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Word Hoard Issue 3 Complete: Pop/Corn

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Word Hoard Issue 3 Complete: Pop/Corn

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*WH*, Issue 3, 8 January 2015
Editors’ Introduction

If you put butter and salt on it, it tastes like salty butter.

Terry Pratchett, *Moving Pictures*

The questions addressed in this issue are broadly axiological, dealing with the ethics and aesthetics of all things popular, corny, campy, and kitschy. Unlike previous issues of *Word Hoard*, which took more explicitly political approaches, “Pop/Corn” might at first seem light and airy, but we hope that there will be a hard kernel that sticks with the reader long after “Pop/Corn” has been consumed. In that sense, this issue is both a continuation of and a departure from the previous issue, “The Unrecyclable,” which took up those aspects of reality that act as scandals or stumbling blocks to our thinking and doing since they cannot easily be reintegrated into our daily lives.

Rather than interrogating the unresolved or un-dissolvable remainders of our cultural production, “Pop/Corn” looks instead to those ubiquitous aspects of our culture that all too often go unnoticed or unexamined. We consume popcorn mindlessly, our attention directed elsewhere, and it becomes a part of our experience without us really being aware of it at all. Of course, we are talking about more than just popcorn. We are interested, in this issue, with the cultural analogues of popcorn—from the cheap horror flicks that we watch, to turn-your-brain-off TV sitcoms, to paperback novels that we buy at airports. Incorporating all of these things more or less without thinking, using them to fill the time between more serious pursuits, we take them in on our way to other destinations. These light, airy, ubiquitous things *mean* almost nothing to us; they are simply there, consumed but hardly noticed, foreground operating as background.

Broadly, we can say that this issue looks at the effects of a certain range of styles—the popular, the corny, the campy, and the kitschy—not in order to define these styles, but to ask how they operate with and against their more “serious” counterparts, namely, those aspects of high culture which everyone seems to agree are objects “worthy” of criticism. As the epigraph above implies, popcorn takes on the flavour of its surroundings. Our contributors certainly picked up on a variety of flavours, each of them approaching the topic with their own sensibilities and applying their critical analyses to a wide variety of objects.

The issue opens with a submission from Western’s own Dr. Allan Pero, “Kant’s Unwritten Fourth Critique,” which thinks through some of the problems and lacunae in Kant’s third critique, addressing them through the lens of camp. Pero’s intervention moves away from the too-close alignment between camp and queer studies (since, as Pero points out, “Pop-Corn”)
camp is the enemy of identity); instead, Pero opts to interrogate Kant using camp, thereby dismantling some conceptual linkages that characterize our engagement with art. In his response to Pero’s piece, “The Time of Camp, or, Camp as Ruin,” Ricky Varghese investigates the temporal register in which camp occurs, as well as camp’s relationship to trauma. Varghese turns to the relationship between trauma and camp through an analysis of Vincent Chevalier’s campy video project “So . . . when did you figure out that you had AIDS?” Varghese’s submission expands on Pero’s analysis by asking a critical question about camp, namely, “What is the time of camp?”

Next, Jaime R. Brenes Reyes and Jamie Rooney provide us with “An Interview with Dr. Laura Penny; or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Kanye,” in which the participants discuss popular culture, academic bullshit, and how to live in an increasingly business-oriented university bent on training workers rather than educating students. The interview’s tone is conversational to say the least, but, in keeping with Dr. Penny’s modus operandi, there’s no dearth of intellectual heavy-lifting going on in this discussion. Penny and her interlocutors deftly manoeuvre from discussions of the economics at play in the university to the abolishment of the distinction between so-called “high” and “low” culture. A wide-ranging conversational piece, this interview is followed by a melancholy rumination in the form of Kevin Godbout’s “Paying to be Proles: The Academic Worker, University Nostalgia and Melancholic Refusal.” In his response, Godbout focuses on the nostalgic and melancholy responses to the sad state of the contemporary university. In addition to commenting on Penny’s public lecture at Western, her books, and the interview with Brenes Reyes and Rooney, Godbout’s piece returns to Kant’s Conflict of the Faculties and Benjamin’s Origin of the German Tragic Drama in order to sketch out a future for the university, one that recognizes the value of digression to learning and life more broadly. Godbout’s piece is, in the final analysis, about value—specifically, the value of education that cannot be subsumed under the rubric of an economic or utilitarian calculus.

What would an issue titled “Pop/Corn” be without some discussion of film? In “Insidious and the Return of the Negligent Parent: the Elm Street Kids Come of Age,” David Christopher provides an in-depth psychoanalytic look at horror films, Insidious and the Nightmare on Elm Street franchise in specific, which focuses on the way that these films portray family life. He argues that Insidious functions as a conservative paean to misogyny and to a set of familial values that no longer hold. If, in the 1980s, the Nightmare on Elm Street franchise served to castigate absent, neglectful, or abusive parents (whose sins would be visited on their children), Insidious, released in 2010, calls back to the same trope, with the twist that the Elm Street generation have become the absent or impotent parents. In her response, “The Circuit and the Ring: Or, Psychosis as A Media Effect,” Mary Eileen Wennekers takes up The Ring in order to
elaborate, by means of a complex and edifying interweaving of psychoanalytic and media theory, an argument about subjectivity, mediation, and representation which insists upon both the material and abstract grounds of the subject. Wennekers reads *The Ring* as an allegory for the psychotic modes of production and subjectivity that exist in the society of the spectacle, or late capitalism in general, wherein production, be it the production of commodities or of subjects, serves completely inhuman needs.

Sarbani Banerjee’s piece, “‘I Don’t Think Therefore I Am Not’—Milan Kundera’s Expeditions through a Brain-dead Czechoslovakia Haunted by Kitsch,” provides an analysis of a wide-ranging selection of the works of Milan Kundera. Banerjee reads kitsch, which is a common thread in Kundera’s *oeuvre*, through the lens of gender, sexuality, and performativity in order to draw out tensions between the individual and mass or mainstream culture. The piece, published here without a response, reminds us of the dangers of kitsch while pointing to the revolutionary potential of the Dionysian as a counterbalance to the pernicious and pervasive reproducibility of kitsch.

Sally Colwell’s contribution, “From Playboy Penthouse to High-Rise Playboy: The Bachelor’s Evolution,” provides an analysis of pop old and new, comparing descriptions of ideal bachelor pads from mid-century issues of *Playboy* with a modern iteration of the notion of the bachelor: Barney Stinson from *How I Met Your Mother*. Colwell’s paper argues that Stinson is the late-capitalist version of the bygone *Playboy* bachelor, using prosthetic techniques and devices to end the process of seduction that he relies on for the affirmation of his identity. Kristen Shaw, in her response to Colwell, “Negotiating Space, Class and Masculinity in *How I Met Your Mother*,” extends Colwell’s argument, claiming that, while Colwell is right to point to the ways in which architecture and technology underwrite certain gendered and sexualized subject positions, *How I Met Your Mother* is only able to normalize the figure of the idealized bachelor (who is, of course, straight, white, and affluent) by “othering” ethnic and working-class identities. In Shaw’s view, the techniques of representation that the show uses to situate Barney as an idealized masculine subject are made abject when *How I Met Your Mother* represents the spaces, lives, and subjectivities of working-class ethnic characters.

Finally, Ashlee Joyce brings us a foray into psychogeography with her paper “Reclaiming the Dérive: The Tourist, the Souvenir, and the Search for the Utopic Everyday.” Joyce’s offering provides an account of how touristic experiences of space, particularly of urban spaces, amount to utopian fantasies. On Joyce’s account, a false notion of distance allows for an idealized experience of these ‘touristed’ spaces, which is belied by the commodification of such spaces. In response to this piece, Adina Arvatu’s “Keywords and Keyboards: The City in the Age of Total Tourism” engages at length with some of the critical concepts of Joyce’s submission—dérive, space, and utopia. In articulating these concepts, drawing from a wide range of sources as well as from her personal experience as a temporary resident of Macau, Arvatu comes to
elaborate a hope for the emancipatory potential of urban practices that could resist the hegemonic injunctions of official culture.

The articles included in this issue of *Word Hoard* cover a disparate field of topics that fall under the umbrella of the popular, the corny, the kitschy, and the everyday. It is our distinct pleasure to present this issue to you, the reader. We would like to thank our contributors for their excellent work, for their time, for engaging in a conversation that, one hopes, will not begin and end within the confines of this small volume. We must also thank our faculty advisors, peer editors, content editors, and copy editors for their commitment to this issue.

So, be at ease. Sit back. Put your feet up and, with a piping hot serving of “Pop/Corn” on your lap, dig in.

William Samson, Content Editor-in-Chief

with

Diana Samu-Visser
Meghan O’Hara
Mélissa LeBlanc
Nahmi Lee
Kant is easy; Camp is hard. As my title suggests, I have seized upon Kant’s authorial and discursive reins to engage in what I hope is a useful thought experiment: although Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* has been the object of innumerable readings, it has not, as yet, been read through the lens of Camp. That is to say, I will not be putting forth a critique of Kant’s text that will recast it, perversely, as Camp, or as an example of Campy, rococo prose— not that that would not itself be a daring, possibly productive exercise. Rather, I will argue that several of the gaps or problematics lurking in Kant’s aesthetics may in fact be thought through by turning to what I am calling Kant’s “unwritten fourth critique”—which is Camp. Camp is of course a knotty, contested term—it is often conflated with Kitsch, or Trash, and just as often understood as a kind of perversion of aesthetic judgments—eschewing what would in bourgeois culture be considered fine, complex, profound, and preferring and privileging instead the base, the simplistic, and the superficial. Camp is relegated to the realm of “guilty pleasures,” as a kind of aesthetic succubus, draining beauty and sublimity of their traditional values and contents. Obviously, I will be arguing something radically different about Camp.

So, where to begin? Why not whet our appetite with one of the most contentious of our several senses: Taste itself. Taste, which the poet Dame Edith Sitwell called “one of the worst vices ever invented,” and its status as subjective universal, is one of the gaps in Kant’s thought that requires our attention. As you will recall, Kant contends that a subjective judgment is predicated upon an object’s provoking feelings of pleasure or displeasure, or beauty or ugliness, in the subject. In this respect, aesthetic judgments cannot be rendered on empirical or cognitive grounds. This is the reason why such judgments are, for Kant, subjective. The first chasm yawns before us: Taste is subjective. But this assertion raises the question/objection: Whence its authority? But Kant is ready for this objection—indeed, there is something strangely defensive, yet playful about the tone of the *Third Critique*—it is as if it were written as an opening statement in a pre-emptive strike, a defence of his thesis, which is better known to us as the first Two Critiques (*Pure and Practical Reason*). The relative pleasure or displeasure of an object experienced by the subject is not measured purely as gratification (instantaneous or otherwise); it is, as Kant insists, “disinterested”—in other words, the experience
operates independently of desire. Hiving off desire from the intrinsic pleasure of beauty (or displeasure produced by ugliness) is a crucial step in establishing the authority of aesthetic Taste. For Kant, desire is by its very finitude an impediment to the universality of aesthetic judgment he wishes to claim for it. Even his famous example of a man placing an object on a pedestal, and demanding that everyone around him worship the object as a beautiful thing in the way he does, implies an important distinction between the gratification one receives in an object, and the pleasure one receives in contemplating a beautiful object. The problem Kant foresees is that gratification is coarse, vulgar, embodied, and desirous; pleasure, once neatly annexed from desire, produces the impetus to attribute beauty to the object, and disavow its origin in the subject. Here’s a moment in which the sadistic dimension of Taste starts to assert itself; the logic of it runs as follows: “I see this object as beautiful, not because of my desire for it, but because of its intrinsic beauty. You ought to agree with me; if you do not, you are a tasteless moron.” If we read this logic in the context of the history of Camp, then we see that it is not Camp that is perverse, but good taste itself. Good taste, a model of aesthetic appreciation which implies cultivation and discipline, must faithfully recoil from the instinctual—in other words, from the subjective particularism of desire. Of course, there is another problem Kant is hoping to forestall: that of relativism or, as he puts it, “everyone has his own taste” (137).

With this phrase, we now encounter the second gap in Kant’s discourse, which he attempts to trowel over with the type of reflective judgment which asserts an object’s “agreeableness”; that is to say, the judgment rendered is merely the subject’s agreement with himself about an object’s gratification—it is a general, but not a universal condition. Another way of putting it is to say that relativism is undercut by a species of majoritarianism—a judgment of Taste is not relatively true, but at the level of the universal, can only be argued to be largely or generally true. Most people would agree that a particular object is beautiful, even if some people—perversely or otherwise—would not. But the catalyst for the “ought” which structures aesthetic judgments—that we “ought” to think something beautiful—unwittingly brings the problem of desire back into the equation. If, as Lacan loves to tell us, “desire full stop is always the desire of the Other” (38), then the imperative that others see the object as we do—as beautiful or ugly—means that Kant’s reluctance to provide specific examples of beauty perforce means that we must turn away from the object, and focus instead upon the subjective response, even as we repair to the other to confirm the validity, even the universality, of that response. When Lacan says what he does, he is asking us to think about the fact that the other not only structures what we desire (I desire this because other people do), but it also functions as means for us to answer the question of the other’s desire (“Since I desire this object, then
other people should too. If I perform my desire in this way, then the other will desire me”). As Schopenhauer smartly shows us in *The World as Will and Representation*, the abstraction of beauty from its objects prompts a fetishization of judgment in order to disavow the inherent quality of beauty in the object itself. Although Schopenhauer readily acknowledges that Kant is more interested in the aesthetic relation between subjects and objects, his privileging of the former as judgment is finally conflated with the suitableness of natural bodies, effectively making “two heterogeneous subjects” fall under the rubric of one faculty—aesthetic judgment (*Volume 1, Appendix*, 531).

Let me then turn back to the problem of Camp and how it might begin to work through some of these gaps or inconsistencies. If aesthetic judgments are expected to occupy the space between that which is agreeable (or not) and that which is empirically or cognitively so (what Kant calls the good), then the liminality of judgment implies that we should focus more properly not on the abstract experience of beauty, nor on the inherent qualities of the object, but more forcefully on the aesthetic relationship between subject and object. This shift in focus brings me back to Camp. A problem which arises in Camp scholarship—from Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” forward—is the ongoing debate about the location of Camp—does it reside in the object, or in the judgment of the subject? Sontag largely holds to the view that Camp is a sensibility which inheres in the Camp subject; indeed, the Camp object, in her view, must be naïve, entirely innocent of its Campiness in order for its effect to be unsullied by knowingness. She tries to work with this juxtaposition of tenets in mind:

Not only is there a Camp vision, a Camp way of looking at things. Camp is as well a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons. There are “campy” movies, clothes, furniture, popular songs, novels, people, buildings . . . This distinction is important. True, the Camp eye has the power to transform experience. But not everything can be seen as Camp. It’s not *all* in the eye of the beholder. (Note 3)

And:

One must distinguish between naïve and deliberate Camp. Pure Camp is always naïve. Camp which knows itself to be Camp (“camping”) is usually less satisfying. (Note 18)

Conceptually, what Sontag asks us to hold in a kind of tension is that Camp is both a question of perception and a quality which inheres in objects. On the one hand, there is an agreement between the Camp object and the Camp subject (the logic of “it takes one to know one”)—for example, we could remember that Tallulah Bankhead played a queen reciting a 5,000 word speech in Jean Cocteau’s *The Eagle Has Two Heads*—one wag would call it *The Eagle Has Two Headaches*; on the other hand, there is a

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Camp sensibility which divines Camp in objects which would otherwise be innocent of it (or, if you prefer, finds “simply divine”). One could invoke the phenomenon of “Sing-Along-Sound-of-Music”: the crowd is neatly divided between those people who love the family wholesomeness of the film and its score, and the crowd who is there to Camp up the experience of the film they love—one encounters Leather Nuns, rather dissipated Marias in Drag, and the like. But there is a third hand; Camp objects may miss being judged as such by particular subjects; and it is here that the trouble begins. Because of the ideology of Taste, and the policing of bourgeois values it demands, Camp can seem, to the uninitiated, like a witty joke has been made with the sole purpose of going over some people’s heads—of mocking those who are not in on the joke. Indeed Camp can provoke an, at times, almost hysterical response: “What is this thing called Camp? What is it? Is it this? Is it that? What about that over there? What is it? What does it want? Does it know when we’re sleeping? When we’re awake? When we’re beautiful or good, or should we be good for beauty’s sake?” My take on this kind of hectic questioning is that it is not produced by Camp per se, but by a relation to Camp that is shaped by the ideology of Taste. The development of an aesthetic sensibility, at least, in Modernity, is often marked by elasticity; in broad terms, modern art and culture has made it possible to find beauty in things that would have otherwise been classed as ugly, vulgar, dense, and grotesque, even as one can continue to engage with the beauty, elegance, and fineness of objects that would generally have the stamp of Taste upon them.

The hysteria, even paranoia that is prompted by wondering about where Camp resides casts a different light on the problem of Kant’s truncating desire from judgment; the imperative of the “ought” which structures Taste does not attend to the ways in which we treat aesthetic objects as having desire. Another way of talking about art’s relation to desire is to say that art is the staging of our desire; it is a process of unconscious engagement with objects, with people in the world. The question thus shifts away from where is Camp located and moves towards a longing for knowledge—not just any knowledge, but one whose function is to answer the question of Camp’s desire: What does Camp want? What does it want from us? Are we meant to laugh? Cry? Does it want to be beaten? Mocked? Dismissed? But as I have suggested above, these questions do not surface for Camp alone; indeed, it is one of the dimensions of art in Modernity—there is persistently—from Impressionism to Damien Hirst, from Symbolism to Jeff Koons—a sense in which art is engaged in deception, in playing a joke on the wide public, that it perforce excludes as much as it explores the limits of representation. We have all felt, at moments, disturbed, or perhaps witnessed someone else’s rage or anxiety over an artwork. This phenomenon bears some analysis; surely this reaction is as old as Modernism itself—people expressing contempt and suspicion over such painters as Cézanne, Degas, Whistler, Van Gogh—painters whom we
now deem to be “friends,” not paint-pot flinging enemies. We somehow accept this kind of response as “natural,” but what if we narrate it a little differently? “You know, I saw this piece of art today, and I just got this feeling, you know? It made me so mad. I mean, it was like it was looking at me, but it was the way it was looking at me—you know what I mean?” What is fascinating to me is that we have developed any number of aesthetic theories, any number of critical methodologies to assess, justify, canonize, and commodify Art which of course has given them a kind of legitimacy—in art markets, in museums, and in the academy—but Camp remains an outlier. It has received some scholarly attention in terms of Queer Studies, largely in the 1990s, but it has remained largely (though not completely) moribund ever since. Why is this? Well, I think there are two reasons: the first revolves upon identity politics, and the second upon intellectual snobbery. More specifically, Camp was invoked as a means of thinking about queer identities, but became quickly absorbed into identity politics. As a result, Camp was figured as a haven for difference, but its very historicity quickly prompted dismissal, even scorn—a scorn borne out of a conflation of a particular kind of Camping with gay self-loathing. Camp was shunted aside tout court for failing to provide a “positive identity” for gay men. Of course, another way of looking at it is say that if Camp (which cannot be reduced to sexual or gender performance or practice) offered men other ways of performing desire, or performing gender, then those avenues have been largely shut down by the ideological demand that gay men be “straight looking/acting. No campers need apply,” etc. However, the lateral policing of gay masculinity by performing masculine straightness obviously raises its own political problems. It reinforces the binary that straight masculinity is correct and desirable, whereas any other performance of it is not.

On one level, one can understand how Camp could be identified with another era in queer history—when shame, guilt, self-loathing, self-mockery, and the continuing threat of violence were/are very real; the image of the drag queen in the illegal bar sending up his own desire while dressed as Marlene Dietrich or Bette Davis can appear retrograde and hysterical, rather than politically resistant. The problem however is not merely that we run the risk of conflating a moment in Camp’s history absolutely with a moment in queer history—it is to miss the greater point—Camp fails to be a “useful or positive role model” for queer identity precisely because Camp is the enemy of identity; it is the enemy of utility. Camp is not about identity thinking, to put it in Adornian terms; rather, Camp is a species of non-identity. This contention brings me back to the second reason why Camp Studies has fallen moribund: intellectual snobbery. I will put it bluntly: when Beckett meditates upon nothingness, it generates thousands of books and articles; if we think about Deleuze and surfaces, it yields the same; yet if we were asked to think about the nothingness or superficiality of Camp, we fall into uncomfortable silence. Suddenly, the phalanx

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of theoretical methodologies we would happily deploy on objects is dropped, and we make a few noises about Camp’s being funny, or silly, or having something to do with “so bad they’re good” films, and that would be that. My question is: why? That is the intellectual challenge I have set for myself—can I talk about Camp with the same theoretical acumen that an Adorno scholar would to talk about Beckett, or Joyce? Or a Deleuze scholar to talk about Woolf or Roberto Bolaño?

In other words, there is a scotoma, a blind spot about Camp that requires our attention. If we turn back to Kant, we can say that if his critique of judgment has a blind spot, it is perhaps Camp which occupies it. If Kant preferred to focus on judgment to the relative exclusion of the object, he nevertheless did acknowledge that aesthetic judgment is structured by a relation to the art object, and that judgment does not reside exclusively in the eye of the beholder. I want to bring this less considered element of Kant’s third critique into the discussion; one of the reasons why I insist upon the inclusion of desire in any discussion of Camp aesthetics is not to differentiate its failure in contrast to the success of Kant’s claim to subjective universalism; rather, the reason is to show that if Kant tried to dissociate art from the power of desire in making a distinction between formal Beauty and natural Sublimity, it was done, as Adorno admits, not without good reason: Kant is trying to free art from our need to molest, grasp, or touch it—it is with the purpose of placing art in the sphere of aesthetics divorced from the empirical (Aesthetic Theory 10). But, if a psychoanalytic reading of art, or more specifically a Freudian reading of it attempts to make art, according to Adorno, “little more than plenipoten tiaries of sensual impulses, which they at best make unrecognizable through a sort of dreamwork” (11), it would seem to contradict Kant—but, and this is important—desire becomes the vanishing mediator which determines their positions: one negative and the other positive. Another way of thinking about it is to say that the negative dimension of the object, the sparkling antagonism that it houses is utterly effaced in the Kantian aesthetic of beauty; as Adorno phrases it, “For Kant, aesthetics becomes paradoxically a castrated hedonism, desire without desire” (11).

