brooklyn, for instance, has hurt local businesses and not produced the amount of jobs expected (nor will it say how many workers it hired from the neighborhood). It has, however, slightly improved transportation in the area and not created the traffic jams locals feared (Fung). Residents also began to take advantage of the cheap cafeteria hot dogs, play area for children, and free water taxi service (Fahim). It seemed, early on, that the residents were making Ikea work for them. However, as is familiar in such cases, all of these “services” are private. Ikea is now charging for its water taxi service to all but customers (most of whom are commuters that have grown used to the service), and for parents leaving their children in the Ikea play are, one can only imagine the potential problems and lawsuits that could one day emerge, sure to end such a “service” that Ikea sees, disturbingly, as a retail-strategy (Higgins).

that, in the last instance—and as this study of the figurations of corporations has been at pains to show—can *never* have a human face. A choice between a “good” or a “bad” capitalism attendant upon a coalition of “good” or “bad” corporations is, according to the underlying logic of capital, no choice whatsoever.

If the neoliberal project ever rights itself again—and considering the cycles of capital and the fact that only an exhaustive neoliberal turn would probably instigate capital’s final crisis—it would not be too hard to imagine how quickly the widening gap between rich and poor would grow, finally squeezing the last juice from the once lush pulp of the American middle class. Because of the impending environmental crisis and growing scarcity of natural resources, such as oil and water, this would surely mean that such resources will be allocated only to the few who can afford them. David Harvey argues that neoliberal economic policy works mainly by “accumulation by dispossession” (essentially taking resources from peoples unable to defend themselves, whether through military or economic muscle) in which “regional crises and highly localized place-based devaluations emerge as a primary means by which capitalism perpetually creates its own ‘other’ in order to feed upon it” (*Imperialism* 151). Harvey, writing presciently in 2003, warns that “[t]he danger, however, is that such crises might spin out of control and become generalized, or that ‘othering’ will provoke a revolt against the system that creates it” (151). In short, it is possible to foresee a (neoliberal) world in which particular geographical pockets experience wild fluctuations in capital influxes and withdrawals, as capital attempts to keep itself cycling in a territorially exhausted world. Such rapid cycles of gain and decline would ensue that it would be helpful to recall Paul Virilio’s

study of “dromology” or the unprecedented speed of life in contemporary times as it relates to the logic of late capital. For Virilio, such a rapid pace of technological change is driven by a war-machine that gives rise to a state of “total war.” I would add, contra Virilio, that capital is a major “engine” for the creation of technology, so that “[t]he transition *from the state of siege* of wars of space to *the state of emergency* of the war of time” can be understood as announcing an unparalleled speeding up of capitalist cycles of investment/growth and withdrawal/decline too (140). Even Giovanni Arrighi, in *The Long Twentieth Century*, points out that “as we move from the earlier to the later stages of capitalist development, it has taken less and less time for systemic regimes of accumulation to rise, develop fully, and be superseded” (216)

We might also understand “total war” to be something similar to Carl Schmitt’s concept of the “state of emergency”—in which the sovereign may suspend or change the (constitutional) law he enforces in times of crisis. Giorgio Agamben deconstructs Schmitt’s “state of emergency” in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, in which he argues that this theorization of law is based on a “state of exception” that “is thus not so much a spatiotemporal suspension as a complex topological figure in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another” (37). What arises from this figure is a definition of “bare life” or “naked life” as captured in the ancient Roman juridical conception of *homo sacer* or “sacred man,” who, in his ambiguous status “can be killed [by anyone with impunity] but not sacrificed” (94, brackets mine). *Homo sacer* comes to stand for numerous marginalized bodies that are defined at the edges or outside of the law, thus constituting