If one approaches Camp in this way, one can quickly see why one would have little or nothing to say about it: 1) because one of the persistent elements of Camp is that it troubles our relation to objects, such that terms like agreeable, beautiful, and good would simply fail to register in any sustained way when discussing a Camp relation to the object, and the affects generated by it; and 2) because there is a non-identical element of Camp, a kind of antagonism, which cannot be calmed down by repairing a sensus communis. Why? Because the “ought” cannot account for some people’s wilful engagement with Camp—except through dismissal, except as a failure of Taste. The spirit of the Camp relation is founded upon contradiction, upon antagonism—an antagonism which inheres in the object, and awaits discovery—
even enjoyment—through relation. In its theatricality, Camp identifies with the production of the beautiful and sublime, not merely with its discrimination. This is one of the reasons why a Camp sensibility is so fascinated by its history; for Camp, history becomes histrionic, it sees the struggle for the production of beauty and sublimity as part and parcel of its spirit. For example, this is one of the reasons why so many musicals are self-reflexive about themselves as vehicles of production—musicals do not simply “put on a show”; they put on a show about putting on a show. Moreover, Camp is just as captivated the gaze as so-called “serious” art—by the anamorphosis lurking in art—a gaze which signals the presence of death, of negativity, of decay. Camp recognizes that decay and death are also forms of progress, of production; this is why Camp has so many moods—melancholic, tragic, and comic.

But let us consider the latter two moods for a moment: how do tragedy and comedy intersect in Camp? Strangely, Sontag claims that “Camp and tragedy are antitheses” (115). In penning this aphorism, she obviously expects us to bristle slightly, and stammer “But, Ms. Sontag, are not comedy and tragedy antitheses?”, which would, were she still with us, result in yet another sotto voce screed on her part about the innate stupidity of academics. But I will remain steadfast in my resolve to argue with Sontag’s witticism, by suggesting that Alenka Zupančič’s reading of comedy and tragedy remains convincing. Zupančič contends that, while tragedy stages the incorporation of the sublime, its transformation into accessible immanence by the heroine, comedy has a different operation. Comedy stages a failed attempt to incorporate the sublime into an object; it appears, it seems accessible, but, unlike tragedy, retains its transcendental feature. In this way, comedy exists as a remainder that reveals the nonsensical, but crucial difference between two apparently similar objects (Shortest Shadow 170-73). As I have argued elsewhere, the important variation that Camp offers is that, unlike tragedy, which makes the Thing accessible and immanent in the dazzling, aloof figure of the tragic heroine, and unlike comedy, which makes the Thing accessible and transcendent in the complex play of appearances, Camp’s encounters with the Thing make it inaccessible and immanent at the same time. That is to say, the transcendental feature of the Thing is made immanent in the camp object or figure as appearance, but as an encounter with sublime knowledge, it remains absurdly and painfully inaccessible. In this case, it is as if a Camp figure or object has heard it has an appointment with tragedy, which it slavishly tries to keep, but is continually waylaid by tragedy’s weird sister, comedy. Again, it would seem that the camp object moves toward the splendour of incorporating the Real, but only succeeds in making it immanent to us in the form of an uncanny double of both tragedy and comedy. But what is important to remember about this appointment with the Real is that it is not predicated upon the desire of the camp figure; it is a desire and assumption that arise in the spectator. Camp does not reverse our
expectations—it calls our expectations into question. It is the supplement or remainder of comedy and tragedy, not their reversal. In this respect, Sontag is quite right when she avers that “Camp doesn’t reverse things. It doesn’t argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different—a supplementary—set of standards” (Susan Sontag Reader 114).

Instead, Camp holds tragedy and comedy in a paradoxical, yet delicate, balance; the impatience that often manifests itself with a camp object (or with the camp sensibility) is that Camp does not fail, but positively refuses to be either tragedy or comedy. But if Camp’s opposite number is not tragedy, what is it? Significantly, Walter Benjamin wonders about another antithesis in The Arcades Project: “We are bored when we do not know what we are waiting for. That we do know, or think we know, are nearly always the expressions of our superficiality or inattention. Boredom is the threshold to great deeds.—Now, it would be important to know: what is the dialectical antithesis to boredom?” (105). By way of an answer, let us put him in conversation with Sontag. The camp-dandy’s appreciation of vulgarity is “goaded on, in the last analysis, by the threat of boredom. The relation between boredom and Camp taste cannot be overestimated” (117). If Camp has an antithesis, it is not tragedy: it is boredom. The camp sensibility keeps boredom at bay by crossing the threshold, going up to the lintel that is “simply sublime,” and revealing its desire by working furiously and frivolously to see it. Camp refuses to be seduced by the blandishments of boredom, by tedium’s reassuring inferiority to our desire.

This point brings me back to the other element which determines Kantian Taste: the universal. If Taste is the subjective universal, then what kind of universal are we talking about? Obviously the subjective cannot determine the universal, since it is, in effect, a product of it. In the case of Kant, the notion that the beautiful and sublime somehow appear in the gap between the agreeable and the good neglects to consider the gap that makes different relationships to the beautiful and sublime possible. Kant’s subjective universal, in order to sustain itself, makes every judgment essentially tragic; that is to say, the tedium of his model of judgment relies upon a way of thinking about the subject’s perception such that it stages the performance of the universal—the subject’s aesthetic judgment emerges from performing or declaring its judgments the “embodied essence” of the universal, of its incorporation, in precisely the same way Hegel would describe the tragic hero or heroine. In sum, Kant’s model of judgment is, to my mind, essentially a tragic one—it speaks of a universe of “ought” that is meant to hold as Taste, even as it fails to account for a subjective relationship to the universal that cannot readily be dismissed as simply agreeable—the comic and the Campy. I of course will focus on the latter. If comedy is, as Alenka Zupančič argues in The Odd One In, “the universal at work” (27), what she means is that, unlike tragedy, which stages the incorporation of the universal, the comic subject becomes the universal; it is not the alienation of the
subject from the universal, but the alienation of
the universal into subjectivity. Camp operates in
a different register; Camp does not perform the
universal, nor is it the disintegration of the uni-
versal into the subject—instead, Camp opens up
the anxiety, the laughter, the bathos of shame—
the failure to perform the becoming subjective
of the universal.

By way of example, let us consider Ronald
Firbank's *Vainglory*, which offers an “entrancing
variation” on Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
In this Camp novel, Mrs. Shamefoot longs to see
her image reproduced in stained glass at the lo-
cal cathedral. In aesthetic terms, she wants to be
canonized by a glazier. She is engaged, in other
words, in the aestheticization of the pontifical.
Curiously, this identification with the aesthetic
object is so strong as to have produced an onto-
logical shift, for “Mentally, perhaps, she was al-
ready three parts glass” (*Three More Novels* 20).
If she “is” three-quarters glass, the remaining
quarter for shame resides, as her name happily
tells us, in her feet; she is caught between being
and becoming. The barrier between her being
and the object, or, more precisely, between her
being and the enjoyment of the object, has been
slowly overtaken by fantasies of immobility
and penetration:

So intense was her desire to set up a com-
memorative window to herself that, when
it was erected, she believed she must leave
behind in it, for ever, a little ghost. And
should this be so, then what joy to be pierced
each morning with light; her body flooded
through and through by the sun, or in the
evening to glow with a harvest of dark
colours . . . What ecstasy! (20)

The immobility of being is here figured as an
apotheosis of freedom that is to be achieved
by becoming a camp object. Mrs. Shamefoot’s
shameless fantasy, to burn only sometimes
“with this hard gem-like flame,” is a parody of
what Slavoj Žižek, in his reading of Schelling,
thorizes as the predestined unconscious act
that charts the relation of the subject’s eternal
being through the ongoing temporal process
of becoming (*Indivisible Remainder* 18-19). In
becoming a camp object, she is, paradoxically,
becoming what she always-already was. In ef-
fect, Mrs. Shamefoot is not vain in the usual
sense; rather she follows trippingly down a
predestined path of enjoyment which her spirit
(the “little ghost” in the window) has already
mapped—an eternal site of daily, blinding jou-
issence. However, the “fact” remains that she is
(at least!) one-quarter human, and that she has
not yet reached the goal set out for her by her
predestined relation to history. The reason per-
haps lies in the shame that still fetters her foot
and spirit to the ground. As Žižek’s theorization
of Schelling contends, the course of freedom is
structured by an antagonistic, yet complemen-
tary, relation between spirit and ground. Spirit,
which determines itself in opposition to ground,
must nevertheless rely upon this very opposi-
tion to produce a fantasy of identity. Once iden-
tity has been conceived as a distinct “being”
from ground, the possibility appears that spirit

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might, through self-conscious fashioning, “rise above” the ground by breaking with the chains of causality (20).

But, of course, the absurdity of her desire is frustrated for the sake of Camp—for her failure to perform universal becoming subject. If she is already becoming a walking stained-glass window, then her spirit has been rendered immanent, yet the ultimate union of glass and spirit is deferred by an intervention from the Real. Although her plan encounters much opposition from the townspeople, Mrs. Shamefoot’s desire is made radically inaccessible; the cathedral is suddenly half-demolished when struck by lightning. The blinding enjoyment comes, but in a radically different form. She must content herself not with being a window, but sitting in one, watching, “in the early dawn, perhaps, when it rains, and the whole world seems so melancholy and desolate and personal and quite intensely sad—and life an utter hoax—” (199). In her bathetic hypotaxis, she must confront, in its temporal links, the causal chain of shame that, in its gravity, continues to weigh her foot to the ground. The lightning, which imposes a limit to her enjoyment, renders her ascent into a sublime object ridiculously anticlimactic. Yet it also opens up the space for the camp reader’s enjoyment of her resolve to accept bravely that her life is not a destiny, that her life is neither the incorporation of the universal, which would have the dignity of tragedy, nor even to be universal dissolving into subjectivity, which would have the happiness of comedy; rather, that her destiny is a Camp one—to become an unhappy, silly hoax. In reading this passage, we are tempted into responding with snorting tears of laughter, and the mirroring laughter of tears. Camp, by making the sublime immanent and yet absurdly inaccessible, does not purge us of fear and pity, but instead offers the consolation of shame as an object of desire. The shame that attends our enjoyment of Camp, the fact that we often mistakenly disavow it as one of our “guilty pleasures,” suggests that we implicitly recognize and turn away from the enjoyment we find in making a spectacle of ourselves. In other words, we disavow the fact that Camp opens a temporal space that makes it possible to enjoy our shame—a possibility from which we do not turn. If, as Elspeth Probyn has recently theorized, “Shame produces a somatic temporality, where the potential of again being interested is felt in the present pain of rejection” (Blush 63), then Camp holds out a means of identifying with the enjoyment of our shameful interest in the object of desire. Here, we can now return to the problematic of Camp as symptom. Camp, as a symptom of the limits of Taste, produces a temporal gap between the beautiful and the sublime by seizing upon the failed moments of aestheticism and decadence, and, as Brigid Brophy suggests in her comprehensive study of Ronald Firbank, by “pioneering backwards” (Prancing Novelist 80). Through the symptom of Camp, aestheticism and decadence return from the future to make potentially lost or rejected forms of enjoyment appear again for our consideration. Camp, in a sense, “unworks” the laws of culture that insist upon the conflation
of utility with enjoyment, of agreeableness with beauty, of disinterestedness with *sensus communis*. In the ways I have described above, Camp resists the appropriation of enjoyment by preserving the principle that “art for art’s sake” is, crucially, art for our own sakes.

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The Time of Camp, or Camp as Ruin: Vincent Chevalier, the Portrait of a Young Man as an Artist by Ricky Varghese

Precisely and intentionally because my concerns are oftentimes temporal, and, by extension, historical in tenor, this inquiry suggests a desire to understand—if at all possible—what the time of camp might be. Does camp have a temporality attached to it, to which it might be attuned? Does the desiring subject, a subject whose taste and desire can be quarantined off from one another, as defensively suggested by Kant in his Critique of Judgment, understand the object of camp as a necessary rupture within the context of its own historical, socio-political and psychical trajectory? Let me ask this question again—simply—what is the time of camp? And, can camp be a response—one among many others—to historical trauma, a rupture in the linear course of history as dealt upon temporality vis-à-vis the traumatic?

As such, before explicating camp’s possible capacity to act as an anything-but-furtive response to traumatic history, it might be worthwhile to contend and tarry here briefly with the very nature of history and its relationship to the traumatic. Following Hegel’s account of and accounting for history and historicity, Rebecca Comay underscores a radical descriptive urgency in how she speaks regarding the nature of abstraction—traumatic history and trauma, as such, rendered as and in the manner of abstraction—“the deadly capacity to cut into the continuum of being and bring existence to the point of unreality” (Comay 77). In what might appear to be of a similar vein, borne out of a similar sense of urgency to make and render meaning to things—objects, experiences, enactments that might be rendered as campy and desiring subjects, or subjectivity as such—it becomes useful to rehearse Walter Benjamin’s now-famous line from his The Origin of German Tragic Drama: “[in] the ruin, history has physically merged into the setting...in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay” (177-78). The urgency that links these two thoughts—thought-experiments, nonetheless, in the final analysis—might reside in a desire to name, nay claim, the anticipatory violence that is to come, an anticipatory violence implicit in historical time, as is the case with Freud’s conception of the uncanny,
wherein camp might motivate us as a responsive gesture set up against the aftermath of this violence that was always already expected.

The unreality of abstraction, the cutting into being, the traumatizing of being to will it (read: rupture, into a rapturous, in a manner of speaking, caesura within our experience of time) into some other sense of its own reality, assumes and presumes a violent confrontation with the future to come, l’avenir, the reality as yet to be named, claimed, or arrived at, yet always already still nonetheless deferred. In a similar sense, the ruin too is a figure of campy abstraction, perhaps the figure of campy abstraction par excellence, a figural discharge of abstraction, itself in a state of ruin, the thing, living and dying vis-à-vis the experience of trauma, here by the way of camp, against any sense of stasis because it can’t stop, it won’t stop, from moving toward decay and nullification. The compelling promise, perhaps, of Vincent Chevalier’s campy video project “So . . . when did you figure out that you had AIDS?”, a comical repurposing of a home video from the artist’s childhood, is precisely that it might offer us some manner by which to think about queer life as, in and of itself, negotiating the ever-prescient sense of a time, itself left in ruins; a time that can only, it would seem, be made sense of through the tense of the future anterior, a time that will have come to pass, some time, sometimes, at times, at a time in the future as yet to arrive. This is a time, in the sense brought forth by Chevalier’s work, that might only be dealt with through camp’s capacity for redemption from the traumatic. This time is a time of abstraction through the vehicle that camp acts as and offers because it both waits and does not wait; it tells of a futurity that in its telling has already come to pass, become past, albeit in a manner of a foretelling. In a way, this foretelling remembers not the past per se, but the future that the past comically resuscitates, against any and all impulse to forget oneself, or of oneself, within the scene of traumatic and traumatized temporality.

The premise: in 1996, Chevalier, at the age of 13, donning a bright blond wig, shoots a home video, which at first sight appears to be an instance of child’s play. He shoots this, along with friends, sisters Kelsey and Chelsey Winchester, wherein it appears to stage a scene set within a talk show. Within this scene, Kelsey plays the role of the talk show host, Chelsey is behind the camera, and Chevalier, himself, plays the role of a man diagnosed with AIDS, having contracted it from his wife. At once both profoundly grave, for the severity of the subject matter that finds itself the ground upon which the video is made—AIDS—and simultaneously comical, for the affects produced by Chevalier and his co-conspirators, the video almost surreptitiously rehearses the by now well-known Žižekian dictum on how to imagine and conceive of political life in the public sphere amidst a time of seemingly otherwise impenetrable crisis—first as tragedy, then as farce. Six years later, at the age of 19, Chevalier—whose artistic oeuvre, if one were to conduct a rigorous survey of it,
presently denotes and connotes radically potent approaches to thinking life, death, and politics under the sign of AIDS—tests positive, and it will still be, then, several years later, in 2010, when he reformats and stages what at its core still bears the semblance of childhood theatricality, fashions it into what I read as a campy biography of and for a future inscribed in and by a now-distant past.

Against the turn toward at times vulgar nostalgia that has reached fever pitch in recent times regarding the revival of (read: remembrance) the history of queer life for younger, perhaps more impressionable, and more contemporary members of the queer community, that attempts to revive memory itself, a memory one cannot easily claim for oneself, in and through the gesture of romanticizing and even fetishizing the bygone days of the gay liberation movement, also mired and deeply affected by the deaths of so many men, one might read in this repurposing of the video not nostalgia but a campy, utterly non-bourgeois and thus non-libratory, gesture at a memory that anticipates the future by claiming the future as antecedent to life in the past itself. In this sense, it both names and lays claim to the future from the past it attempts to unfold, address, and revive as a foretelling of the future to come. Also, it might bequeath us to simultaneously, as well, read in this project a profound critique—a critique already implicit in camp's capacity to laugh at its own self, to not take itself too seriously precisely and intentionally because of the seriousness that is always already implicit in life, as such—of any discourse that claims to situate and couple fantasies of presumed childhood innocence with the impulse toward nostalgia. Chevalier and his friends are anything but innocent bystanders to historical time or temporality; rather, in the strictest Heideggerian sense of being “thrown,” the video showcases what it means to be thrown into the midst of a historical time and into a world traumatized—cracked open, ruptured to produce a caesura in any presumed and assumed linear order of time—by the history of AIDS, that which both sits amidst and alongside it.

Moving away from and beyond attributing trauma with either a positive or negative value—though knowing fully well that moral life often falls prey to this presumably inevitable folly of deeming and speculating judgment and taste to affective life—is this precisely not what it, the traumatizing of history or, more succinctly put, traumatized temporality, is? As such, as Comay suggests, trauma is where—in “the linear order of time is thrown out of

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sequence” (25). Trauma, here a deeply psychoanalytic term, is not, and never has been, an easily describable thing, if a “thing” at all, because “to be traumatized” as such is not subjectivity as being described by external characteristics or determinants (i.e. the person “looks” traumatized or that situation “appears” traumatic)—it is not in a look or a perceivable visible affect, though there are ways in which it can manifest or appear as such in a “look” per se. It evades and eludes being touched. Rather, it is more akin to a shift in our self-perception that coincides, falls alongside, a shift in how we experience time, the temporality of the traumatic event—history, as such—that cannot be easily named. So quite unlike Ryan Murphy—who restaged Larry Kramer’s 1985 The Normal Heart, narrativizing the early days of the AIDS crisis, in the form of a made-for-television film in 2014—who claimed, regarding this restaging, “the actors were so emotional. The tears were flowing from the very first take, because the pain of the material and the ghosts of all the people who had died were so intense. People were very reverential. Everybody cried every day of that movie” (Ausiello), it would appear that Chevalier’s project’s intentionality is radically and altogether different. Unlike Murphy, whose attempt, it would seem, was to depict the traumatic Real of the AIDS crisis—the pain, the intensity, the reverential attachment to and investment in historical details, the ghosts and their hauntings—Chevalier’s desire appears to be one wanting to merely approach the traumatic history, an autobiography at that, via a campy gesture that only barely grazes the surface of that Real. Unlike Murphy’s penchant for an all too effusive and seeming realism that still does not even come close to the Real of trauma despite appearances, Chevalier approaches the experience of that traumatic history vis-à-vis a return to a childhood that assumes—and never forgets—that this history has always already been a part of him, inextricably tied to his and, by extension, our identities. He achieves this through a child’s play, not so much to return to a time of innocence but to undergird that presumed innocence with a different sense, a sense that is aware of the impossibility of touching the traumatic. Laughter is not just the best medicine in this scenario—it might not even be a medicine, as such—it, more significantly perhaps, becomes the diagnostic tool for recognizing the rupture in historical time; here, a rupture signified by AIDS itself.

And what of anticipation in this scene that happens upon the traumatic via the campy? Or, rather, what is anticipated in the video that becomes the future past, in the future to come? And, how might we imagine memory and self-perception within the gestural openings made possible by such a project that privileges the campy—again what is “traumatic” regresses into the scene of appearance—against the easy fall into the realm of nostalgia? Fundamentally, the question, as well, might be one of redemption—what might be redeemed or recuperated from trauma, when time, historical time, shifts, is forced out of step with itself, when it becomes the future past it had already come to
anticipate, wherein the rupture in time is constitutive of how we remember the future simultaneously as we remember the past as well and when this recuperation, this redemption, is mediated via the playing out of a campy gesture addressing what is profoundly a grave history. All this abstraction might cut into the very way in which we think being, queer being, life and death, living and dying, in the scene of AIDS, and consider memory—and not just nostalgia driven by market forces or bourgeois investments in a linear historicity—as constitutive of how we think of that being, here a being thrown into the fray of a ruptured temporality, ruptured precisely because AIDS, as William Haver once suggested, “is, for consciousness and for thought, a necessarily impossible object” (1). This impossibility is an impossibility to take seriously precisely because as Haver continues, “AIDS is radically unthinkable, resisting objectification, interpretation, the understanding, meaning, and the aspiration to transcendental subjectivity absolutely” (1). Even the present-day fall into nostalgia, as suggested by gestures such as the one made by Murphy, presumes an easy explication on how to relate to AIDS, to name it and to claim it as one’s own, as part of one’s own personal or historical trajectory. What Chevalier’s video project does, contra to this fall into nostalgia, is that it stages a relationship to AIDS that is profoundly ephemeral and intentionally so for its own keen self-awareness of how AIDS, as much as it is riveted to the claims of lived experience within discourses regarding health, illness, wellness, treatment, and cure, is also a relationship to time, a relationship to how time, time itself, given over to its own unsettling, and trauma might be intrinsically tied to one another in what we remember of the disparate nature of living under and within the sign of AIDS. The “impossibility” to think the object of AIDS is precisely staged in the way by which much of the repurposing of the video, years later after Chevalier himself tests positive, relies on the very abstract nature of a future as yet to be realized, but simultaneously living, time already coming to ruin within the past that is played out within the scene itself. AIDS as an “impossible object,” as an abstraction that cuts into being, exists most profoundly within such a staging of a temporal disjuncture; it exists simultaneously as both lived experience and beyond it as an unnamable force, a sign always to live within and under and already present in the past that anticipates the future. It exists precisely in the tear in time, and in how this time might be remembered heretofore, simultaneously as we laugh at a couple of children play-acting questions regarding mortality in a home video.