exceptions to the rules that are included through their very exclusion, such as migrant workers, immigrants seeking asylum, or the “enemy combatants” (still) held in Guantánamo Bay. However, with the turn toward biopolitics that a never-ending state of exception facilitates, the concept of *homo sacer* can be expanded: “[i]n modern biopolitics, sovereign is he who decides on the value or the nonvalue of life as such. Life—which, with the declaration of rights, had as such been invested with the principle of sovereignty—now itself becomes the place of sovereign decision” (142). The result is that “[t]oday a law that seeks to transform itself wholly into life is more and more confronted with a life that has been deadened and mortified into juridical rule” (187). In other words, *homo sacer* can be conceived both as a figure for a biopolitics that increasingly produces docile bodies, as Foucault would call them, and as a body reduced to “bare life” without rights—a body that simply does not count. This dual mode of *homo sacer* can be seen in the film *Children of Men* (2006), which depicts a dystopian, totalitarian future in which humanity can no longer reproduce through natural or scientific means and civilization is collapsing.<sup>112</sup> The film shows the relative “freedom” enjoyed by certain British citizens, themselves subject to the tyranny of biopolitical control (ironically the subject cannot reproduce life, yet the state, in fact, (re)produces it in biopolitical fashion), as well as the suffering of those excluded, the many illegal immigrants seeking asylum, who have no place in such a society and are rounded up in internment camps. My point here is that both “kinds” of *homo sacer* can simultaneously exist in a society. The immigrant detention centers dotted along the wall being

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<sup>112</sup> Žižek reads the film in a similar way, stressing the biopolitical element, the state of emergency, and figure of *homo sacer* in an essay on the film’s website (as well as in the dvd commentary). See “The Clash of Civilizations at the End of History.”

constructed across the U.S.-Mexico border, for instance, and the civil liberties lost in the Patriot Act (still in place) illustrate that the “state of exception,” the endless War on Terror, and *homo sacer* are integral to America’s current social and political livelihood.

Consequently, it would simply take a disaster of major proportions—whether environmental, natural, war-related, or financial—to create the conditions from which a divide between the haves and have-nots, even within America itself, could be exploited into a further (class-based) division between the haves and the *homines sacri*. Such is the idea behind Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, wherein Klein explores how neoliberal “shock treatment,” as Milton Friedman termed it (7), was instituted in countries devastated by war, natural disasters, or financial debt, such as Chile, Poland, South Africa, and Russia, among others. In times of crisis, countries “in shock” could be easily compelled by the U.S., World Bank, and International Monetary Fund to adopt neoliberal economic policy, bypassing any democratic process of legitimation and ignoring counterarguments for economic recovery.

Klein’s study is notable not so much for the revelations about neoliberal economic policy and its political and financial backers, but for its thesis that “[n]ow wars and disaster responses are so fully privatized that they are themselves the new market; there is no need to wait until after the war for the boom—the medium is the message” (13).

What Klein calls the “shock doctrine” is a kind of disaster capitalism that seeks to institute brutal “structural readjustments” (the neoliberal term for its own policies) that redistribute wealth upward in times of crisis. In short, disaster pays, as it did in Iraq:

since every possible aspect of both the destruction and reconstruction has been outsourced and privatized, there's an economic boom when the bombs start falling, when they stop and when they start up again—a closed profit-loop of destruction and reconstruction, of tearing down and building up. For companies that are clever and farsighted, like Hailliburton and the Carlyle Group, the destroyers and rebuilders are different divisions of the same corporations. (381)

When Klein discusses the failures of the government and FEMA in responding to the victims of Katrina in 2005, and the ways that private industry stepped in (Wal-Mart delivering supplies to victims), the outlines of the true danger begin to appear (408-413). In the midst of such a disaster where the American government, long since crippled by neoliberal economic policy, failed to assist many of its poorer citizens and establish order, a certain company came to people's aid instead, although only to the aid of certain wealthy residents. This company was the right-wing run Blackwater, the private military "contractors" (by definition they are mercenaries composed of U.S. veterans and other dubious types, such as former El Salvadorean death squad members) still active in Iraq, who, according to Jeremy Scahill, arrived on the scene to help reestablish order *before the government actually hired them* (324). As Scahill writes, "[t]he rise of Blackwater's private army is nothing short of the embodiment of the ominous scenario prophesied decades ago by President Eisenhower when he warned of the 'grave implications' of the rise of the 'military-industrial complex' and 'misplaced power'" (377). Surely, the reconstruction and gentrification of once-poor neighborhoods will be heralded for helping

to pull New Orleans together both financially and symbolically, whereas the class and racial divides that pre-existed the disaster have only been aggravated, as poorer residents have been left out of the city's tourist-based reconstruction plans (see Gotham [2005] and Venkatesh [2006])—a better example of *homo sacer* would be hard to find.