What remains? Memory—in how it might be remembered both as a past and as a future yet to still be named and claimed. A detour, of sorts, might be worthwhile to explore. In the now classic tale of memory and remembrance of traumatic ruptures that both inform and is informed by historical time, penned by Marguerite Duras and filmed by Alain Resnais, the 1959 film Hiroshima mon amour, the character of the French woman, only known within the confines of her common name “French
woman” proposes an uncanny, again in the Freudian sense, experience with memory and remembrance that “forgetting will begin with our eyes” (Hiroshima mon amour). Using this notion that radically stages and privileges, perhaps necessarily so, a scopic fidelity to how we choose to remember, forget, and live with the past—perhaps, in the scene of campy theatricality, in the scene of a laughter that cannot be helped, but that cannot as well be taken seriously—it becomes imperative to think through the temporality of the gesture of looking at historical memory, in how queer subjectivities always already live in the time of a future anteriority, and how AIDS as sign and signifier, as both lived experience and as campy abstraction, both one and the same in the same instance, both the subject and object of the look at history and what ruptures it, has written for us a biography of and for the future, a memory of the future to come. The uncanny tendency, here, of restaging that “species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud 124) speaks as much about perceived and perceivable lived experience as it does about time, a turn, or rather, a return, to(ward) a time, not so much in the vein of a nostalgia that arouses merely the sensual in and of taste, judgment, and discourse, but in the name of a time in which living, dying, and laughing are historicized and simultaneously anticipated.

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“Pop/Corn”
An Interview with Dr. Laura Penny, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Kanye
by Jaime R. Brenes Reyes and Jamie Rooney

Dr. Laura Penny teaches legions of students eager to demystify society and its contents. Currently a “contract-mode” (post-adjunct, pre-tenure-track) assistant professor in Contemporary and Early Modern Studies at The University of King’s College in Halifax, she publishes columns for major newspapers such as the Globe and Mail and the National Post and has written two books: Your Call is Important to Us: The Truth About Bullshit (2005) and More Money Than Brains: Why School Sucks, College is Crap, and Idiots Think They’re Right (2010). Her work reminds us that, despite sustained attacks from every front, the arts and humanities are here to stay.

In mid-November 2013, Penny, an alumna of the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism, returned to Western under the auspices of The Society of Graduate Students to deliver her conversational lecture: “Full Fees and Empty Pockets.” Penny noted the post-1996 additions to the Western campus, especially the new Richard Ivey School of Business; as detailed below, she has proposed an initiative to “burn down all the business schools and salt the ashes so no more MBA-lings could spring up from the ruins” (More Money Than Brains 124). During her sojourn in London, Ontario, Penny kindly allowed us (Jaime and Jamie) to interview her on behalf of The Public Humanities @ Western. The Public Humanities aims to address common problems as well as opportunities that arise between the campus and community, thereby cultivating a renewed spirit of citizenship through arts and humanities. Penny is also a major contributor to Halifax Humanities 101, a program that teaches the liberal arts, opening the way for “disadvantaged people to begin to participate in the life of the community, to engage in the political life in the widest sense.” As Penny discusses in the lines below, the anti-elitist, contra-classist mission of the Halifax Humanities 101 centres on offering an accessible liberal arts education to those who are “outside” the traditional university orbit.

As a self-described “hood-rich” assistant professor (raised “prole,” currently living on a bourgeois income), Penny is perfectly poised to address our questions on the complex interrelations between Kanye West (pop culture), the stock market (anti-intellectual corporate values), and bullshit (the challenges facing
academia). In this interview, Penny elaborates on what she would alter/amend if she were crowned Queen of Pop Culture. From the pop to the cultural, Penny adds critical theory to the mixture without leaving behind the trendy and smarty.

Her office door brandishes quotes from Montaigne, Nietzsche, Deleuze, and of course—Kanye West. These intertexts are to hedge fund managers as garlic cloves are to vampires (she also teaches a course on vampires at King’s). Kanye’s entranceway quote is “the greatest tragedy of my life is that I will never get to see myself perform live.” If the Dionysian and Apollonian birthed tragedy, Kanye is the baby-daddy of its rebirth. (Penny might smile that “baby-daddy” is in the OED.) As Penny argues below, Kanye belongs in the academy; Homer belongs to the masses. But, beyond popularizing “high art” or legitimizing the scholastic critique of “low art,” Penny is annihilating the distance between art’s highbrow, lowbrow, and no-brow. There is no brow that is safe from her—she’s interrogating or furrowing them all, one by one. For that reason, it’s a great tragedy that she will never get to interview herself.

Jaime R. Brenes Reyes and Jamie Rooney: Is there “bullshit”—to use your term—in the liberal arts?

Laura Penny: No, I actually think there’s a lot more bullshit in other more explicitly careerist departments. At least in the liberal arts most of us now are fairly frank about the fact that this may not qualify you for a job, and you may have to do other things as well. The idea of greater bullshit is that everyone should be an engineer, or that everyone should be a commerce student. And, if anything, I actually think that we [in the liberal arts] get a hard time for not being rigorous, which I don’t think is fair; other more careerist disciplines are a lot less rigorous than we are.

JBR/JR: In The Star’s synopsis of your book, More Money than Brains, they say that, “Today’s emphasis on training, money, and jobs means the real purpose of higher learning—critical thinking and literacy—has been lost to the corporate agenda” (Robertson). At Western University, many professors argue for the maintenance of civic values “in the face of intense pressure to capitulate to corporate logic” (Alison Conway, qtd. in Samu-Visser and Budabin McQuown 67). Within the university, when are these civic values at odds with corporate values?

LP: I’m not wholly compelled by the argument that civic values are a given, because it makes us sound like missionaries. And, I don’t think that kind of missionary position—to be puckish—is necessarily a winning argument or that it’s necessarily true. As for the corporate values, the big problem is that corporate values tend to be values of short-term expedience. Temporality as we know it has been telescoped to the next fiscal quarter or, politically, the next election. So, actually the thing I like about the liberal arts and that I think is valuable about the liberal arts is the “long-term.” Making kids read the Greeks,
the Romans—get acquainted with the Middle Ages, get acquainted with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment—gives them a sense of just how short-term our values are. That’s the actual value of the liberal arts—seeing how many times we’ve made civilizations and destroyed them is a good way to realize that what’s happening is contingent, is provisional, that this is not the only way to live and this is not the only way people have organized themselves.

The empathy argument and the citizenship argument, both of which are kind of moralizing, would also disclude a lot of our syllabi. If you’re going to follow Martha Nussbaum’s argument—“The humanities are important because they teach us to be good citizens”—well then why are you getting your kids to read the Marquis de Sade? I would have to change my syllabus a lot if that was the goal of the liberal arts. So, it’s more again a sense of the long term rather than the short term; the corporate agenda at the university has to do with fulfilling our short term needs in a way that is going to be ultimately self-defeating.

JBR/JR: I wanted to know about your own experience at Western, because the Western motto is to provide the best student experience in Canada. And, they want to be global . . .

LP: Best student experience in the world! Suck on that U of T!

JBR/JR: What do you think Western means by experience here?

LP: This is something that has everything to do with the growth of administration, with the—I would say—cancerous growth of administration at every university. I do think that emphasis on experience is something that comes from administration, and it usually means buildings and services. It never means instruction; it never means we’re going to pay people lots of money to teach you. It never means how little they’re willing to pay to teach people even though this is what they always talk about on the website. They don’t talk about the fancy dorms on the website; they talk about “how committed our teachers are, [and] how much they love teaching you.” So, experience is just a code word for aspects of university life that are not scholastic. This is the kind of thing that administrators think of when they think of experience—basically the experience of everything peripheral to learning.

JBR/JR: In your 1998 MA thesis in Critical Theory, “Spent: On Economic Metaphor in Post-Structuralist Philosophy,” you propose a demystification of “the economic” as “the first step towards revoking its dangerous deification” (7). In Canada, have the economic and business elements of universities taken on a sacred status, making them beyond legitimate critique and judgement?

LP: Economic language is essentially for us what the Catholic Church would have been for the Middle Ages. It’s the main type of interpretative mode; it’s the thing to which all things must appeal. I do think it demands demystifying because, on one hand, it does have this power and authority precisely because it doesn’t make much sense to people. In a lot of ways the

“Pop/Corn”
right market fundamentalists are much better postmodernists than any liberal arts person: all market values are absolutely relative; a lot of them are fundamentally simulacral. So, my basic argument in More Money Than Brains is that a lot of things that people say about the liberal arts are actually much more applicable to the financial class which, like the administrative class in the university, has grown precipitously and has gone from being managerial to being a parasite that’s eating its host.

**JBR/JR:** Tenured faculty appear as a figure we need to demystify, at least to the public. At the same time, adjunct faculty is on the rise; people don’t know about the percentages, but at the same time student satisfaction is not going down. So, what the hell is happening?

**LP:** One of the things that I’ve found repeatedly is that there is this assumption that everyone who works in a university makes 100 Grand. People read “sunshine lists,” they see professors on them, and they just assume that if you’re a professor, you are making good money. I find people are consistently shocked [about] the actual situation of adjuncts, it’s the best kept secret in education. Again, no university website ever sells anything to parents and students but high quality teaching. I’m sure if I looked at Western’s website right now, they would be like: “Our teachers are the best, they care so much, blah, blah, blah.” But, increasingly, because most tenured faculty are hired on the stats based on their research more so than their teaching, increasingly those functions of the university that the general public thinks of as being the primary functions of the university are falling to adjuncts, grad students: the underpaid.

I’d say here is that if you look at things like the dialogue on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), that there is, on the one hand, they want the university experience to be more boutique-esque, to compete with MOOCs, but on the other hand, the actual job of dealing with undergrads is not one that the university values as much as it should. When I started telling people how much money I made, they were shocked: A) They were shocked that I would tell them, because it’s Canada—you can talk about your colonoscopy, you can talk about your sex life, you can’t talk about how much money you make, which only benefits the wealthy, and only makes people blame themselves for structural problems and for wage erosion; B) They were shocked at how little money I made. I do think there is this culture of wanting to blame individuals for structural problems, and we at the university don’t seem to be doing a better job of dodging that than the rest of the culture. Even though a lot of people here have read Karl Marx, that doesn’t seem to change the deeper situation.

**JBR/JR:** As a follow-up question, your dissertation proposes the demystification of “the economic” as “the first step towards revoking its dangerous deification” (7). More recently in your book, More Money than Brains, and in interviews, you have proposed an initiative to “burn down all the business schools and salt the ashes so no more MBA-lings could spring
up from the ruins” (124). Are the kernels of your books and works found in your MA and PhD work?

LP: The reason I wrote that MA thesis was I was really struck by the fact that after May 1968 did not work out as people like Deleuze—my hero—had hoped, that immediately you have Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze, and Guattari, all writing these books with these sustained economic metaphors. So, why is it that that’s the language that they choose to talk about this “Why do revolutions fail?” problem—which is still a huge problem. I’m very lucky; my campus at King’s is actually pretty political. We have the lowest rate of student debt in Nova Scotia, because we do get a lot of affluent students from Toronto. But, we also have the highest turn-out for things like tuition protests, because even if students aren’t in debt, they see this as a real problem, they see this as an intergenerational inequality, which is a huge issue, which is what I’m writing about in my next book.

I’ve been interested in economics for a long time just because I think that again, this is kind of our primary way of assigning value to things. I’m definitely on “Team Nietzsche”; we’re compulsive value assignors, that we cannot but interpret things, that we cannot but make meaning all the time, wherever we go. And, it’s curious that this is the system that we’ve chosen to be the big system, the one that all the other systems have to account for and answer to, ultimately. So, I can do a good job of making arguments about the liberal arts from an economic perspective, that culture is a multi-billion dollar industry, that I’m pretty sure J.K. Rowling doesn’t regret her liberal arts degree. I can do that and I’m happy to do that because that’s one of the flanks that we have to defend ourselves on, but I also think that we should be asking why this is the system through which we interpret everything. When people talk about the ‘real world,’ what they generally mean by that is the economy, but so much of the economy is purely notional and purely emotional, that even Keynes wrote about the animal spirits, that things are valuable because we think they’re valuable, things are valuable because we feel they’re valuable. So, I always find it really strange when people say, “That won’t work in the real world,” when they mean an economy that is so fabulated in so many ways.

JBR/JR: From the marginal perspective of the liberal arts, should we take a kind of “guerilla” tactic or should we just ignore what the critics say?

LP: Ignoring is never good, especially when they have so much of the mainstream press in their clutches. You can make the argument that in fact a liberal arts degree is not a life sentence to “baristadom,” and what’s more is that this is a totally post hoc ergo propter hoc argument—problems with youth unemployment are structural problems with the labour market, structural problems of intergenerational inequality—to come along and be like, “Cus you like English that’s why you can’t get a good job.” First of all, that’s again reducing a structural problem to an individual choice. Second of all, it’s also just not
empirically true. If you look at the history here, people in the humanities generally have a couple of rough years when they first get out of school where they have to find a career, because they’re not as immediately legible to human resources departments as a commerce grad, or an engineering grad. But after that, their earnings catch up, and what’s even more significant is a recent study in the States: The American Academy of Arts and Sciences said that 84% of people were happy they’d done a humanities degree (3). So, I do think that you have to make the argument that kids are going to have to invent their jobs increasingly. If there’s no guaranteed prizes at the top of the greasy pole then kids are going to have to be a lot more inventive and flexible, and again this is one of the things that the liberal arts is good for.

That there is an economic value to studying the liberal arts, I think is an argument we have to make. But, also, there’s a way that it allows you to criticize the notion that economic value is the only value. This is one of the other things that you get from the “long-term” in the liberal arts: the notion that this economy that we have is just one way to put together people. Because the imagination deficit, the poverty of imagination, the fact that it’s hard to think of other ways of doing things—this is a serious problem. This is as big of a problem as fiscal deficit and political deficit. A couple of weeks ago I was teaching my homeboys Deleuze and Guattari and one of my students was like, “I’m not sure how this is political.” We were doing “The War Machine” essay and I was like, “Well, if we can’t think differently, if we can’t have different shapes of thought, and the only way we can think is hierarchically, then how are we supposed to live differently?” This is one of the reasons that I’m so madly in love with Deleuze, is because his whole career is devoted to this question of “How do we make different ways of life possible?”

JBR/JR: Your work focuses on a contemporary “campaign against intellectualism,” especially in the arts and humanities. On one side of the argument, Margaret Wente has repeatedly written articles such as “Fries with that BA? The declining value of a degree,” arguing that a BA in English is “not the wisest choice of major” and associated with widespread underemployment (1). As a counter-point, The Atlantic recently published, “The Best Argument for Studying English? The Employment Numbers.” The article uses employment survey data to demonstrate the pragmatic value of a liberal arts degree. What are the best ways/means for arguing for the legitimacy of the liberal arts within the university and a broader public intellectualism?

LP: Well, the first thing you have to do is establish that Margret Wente is an obsolete privileged boomer. I remember when I first started at the Globe, because I used to write a little bit for them, one of the things that a lot of Globe columnists would do before everybody had the Internet was just rewrite something that had been in the New York Times last week. Now that we have the Internet we don’t need her to do that anymore. She is literally obsolete. She is a
Walkman. She is an eight-track cassette tape. She’s everything I hate about that generation in one smug package. She’s a typical “pull the ladder up behind her.” This is a woman who has an MA from U of T in English. She’s had a very fine career as the editor of The Report on Business. I’m not sure how her MA in English qualified her to do that, according to her own arguments. And, again, she’s one of those people—this is what bad boomers do—who cannot abide the notion that other people are young. She cannot abide the idea that anyone else protests things: “O, we did that in the ’60s, we ended racism, sexism, and homophobia by fucking in the mud at Woodstock so whatever you’re doing now is just derivative.” And, I do think that she’s a great example of pseudo-contrarianism. I would put [Kevin] O’Leary in the same camp, where you have the tone of a contrarian, like, “I am speaking truth to power,” except that you’re saying everything that power wants to hear.

JBR/JR: You have made suggestions for post-secondary education as Queen of the Colleges. If you were instead Queen of Pop Culture, how would you alter/amend the popular vision of universities or pop culture itself?

LP: I actually think that this is something we do a fair amount at the university I work at. Like, right now, I am teaching a course on vampires. I don’t actually have a lot of Twilight kids, mercifully—although we did talk a bit about Twilight last night—it’s great to start where the kids are. So, we have other courses on things like Pirates, for example. And these courses are wonderful traps. You give this course a cool title, and then I actually make them think and read things that are really hard. And, again, it’s very easy to assume that kids coming in know nothing, but you’re absolutely wrong to think that. They are not tabula rasas at all.

What I want to say here is that a lot of pop culture is actually quite sophisticated. On the door of my office, I have a quote from Michel de Montaigne, a quote from Nietzsche, a quote from Deleuze, and a quote from Kanye West. The quote from Kanye is, “the greatest tragedy of my life is that I will never get to see myself perform live.” I love it. It makes me laugh every time I look at it. I actually just had a discussion with the school paper about his new album Yeezus. Kanye is really smart, and that we see a lot of the dismissal of anyone under 40, the infantalizing of black people, the failure to understand hip-hop culture—which is really the only new culture produced in the last twenty years, unless you want to count the Internet—but that’s more of a recycling of what has ever been, as Marx says of capitalism. So, I like pop culture as it is, and I think that pop culture is complex and sophisticated in ways that other things we’re giving to young people aren’t. Again, it has failed kids far less than the government, far less than most schools. If you are a kid growing up in America right now, there is more of a chance that you’re going to develop an acquaintance with high art through Kanye or Jay Z, than there is through your failed, crappy, underfunded schools. Blaming pop culture for social problems is just wrong. There are lots
of things that are mercenary in pop culture, lots of things that are sexist, racist, homophobic, but again, pop culture is a lot more honest in some ways than mainstream media, than what currently passes for education.

JBR/JR: So, are we talking here about cultural studies, or the integration of pop culture within English, or literature, or education?

LP: The big thing in education, or this is the way that I see it, or how I try to do it, is getting students from where they are to where you want them to go. And, so, it’s always good to start from where they live, to say this is what you think about vampires, but there is an actual history of this metaphor, and this is how it intersects with sexuality, this is how it intersects with the Catholic Church, and there is a lot of overlap between vampires and Jesus that is extremely anxiety-making in the 17th century for certain Catholic bishops. We have to give the kids some credit for what they already know. If you treat the kids like they don’t know anything, that’s patronizing, and patronizing is never a good way to start educating anyone—you cannot teach anything if you’re going to condescend to them. I taught in Buffalo, when I was doing my PhD there, and I had a student from Baltimore who was a free-style rapper, and we were doing Dante, even though my boss told me not to because it’s too hard. That’s me flipping the bird for the recording. I had a huge fight with her. The minute you decide that something is too hard, you’re not teaching anymore—that you’ve just given the fuck up. And I got in trouble, but I didn’t care. And so we were doing *Terza Rima*, and this kid could turn anything into *Terza Rima*; it was amazing. After I showed them what *Terza Rima* looked like, everyone in the class had to write down a non-explicit sin that they had committed recently, and he was just converting them into *Terza Rima* on the top of his head.

I had this argument going on with one of my favourite colleagues, a very friendly and affectionate argument, that it’s actually easier to teach poetry now than it was twenty years ago because of rap music. Students are habituated to the idea of rhythmic language; they’re habituated to the idea of a rhyming language. The other thing I needle him about is that he’s one of these “all men are pantywaists now” people: rap music is the only cultural expression where verbal dexterity is wedded to an aggressive, abrasive masculinity, like, “Why do you not love Kanye?” The new Pusha-T album is incredible! So I’m slowly winning him over. I really love hip-hop and that we are living in its golden age, and a golden age of television. All these declinist narratives about pop culture are from old people who cannot get over The Beatles, old people who are entirely too suffused with nostalgia to see that there’s a lot of good stuff out there. It’s very easy to assume that things were better when you were young. There are a lot of golden ages happening right now that give me great hope. So, yeah, I love pop culture. It’s a good way to help explain old stuff, but it’s also a good place to start with your students because they’re already soaking in it. It’s not like
they come to us with no culture; they come to us with a host of different assumptions that we have to engage.

**JBR/JR:** Can you tell us more about the Halifax Humanities 101?

**LP:** It’s such a great idea. One of the things we have to be vigilant about is appearing as an ivory tower and that you can only study the liberal arts through the great books if you are bourgeois and have leisure. Halifax Humanities is actually a version of something called the Clemente Program that is all over North America. There are eight in Canada: there is one in Vancouver, there is one in Calgary, some in Ontario, and they are trying to start one in New Brunswick. We have been doing ours for eight years. I’ve coordinated Section 4, which is roughly the eighteenth to nineteenth century, where we read things like Kant, and I have also done Section 5, where we read things like Elliot, Nietzsche, De Beauvoir, Arendt, and it’s great. We are actually having next weekend a fundraiser, which we have done before, where we have 24 teams read all 24 books of The Odyssey, because we are not fun-run people, we are reading-people. Yeah, people really get into it, and one of the things I love about it is that we have a lot of our former students, we have current students, we have “old money” who are good enough to donate to us, so it’s a great way to break down those class barriers. It’s amazing, first of all, how interesting the readings of stuff are—you get a very different interpretation of “The Waste Land” from an eighteen-year-old who is fresh out of high school.

One of the things that is really great about Halifax Humanities is a lot of programs for poor people are about trying to make them economically viable: they are job-training programs. We are emphatically not that. Many of the people we deal with are people who are physically ill, or mentally ill, or older, or single-parents and will never be proper capitalist units. But, it’s really amazing to see how they bond between each other, because another problem with being poor is isolation, that you feel that you’re the only one in this situation and that it’s your fault, that it has nothing to do with the structure that you live in, that it has nothing to do with being physically ill, or mentally ill, or, again, a single-mother. “It’s your fault,” is what the economy wants to tell you ever repeatedly, to individualize this or to protect this—as Margaret Thatcher once said, there is no such thing as society. One of the great things about it is that I have never had a professor go in there and come out disappointed. Most of the professors I’ve asked to do this are like “Oh my God, they are really into it.” They can just talk about it without the pressure to get a good grade, or to get a recommendation for grad school—there is no kind of end. And it’s exactly at the point at which we have to start a second year seminar for them, because they didn’t want to leave. And, then, we had this seminar where they decide the topic every
year. This year they’re doing religion—I haven’t been in there yet because it’s not where I shine. I guess I’ll teach Nietzsche—maybe later!

Halifax Humanities, I love it, because it’s a good example, first of all, that the humanities need not be elite. Again, people that society routinely dismisses are actually quite brilliant, if you give them a chance to read and to speak. The conversations they have with each other and the fact that they have this community now, I am deliriously happy about it, and I’m really looking forward to reading *The Odyssey* with these people again next weekend.

**JBR/JR:** One last question, the final one: if a popular culture of meritocracy or mediocrity flourishes, are we more likely to become a society of bullshit (bluff, fakery, and phoniness) or corniness (unsophisticated, ridiculously old-fashioned, and sentimental)? Where does ‘truth’—from the title of your book—fit into this dynamic?

**LP:** You mention meritocracy, and I want to take advantage to tell you the coolest thing I learned when I was researching for my last book, and that’s the reason why I write books: to learn stuff, as well as to try not to explode with rage—to try to convert as much of my *ressentiment* into jokes as possible. It’s all about how to manage the *ressentiment*. One of the best things about meritocracy is that the guy who invented the word didn’t intend it in the way that everybody uses it—that the cream rises to the top, the best get the best. The guy who invented the term meritocracy was a British sociologist named Michael Young who wrote a dystopian novel called *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, which was about the fact that a certain phylum of people who were really good at taking tests, and really good at getting into elite schools, and really good at becoming stockbrokers, were running the world. He actually had this great article in *The Guardian*, just before he died, where he says that at least in the good old days when people got by on nepotism, they had a certain measure of humility: they knew that part of why they had a job was chance or that they knew somebody. So, I feel so sorry for Michael Young, because people constantly use meritocracy as, you know, “this is what justice would look like,” and that is not how he meant it at all. He meant it as a pejorative. And, he was writing in 2008 in *The Guardian* about the financial crisis; after the financial crisis you have this whole narrative, again of “we almost blew up the world, but we’re the only people who know how to fix it . . . you cannot expect people who study English or philosophy to understand credit default swaps.” So, he was talking specifically about this kind of competence that we constantly reward. Imagine, making up a pejorative term and then everyone thinks that that is the way things should be.

What I want to say about mediocrity is that there is a lot of pop culture, which is genuinely excellent. I see a lot more well-compensated mediocrity amongst the managerial class. One of the arguments I make in *More Money than Brains* is that I never get mad about Miley Cyrus or athletes making a squillion dollars, because: A) they are genetic freaks; B) they have no private lives whatsoever. They are being cannibalized by *TMZ* and things like that on a daily
basis—and I say that as someone who loves TMZ. I think gossip is intensely pro-social and ethical. They are the people who are earning their money in a lot of ways, if for no other reason than giving us all objects to talk about in our offices. There is a certain sort of brutal democracy in pop culture: if you make a bad record, if you don’t please your audience, you’re fired. On the other hand, you can drive a corporation into the ground, and still get a multi-million dollar golden parachute at the end of it, and you get that from a board of twelve motherfuckers exactly like you. This managerial class reproduces like spores and has infiltrated our world and is now cannibalizing us.

JBR/JR: That outstanding pop culture—is its enemy bullshit or corniness (unsophisticated, old-fashioned, sentimental)?

LP: I don’t mind unsophisticated. Unsophisticated can be very good. Again, I love Kanye, I love my Basquiat, and a lot of rap that people may see as unsophisticated—which is wrong. So, unsophisticated doesn’t bother me as a “prole” (proletarian), because sometimes sophistication can be a way of concealing vacuity, like a lot of art-house movies that I never want to see again as long as I live. There are certain types of literary fiction that are “middle-aged-person-has-problems” and “first-world-problem” at that; unsophisticated is not necessarily a bad thing. Sophistication can be almost like a guarantee that you’re getting your “cultural kale,” like “we’re going to the symphony now because that’s what sophisticated people do.” It’s a terrible reason to go to a symphony. I don’t mind unsophisticated. I do not like sentiment. I am not a big fan of sentiment. This is probably because I am intensely sappy. This is definitely a self-loathing position on my part. But I do think that sentiment is manipulative, and that sentiment always goes hand-in-hand with that kind of calculation. There is that great passage in Adorno’s Minima Moralia, that you cannot give kids presents anymore because they are wondering what your angle is, that gifts are now ways to sell toothbrushes and soap. I do have intense suspicions about any movie that wins an Oscar, for example, that sentiment is a way for us to pretend that we are doing something about all the damage wrought by calculation. But we are not. We are just feeling in someone’s general direction, again in this condescending and patronizing kind of way. So, yeah, if we are talking corny-sentimental then thumbs down, but if we are talking corny-crude or apparently-unsophisticated then thumbs up, because this is where a lot of interesting things actually come from.

University of Western Ontario

1 In More Money Than Brains, Penny provides her platform as the hypothetically coronated “Queen of the Colleges” (124).
Works Cited

“Paying to be proles”: The Academic Worker, University Nostalgia and Melancholic Refusal
by Kevin Godbout

La mélancolie est refus radical de la nostalgie pour la terre natale.
[Melancholy is the radical refusal of nostalgia for one’s native land.]

Angela Cozea

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;

William Wordsworth “Intimations of Immortality”

My depression dreams of a life without anxiety.
My anxiety dreams of a life without depression.
This worries me. Then gets me down.

@NeinQuarterly

This response to Jaime Roman Brenes Reyes and Jamie Rooney’s afternoon interview with Laura Penny, “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Kanye,” has a few things to say about the sorry and sad state of the university in North America. The quotation in the title of my response is from her talk delivered later that same day, and was, in fact, a possible alternate title—Penny ultimately went with “Full Fees and Empty Pockets.” Sadness for modern universities, however, is never enough: the general public and the popular media ruthlessly attack this affective reaction to the defunding of post-secondary education as the complaints of whiny over-privileged students and young adults. That this spin of entitlement is (almost) completely false does not much matter. Besides, one is sad about the weather, spilt coffee and when the
cat marks the couch: what one feels about the current services-based, administrated to death, business-first university is not mere sadness. A critical engagement and reflection on this sadness is required—this unreflected sadness ought to be productively opposed to critique, to a critical project worthy of the training one purportedly receives from a public university. Through the “How I Learned to Stop Worrying” interview, but also “Full Fees and Empty Pockets” and Penny’s two monographs, the problems of the university appear in precise and stark relief. This university of a long-faded past is the dream and desire for a return to scholarship’s “purer” origins. Kant’s definition of the university represents such an origin, both actual and fantasized. I am going to work through two responses to the current issues that threaten the future—even the mere possibility—of the public university in the age of privatization. The first response works through a reflection on nostalgia and presents a pining for the “classical” university as I will refer to it. The second is a refusal of this nostalgia (for the classical university) through melancholic contemplation.

The idea of university which emerges from this melancholia transforms and redeems the Kantian classical university. This happens by separating the phenomenal events and objects of the university from the idea which inspires the university’s activities and discourses. Nostalgia and melancholy are complimentary through this radical opposition between them: the melancholic view of the university, rather than reflecting upon or recuperating an idealized past, refuses that past in favour of a possibility which did not come to pass as a prophecy, of a possible future, in the promise of every moment just about to arrive. The refusal of the present or past university as a homeland for intellectual thought and the scholarly class is not a dream of a recovered idealized university (which while desired does not exist and may in fact be more nightmarish than dreamlike), but rather the contemplation of an idea of the university in its materialist component pieces, which has not come to pass and is redeemed by its prophetic possibilities. Refusing to play the game(s) of the university exploitation machine—by whatever means available and necessary—may be the final imaginative act remaining, especially for the oppressed and exploited junior scholar and academic worker. This refusal, at first glance, may seem like a manifestation of nostalgia and a desire for a return to origins—by the end of this response to the Penny interview with Brenes Reyes and Rooney I will draw a line between two versions of an imagined past of the university and offer a possible future and the academic worker’s part in it. In this outline, I draw a distinction between an idealized university and the idea of a university: the former represents a utopian phantasm built up from the unmediated nostalgia for the classical university; whereas the latter, is a constellated ruin, a map into the past which may yet transform the future.
The classical university and academic work

The academic worker is the product of the university: a necessary and specifically trained producer of knowledge. Universities, as Immanuel Kant bluntly put it, create doctors. Kant’s *The Conflict of the Faculties* outlines as classic a definition for the vision of university and the creation of doctors, and his language ties the doctor to intellectual labour:

Whoever it was that first hit on the notion of a university and proposed that a public institution of this kind be established, it was not a bad idea to handle the entire content of learning (really, the thinkers devoted to it) like a factory, so to speak—by a division of labor, so that for every branch of the sciences there would be a public teacher or professor appointed as its trustee, and all of these together would form a kind of learned community called a university (or higher school). The university would have a certain autonomy (since only scholars can pass judgment on scholars as such), and accordingly it would be authorized to perform certain functions through its faculties (smaller societies, each comprising the university specialists in one main branch of learning): to admit to the university students seeking entrance from the lower schools and, having conducted examinations, by its own authority to grant degrees or confer the universally recognized status of “doctor” on free teachers (that is, teachers who are not members of the university)—in other words, to create doctors. (247)

To a large extent, the broadly understood purpose of the university remains this. Kant’s critical project, of course, establishes the labour of the university worker as the free expression of their intellectual powers, and cautions against the transformation of intellectual work into forms of serfdom or slavery. Kant’s definition or conception of the university, while classic, is one that must be continually re-examined, abandoned and renewed. Kant’s text, in the aftermath of Marxism and capitalism, cannot be held distinct from the exploitation of the factory worker, and the struggle of the worker to rescue themselves from that exploitation. But there is in Kant’s definition no question that he is outlining a university and outlining the basis of peer review: only a scholar can measure the worth of another scholar, that scholarship is primary to all other considerations at the university. The current university administrator makes an enemy of even the most basic principles of a university, in pitting services against learning, in saying that market principles—and not peer review—shall decide what scholarship is permitted, and in seeking revenue generation and expense reduction as absolute ends at the expense of all else.

But—to borrow Leszek Kolakowski’s question from his essay of the same title—“Why Do We Need Kant” in the context of the crisis facing universities? Without entering into a

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discussion of the entire Kantian critical project (and especially the second Critique), the answer for Kolakowski is that Kant’s thought and critical project is tied to the “survival of our culture” and necessary in “the struggle against slavery” (44). He writes that “even though the idea of human dignity, conferring the same equality on every human being, is older than Kant and actually of biblical origin, we owe Kant not only the attempt to establish it independently of revealed religion, but also the clear distinction of this idea from everything that may ever discovered in anthropological, historical, and psychological research” (54). Kolakowski contends, in the final sentences to his essay that “Humanity is moral concept. Unless we recognize that, we have no good reason to challenge the ideology of slavery” (54). In the intellectual project of critique, which the classical university privileges above all, the idea of human dignity, the morality of humanity and abolition of ideologies of slavery are primary—all of these are distinct from the revelations offered by religion. It is the absence of these three pillars of the classical (secular) university which makes the current state of affairs so saddening. Academic workers have their human dignity routinely stripped: universities are run by business-first administrators of questionable ethics and precarious workers are held down like serfs.

The sadness for the modern university I expressed earlier is perhaps better stated as a form of anxiety, lived and experienced by the members of a community. The exploited academic worker at their institution lives in a state of constant balled up anxiety. This anxiety is always two-fold: it combines the concerns of obtaining basic subsistence (food, shelter and wages) and social status within the university and the community at large (scholarship, academic freedom, the quality of teaching and the valuation of what one does professionally). This worker is always ready to participate in their own exploitation through self-reproaches: the worker is at fault for their weakness, and the system which exploits them is blameless by virtue of its status as system. The system is a narrative cycle of exploitation from all sides. It is always easy to attack the weak and vulnerable, and spin the narrative appropriately. This narrative can take on many shapes. One of this narrative’s most pernicious forms is the life of the graduate student or adjunct faculty member, as these academic workers must battle just to achieve the barest of subsistence within the academic context and through their labour. The horror stories echo in the nightmares brought on by debt, overwork and having to decide between the next meal or the next book, next month’s rent or conference or research travel. The self-appointed leaders of the university, not the students nor the faculty, but the business leaders, are quick to delegate responsibility and renounce the issues: an academic worker’s poverty is the result of their failure—failure to find funding, to generate publications, to partner with industry.

In Tony’s Kushner’s masterpiece play Angels in America, Roy Cohn, the closeted yet promiscuous, hyper-conservative, Reageanite...
lawyer, complains—as he answers a round of seemingly endless phone calls—that he is not an octopus (17). As he is about to expire from AIDS-related complications in part two, he exclaims to the spectre of Ethel Rosenberg: “Next time around: I don’t want to be a man. I wanna be an octopus. Remember that, OK?” (Kushner 247). The academic worker is both a victim of Reageanite neoliberal logic, but also very much in the position of Roy Cohn, bed-ridden, sick, and dying: the worker takes on more tasks than is possible in each hand, learning to live in perpetual isolation and darkness in a deep dark ocean—otherwise known as their basement office space. The academic worker lives in the depths, away from surface and sunlight, and subsists on small fish and plants. The academic worker is constantly trapped in a state of taking an endless series of mundane—even degrading—tasks, wishing they were more like an octopus-like creature and less like a human. This process of dehumanization engenders the sadness, feeling of depression and the accumulation of anxiety: one’s hopes for middle-class status and subsistence are instead a constant struggle for professional advancement in direct tension with securing the essential to continue living (on a diet of food stamps, salt, coffee, and beer).

The news, at least, is not all bad. Universities have a way of attracting all sorts of enthusiastic, highly-intelligent and articulate people. Sometimes they are able to take a break from the rigours of academic work for a conversation around a few drinks. Last year, I had the joy to play a fly on the wall during Brenes Reyes and Rooney’s afternoon interview with Penny, and then I got to listen to Laura deliver a resplendent talk to some colleagues that night. I sat with those three during the interview in the Grad Club booth, over beers and spirits, and laughed (and sometimes got a word in) during the interview. The interview’s jovial, almost flippant, tone is informed not just by alcohol and good spirits, but by the remarkable ability of literary arts lovers to turn resentment into humour and good cheer. My response to Penny’s interview with Brenes Reyes and Rooney, in part, is rather simple: read it and treasure it, for Penny’s candour is rare and courageous. She is an academic who has not forgotten how to speak in the common tongue. A sure highlight to my mind is this question from Brenes Reyes and Rooney: “What do you think Western means by experience here?” and Penny’s answer:

This is something that has everything to do with the growth of administration, with the—I would say—cancerous growth of administration at every university. I do think that emphasis on experience is something that comes from administration, and it usually means buildings and services. It never means instruction; it never means we’re going to pay people lots of money to teach you. It never means how little they’re willing to pay to teach people even though this is what they always talk about on the website. They don’t talk about the fancy dorms on the website; they talk about “how

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committed our teachers are, [and] how much they love teaching you.” So, experience is just a code word for aspects of university life that are not scholastic. This is the kind of thing that administrators think of when they think of experience—basically the experience of everything peripheral to learning. (“How I Learned to Stop Worrying” 29)

The root of academic worker exploitation here at Western, and around North America, lies in this. Students are the recipients of a great privilege: to be here and to be further educated. The public image of the spoiled, party-first student is crucial to the exploitation of debt-addled, impoverished, yet highly-educated young people. This gets worse when one transitions from undergraduate to graduate studies. The enthusiasm and commitment of the academically successful student and junior scholar/teacher is the dual flogging of the academic worker: administrators make six-figure salaries to keep academic workers desperate and willing to accept below-subsistence wages without health benefits—and keep this information from the broader public and the press. Research is better paid because it generates more potential for capital—those who cannot do end up teaching—even though teaching and research go hand in hand and mutually benefit one another. With the continued partnerships with private industry, the value of independent research is also constantly at risk. Woe betide any university, and its business-school trained and weaned leaders/administrators, that pays either its teaching assistants, part-time faculty or adjuncts a living wage and treats them with dignity and respect. Underpaid and overworked, the academic workforce is left to uphold the ideal of the public university with little public support, and must often do so despite the acts of the administrative class who are delighted to slash and burn public institutions for a quick profit or a new source of revenue. The various groups of academic workers are far too busy fighting over disparate concepts and crumbs to mount an effective resistance, and a vicious cycle entrenches itself.

Nostalgic dreams

One certainly feels as if Kant’s definition of the university is describing a home for the public university and its communities. If the contemporary university has lost its classical definition, it seems to have therefore lost its ancestral home in the minds of its scholars and doctors. There is no easy fix for this malaise brought on by current circumstances. Svetlana Boym in The Future of Nostalgia writes that there are no wonder drugs for nostalgia. The academic worker pines for a university which may never have existed, and awaits a homecoming to an origin whose door was always already closed. Boym marks two “kinds of nostalgia” which “are not absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing” called reflective and restorative nostalgia (41). She explains that restorative nostalgia “puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” whereas reflective nostalgia “dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remem-
brance” (41). Boym adds: “Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (41). The great complaint of the nostalgic faculty member or student is the lament over the ruins of the university, while pining for the restoration and revival of a purer university, one which may indeed have never existed or was never sustainable. In this vision of the university, the worker is always front and centre, in this sense Penny honours the Kantian model of the university while trying to extract the labourer from their exploitative situation. This is the dominant theme of Penny’s other work and her recent talk at Western.

Brenes Reyes and I, after the afternoon interview, had the pleasure of welcoming Penny to give a talk here at Western. It is in this venue where Penny unpacked at much greater length the current, sorry state of the academic worker. The themes from the interview return, but in further detail and with Penny twisting the knife even further into the self-replicating autocracy of university administration. The narrative of austerity is always that the working classes have to tighten their belts for the greater good. I am sure graduate students relying on food banks are not feeling their belts tighten. Penny expresses the contradiction between promoting the commitment of impoverished teachers and the opulence of university president salaries perfectly:

Search though I might, I have never ever seen a university website that boasts, “Our president makes more than the Prime Minister or POTUS!” Even though several of them do, including yours [referring to Western University’s President]. I am not wholly compelled by the argument that these people are worth it, that we are forced to shell out this kind of money for managers because we must compete with private industry to get the best sociopaths. I find this argument especially unconvincing given how miserable the academic job market has been of late. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)

Debt, low wages and the tenure lottery are a remarkably disciplining series of concepts and realities for academic workers. A temporary panacea is the allure of nostalgia for the declining ideals of the university and the fulfillment of a dream where graduate students and junior academics survive this current job market and maybe, just maybe, get out of crushing poverty and revive the classical university at the same time. The university community imagines a coming-together of minds funded by the public and invested in the public good. If the current university does not reflect this community, one awaits its restoration and nostalgically reflects on this state of affairs—and suffers for it.

The larger element of Penny’s critique of education is not limited to only this dialectic of nostalgia: her critique is not a critique of constant crisis (like mass media outlets). Education as a whole falls victim to this ethos of constant crisis. A doctor in anything has given up twenty years or more (elementary and secondary school to go with the three university

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degrees) of their lives to education. For those twenty years, how many of them can be valued according to the pursuit of learning for its own sake, and not for that of a political, economic, corporate or parental master? How many of those years were actually spent learning and critiquing rather than simply confirming or copying from some pre-supposed notion or set of conclusions? And most importantly: how many times has an educational system that was working just fine found itself irremediably bungled by the irrationally overbearing edicts of an administrative class that has no conception of how to run, capture and keep the attention of a classroom? When was the last time university administrators had to give lectures to first year university students, to face the critique of a classroom setting? Penny describes this gap between administrators and teachers perfectly in More Money than Brains, in the context of secondary schools:

[It is] very difficult to recruit, train, and retain good [school] teachers. Teaching has one of the highest attrition rates of any profession, with many leaving after five years. Some bitch about the mediocre pay, others complain about discipline problems in the classroom, but the most commonly cited reason for leaving the profession is intransigent and ineffectual administrators who undermine or overrule the teachers they are supposed to support. (90)

How much does the frustration of the school teacher resemble that of the university teacher? Teaching to the labour market, teaching to the economy, teaching to the lowest common denominator—where one asks: is the only room to advance into a living middle-class wage either winning the seniority lottery or defaulting to the administrator’s track of failing upwards?