Corporate capitalism's underlying zero-sum logic is sure to lead, probably within the next decade, to another crisis of corporate legitimacy similar to that of the late 1990s. As capitalism reaches its territorial global exhaustion and corporations find it more difficult to tap into cheap labor sources by threatening to pull up stakes and move elsewhere—thus indulging in a lowest common denominator game with its prospective new homes (countries)—capitalism finds itself having to commodify more and more hitherto unimagined areas of life—specifically life itself. Recent breakthroughs in genetics—human, animal, and plant life—have made it “necessary” for companies to patent their “discoveries.” As a result, corporations now literally own “genes,” the DNA of life itself. Thus, “late” capitalism may be a more literal and morbid description than it was first meant to be. In *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life*, Kaushik Sunder Rajan offers a comparative study of the biotechnology industries of the U.S. and India and argues that a new phase of capital, biocapital, is arising. Rajan writes “biocapital is the implosion of an emergent economic regime with an emergent epistemic one” in which “biotechnology and subsequent genomics ‘revolutions’ are technocapitalist assemblages that allow analyses, and create types of knowledge, that reconfigure definitions, understandings, even the grammar of ‘life itself’ [. . .]” (142). In short, we might understand “biocapital” as being that form of (neo)liberal capitalism that



is able to *capitalize fully and to unprecedented levels* on the emergence of an age of biopower.

One outcome of biocapital, as Rajan argues, is “the ability of information to describe ‘life itself,’ and to accrue value through insertion into transnational circuits of exchange. This reconfigures subjectivity in ways that turn populations into source [. . .], experimental subjects [. . .], and obligatory passage points without which the global exchange networks that get constituted could not thus be constituted” (102). In terms of medicine, for instance, a biocapital regime would go even a step further than the *everyday* biopolitical medicalization of life witnessed in the alarming concern for health and happiness as it relates to the pharmaceutical industry in *White Noise*. Genomics suggests that disease can be dealt with *at a genetic level*, thus medicine becomes even more “personal” and necessary than ever: “the *possibility* of personalized medicine is *insurance* (for the patient, against future illness), just as the always existent patient-as-consumer is insurance for the pharmaceutical company” (167). This means “that *every* person, no matter how healthy, is possibly someone who might fall ill, the potential market for a drug is enlarged from ‘diseased’ people to, conceivably, everyone with purchasing power [. . .]” (175). The potential for developing such genetic therapies, however, is attendant upon building a database of personalized genetic information. The database that Gladney is included in when he talks to the SIMUVAC technician may appear somewhat benign on the whole (Gladney turns his back on the doctors in the end), but this will not be a “free choice” for subjects existing within the age of biocapital, since “one does not just have to *conceive* life as information: one can now *represent* life in

informational terms that can be packaged, turned into commodity, and sold as a database [. . .]” (16). What for Gladney is a mid-life crisis will now forever become a pre-life crisis.

Furthermore, the concept of the commodification of life needs to be reexamined. As Melinda Cooper argues in her enlightening *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*, “what neoliberalism seeks to impose is not so much the generalized commodification of daily life—the reduction of extraeconomic to the demands of exchange value—as its financialization” (10). This can be seen in Cooper’s incredible tracing of biotechnology as a post-Fordist, flexible, and speculative mode of scientific production. Cooper writes, “while industrial production depletes the earth’s reserves of past organic life (carbon based fossil fuels), postindustrial bioproduction needs to depotentialize the future possibilities of life, even while putting them to work” (25). What neoliberal-driven biotechnology wants to do (what Rajan would call “biocapital”) “is return to the earth, recapturing the reproduction of life itself within the promissory accumulation of the debt form, so that the renewal of debt coincides with the regeneration of life on earth—and beyond. It dreams of reproducing the self-valorization of debt in the form of biological autopoiesis” (31). Therefore, “what is at stake and what is new in the contemporary biosciences is not so much the commodification of biological life—this is a foregone conclusion—but rather its transmutation into speculative surplus value” (148).