For the academic workers here at Western and around Canada, who are somehow supposed to live up to the nostalgic ideals of the university while also suffering sub-poverty level living conditions—unless they win the major funding grant lottery—it all becomes a bit much. Penny, in her talk “Full Fees and Empty Pockets,” explains the factors at work in the current university exploitation system of junior university workers. The explanation is lengthy, and I feel the need to quote it in full, with breaks for commentary:

The fact that this institution expects you to pay full fees for very little in the way of instruction or services is a microcosm of an exceedingly frustrating and ultimately unsustainable macrocosm. This is simply to say that a couple of trends that are affecting younger workers and students meet here, in the demand that you pony up full tuition, even when you are no longer pestering professors on a regular basis, even when you are not taking up valuable classroom space, even when you are not using the resources you are allegedly paying to use. Young work-
ers and scholars are increasingly subject to a sort of fiscal pincer attack, an economic predation that comes from at least two, and maybe even three, flanks. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)

And to be exceedingly clear: the business-first university expects graduate students to pay their full fees and be happy they are fortunate enough to be exploited. One could be working in the “real world” at a “real job” with other non-student civilians. These middle-managers forget that universities are supported by the public with the purpose of being different from the rote business logic that permeates all aspects of contemporary social life. Worse, whenever the institution comes up short on its budgetary plans, the first source of revenue recuperation is more tuition fees, and the second is another ancillary fee for a made-up service, which justifies the hiring of yet another Vice-President of University Services. The creation of revenue streams for the business-first university is the end in itself and not a means to survive government under-funding. Penny continues:

First, students are being charged more for their education. Tuition fees have gone nowhere but up, and increased demand for post-grad degrees has certainly not reduced the costs associated with them, since the university as an institution excels at providing all the exploitation of regular capitalism, with few of its associated efficiencies. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)

I have had the distinct displeasure of demanding from Western’s middle and top managers public statements in favour of increasing government funding for post-secondary education all year this year. The ask, especially when its made to the business-first university president, is always returned with a flustered blank stare, as if I had just revealed some atrocity or demanded the sacrifice of a favourite pet. Penny then outlines another flank of attack:

Second, students and adjuncts have been taking up a greater and greater share of the actual day to day work of the university. Given that the number of tenured faculty at Canadian universities is shrinking, even as enrolment continues to grow, and that most of the metrics we use for hiring and promotion are more research-centric, it’s not surprising that more of the teaching and grading burden falls on poorly paid adjuncts or on grad students who fork out cash for the privilege of doing the university’s scutwork, who are effectively paying to be proles. When I was a member of the grad students’ union and the relatively new local [PSAC Local 610], we tried making the argument that, since enrolment and thus, tuition fees were conditions of graduate student employment, any tuition fee increase should be matched with a raise. As I was not on the negotiating team, I did not actually get to hear the admin team laugh this off the table, but suffice it to say it was not part of our final contract. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)

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In North America, somewhere between half and three-fourths of all university teaching is conducted by people who do not know if they will have stable employment from season to season, and the money they earn is nowhere close to ever being enough. To add insult to injury, university middle and top managers are paid massive salaries to remind precarious workers that they should never, ever expect more, or something fair, or something reasonable. Because of austerity, because the entitled worker already has too much, because reasons! Penny then marks the interaction between the two first problems she has raised:

These two factors—increased fees and diminished pay for work the institution’s functions depend on—are phenomena that affect many young people who are currently entering the work force. I thought being Gen X sucked, but things are arguably even more challenging for you Gen Y whippersnappers. You all have shown up at North America’s party at 4am, when all the good booze is gone, when there’s little left but a half-bottle of creme de menthe left to drink, but oodles of puke and property damage left for you to clean up. You have been royally demographically screwed, without the benefit of compliments, dinner or lube. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)

When I was younger and in high school, I did not get invited to any of the good parties. It appears, however, that my entire generation was not invited to the most important party of all.

This again marks the theme of not just raw exploitation, but that somehow this exploitation, this violence is supposed to be pleasurable, that I should somehow be thankful to hold up the crumbling edifice of the university as a place for academic freedom, scholarship and higher learning while it is torn apart and collapses. But there remains one final issue to consider:

That brings us to the third problem, which is one that strikes me as being particularly acute in fields like academia, publishing and journalism. This would be the exploitation of the fact that you are foolish enough to love this. I’m sure many of you entered graduate study because you could not do otherwise, because you really care about your work, and with a much more gimlet-eyed view of your prospects than many of us back in the 90s might have had. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)

Penny’s statement, “foolish enough to love this,” is perhaps the crescendo of this passage. I have yet to meet an academic worker who is here because they hate the university or their work, at least not initially. Hating the conditions of one’s labour is different than hating the labour itself. So many academic workers love the work that they do, they simply hate suffering for it. This is used by university administration middle-managers time and time again: do you not love being here? Are you not so fortunate to love what you do? Why complain then? And the guilt silences feelings of dissent.
Brenes Reyes and Rooney, in the Penny interview, remark that the current generation must invent its future jobs. Gone or eroding are entry-level jobs, health benefits, daycare, regular working hours and wages, access to union protections: the world of stable work is vanishing or has already vanished. And on top of this the academic worker is supposed to pull themselves up by their boot straps, accept the “facts” and consume—without retching—an increasing pile of fabricated, pre-packaged bullshit. And they must like it, like it as much as if it tasted like all the delicious flavours of all the ice creams (even though the academic worker can no longer afford ice cream). At what point is enough, enough—I am reminded now of the closing words from William Blake’s “Proverbs of Hell”—and can one begin to refuse this pile of nonsense, to refuse this nostalgia for a university that is long gone and this notion of a messiah-that-shall-never-come, that the university is somehow just going to get better, someday, somehow? It is a fantasy to reflect on a university that may never have been; it is delusion to hope to restore a university which has long since fallen to the abyss of the past. One cannot eat nostalgia, beer and onion soup and expect to survive for long.

**A melancholic refusal**

What is remarkable about Laura Penny is how her engagement with the twin nostalgias outlined above always makes the university a series of problems, like a meditation without a sense of victimhood, where the system is critiqued without faulting the individuals trapped within that system, where the anxiety of the system has not annihilated those individuals. Penny has suffered from the current university system as much as anyone, but those experiences are transformed into the puns, jokes, aphorisms and reflections found in her work. Penny’s voice in her work is resolute, clear, productive and creative, even hopeful. It appears that something else, something different, is at work in her beyond nostalgia—something sustains Penny’s ability to engage in her critique, despite it all. As Penny reminds her readers at the outset of *Your Call is Important to Us*: “We live in an era of unprecedented bullshit production” (1). She writes:

Feeling like six pounds of shit in a five-pound bag is nothing new. There have been melancholias and manias on the medical books since the ancient Greeks. In a more churchy time, these symptoms might have been interpreted as demonic possession and treated with exorcism [. . .]. In the early days of psychoanalysis, the same symptoms might have been evidence of a neurosis or a block, and the would have had to talk his or her way through it, in search of primordial trauma, perhaps under the influence of hypnosis or cocaine. […] It was not until the early 1990s that things began to change. In the post-Prozac world, a World Health Organization study on depression estimated that 121 million people suffered from the disorder, and

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that only a quarter of them had access to treatment. Now I hate to make chicken-and-egg arguments, but which came first, the miracle cures or the global depression epidemic? My money’s on the cures. (Your Call is Important 154-55)

What then is the academic worker to do with their melancholia if nostalgia dreams are simply roadblocks to the idea( ls) of the university? What pill should the academic worker ingest to forget about the pain and dispel the anxieties? Does the academic worker have to succumb to another problem invented by the services-first university and subscribe to a product to “fix” it.

What to do with this pesky depressive ego-ideal and its anxieties? To draw from the conclusion of Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s Au-delà de la mélancolie, the ego must pluralize in the obsession with death and engage in a necessary encounter with melancholy to find a post-melancholy aesthetics where the ego is transformed into a mere ornament (149-50). What does this mean? The phenomenological subject described by Buci-Glucksmann (who actually is something like a flower-painting landscaper), which is obsessed with death and whose ego is a mere ornament, must live as if catastrophe approaches around every corner, as if every moment is a crisis, and therefore, no crisis is worth getting too worked up over. There are no easy analogies, syllogisms or syntheses to explicate this process and provide a guideline to easy success. The process only ends at one’s own death. If everything is valuable and everyone has value, one fights at every moment for the dignity and survival of life and the world, but this fight is engaged upon in a state of near-absolute calm, where all phenomena, depending on the perspective at work, are valued and are worth redeeming. The value of life is the cornerstone of art and philosophy, is the very question upon which liberal arts discourses are founded. As Penny outlines, part of the solution to the fiction of pre-fabricated realities is to be found in the training and critique made possible by the liberal arts. It is necessary to overcome the limits imposed by Kantian conceptual thinking to arrive at another vision of critique. As I pointed out earlier, the conditions which lead to the current state of extreme exploitation are also in the classical definition of the free university. Kant is a crucial point of departure, but one cannot stay there forever or even for very long. Something more is required, or else a nostalgia for Kant’s university is all one is left with.

As Penny’s visit to Western was planned over email and by phone, she and I had promised to chat about Walter Benjamin over beers after the Western talk, and while this never came to pass, Benjamin’s writing stages the opposition to the Kantian nostalgia I have outlined so far. For Benjamin, the word constellation represents a difficult overcoming of his roots in Kantian philosophy and German idealism. It tackles the relationship between “idea” and “concept” but also the mass of signification which comes with those words—and the inheritances from Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel.
It appears in the *Trauerspiel* book and forms the oppositions which sustain the thought of Benjamin throughout his *oeuvre*. This overcoming, or rather building a productive opposition out of Kant’s critical project, is grounded on a rigid differentiation and separation of idea and concept: it is based in radical opposition, the dialectic of clarity and opacity. This opposition enables and generates knowledge, as opposed to the accumulation of knowledge as a series of empirical syntheses. A reading of a now-classic passage from the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue,” from *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (translated as *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, often referred as the *Trauerspiel* book) helps to clarify the importance of opposition in Benjamin’s thought:

The set of concepts which assist in the representation of an idea lend it actuality as such a configuration. For phenomena are not incorporated in ideas. They are not contained in them. Ideas are, rather, their objective, virtual arrangement, their objective interpretation. If ideas do not incorporate phenomena, and if they do not become functions of the law of phenomena, the “hypothesis,” then the question of how they are related to phenomena arises. The answer to this is: in the representation of phenomena. The idea thus belongs to a fundamentally different world from that which it apprehends. The question of whether it comprehends that which it apprehends, in the way in which the concept genus includes the species, cannot be regarded as a criterion of its existence. That is not the task of the idea. Its significance can be illustrated with an analogy. Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts or their laws. They do not contribute to the language of phenomena, and in no way can the latter be criteria with which to judge the existence of ideas. (34)

It is not the role of concept to immanently reveal the world of ideas, or demonstrate its derivation from an idea. Benjamin stages the evolution of knowledge in opposition, where, to make an example of nostalgia, Boym’s restorative and reflective nostalgias are points in a constellation, which situate a version of nostalgia that is malleable yet consistent. One finds nostalgia by finding the constellation, but this finding is not a possessive grabbing of the concept. Constellations are not the stars themselves: ideas are not “their” concepts: ideas do not possess their concepts, nor the reverse. Ideas represent phenomena, as a constellation is a formation of stars, but of another world than the world of the stars. The opposition of idea and concept is a generative, productive relationship. But the relationship is open and non-possessive. The language which appeals to the concept is not the same language of the world of ideas. Benjamin writes:

Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements’ being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are
subdivided and at the same time redeemed; so that those elements which it is the function of the concept to elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes. The idea is best explained as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart. It is therefore erroneous to understand the most general references which language makes as concepts, instead of recognizing them as ideas. It is absurd to attempt to explain the general as an average. The general is the idea. The empirical, on the other hand, can be all the more profoundly understood the more clearly it is seen as an extreme. The concept has its roots in the extreme. (Benjamin 34-35)

Benjamin makes a series of associations: on the one hand the idea is general; on the other hand, the concept is the average, empirical, extreme. This framing of the idea separates it from empiricism and the collection of raw data: it is never sufficient to collect data and present this as the general idea. One's conclusions about nostalgia and melancholia, for example, cannot be based in the sensory data of subjects and patients: it must emerge from nature itself, from language itself. These conclusions are not judgments or assessments, they represent a finding of what keeps the world together and its experience meaningful and relevant. The idea is central, it redeems and represents. Benjamin takes this even further:

Ideas—or, to use Goethe's term, ideals—are the Faustian “Mothers.” They remain obscure so long as phenomena do not declare their faith to them and gather round them. It is the function of concepts to group phenomena together, and the division which is brought about within them thanks to the distinguishing power of the intellect is all the more significant in that it brings about two things at a single stroke: the salvation of phenomena and the representation of ideas. (35)

As I was once asked by a colleague: “Is there an Idee capable of salvaging the phenomena of the university—is this not why one always return to Kant’s Conflict of the Faculties?” In this question, one finds Kolakowski’s point on the value of Kant as a crucial point of departure for culture. The last sentence from the Benjamin quotation is a classic example of the tension between Benjamin’s materialism and messianism. Ideas are generative and concepts possessive—concepts group phenomena and ideas represent them—the salvation of phenomena is in their idealization. The salvation of phenomena is in the dignity which ideas and their constellations afford them in that process of redemption. Moreover, it is in the peer review process, in the relationship and collaboration between colleagues, that the phenomena of scholarship and research are redeemed and saved, despite the systematic privatization of universities. It is becoming incredibly difficult to find a place in the university to share research which is not exploited by...
that same university: the creation of alternative solutions or spaces, such as The Word Hoard, is more necessary than ever. Kantianism and prophecy may exist in an oppositional relationship, but it is ultimately a productive one.

Blake once wrote in the Marriage of Heaven and Hell that “Without Contraries [there] is no Progression” (34). My response has outlined a few such progressions through opposition. Here is another: Călin Mihăilescu takes two words for concept, one from Spanish and the other from German, preserves the full philosophical and literary history of the words, and sets up an opposition between them, just as outlined with nostalgia previously. For Benjamin, Begriff is a form of concept that carries the philosophical inheritances of Kant and German Idealism in general. In his essay, Mihăilescu contrasts Begriff to concepto—the latter draws from Mihăilescu’s reflections on Balthazar Gracián. In this context, concepto takes on the qualities Benjamin ascribes to Idee in the Trauerspiel book. Mihăilescu writes that the “etymological difference between concepto and Begriff may suggest their systematic opposition” (7). About the concepto he writes that it “points back to the two meanings of the Latin concipio: ‘to gather as a totality,’ and ‘to become pregnant/to give birth’” (7). Mihăilescu continues, writing: “On the other hand, the Begriff rather than being a ‘gathering,’ is a clutching, a grasping (as performed, naturally, by griffons)” and adding that:

The “birth-giving power” of the concepto is replaced here by that of “harvesting,” with the ironic result that the instrumentalization of reason gradually diminishes the generative powers of reason. As the Begriff gathers the world through the oblivion of its beauty, it comes to define life as possession. (7)

The notion of concept as a clutching, a possession of knowledge, forms a vital opposition to the Idee or concepto as the possibility for generation and birth/rebirth. In this way, the idea of the university is not a reaching into hell, like Orpheus reaches for Eurydice, for the desired object, but the creation of a new phenomenon. This inaugurates a dialectic to which one is not accustomed, where instead of a negation leading to a synthesis, one locates a negation that suspends complimentary terms and allows for their interaction. Like melancholy and nostalgia. Like Idee and Begriff.

Futures

I began this response with promise for a future: this futurity is located in a sustained contemplation of the past, a past which did not come to be, about which one is melancholy. The modern university, in its obsession with directing research outputs, market reciprocity and learning outcomes, has completely occluded the value of digression as a method of learning. How often have the greatest insights of thought emerged from pure digression: wanderings in a library at

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night, a frustrated experiment at the laboratory or a walk in the woods? The long, slow walk is so often a refusal to produce, but it is a grand opportunity for free-form creation and visionary thinking. But these visions are so often lost in the midnight strolls that shape thought, and yet those visions are formative and constructive, as Frédéric Gros has argued in *Marcher, une philosophie*. Crushing poverty does not leave space for thought: that space must be allocated to survival, the necessities of bare life. Penny’s critique of modern life is tied to a critique of economic rhetoric and language. The language of the economist is the only form of discourse that carries weight in this current age. To an extent, the critique of the modern age must be conducted in that language. At the same time, another language is needed, one which provides space for non-numerical value, one that is rooted in general, meaningful ideas and not solely concepts drawn from market economics. In this language, oppositional thinking conducts leisurely and digressive ideas, born from deep consideration and lengthy debate. In this language, words are not counted but they are felt, like caress or a wound. In this language, the university emerges as a place where the labour of the academic worker represents an experience where the map is not the territory. To be clear, there is no space in this battle for survival, for the possibility of a future university, to fight with one’s natural allies. The scholars of the university must direct their energies not to petty arguments over this or that concept, but towards an idea of the university which embraces the totality of its prophetic possibility. No one is coming to save the university: that’s up to the academic worker and their allies—and the feared disaster(s) lurk around every corner, and the time for action was always already yesterday, the eternal distant prophetic past.

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Horror films that highlight adolescent nightmares and negligent parents have come a long way in thirty years. In the late 1970s, Robin Wood was succinct in positioning the family as the location of normalcy in twentieth-century horror film (Wood 201). In the mid-1990s, Tony Williams agreed that “all horror films, in one way or another, are family horror films” (Williams 168). At that same time, Vivian Sobchack states that the “American bourgeois family” drama in science-fiction and horror narratives is specifically “marked by . . . disintegration and transfiguration” (Sobchack 144). Pat Gill expands on Sobchack’s observation with an omnibus survey of horror films in which he sees the tribulations suffered by teens in late twentieth-century slasher films as a cinematic metaphor for the fears of the divorce generation characterized by “deficient parents” that “are hapless and distracted, unaware of their children’s problems and likely to dismiss or discount their warnings and fears” (17). Gill specifically refers to the teenage nightmares and lacking parental guidance and protection in the Nightmare on Elm Street films (26-28). Late twentieth-century classics such as John Carpenter’s Halloween, Friday the 13th, Clive Barker’s Hellraiser, and Wes Craven’s A Nightmare on Elm Street feature fantastical spectacles. More recent films that have inherited the negligent parent theme such as Hostel (2005), Turistas (2006), and even Human Centipede (2010) abandon these spectacular fantasies. Moreover, these later films efface parents from the narrative entirely and feature already independent young adults in the graphically violent realism of their terror and torture. James Wan’s Insidious (2010) appears to be a nostalgic anomaly—a post-modern palimpsest of intertextuality that longs for horror conventions of the past. In a nostalgic revision of the themes articulated by Pat Gill, Insidious recodes the negligent parents of the Elm Street generation as exclusively female in both the malevolent netherworld and the normative bourgeois family protagonists.

To facilitate this analysis of Insidious, this paper will use three distinct trajectories. First, this analysis will read Insidious as the type of nostalgic pastiche articulated by Fredric Jameson in “Postmodernism and
Consumer Society.” Jameson claims that nostalgic fantasy “satisfies a deep (might I even say repressed?) longing to experience them again” (197). Jameson’s reference to the repressed is particularly relevant in a discussion of Insidious. In that context, the second trajectory of this analysis will draw upon psychoanalytical theories regarding fantasy, the “return of the repressed,” and “the mirror stage” to unpack the depictions in Insidious as indicative of the psychology through which nostalgia is realized and extended, especially as it relates to the repression of parental authority during the formative stages of subjectivity. Lastly, these analyses will be framed in Pat Gill’s understanding of the 1980s slasher cycles as indicative of a suburban anxiety regarding negligent parents in an era of rising middle-classed and bourgeois divorce rates.

Insidious follows the horrific misadventures of a young bourgeois couple, Josh and Renai Lambert, as their home is infiltrated by myriad malevolent demons via the window of their inexplicably comatose son Dalton’s astral link with their netherworld. Not since Poltergeist (1982) has any popular horror film dealt with the cinematic metaphor of child abduction. Unlike Poltergeist, however, Insidious leaves the body of the abducted child in the realm of reality and the malevolent agents of “The Further” abscond with only his soul (Insidious). Following revelations from Josh’s mother that Dalton has inherited his ability to project his consciousness into this netherworld, it becomes evident that only Josh is capable of following Dalton into “The Further” to effect his rescue. In doing so, the family risks opening a portal that will allow the army of tortured souls populating “The Further” to roam freely into the Lambert’s home. Josh manages to escape with Dalton just in time, but not before he is possessed by a demonic mother attempting to appropriate Josh’s body since his early childhood.

This narrative is replete with intertextuality that is nostalgic for the conventions of late twentieth-century horror films and that navigates a diverse palimpsest of horror classics. Jameson describes postmodern intertextuality as a form of pastiche that has been evacuated of its parodic impulses (Jameson 194-95). Lacking the cohesion of an assumed dominant style, intertextual reference has no norm against which to level satire. Rather than attack postmodern intertextuality on this level, Jameson introduces the concept of nostalgia as its function. In addition to Insidious’ allusion to Poltergeist, the excessive reliance on startling visual shocks that punctuate the narrative is reminiscent of such monster classics as Ridley Scott’s Alien (1979). The bumbling assistants to the matriarchal medium that assists the Lamberts are an allusive combination of the Frog Brothers in the Lost Boys and the heroes of Ghostbusters with their semi-scientific devices and comic bickering. In “The Monstrous Years: Teen Slasher Films and the Family,” Pat Gill refers to late twentieth-century slasher worlds as “school hallways, the hometown streets, . . . and the bedrooms of its victim,” all of which are featured in Insidious (Gill 19). The black and white family of motionless wraiths Josh encounters in “The Fur-
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Street movies (Figure 2). Is all of this nostalgia merely empty intertextuality—a post-modern “pastiche” without “parody” (Jameson 194-95)?

The cinematic nostalgia in Insidious acts as a spectacular patina over the film’s ideological project. Insidious acts as a nostalgic fantasy of displacement that allows the Elm Street generation of moviegoers to repress the responsibility of their own negligent parenting. Insidious’ nostalgia is clearly aimed at the audiences of the horror cycles of the late 1970s through the early 1990s. This audience, come of age, is loosely reflected in the 30-something protagonists of the film. The slasher genre of the late twentieth century featured predominantly adolescent protagonists: Laurie Strode in Halloween, Nancy Thompson in A Nightmare on Elm Street, Kirsty Cotton in Hellraiser, etc. Gill observes that “[w]hat is striking about most of these films is the notable uselessness of parents, their absence, physically and emotionally, from their children’s lives” (17). Gill suggests that these fears have been generated by the assault on the mythology of bourgeois domestic harmony experienced in the transition of family structures under increasing rates of divorce (18). Similarly, more recent horror films feature predominantly post-adolescent protagonists. Insidious is conspicuously empty of any adolescent characters.

The audience members at whom Insidious is aimed have become the negligent parents that Gill refers to in “The Monstrous Years,” now robbed of their adolescent tragedy and facing the same indictments Gill ascribes to their own parents. In a statement that might equally apply to the plight of Dalton in Insidious as to the characters in the films to which Gill refers, he states that “the decay of the family makes children not merely defenseless but also prone to danger” (21). As the isolated and terrorized teens of the earlier films, and the teen audiences to which they appealed came of age, there was no catharsis or escape; as they became parents themselves, the family crisis reproduced itself. Other recent horror films, such as Hostel (2005), Turistas (2006), and Human Centipede (2010), still populated by young adults in peril, articulate fears of a younger generation—the children of the now grown Elm Street generation. Now in the role of parents, the Elm Street generation has been alienated by the new series of films in which their unresolved anxieties are not addressed, but in which they face the accusations of neglect the older films placed on their own parents. The contemporary news media acted to remind these new parents of this transfer of responsibility. Recent media sensations regarding negligent parents have focused on the coming of age scenario. In 2009, the media was flooded with revelations of the discovery of a child abducted almost 20 years prior. In 2011, The New York Times summarized that “Jaycee Lee Dugard was kidnapped as an 11-year-old in 1991 by Phillip Garrido, who kidnapped, raped and held her captive for nearly two decades . . . Ms. Dugard was dragged into a car on her way to a bus stop as her stepfather [Carl Probyn] watched helplessly from the family home” (Jaycee). “Initial suspects included Probyn and Ken
Slayton, Dugard’s biological father” (Raman). In January 2013, Nation Now reported that in the case of Jonbenet Ramsey, murdered in her home in 1996, “a grand jury had indicted the 6-year-old’s parents in 1999” but were unable to follow through with a conviction (Pearce). For decades, “[s]uspicion swirled around the parents, as did tabloid headlines” (Pearce). The increasingly graphic teen torture in more recent horror films, almost always by a member of the previous generation, in conjunction with media sensationalism of neglected children that (would) have come of age opened old wounds. Both recent horror film and the media worked in concert to accuse the Elm Street generation of the negligence they had comfortably located as the responsibility of their own parents.

To facilitate the generational displacement of anxieties regarding negligent parenting, the narrative in Insidious highlights the absence or neglect of the 30-something parents. Early in the narrative, Josh and Renai share an exchange in which Josh’s absence and negligence is central. Josh is unable to transport the kids neither to nor from school because of a pre-scheduled PTA meeting about which he failed to inform his wife. Josh returns home well past dark. Shortly thereafter, an unsupervised young Dalton receives a head injury while exploring the family’s dilapidated attic. It is this incident in which the demon first gains access to Dalton and makes him the gateway through which malevolent forces from “The Further” can infiltrate the Lambert home. While Renai is composing music and Josh is at work, one of the demons infiltrates their infant daughter’s bedroom. Renai is only made aware of the invasion via the baby monitor on a different level of the home. As the frequency of paranormal activity increases in the house, Josh remains conspicuously absent. He continues to stay late at work in his capacity as a school teacher until Renai becomes overwhelmed managing the ghostly invasions alone. She contacts him at work and pleads for him to return home. When he finally arrives she interrogates and accuses him. “You’re never here . . . You’re not here with me in this situation. You’re just avoiding it.” Later that evening, Renai wakes from a nightmare in which a shadowy figure stalks her outside the French doors in her bedroom. The cinematography uses conventions such as close range telephoto imaging, black and white film stock, and echoing voices to highlight the Elm-Street-like nightmarish experience of the episode. As the figure invades her bedchamber, the dream fuses with reality, and Josh comes to her rescue. He agrees to abandon the house for safer climes and begins the narrative trajectory that displaces their parental negligence.

Saddled with the guilt formerly ascribed to their own parents (by Gill, the media, contemporary horror film), the nostalgic audience of Insidious was in dire need of a fantasy of displacement through which it could alleviate anxieties regarding its own negligent parenting. Slavoj Žižek’s description of “Fantasy as a support of reality” (Sublime 47) finds its most comprehensive articulation in his The Plague of Fantasies, a neo-Lacanian extension...
of psychoanalytical theory, which provides a particularly useful framework for the examination of how cinematic fantasy works to displace both repressed and explicit social anxieties. Žižek defines the psychological working of fantasy as a mechanism that maintains a distance between our perception of reality and the Real while creating that which is desired in a process of negotiating subjectivity (Plague 5-7). Fantasy works to provide comfort by obfuscating the horrors of a reality in which desires are in constant flux based on social intersubjectivity (Plague 9-11). The focus on supernatural killers from an ambiguous netherworld in many of the slasher films of the 70s and 80s (and in Insidious) was comforting on two levels: it exoticized family discord with a supernatural metaphor, distancing the viewer from such graphic reality as that present in recent torture pornography, and it displaced the perceived malevolence of parents to sexually troubled monsters.

The first of two repositories for the displacement of guilt regarding negligent parenting is Christian demonology. The demon holding Dalton's mind captive and that is trying to enter his body is represented in the specifically Christian visual conventions of depictions of Satan. He has hair like horns, and Elise observes that “he has hooves for feet,” a “black body,” and a “blood-red face.” In “The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture,” Christopher Sharrett observes the tendency in the Hellraiser movies, “à la The Exorcist (1973), to make the devil carry the bag for a variety of political-economic phenomena” (Sharrett 263). Insidious does the same with social politics. The Satan-like demon is made to ‘carry the bag’ for the parents’ inability to understand the ills of their catatonic child.

However, in Insidious, the previous generation of parents are made even more monstrous than the Christian demons. Referring to many of the same earlier horror films Gill mentions, Carol Clover states that “[t]hese films do indeed seem to pit the child in a struggle, at once terrifying and attractive, with the parental Other, and it is a rare example that does not thematize parent-child relations” (100). Part of the nostalgia in Insidious reintroduces this struggle between the now parental Elm Street kids and their own parents. It is Josh’s mother, Lorraine, who first reports seeing the demon holding Dalton captive in her dream. In conversation with Lorraine, the same demon also suddenly appears behind Josh. Lorraine is coded as a catalyst that draws malevolent forces towards Josh. The entry of Josh’s mother into the narrative represents a sort of regression for him to a childhood state where he repeatedly defers to the authority of his mother and her clairvoyant friend Elise. Josh initially attempts to reject Elise’s dangerous re-introduction of his repressed astral projection. He speaks in a language that highlights rationality, usually held in opposition to the pre-repression pleasure principle (Freud Beyond 54). “How did the voice of reason become the bad guy here?” (Insidious). Nevertheless, Josh is compelled to re-enter the repressed netherworld of his childhood by his mother. Lorraine reveals to Josh a series of photos, repressed from his memory, in which a demon-hag advances ever-closer to
young Josh. Elise states that “suppressing your memory and your ability to astral project was the only way to stop her from getting into you.” The dialogue offers a cursory, almost dismissive phrase in which Lorraine makes clear her responsibility for neglecting Josh: “I’m sorry Josh.” In an analysis that identifies *Insidious* as participant with the films to which he refers, Gill concludes that “[t]he screams provoked by the anomalous monsters stalking these adolescents are a cry for help unheeded by parents” (20). Lorraine admits to Josh, “I dismissed your stories. I told you to grow up. And then I saw her for myself.” Elise takes some of the responsibility as well: “I didn’t want to make you remember all this. I do it for the sake of your son.” Lorraine and Elise convince Josh that Dalton has inherited his astral abilities from Josh, and that he must re-enter “The Further” to save his son. Convinced of his responsibility in Dalton’s plight, Josh agrees to follow Dalton into “The Further.”

*Insidious* goes one step further in its nostalgic project to relocate the responsibility of the horrors of negligent parents on the previous generation. Unlike the slasher films to which Gill refers, in which primarily male parents are negligent, *Insidious* identifies these parents, Josh’s parents, as exclusively female. Both Josh’s and Renai’s fathers are entirely absent from the narrative, not even endowed with a backstory to explain their absence. Monstrous mothers, however, abound. As the film opens, the first-person perspective of the camera wanders through young Josh’s house as he sleeps, no sign of parents anywhere, until the camera settles on a demonic hag loitering in the window with ambiguous designs against the sleeping child. Once Josh’s mother enters the narrative, the malevolence and most spectacular aspects of the horrific mise-en-scène accelerate substantially. The “monstrous-feminine” and the relationship of the male child to the phallic mother are articulated by Barbara Creed in predominantly psychoanalytical terms (Creed 35). “With the subject’s entry into the symbolic, which separates the child from the mother, the maternal figure and the authority she signifies are repressed” (44). When Josh defers to the authority of his mother and Elise, he enters a world of his own repressed unconscious in which the demonic matriarch he suppressed as a child is unleashed once again. The parental Other is decidedly female on three counts: Lorraine, Elise, and the demon-hag (although the demon-hag is performed by a male actor—an aspect of the narrative substantially highlighted in the sequel.)² Before their intervention, Josh’s successful repression of the monstrous patriarchal mother was his own salvation. Unfortunately, his own mother initiates Josh’s recall of his pre-repressed state; her friend Elise, maternal to Josh in many regards, re-initiates him into its labyrinthine psychology; and the evil repressed mother within “The Further” finally possesses him. Josh has some serious mother issues.

The nightmarish dream-world of “The Further” is clearly Josh’s unconscious. The viewer is only given access to it through Josh and never through Dalton. It is a spectacular dream-world, similar to that of the *Elm Street* films, in which all manner of supernatural

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entities maintain residence, a labyrinth of Josh’s nostalgic unconscious. Dalton becomes trapped in this realm where Josh’s repressed demons, re-introduced by his mother, run rampant. In “The Further” Josh is confronted with horrific foils for both his mother and himself. Both Josh and the Satan-like demon are “desperate to possess Dalton,” and the demon-hag, like Josh’s own mother, is just as desperate to possess Josh. In this regard, *Insidious* takes the misogyny present in the slasher cycles to new heights. Freddy Krueger is a demon in his own right. The Satan-like demon in *Insidious* and his somewhat less threatening ‘younger brother’ (the long-haired wraith) have a mother. The demon-hag is clearly the matriarch of the horrific netherworld. Her dominance disavows God’s paternity over the representation of Satan that holds Dalton captive allowing both the Christian and the bourgeois domestic father to remain unscathed by the film’s project of blame. Instead, the narrative focuses on the Oedipal invasion of the mother into the son’s successful repression of her authority and the concomitant annihilation it brings (Erens 359). Breaching his successful repression of the maternal Other unleashes the demons over which she presides, and Josh must once again confront the matriarchal demon-hag he had successfully repressed as a child.

Josh finally confronts her in a mirror, invoking Lacan’s “mirror stage” and what Christian Metz describes as “the mirror which alienates man in his own reflection and makes him the double of his double, the subterranean persistence of the exclusive relation to the mother” (4). The identification with a complete “imago” that Lacan suggests marks the first recognition of the individuality of the subject is represented, in this case, by the oppressive matriarchal feminine repressed within Josh’s unconscious (Lacan 256). The demon-hag is a horrible and repressed aberration of Josh’s mother’s patriarchal authority, given access to Josh via the mirror-stage mechanism within “The Further” of his unconscious. Unable to escape it in his conscious life, she is free to do so once he allows his consciousness to explore his unconscious. There repressed within “The Further” is his mother’s alter-ego, finally able to possess him entirely, keeping him trapped within, while she runs rampant.

This pivotal moment in the narrative plays with an immanence of the self-identificatory effects of the mirror stage in an unconscious space that allows for Freud’s return of the repressed. In the third section of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, he offers a compelling description of the way in which the early repression of desires (and, by extension, the fears that emerge from them) that would cause displeasure will inevitably re-emerge in aberrant forms.³ Josh’s repression of matriarchal authority “renews its demand [to penetrate Josh’s conscious mind], and, since the path to normal satisfaction remains closed to it by what we may call the scar of repression, somewhere, at a weak spot, it opens another path for itself” (Freud, *Moses* 127). However, the repressed never enters “consciousness smoothly and unaltered” (*Moses* 95). The demon-hag’s final possession of Josh’s being brings horrific results, realized in the murder of
one of his corporeal matriarchs. The clairvoyant Elise, now a threat to the aberrant demon-hag's authority over Josh in the real world, is promptly dispatched.

The closure of the film leaves the demon-hag at large, in Josh's male body, a specific reference to the horrors of masculinized women now able to masquerade in male bodies and practice their malevolence by refusing the male child's need to keep them repressed. By confronting his own evil foil, Josh rescues Dalton but leaves him a world where the unrepressed patriarchal mother, now possessing Josh, is unleashed. Josh's negligence, now full-fledged malevolence, is not his own; it is the effect of his domination by a repressed representation of the matriarch. The monstrous-feminine has found a safe haven in the negligent father, and Josh's responsibility is neatly displaced onto the previous generation of mothers (of which the narrative provides an excess of three, but not a single father). Renai is little more than a damsel in distress at the hands of Josh's demons, assaulting her through their son. The promotional images for the movie suggest that there is an inherent evil to Dalton reminiscent of *The Omen*, but the narrative does not deliver on that false promise. Josh's son Dalton is merely a susceptible portal for the demons of Josh's unresolved matriarchal repression.

*Insidious* is a horror nostalgia film that longs for the conservative adolescent monsters of the 1970s and 1980s: parents, women, and nightmares. It works as a fantasy of displacement that revisits the themes introduced by Pat Gill in his analysis of negligent parents in *A Nightmare on Elm Street; Insidious* relieves the new generation of parents of the blame they placed on their own parents. Facing indictments in contemporary horror film and in the media, the children of the *Elm Street* generation, now parents themselves, were in need of such a fantasy. It is no coincidence that the remake of the original *A Nightmare on Elm Street* came out in 2010, the same year as *Insidious*. Both represent articulations of 'the Freddy Krueger generation,' nostalgic for its own neo-conservative worries, so much less troubling than the socially critical, and unsettlingly violent torture pornography in current vogue. *Insidious* is a horrific nostalgia film in which an aging 'slasher' generation attempts to reassert its horrific agenda of repressed fears regarding parental responsibility and displaces all responsibility onto the mothers of the generation previously blamed. The film's most progressive moments are the vilification of Christianity, but this vilification is also displaced onto women. *Insidious* not only placates the parental anxieties of the generation to which it appeals, it specifically placates male anxieties and recodes their negligent parents as entirely feminine, salvaging both the current parental generation, and the patriarchal order of their responsibility for the terrors faced by their children in a single revisionist nostalgia. *Insidious* offers its audience a reassuring narrative through which to explain away contemporary parental negligence. It's not our fault, kids; ask Freddy Krueger—it's all Grandma's fault.

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1 In “A Souvenir of Love,” Rey Chow observes that “cinematic image, because of its visible nature, becomes a wonderfully appropriate embodiment of nostalgia’s ambivalence between dream and reality, of nostalgia’s insistence on seeing “concrete” things in fantasy and memory” (Chow 64).

2 Carol Clover argues that while “Freud stressed the maternal source of the unheimlich, the Other of [slasher] films is decidedly androgynous” (Clover 100).

Works Cited


*Insidious.* Dir. James Wan. Film District, 2011. DVD.


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I. Representation and the law

As Jacques Lacan induced, “a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier” (Lacan, XI 207).¹ This proposes a sort of grammar of subjectivity, governed by the principle of exchange, which Hegel's note on the relation of subject to predicate provides some explication of:

Only in the end of the proposition does the empty beginning become actual knowledge. This being so, it is not clear why one does not speak merely . . . of that which gives the meaning without adding the meaningless sound as well. But it is just this word that indicates that what is posited is not a being [i.e. something that merely is], or essence, or a universal in general, but rather something that is reflected into itself, a Subject. (Phenomenology of Spirit 12-13)

The experience of subjectivity, that is, our self-reflexive perception of ourselves, entails a certain structure of representation. Borrowing from mathematical language, the situation of the signifier in this structure can be designated as medial, as the graph of the adjacencies between edges. A consequence follows: If all possibilities of subjectivity are governed by signification, they must also be functions of representation.

A certain positing negativity is constitutive of the possibility of representation itself, but, and as in the sense of media, this mediation has an irreducibly materialist ground in our corporeality. As Hegel intoned and Slavoj Žižek delights to insist, the Subject is also Substance², and those representations you hold to yourself as the most integral of possessions (unless you have lost your mind) are material both in the sense of the horrifyingly spongy texture of your cerebral cortex and in the sense of the object of the observational avarice that torments of the stand-up comedian. Simultaneously, subjectivity-as-representation requires an irreducibly abstract ground: “If the Real is a minimal difference, then repetition (which establishes this difference) is primordial” and, consequently, “the Real is primordially nothing but the gap that separates a thing from itself, the gap of repetition” (Žižek, LN 614). This gap...
is, in Freud’s model of consciousness, one that is characterized by difference and by trace:

We shall suppose that a system in the very front of the apparatus receives the perceptual stimuli but retains no trace of them and thus has no memory, while behind it there lies a second system which transforms the momentary excitations of the first system into permanent traces. (Freud 538)

And so Jacques Derrida, in his brilliant ventriloquism of Freud, states that even at the level of the so-called substrate of consciousness—the neuronal register, as it might be called—there is the necessity of a resistance, a site of minimal difference:

They “thus offer a possibility of representing (darzustellen) memory.” First representation, first staging of memory. Darstellung is representation in the weak sense of the word but also frequently in the sense of visual depiction, and sometimes of theatrical performance. (Derrida 77)

It therefore follows that representation is a matter medium specificity: “Fraying, as the tracing of a trail, opens up a conducting path. Which presupposes a certain violence and a certain resistance to the effraction” (Derrida 77).³

There is a third entity that exerts its force within this theatre of operations: The effects of the Real are manifested in the field composed by the subject’s relationship with the Other, which is also the site of the primordial articulation of the Law. As Lacan notes, this is “the symbolic articulation that Freud discovered at the same time as the unconscious that is, in effect, consubstantial with the unconscious. The necessity of this articulation is what he indicates to us in his methodical reference to the Oedipus complex” (Lacan, Ecrits 181). This Law (honoured, as the Tsar by the Imperial Ballet, by the enactment mobilizing representation) emerges in a manner that is simultaneously antecedent to and concurrent with the subject’s originary encounter with the Other, and that takes place as a joust under the auspices of recognition.⁴ In this engagement, the subject’s challenge to the Other is her desire to assume the Other’s desire, for the only way by which she can be certain that the Other recognizes her is if that Other requires her recognition in turn. This dialectic produces the ground from which she can stage the experience of subjective perception and, as it follows, the fantasy of consistent reality.⁵ As Slavoj Žižek summarizes:

What, then, is fantasy? The desire “realized” (staged) in fantasy is not the subject’s own but the other’s desire—that is to say, fantasy, a fantasmic formation, is an answer to the enigmatic “Che vuoi?” (What do you want?) which renders the subject’s primordial, constitutive position. The original question of desire is not directly “what do I want?” but “What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I for others?” (LN 686)
In order to locate herself by the coordinates of the Other’s recognition, the subject asks, “What do you want from me?” But, notwithstanding that this occurs in a field, it must not be understood as a Euclidean diagram: “The L of the calling-into-question of the subject in his existence has a combinatorial structure that must not be confused with its spatial aspect. In this respect, it is the signifier itself that must be articulated in the Other” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 185). Accordingly, the graph of this act—which is unconscious and pre-ontological, but an act nonetheless—must be thought of in the most resonant application of the term: “I draw.” This sense of the verb conveys both an invocation of the Other’s desire and the inscription of “the lines that condition the perceptum—in other words, the object—insofar as these lines circumscribe the field of reality rather than merely depending on it” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 187).

This symbolic mechanic, and its complement, the spatial and narrative coordinates of the bourgeois family, stage the primary scene. Accepting this proposition, the fulcrum of the problematic of subjectivity—the punctum of the analytic question—returns, again, through the motif of the signifier. This mark—the mark of the signifier—is typecast from the symbolic matrix designated Name-of-the-Father and the schematization Lacan offers early on is one means of rendering its effect, the subject, precisely as she is: As a graph. Glossing Freud’s “A Note Upon a Mystic Writing Pad,” Derrida observes, “Psychical content will be represented by a text whose essence is irreducibly graphic,” (75) which can be understood both as the graph of the Lacanian function $<>o$, but also and at the same time, from its full significance, the graph as it signifies to scratch, to carve, to write, and to write down, and to propose a law.

**II. The symbolic coordinates of psychosis**

As the guarantor of symbolic exchange taking place on the field that, defined by signifiers, becomes the ground of their meaning, the Name-of-the-Father is one of the surveyor’s pegs designating the site where the subject emerges as an effect of the contest there enacted. For the subject who evades psychosis, the Other is the “locus from which the question of his existence may arise for him” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 182), and the “the fourth term is given by the subject in his reality, foreclosed as such in the system and entering into the play of signifiers only in the form of the dummy [mort], but becoming the true subject as this play of signifiers makes him signify” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 186). This is so because the enunciation of the Name-of-the-Father bars, and therefore defers, the subject’s desire, and in doing so provides the minimal difference that is constitutive of her subjectivity (and of those imaginary operations coordinated in classical psychology under the identity “percepts”). In order for the requisite minimal gap to emerge, something, as Žižek argues, “has to be radically (constitutionally) excluded” (LN 668). This object, “objet petit a, is that which should be excluded from the form of reality, that whose exclusion constitutes and sustains the frame

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itself” (Žižek, LN 668). The object a functions as the object of desire precisely through its relation to the subject who has been denied it by virtue of the bar of deferral, creating a minimal difference within the object necessary for it to bear gracefully the subject’s desire. To extrapolate this statement into the neuronal register we can again consult Derrida, who extrapolates its function there from the periodicity that Freud insists governs the action of perceptual neurons, which, as he quotes Freud, “appropriate the period of an excitation”: “Pure difference, again, and difference between diastems. This concept of period in general precedes and conditions the opposition between quantity and quality and all which that opposition covers” (83). Periodicity, resulting from deferral, is in this sense both a material and ontological ground for the subjective perception of the world as consistent. In the symbolic order, periodicity is produced as a function of phallic signification, which, precisely by its limiting of jouissance, produces the first “petite mort” and all those that follow. This structure of termination—of death—governs the functions that constitute the percipiens: “Traces thus produce the space of their inscription only by acceding to the period of their erasure” (Derrida 112).