If we can conceive of a dystopian capitalist future, in which the gap between rich and poor has been further exploited, one can only imagine what this entails in terms of

health care and a biotechnology industry that often relies on the “cooperation” of subjects that have little choice in the matter.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, corporations create, despite their increasing decenteredness, a figurative, if amorphous, body that can be used as a target for those attempting to battle neoliberal capitalism as it transitions into a truly unique and hitherto unparalleled stage of late capitalism, a veritable bioeconomy. Already, small groups of farmers have begun to fight, with varying success, against Monsanto’s patent infringement suits over genetically modified seeds that spread to some farmer’s fields and affect their crops.<sup>114</sup> Bolivia’s Cochabamba have also fought a successful victory against Aguas del Tunari and the privatization of their water (Bakan 164-6), and the Zapatista movement has similarly fought against the privatization of the land of the people of Chiapas. These kinds of particular resistances toward neoliberal capitalism and privatization will have to be adopted more and more in western states as well when one of the primary dilemmas in the near future will be who controls the rights to the production and re-production of life itself. Such startling questions may lead to strange

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<sup>113</sup> Rajan points out how the Indian state willingly allows its population to become a genetic informational database for the biotech industry in order to court foreign investment and propel its own biotech industry forward (77-103). Cooper, in looking at reproductive technologies (129-51), states “[i]n the sense that egg markets are increasingly drawing on the underpaid, unregulated labor of various female underclasses, the difference between human reproductive medicine and the brute commodification of labor and tissues that prevails in the agricultural industry becomes difficult to maintain” (136).

<sup>114</sup> Canadian farmer Perry Schmeiser fought a high-profile legal battle against Monsanto Canada Inc. over such a suit claiming he had knowingly pirated patented GM (genetically modified) seeds from the company. Schmeiser’s case eventually went to the Canadian Supreme Court, which ruled for Monsanto’s claim to patent ownership, but ruled against the ability for the company to take Schmeiser’s profit from the 1998 harvest. Nor did Schmeiser have to pay Monsanto’s legal bills, though he had amassed a considerable bill himself (Pringle 180-83). His countersuit is still undecided, though he won an out-of-court settlement for a \$660 crop cleaning bill from the company.

Other farmers have not been so lucky, as Monsanto’s alleged strong-armed tactics and encouragement of neighborly “whistle-blowing” has led to suits filed against numerous farmers, many of whom simply cannot afford the time and particularly the large amount of money to fight Monsanto, as the Robert Kenner documentary (which is not related to Pringle’s book *Food, Inc.*) *Food, Inc.* shows.

strategic political alliances and conjunctures. Whether or not a global “multitude,” as Hardt and Negri term it, will properly emerge “in common” to inherit the productive forces of capital and bend them to its own ends remains to be seen, but certainly the aspects of the multitude—its creativity, positive productive power, fluidity, and multiplicity—are what is needed to imagine and build a world from out of the crisis-ridden ruins of the old.

### Capital Punishment

The new economy cannot be established without a [. . .] selection of subjects and zones singled out for transformation. The chaos that we constantly hear about will either provide the opportunity for this selection, or for our victory over this odious project.

The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*

*We want the Dead Father to be Dead. We sit here with tears in our eyes wanting the Dead Father to be dead—meanwhile doing amazing things with our hands.*

Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father*

“What grand enterprise has not been *an extreme* at the moment of its inception? Only when it is accomplished do commonplace people realize that it is possible.”

Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*

I.            Either/  
The vital role of the imagination is made clear in Jim Jarmusch’s *The Limits of Control* (2009), in which a would-be assassin travels through a labyrinthine Robbe-Grillet-like world of strange doublings and ambiguities en route to kill the head of some oppressive state

Or            II.  
There is a scene in Werner Herzog’s *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* in which a would-be conquistador is beheaded by the mad Aguirre while counting to ten. As the man reaches nine, Aguirre lops his head off. It trundles several feet away and finally comes to a rest. Then,

(surely a figure for Bush II). When the assassin arrives at the president's compound, the task seems impossible. Guard towers maintain strategic points of entry, security guards stalk the premises, black helicopters buzz above. Yet a Zen-like meditation lands the assassin impossibly within the compound, inside of the president's very office. "How the fuck did you get in here?" asks an angry president. "I used my imagination," answers the assassin. Soon after, the assassin takes a garrote to his victim's neck. The true path to resistance, Jarmusch suggests, is that of the imagination itself, which remains, so long as consciousness is aware and receptive, *beyond the limits of any control*, even that of capital itself.

in the most surreal moment of the film, the hacked-off head finishes its count. "Ten," says the impossible head. If such a beheaded imperialist figure could be imagined as corporate capitalism today, it would still be necessary to decide to what degree such an execution partakes of Robespierreian terror and what part *Alice in Wonderland* absurdity. That Aguirre himself is a megalomaniac prone to violent acts should give one pause too—as well as the unnerving and troubling fact that the impossible head still manages to speak from beyond the limitations of its own death.

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