In the economy of psychosis, the advent of the Master-Signifier, and therefore, the emergence and situation of the Name-of-The-Father, is thrown off-kilter. In this event, the dialectical rhythm—the flickering of the signifier as it is barred—disintegrates, producing a failure of the fantasized stability of representation: “the object (in this case, the gaze or voice) is included in reality, the outcome of which is the disintegration of our “sense of reality,” the loss of reality” (Žižek, LN 667). In this scenario, the primal scene is bereft of the source of minimal difference and is rendered obscene:

It is the lack of the Name-of-the-Father in that place which, by the hole that it opens up in the signified, sets off a cascade of reworkings of the signifier from which the growing disaster of the imaginary proceeds, until the level is reached at which signifier and signified stabilize in a delusional metaphor. (Lacan, Ecrits 207)

The “foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father” opens a space through which the obscene father emerges, usurping, so to speak, the father in his symbolic function as the establishment of Law. If the Name-of-the-Father is summoned but fails to appear, “a pure and simple hole may thus answer in the Other; due to a lack of the metaphoric effect, this hole will give rise to a corresponding hole in the place of phallic signification” (Lacan, Ecrits 191). The vortex marking this absence is both utter, excessive jouissance and the substantified Real: The blind spot where the object returns the gaze of the Other to us becomes seen, and the Law, which, as a terminus, is symbolically bound to death, no longer bars the subject, causing the establishment of a fantasy-structure in which the objet a of her desire, no longer deferred, collapses from its function as the mark of the site of pure
abstraction into the screen of fantasy as a perceptible entity.\textsuperscript{9}

In light of these considerations we may re-read Guy Debord’s theses on the coordinates of late capitalist subjectivity in their ontological specularity. Debord, joining Marx and Lacan after Freud, articulates a fundamentally historicist analysis of the problem: “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 12).\textsuperscript{10} This constitution of simulacra, is, as Debord diagnoses, the drive of the late capitalist mode of production, composed of

an everyday life that should be understood as the systematic organization of a breakdown in the faculty of encounter, and a replacement of that faculty by a social hallucination: a false consciousness of encounter, or an “illusion of encounter.” In a society where no one is any longer recognizable by anyone else, each individual is necessarily unable to recognize his own reality. (Debord 152)

Here, abstraction is reified into the spectacle; so that it is no longer an encounter with the Name-of-the-Father that articulates the signifying cut of abstraction or its Law. With no place from which to pose the question “What do you want?”, the subject is no longer a symptomatic conversion of this question, but is rather a figure of the obscene: A psychotic hallucination of encounter.

The mediation constitutive of subjectivity has its correlation in representational technologies: “The structure of the psychical apparatus will be represented by a writing machine” (Derrida 75). But not all writing machines are bound by Law—or, rather, some writing machines reproduce not the chain of signifiers made possible by the cut in the real but the substantified cut itself. The narrator of Kafka’s In the Penal Colony describes a scenario in which the coordinates of signification are evocative of a technique of representation wherein the signifier itself has become the subject of reference—in which the writing machine that graphs the Law onto the skin of the prisoner is the most obscene substantification of the signifier that the cruel, primordial father could produce. The apparatus performs the operation of “substituting the signs of the real for the real” in a manner that illustrates the implosive consequences of the deployment of a representational, “perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (Baudrillard, Simulacra 2), and the Commandant is an exemplum of the obscene father, “an absolute Master for whom there are no limits; yet simultaneously, he possesses an insight into the very kernel of our (subject’s) being, our desire has no secret for him . . . [he is] a father who knows” (Žižek, Symptom 159). It is this father from which we have no secret, no place from which to ask, “What do you want?”

In terms of a critique of capital, this structure also emerges in the spectacle: “The

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spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power’s totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence” (Debord 19). In such scenes, we find parables describing the iteration of a symbolic system (that of late capital) in which “the barriers of representation rotate crazily, an implosive madness which, far from being ex-centric, keeps its gaze fixed on the center, on its own abyssal repetition” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 73).

**III. The Spectacle and The Ring**

Guy Debord’s inaugural thesis on the society of the spectacle takes on a resonant insistence when considered in terms of this graphing: “The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life” (12). Here Debord is invoking Marx’s distinction between dead labour and living labour (Marx 287-90). However, recalibrated as it is under the regime of real subsumption, this autonomous movement is not that of a death drive, but of an *un-dead* drive—that is, what we might imagine as the sex drive of a virus:

Replacing that necessity by the necessity of boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs, now met in the most summary manner, by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs, all of which come down in the end to just one—namely, the psuedo-need for the reign of an autonomous economy to continue. (Debord 33-34)\textsuperscript{11}

An exemplary allegory of the psychotic coordinates of this mode of subjectivity and of production is presented in the 2002 psychological horror film, *The Ring*. As could be expected, the generic conventions of the family-drama horror film are invoked by the manner in which the incidents of the plot unfold and the regular coordinates of the (improper) family drama emerge. Rachel is clearly a failing mother, Noah is an absent, immature, father, and their preternaturally independent son Aidan is being plagued by “visions” it becomes clear he is receiving from a diabolical source. But the events of the film are inscribed in a manner that is fundamentally concerned with mediation, both in its subjective and technical senses, and it is this scene that ultimately configures the subject-position of the its protagonist and of the identificatory subjectivity of those who view it.

The opening mise-en-scène explicitly engages with that form of mediation that emerged in conjunction with the transition from industrial to late capitalism, by which I mean to say: Television. As generic convention dictates, it dramatizes the situation of two teenaged girls home alone at night. However, their conversation displays a discomfiting obsession with the subjective encounter with mediation. Katie, remarking “I hate television. It gives me headaches . . . it’s like a big conspiracy . . . any ideas how many electrorays are travelling through our brains every second?” recalls Jean Baudrillard’s succinct technical explanation of the means by which this medium substantifies the gaze of the Other. As an analogue mediation, “the cinema
is an image; that is to say not only a screen and a visual form, but a *myth*, something that still retains something of the double, of the phantasm, of the mirror, of the dream,” and as such is incomparable with

_the “TV” image_, which suggests nothing, which mesmerizes, which is itself nothing but a screen, not even that: a miniaturized terminal that, in fact, is immediately located in your head—you are the screen, and the TV watches you—it transistorizes all the neurons and passes through like a magnetic tape—a tape, not an image. (*Simulacra* 51)

Following Baudrillard’s logic, television is the screen through which the obscene emerges, and it is precisely this obscene relationship to the screen (which, recalling Lacan, is the frame that establishes the consistency of our subjectivity) that is established through Becca’s recounting of a story common in turn of the century North-American oral culture:

“I got a better one. Heard of the videotape that kills you? . . . You start to play it and it’s like someone else’s nightmare. And then suddenly this woman comes on, smiling at you, seeing you through the screen . . . someone knows you’ve watched it.”

The screen is, as we know, not *supposed* to be watching us, and the conviction that it is is a clear indicator of the advent of a psychotic economy of representation. These intimations of destabilization converge in the moment that concludes the opening vignette, when the television turns on automatically and registers the real of its medium in the form of the static of a non-signifying signal. The event of Katie’s death, linked causally by virtue of syntagmatic order to the apparition of the television screen, is given to be seen by the viewer of the film in the imaginary register. An imperceptible image flashes, followed immediately by the infection of the entire cinematic screen by static, which functions to inscribe the eye of the viewer within the scopic economy of the film by virtue of the perception of a substantified gaze. This representational schema erupts throughout the film as moments of visceral temporal and visual disturbances that appear visually similar to hallucination but are presented to the viewer as objective by virtue of their inclusion in the diegesis of the film. By virtue of our position as the seeing subject we are required to identify with this psychosis, and this is in no small part responsible for the extremely unsettling subjective effect produced by the film. A strategic intensification of the corresponding affect is effected by the deployment of a consistent visual trope depicting the destruction and the distortion of the image of the subjects who have fallen under the obscene Other’s gaze, and whose faces (by which they ought to be recognizable) are scratched out in drawings, blurred in photographs, subject to digital distortion in security monitors.

Nonetheless, the narrative structure of the film proceeds along recognizably logical lines, therefore appearing to secure the fantasy of consistency that accompanies just-regular-type-pathological subjectivity. Prompted by

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the worrisome drawings being produced by her young son after the death of his cousin, Rachel becomes engaged with the mystery of Katie’s death, interviewing her traumatized friend and tracking down the location of the allegedly murderous transmission. She herself views the montage, which presents a series of disconnected but saturated images that are characterized by their uncanny manipulation of normative proportion and which recur again and again throughout the film. Still, while the effect of these moments is disconcerting, there is nothing to explicitly indicate to the viewer that the incidents of the plot are exceeding the limits of natural logic until Rachel asks Aidan’s estranged father Noah to help her “find out where the tape came from.”

In preparation, Rachel makes a copy of the tape, noticing that the time tracker is scrambled, and won’t make sense. Noah’s more sophisticated playback equipment confirms this, initiating a conversation that indicates that, impossibly, the tape has no record of being recorded.

Noah: “Are you sure this is a copy? The numbers are all screwed up.”

Rachel: “Same problem got copied I guess.”

Noah: “That’s impossible. The numbers are the control track. They’re put on the tape whenever it’s recorded which means, theoretically, that there shouldn’t be any images . . . When you record a track, the makeup is like a signature for whatever does the recording, like a camcorder, VCR or whatever. So the control track can tell us where it came from. To not have one . . . I mean, that’s like being born without fingerprints.”

Simultaneously, the distinction between visual representation and the corporeal begins to deteriorate. This is viscerally introduced in the scene where the image of a fly, which previously had unsettled Rachel by seeming to so real as to be on the “real” side of the screen, attains corporeality as she is printing photos of images from the tape as they appear on a screen. As she pulls it from the screen in a moment of primordial and obscene transgression, the boundaries of her own body are similarly transgressed—that is, she begins to bleed from the nose. This symbolic movement is reiterated and substantified in the next syntagm, a nightmare sequence in which Rachel coughs up an electrode while water leaks through the telephone receiver she is engaged with. As she looks through the door of Aidan’s room, Samara is in his place, and grabs her arm. Rachel wakes screaming to discern a burned handprint on herself. Again, what ought to be a site of representation proper—the dream—has been rendered obscenely corporeal.

These manifestations of a psychotic economy of subjectivity persist as incidents in the diegesis; yet, as the film progresses towards its anticipated resolution, several scenes indicate a potential return to a normatively configured primal scene. In a moment consistent with this trajectory, Noah admits that while he does not want to be Aidan’s father, “but I don’t want anyone else to do it either—be your father.” Aidan replies, quite properly, “It’s a conundrum.”
Here is a precise dramatization of agency of the Name-of-the-Father: It produces “a riddle in the form of a question the answer to which involves a pun or play on words” (“Conundrum”). However, these gestures towards normativity are persistently undercut by an insistent iteration of the psychotic through its potentials of mediation. While this conversation is going on, Rachel is looking at Becca’s scrapbook. A shot panning across the stage: “2. People don’t even know how luck they are compared to the people in this book. 3. When they referred to the TV as a “magic box” it was so strange.” These words are bordered by a compulsive repetition of a drawing of a fly.

Nonetheless, the overarching tendency of the action of the film continues along a predictable course, which takes the form of a supernaturally-inflected detective story. The island to which Rachel has traced the origin of the images is washed over with the melancholy patina of a curse, but as she becomes more and more engaged with locating the agent culpable for the death of her niece that agent is imagined as a subjective being. And so, while we visually encounter a series of shots that repeat the images of the tape as these irrupt into the diegesis of the film as hallucinatory flashes or montage, these images are figured as merely supplementary to historical record where the ‘real story of the tape,’ so to speak, is to be found. While they retain their hallucinatory quality of the purely visual, they appear to be contained within the logic of the clue. Thus, although Samara’s progeny does seem mysterious—the doctor on the island says of her mother, “She wanted a child . . . adopted, they said, never where”—it becomes clear to Rachel that the murderous acts of the entity operating through the agency of the tape are those of a terribly angry, because terribly wronged, ghost of a young girl. The reaction of Samara’s father to Rachel’s unearthing of the story—violence, and, moments before his suicide, the categorical assertion, “My wife was not supposed to have a child”—provides the viewer evidence of an unstable perpetrator whose injuries to the little girl require recompense in order to restore balance to the ethical economy of the film. Towards this end, Noah and Rachel locate the site where Samara was, as they understand, imprisoned at the hands of a maddened father. The small room at the top of the barn is staged and lit like a theatrical scene, with a television set prominently placed in the center and vortex of the room. Rachel says, wonderingly, “He kept her here, alone” to which Noah, indicating the television, replies, “Not alone.” This trace of a scenario appears to provide an explanation for the role that television plays in what now seems to be a fairly explicable haunting. When the Ring (the well Samara was pushed down) is excavated, in archaeological fashion, from under the floorboards of a cabin, it seems almost logical that a television set would become animate and knock Rachel into it. This is so especially because it causes her to discover the body that, although it appears grotesquely large for that of a small child, is recognizable as that of the girl represented in the videos Rachel had uncovered through her investigation. This syntagm

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produces what appears to be the narrative closure of the film: The body is recovered and will be buried, posing the identifiable termination of the grievance of an angry ghost. Alongside this resolution, an exhausted Rachel initiates the possibility of normative domesticity with Noah, telling him, “I want to go home,” causing him to embrace her in a gesture towards familial reconciliation that is reiterated in the following scene, when as the reconstituted family drives home, Aidan wakes to see his parents holding hands.

But then there is the twist, which accomplishes a dialectical sublation of the normative iteration of the trajectory of a horror film. The next day, Rachel, now an attentive mother, wakes Aidan, who asks, “What happened to the girl? Is she still in the dark place?” Rachel replies, “No, we set her free.” And Aidan, terrified, reveals the handprint burned into his arm: “You helped her? Why did you do that . . . You weren’t supposed to help her. Don’t you understand, Rachel? She never sleeps.” And thus the remorseless logic of the film asserts itself. In Noah’s apartment, the television turns on, and on again, to represent the image of the well, and Samara emerges from it, moving disjunctively towards the gaze of the spectator and nearer to the site at which the screen maintains the minimal barrier between representation and the Real. As this traumatic Thing—the gaze substantified—punctures through the field of vision that the screen establishes, her physically distorted body retains the flicker of the pixelated mediation of the television signal.

Rachel discovers Noah’s body moments later. He’s been positioned in the chair in front of the television, and, it is, again, his face which bears the mark of the Other’s violence in its disfiguration. Here, stripped of the fantasy that this Other is a creature of limits, she reacts in a perfectly logical and perfectly ineffectual manner, screaming the agonized question of the subject: “WHAT DO YOU WANT? WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?!?” The receptor is not, in this extremity, the Other whose enigma is represented through metonymy, but, rather, the obscene Other that desires only its unlimited repetition through a medium that is symbolically related not to death but to undeath. Here, then, is the moment of tragic reversal. Rachel asks herself, “Why not me? What did I do that he didn’t?” and realizes: Unlike any of the others who have encountered the tape, she copied it, facilitating the deathless reproductive drive of the Thing. This is the Law that Rachel, in requiring Aidan do the same while knowing very well that the proliferation of the tape will perpetuate the grotesque annihilation of other subjects, is rendered subject to.

The final moment of the film places us under a similar fright, the fright of the confrontation with an absolute Master from whom we can receive no recognition. Aidan, turning to Rachel, asks, “What about the person we show it to? What happens to them?” The next frame is an accelerated repetition of the montage, hailing us as subjects into the psychotic scopic economy of the film.
IV. The Undeath of representation

“The principle which Hegel enunciated in the Jenenser Realphilosophie as that of money—“the life, moving of itself, of that which is dead”—has now been extended by the spectacle to the entirety of social life.” (Debord, 151)

In Hegelian thought, the possibility of representation is ontologically suspended from that movement of abstraction—the advent of terminus—which we might consider as emanating from the space where the subject is punctured into herself by virtue of her missed encounter with death. Death is a fundamental necessity for recognition, and, therefore, for subjectivity, which is, after all, the outcome of a “fight to the death,” in which the “truth of pure negativity and being-for-self” is attained because the subject has experienced “fear and trembling at the encounter of the absolute Lord, death” (Hegel 117). “This pure universal moment,” writes Hegel, “the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, pure being-for-self, which consequently is implicit in this consciousness” (117). The absolute negativity and the advent of the Law, is, as has been elaborated here, not represented in the subject’s perception, but rather appears only by virtue of its effects: “This nonexistence, of course, does not simply reduce the Law to an empty imaginary chimera; rather, it makes it into an impossible Real, a void which nonetheless functions, exerts influence, causes effects, curves the symbolic space” (Žižek, PV 39). To clarify by virtue of reiteration: This scene is configured by the ontology of the Notion, which here is the motor—the drive—whose effects comprise the being of recognition, and this scene requires, precisely, a terminus as its condition of possibility. Again, Derrida guides us in tracking this through the technics of mediation:

Force produces meaning (and space) through the power of “repetition” alone, which inhabits it originally as its death. This power, that is, this lack of power which opens and limits the exertion of force, institutes translatability, makes possible what we call “language”, transforms an absolute idiom into a limit which is always already transgressed: a pure idiom is not language; it becomes so only through repetition; repetition always already divides the point of departure of the first time. (95)

The media effect of subjectivity is dependent on a certain relationship to death. What Derrida calls “the datum or effect of repetition,” requires a minimal difference between the representation and its referent (95). A mode of representation that collapses this difference is oriented by the psychotic precisely because “the sting of the relation to death is obliterated in the process” (Derrida 95).

There is another dimension to this relation. It is suspended from the encounter with the Other:

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For it is an experiential truth for psychoanalysis that the question of the subject’s existence arises for him, not in the kind of anxiety it provokes at the level of the ego, which is only one element of his cortege, but as an articulated question—“What am I there?”—about his sex and his contingency in being: namely, that on the one hand he is a man or a woman, and on the other that he might not be, the conjugating their mystery and knotting it in symbols of procreation and death. (Lacan 184).

Further, in the visual regime the split between the eye and the gaze is itself necessary for a symbolic relationship to death:

Indeed, it is by means of the gap in the imaginary opened by this prematurity and in which the effects of the mirror stage proliferate, that the human animal is capable of imagining himself mortal—which does not mean that he could do so without the gap that alienates him from his own image, this symbiosis with the symbolic, in which he constitutes himself to death, could not have occurred. (Lacan 186)

But in a mode of production where valorization no longer has an origin, there emerges an order of pure exchangeability, a translation that is purely transparent because it is without referentiality—without origin. The structure that in recognizable subjectivity is suspended from the necessarily unsubstantified traumatic thing produces psychotic subjectivity when, as we have seen, the object a as the blind spot from which we repress our (necessary) engagement with the Other’s desire becomes substantified. For Debord, in the register of the scopic, this phenomenon is precisely the characteristic of the spectacle: “The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical” (15). In these circumstances, when the minimal gap of representation implodes with the neutralization of the poles between signifier and signified, it is not death or the aim of the death drive which is manifest, but the simultaneous desiccation of subjectivity and death.

To what extent can we propose that this implosion is homologous to the configuration of psychosis as described by Lacan? After all, even in psychosis, the representation of subjectivity is configured by the Law of the Father, even if only by its absence. Perhaps an example might be the obscenity, and the obscene fascination, that emanates from the taxidermied object that no longer functions as a relic, but instead as a corpse that is denied its symbolic resonance and, like the digital photograph, is thereby reduced to nothing but a deathless body because it does not decay. And so also the body of Samara as it emerges from screen of representation itself, abolishing the relationship between the body and its representation in the imaginary and thus, the symbolic status in subjectivity of the body itself, which rests on its immateriality, on the fact that it is and remains a phantasm... It belonged to our era to wish to exorcise this phantasm
like the others, that is to say to want to real-
ize, materialize it in flesh and bone and in 
a completely contrary way, to change the 
game of the double from a subtle exchange 
of death with the Other into the eternity of the Same. (Baudrillard, Simulacra 95)

Under this economy, what Baudrillard refers 
to as the emergence of the structural law of 
value, representation becomes a consequence 
of the substantification of the specular into the 
spectacle. A subjectivity suspended from the 
mirror stage, from the encounter with the gaze 
of the Other, is a media effect of the analogue 
regime of representational technology. But in 
late industrial capitalism, and the concurrent 
emergence of the digital regime, we encounter 
the evidence of an epistemic rupture in a com-
pletely different configuration of the symbolic 
body corresponding to:

the absolute loss of the image, bodies that 
cannot be represented, either to others or 
to themselves, bodies enucleated of their 
being and their meaning by being trans-
figured into a genetic formula or through 
biochemical instability, point of no re-
turn, apotheosis of a technology that it-
self has become interstitial and molecular. 
(Baudrillard, Simulacra 101-02)

This body is homologous with the medium 
specificity of the digital screen, a body whose 
representation is the body of the code, that 
in copying itself without remainder into its 
representations leaves no tracking, no trace, no 
indication of an origin prior to itself, and con-
sequently, loses the symbolic relationship to 
death, and, so, the motor of the drive.

In 1972, Derrida tracks the necessity of 
the terminus in the register of representation in 
the following cascade of propositions. In rela-
tionship to techné as mark:

The machine is dead. It is death. Not because 
we risk death in playing with machines, but 
because the origin of machines is the rela-
tion to death . . . Representation is death, 
which may be immediately transformed into 
the following proposition: death is (only) 
representation. But it is bound to life and the 
living present which it repeats originarily. A 
pure representation, a machine never runs 
by itself. (114)

If death is finitude and representation is the 
consequence of determination, then represen-
tation is death and therefore death is for us as is 
the representation: our ground.

Except when the machine runs by itself.

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1 Lacan continues, “The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject” (XI 207).

2 Or, more precisely, “The living Substance is being which is in truth Subject, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself. This Substance is, as Subject, pure, simple negativity, and it is for this very reason the bifurcation of the simple; it is the doubling which sets up opposition, and then again the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its antithesis” (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 10).

3 What is also presented here is a problematics of origin, and, more specifically, of an origin that is lost, which, in psychoanalytic terms, is the ground of the drive: “In the case of the object a as the object-cause of desire, we have an object which is originally lost, which coincides with its own loss, which emerges as loss, while, in the case of the object a as the object of the drive, the ‘object’ is directly the loss itself—in the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the lost object to loss itself as an object. In other words, the weird movement called ‘drive’ is not driven by the ‘impossible’ quest for the lost object; it is a push to directly enact the ‘loss’—the gap, cut, distance—itself” (Žižek, LN 639).


5 The perceptual experience of the world is, precisely, the subject’s fantasy, which is designated by the Lacanian matheme ($<>o$). Žižek elaborates: “The function of fantasy is to serve as a screen concealing this inconsistency; finally $s(O)$, the effect of the signification as dominated by fantasy: fantasy functions as ‘absolute signification’ (Lacan); it constitutes the frame through which we experience the world as consistent and meaningful—the a priori space within which the particular effects of signification take place” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 123).

6 Here Lacan echoes Freud’s ambiguity: “Strictly speaking, there is no need for the hypothesis that the psychical systems are actually arranged in a spatial order. It would be sufficient if a fixed order were established by the fact that in a given psychological process the excitation passes through the systems in a particular temporal sequence” (Freud 537).

7 We may also note that this atemporal periodicity is the logic of exchange under capital: “In this opposition commodities as use-values confront money as exchange-value. On the other hand, both sides of this opposition are commodities, hence themselves unities of use-value and value. But this unity of difference is expressed at two opposite poles: the commodity is in reality a use-value; its existence as a value appears only ideally, in its price, through which it is related to the real embodiment of its value, the gold which confronts it as its opposite. Inversely, the material of gold ranks only as the materialization of value, as money. It is therefore in reality exchange-value. Its use-value appears only ideally in the series of expressions of relative value within which it confronts all the other commodities as the totality of real embodiments of its utility. These antagonistic
forms of the commodities are the real forms of the motion of the process of exchange” (Marx 199).

8 This term must be deployed in the sense that its condensed etymological significance provides: facing against the scene, and, to borrow from the language (and logic of origin) of botany, the reproduction of a reversed shape. The primal scene has not been evaded; it is instead reconfigured in a manner that reproduces an inverted subjective effect.

9 To propose a symptomatic condensation that this configuration produces, we can note that the dream of Kurtzweilian singularity—a combination of the foreclosure of death and a desire for perpetual life outside of bodily/sexed reproduction (radically misogynist as many aficionados of this “singularity” are, we must note that their singularity is equally a rejection of the symbolic Other) often correlates to the libertarian political tendency, which also emphasizes the rejection of any determination, that is, the legitimacy of any authority, symbolic or otherwise, that proposes to limit her acts.

10 Just as, for and after Marx, the mode of production is not only the technic (narrowly conceived) of commodity exchange and production, but is a social relationship between people mediated by the commodity form: “It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Capital 165).

11 In an embarrassingly symptomatic fashion, the desire for what is boundless—not sublime, but boundless—has become ubiquitous and indeed pops up in the most astonishing places, like the current marketing campaign advertising the University of Toronto.

12 In strictly psychoanalytical terms, it’s useful here to provide Žižek’s gloss on the sensation of being watched: “What happens in psychosis is that this empty point in the other, in what we see and/or hear, is actualized, becomes part of effective reality: the psychotic actually hears the voice of the primordial Other addressing him, knows that he his being observed all the time” (Žižek, LN 667).

13 “The time of production, time as commodity, is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals. It is irreversible time made abstract: each segment must demonstrate by the clock its purely quantitative equality with all other segments. This time manifests nothing in its effective reality aside from its exchangeability.” (Debord 110)

14 “Insofar as the symbolic constitutes itself by way of positing some element as the traumatic non-symbolizable Thing, as its constitutive exception, then the symbolic gesture par excellence is the drawing of a line of separation between symbolic and real; the real on the contrary is not external to the symbolic as some kind of substance resisting symbolization—the real is the symbolic itself qua “not-all”, i.e. insofar as it lacks the constitutive exception” (Žižek, “Woman” n.7).

15 Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange and Death, 6-7.


In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (1999), Milan Kundera describes two types of laughter—the demonic and the angelic—and observes the dilemma of the latter. According to him, the demonic laughter, having at its core “a heroic skepticism that immunizes them to the hypocrisy of sentimentality” champions the natural human condition of non-sameness, thereby inhabiting a negative yet truthful character (Kimball n.p.). In opposition, what Kundera calls as “circle dancing”: “take two steps in place, one step forward, lift first one leg and then the other” is the rhetorical meaninglessness of repetitive actions and the lure of the mob that defines the angelic laughter. In its refusal of the artless human condition and “the dream of a paradise where distinctions vanish and all men are brothers” (Kimball), the post-1948 Communist occupation and horror of Stanilism had in effect rendered Czechoslovakia a hotbed of repetitive actions and the lure of the mob that defines the angelic laughter. In its refusal of the artless human condition and “the dream of a paradise where distinctions vanish and all men are brothers” (Kimball), the post-1948 Communist occupation and horror of Stanilism had in effect rendered Czechoslovakia a hotbed of what 19th-century Europe had coined as kitsch. Kundera, who was officially stripped of jobs because of his acerbic writings, remarks that this was a period of collective lyrical delirium . . . People like to say: Revolution is beautiful, it is only the terror arising from it which is evil. But this is not true. The evil is already present in the beautiful, hell is already contained in the dream of paradise and if we wish to understand the essence of hell we must examine the essence of the paradise from which it originated. (Roth 96)

In Eva Le Grand’s reading, the “absolute denial of shit” refers to a heavenly state, as it overlaps God’s image with the ignominious, defecating mortal condition. In her words: “shit evacuates everything which makes humanity different from the image of a God wreathed in purity”(14). Thus, shit becomes the metaphorical gestation of kitsch. The protagonist of Kundera’s novel The Joke had jokingly written to his girlfriend, “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!,” and was rusticated from the university, deposed of the party membership and confined to the mines. Because a joke
in every community is the leeway where one’s distinctiveness can be most celebrated as well as the common mirror where a group sees its collective yet unique visage, to take away this self-reflective medium and to constitutionalize the enactment of humour become tantamount to the death of the creative divergence of a people under the menacing shadow of an all-engulfing kitsch.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera writes: “Kitsch has its source in the categorical agreement with being . . . What makes a leftist a leftist is not this or that theory but his ability to integrate any theory into the kitsch called the Grand March” (256-57). In another part of the novel, he follows this idea: “The identity of kitsch comes not from a political strategy but from images, metaphors, and vocabulary. It is therefore possible to break the habit and march against the interests of a Communist country. What is impossible, however, is to substitute one word for others” (261). Kitsch is that kind of automated meta-language and meta-practice that controls and crystallizes a group’s pathological responding quality through an inexorably extremist vice-grip, allowing no joke, no freelance article to dwell in a non-ideological middle-space between obsessive Communism and Trotskyism, collaboration and corrective barracks life, the status of a doctor and a window-washer. At the root of this atrocious gesture is then a high degree of defensive and xenophobic mechanism fearing betrayal of its most prized rhetoric—an attitude that functions alike for every bureaucratic undercover agent across the globe. Broch defines the immediate symptoms of kitsch as not only “poor taste” but “the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and to be moved to tears of gratification at one’s own reflection” (Kundera 2000: 134). This intimates a ritualized process of self-legitimation through repetitive enforcement of a sham idea with the same capacity that a demagogue employs to convince his audience. The brunt of this viciousness, no doubt, first and foremost impairs the faculty and the class of intellect and intellectuals respectively. It is hence to perform one’s individuation, to fight one’s erasure on the face of an overwhelmingly anonymous crowd, that body and its animalistic instincts become so important for Kundera. In *The Book of Laughter*, one character frustratingly recognizes that the number of orifices in human body are so limited that every individual almost copies another in her/his erotic life. Under such a realization, a radical breakthrough in terms of sexual experience can be the only promise for liberation—offering a kind of lightness that helps articulate one’s own free will against the perpetual oppression by a political and cultural sameness.

Kundera makes an excellent observation based on a clipping from the October 1993 *Nouvel Observateur*: to paraphrase him, of a list of two hundred and ten words that were given to the Leftists, when a poll was taken a few years ago, they had eighteen words in common that fascinated them. When the same survey was carried out in 1993, it had boiled down to three—“revolt,” “red,” and “nudity” (*Slowness*...
Thus, having to go on representing or defying the warped sign called Communism, the only way of reclaiming one’s human quotient is through nudity. The body’s magnitude as a respondent to the governmental apparatus is noted by Marjorie Rhine: “the individual body is a critical pressure point between an oppressive or imposing political system and all that is most private, most in need of being protected if any sense of individual integrity is to be retained” (231), and in Kundera’s own words: “a scene of physical love generates an extremely sharp light which suddenly reveals the essence of characters and sums up their life situation” (Roth 99).

In The Unbearable Lightness, as Rhine explains, Tereza’s physically conscious love for Tomas is proportional to her desire to escape her mother’s world of “vast concentration camp of bodies, one like the next, with souls invisible” (47). We understand how the body becomes the fulcrum of an individual’s existentiality in one of the most touching moments in Slowness, where the Czech scientist loses one of his false teeth in a brief dispute. Having previously lost his career and being left with the misconception of a sturdy body, which is no more than a “mishapen silhouette” of a physique that reminds him of the oppressive regime, his loss of a tooth means a second castration over and above the political assault.

The Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia was principally countered by the tactile body language of the cerebral masses, such that interplay between body and photography becomes momentous in the display culture of kitsch. The words ‘picture’ and ‘picturesque’ being very close, it is a cameraman’s eternal desire to capture something ‘live’ in its ‘pristine state.’ Yet, because the subject matter of the Soviet occupation had principally been macabre visions like war, death, mutilated bodies and destroyed artefacts, the wish to immortalize such moments is highly morbid. Further, an individual at a given time could as much be a manufacturer as a prey of kitsch because of the camera’s positioning and the body’s responsiveness towards it. This is because human anterior and posterior have completely different equations with the camera: while the former implies full-fledged exercise of one’s agency and the reduction of the camera into a mite of technology, in the latter, individual subjectivity is absolutely destroyed by a kind of helplessness and lack of knowledge, where in the absence of human facial language, the camera becomes a ruthless gargantuan apparatus of surveillance objectifying and swallowing up one’s entity. Taking pictures from behind imports the same pattern of violation as was perpetuated by the secret police while interrogating Tomas or seducing Tereza and tracking their every word and movement. The camera in these cases performs the watchdog’s role, disrupting what Kundera so appreciates about traditional liberal values: “respect for the individual, for his original thought, and for his inviolable private life” (Kimball). On the other hand, photography’s stunt effect and extracting of preset judgment from a given spatio-temporal framework is evoked in The Unbearable Lightness, where a parade initiated by an association of Leftist doctors is brought to a standstill following the death of the cameraman,
who is blown up by the mines while capturing such a ‘magnanimous’ undertaking. Flanked by a film star and an artist in order to popularize the parade, the missionary group was actually staging its philanthropic ideals before the camera; to that effect, dissipation of the group had to be an inevitable upshot following the death of the ‘eye’ before which it was narcissistically enacting itself. Kundera pre-empts our current climate wherein to make oneself heard or felt in a war or protest is impossible without cameras. Kundera calls this as the latest human condition where to make oneself be heard or felt in a war or protest is impossible without cameras. It is, according to him, the dancer’s syndrome, which Grand defines as an “imagological pantomime” (125). Owing to this same desire, the journalist in Slowness, while chased by her cameraman friend, cannot resist donning herself in a spectacular white gown before attempting suicide. Similarly, Vincent fancies sodomizing his female friend before “a sizeable, anonymous audience,” thereby appealing to an exhibitionist sex where public gaze is the only catalyst to help extend the phallic erection. In encountering a fiasco that roots back to his “wilted wild strawberry-like” member lies the hopelessness of orgiastic ambitions devoid of a focussed lens. The camera thus becomes a mock-up of the uncontrived self, whose kitschy presence, be it in detaining the external appearance or the real persona, henceforth renders the body visible or invisible while marking it undyingly with added value.

All over their respective presence in the two novels The Unbearable Lightness and The Joke, Sabina, the heretical descendant of a puritan Czech lineage, and Ludvik Jahn, the communist and intellectual student, epitomize two spent individuals, who through their numerous sexual escapades have traded their bodies on a sacrificial scale to both disquiet and quieten the raucousness of Communist music, band, food, writing and thought. Their orgy without consolation is, as Kundera would say, “a nudity that represents nothing at all, neither freedom nor filth, a nudity divested of all meaning, nudity denuded” (Slowness 117). They symbolize Umberto Eco’s notion of postmodernist, post-avant-garde “exhaustion” that tears one apart between “furiously anti-traditional avant-garde and the emergence of the post-modern willingness to revisit the past” (276). The mass desertion of churches alongside the encroaching “ugly architecture” of America that Sabina despises is what Adorno calls “a realm of artificial imaginary,” whose key drive, as he explains, rests in “a desperate compulsion to escape from the abstract sameness of things by a kind of self-made and futile promesse du bonheur” (Călinescu 228). However, even in their choice not to buy this new fake drabness that guarantees compensation and breakaway from an earlier quotidian existence, Sabina and Ludvik’s counter-kitsch expression has the danger of becoming an extension of kitsch, thereby floundering in the maelstrom of a vicious circle. As Călinescu points out: “a reaction against the ‘terror’ of change and the meaninglessness of chronological time flowing from an unreal past into an equally unreal future” is but another way of conforming to kitsch (248). This is because a
rejoinder to the regime is still a reaction towards it and not completely oblivious of its working principle. In such a forceful gesture, the body becomes the medium for random experiment. The body that had initially been a receptacle for the Russian spy’s sadism goes on to become a site for Prague citizen’s own masochism. In its victory as well as defeat, in the meticulous procedure of anatomical detection by an overwhelming state-run idyll followed by rejection of such an idyll through fetish for erotica, it is the body that gets doubly affronted.

Against the brain-dead auto-responsive network propagated by communist Czechoslovakia, a body’s individual consciousness of temporality becomes a statement about its personal position with respect to the system. While speed implies perfunctory mannerisms that serve one’s short-lived material wants, slowness becomes the knotty condition that ruminates in a zone of inertia without essentially hoping to be extricated. Thus, in *The Joke*, the character of Zemanek, a one-time jingoistic supporter of Communism, moves ahead as if seated on a speed-machine that ensures slick fame, and lives on as an empty signifier into which any meaning may be situationally fitted; Ludvik, betrayed by the party, remains but only and solely a synecdoche of Communism. Ludvik would never be able to catch up with and avenge his perpetrator Zemanek, because by the time he gets a chance to do so, Zemanek would have progressed along with the Czechoslovakian history and entered into the phase of “next generation”:

Today we were a different Jahn and a different Zemanek, so that if I hit out now, years later, my blow would be completely incomprehensible, would thus attain a completely different, alien significance not intended by myself, and could be deflected in every conceivable direction, in a way I could not even control, let alone justify. (274)

For Ludvik, to reconcile and exonerate the past would therefore mean disowning the greatest ordeal that he has faced and the greatest love for Communist ideology that he has harnessed, and ‘slowness’ is his only way to reclaim self-consistency: “How was I to explain to him that I needed to hate him?” (258); “Then I realized how feeble it was to want to annul my own joke when throughout my life I was involved in a joke which was all-embracing, unfathomable and utterly irrevocable” (271). Slowness thus inscribes Ludvik’s only possible sense of belonging in the bosom of hatred.

From this aforesaid episode, Kundera’s understanding of speed as a marker of forced amnesia and a way of living in ‘here’ and ‘now’ without paying heed to the future can thus be seen as an irrevocable split-up between the corporal theory and the psyche, causing the former to become a self-referential entity. The very resitive character of this speed stands on the awareness of its hollow chase for the Epicurean dream, because hedonism, as Kundera puts it, “has a melancholy backdrop . . . the Achilles’ heel of hedonism is not that it is self-centred but that it is . . . hopelessly utopian: in fact, I doubt that

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the hedonist ideal could ever be achieved; I’m afraid the sort of life it advocates for us may not be compatible with human nature” (Slowness 7-8). Beneath the mask of hedonism, however, speed can also be a way to avert quality thinking, to forestall drawing a trajectory between what one did and who one is. For the post-1968 Communist party of Czechoslovakia, the only way of clearing their extensive violence was also the excuse of speed—that the politicians had done the deed first and then (apparently) pondered. In this highly emotionless and blank impulse, there is a strategic avoidance of productive wistfulness, which signifies lack of passion and thereby a philistine attitude, in Liisa Steinby’s words, something “which wants only orgasms but not the whole range of eroticism” (161). Greenberg shows how kitsch and speed draw their lifeblood from the same placenta: “Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same . . . Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time” (emphasis added, Greenberg 10).

While Tomas is also a transporter of speed, he is the quintessence of “Es muss sein” (German for “it must be”), who defies Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence and lives in ‘this right now,’ such that speed in his case is a concrete progress carrying the germ of novelty. Roger Kimball compares Tomas with Kierkegaard’s aesthete in Either/Or, whose attempt to establish “a compromise between fear and desire” confirms him in the capacity of “a connoisseur of what Kierkegaard called ‘the rotational method’” (Kimball). For the likes of Zemanek, speed is the veneer for their vibrating around the same end in order to prevent a head-on collision into nothingness, a motion that does not take one anywhere but that endlessly tries to deflect an avalanche into retrogression. Zemanek is the nationalized communism’s kitschy version of speed which means impunity from guilt; he lives full-fledgedly neither in the present nor in the past but paradoxically becomes timeless. In opposition, Tomas and Sabina, despite their pleasure-seeking series of deathwards betrayals, live through complete responsibility of “reconstructive dialogue with the old and the past” (Călinescu 276) by neither unconditionallly dismissing nor approving any category but revisiting them with irony. Sabina, who loves light and unambiguous perception without falling for its two extreme borders—the total darkness and the blinding daze—who grants ‘prison,’ ‘occupation’ and ‘tanks’ their due malice without the slightest hint of drama or romance, is the perfect example of the avant-garde, by which Greenberg means “a superior consciousness of history” and a “new kind of criticism of society” (4). For both Tomas and Sabina, life has an unrepeatable spirit that does not abide by the ‘given’ and instead shapes its own incresate thrust by becoming a second original besides the available and accepted originals. They are products of the responsiveness “Einmal ist
“keinmal” or “what happens but once might as well not have happened at all” (Steinby 156), which creates them anew in every moment of history, positing them in the undying wonder of what Kundera calls “the old are the innocent children of their old age” (The Art 132). Their speed resonates with the freedom to choose, not the best because it cannot be known in advance, but in all serious intentions, which entails their escape from every form of enforcement. As Milan Jungmann points out, the betrayal by the Communist Party and its counterfeit socialist culture in Czechoslovakia had also caused former partisans like Kundera to assume drastic forgetfulness towards a past that had callously disabled their capacity of asking questions. In Kundera’s speedy transmutation by “subjecting to radical criticism everything that had heretofore made up the basic components of his ‘simple faith’” lay the counter-action towards the injury done to intellectualism by the bureaucracy (Jungmann 124).

Kostka, the physician who conceptualized Communism in terms of Christianity, has a great understanding of Ludvik’s overwrought inertia—because Ludvik has severed himself from the bond of Communism—yet because he has not enlisted as a faithful Christian, there is no way he can rid himself from the mire of hatred. The emptiness in Ludvik’s vengeance embodies dismissal of kitsch generated by both Communism and Christianity. What is more, these two conventionally hostile instances of kitsch become identical twins in amplifying Ludvik’s sense of indignation. His teaming up with or submitting before any one of them would have been as good as submitting before both. Kundera in his essays Testaments Betrayed explains how the ghost of our collective theological foundation in history makes it impossible to enunciate any communist idiom in severance from Christianity:

Over the course of the Modern era, nonbelief ceased to be defiant and provocative, and belief, for its part, lost its previous missionary or intolerant certainty. The shock of Stalinism played the decisive role in this evolution: in its effort to erase Christian memory altogether, it made brutally clear that all of us—believers and nonbelievers, blasphemers and worshipers—belong to the same culture, rooted in the Christian past, without which we would be mere shadows without substance, debaters without a vocabulary, spiritually stateless. (6)

Thus, even though Communism and Christianity formally do not acknowledge any kinship, the universal thread of kitsch passes through both of them. As such, in shunning one of these ideologies, Ludvik loses the sympathy of all straitjacket institutions and continues as an ostracized misanthrope.

The sacrosanct treatment of an allegedly atheist organization is realized in the deification of meta-communist icons by the ardent leftist Piotr Shelest: “I want you to know that Lenin

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and Stalin are still my exemplars . . . Let’s not mention them needlessly. You know, the Holy Scripture also says something like this: take not the Lord’s name in vain” (Prague Spring-Prague Fall 99). Such a dogmatic statement comes from the man who in his prime was notoriously politically xenophobic, which especially included his anti-Semitic diatribes, and who (as excerpts from his diary suggests) “considered Brezhnev a ‘weakling,’ a ‘milksop’ for not having made a real bloodbath in Czechoslovakia in 1968, similar to the one in Hungary in 1956” (Prague Spring 100). Viewing liberal and democratic socialist ideals as offensive initiatives by “abstract humanists” and “self-declared theoreticians,” a veteran like Shelest stands for the most reactionary mouthpiece of the party who would not let go of the platitudes about the “class nature” of communism. Broch explains how this echoes with the social anxieties and expectations of the institution of believers:

An open system, like the Christian one, is an ethical system: it provides man with the necessary directions for him to act as a man. The hints given by a closed system, on the other hand, are no more than simple rules of play, i.e. it transforms that part of human life which is in its control into a game that can no longer be valued as ethical, but only as aesthetic. (63)

Starting from music and artistic impression to political ideas, Communism had divided the people between those that followed the prescriptions and hence the authentic enthusiasts who would make it big under its rule, and the others. This second category literally sucked in everyone or thing—Bourgeois Right Wing supporters, the aristocratic class who were apparently apolitical, the Christian apostle, the heretical Leftist intellectuals and, as Tereza mentions in The Unbearable Lightness, the preregime constructions, public places, hoardings, birds, animals, et al. How shaky such an idyllic bubble must have been to feel threatened by the slightest cheek of the non-allies and thereby invest pointlessly on trivial niceties, is a commonly intriguing question.

At the administrative level, kitsch was manifested in the pompous attempt to commemorate the ideal that one wanted to achieve but also failed. Radoslav Selucky, a participator in Prague Spring remarks that this could be noticed in the most impractical decision taken by the obsolete apparatus of Czechoslovakia imitating the over-centralized planned economy of the Soviet even after so many crashes. One of the foremost features of kitsch is therefore never to be designed on the spur of the original moment and to always remain a vanity of hindsight. Harold Rosenberg writes: “Kitsch is art that follows established rules at a time when all rules in art are put into question by each artist” (266). Kundera has a more fitting example for this protracted stimulus: “Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by
children running on the grass!” (Unbearable 251). In other words, kitsch is rife with a secondary, plastic, hence superficial connotation. It generates nostalgia and phantasmal craving for the unattainable utopic ‘pure,’ clinging on to some empty signifiers that tend to vulgarize instead of refining vision. Matei Călinescu explains this imitative quality of kitsch and its endorsement by market economy: “Value is measured directly by the spurious replicas or reproductions of objects whose original aesthetic meaning consisted, or should have consisted, in being unique and therefore inimitable” (226).

When a regime inflicts such compulsory emulative gestures on its populace, sex becomes the last resort in shelving one’s collapse into the world of clones—the last shock-absorber to resist a stupefying fallback into the complacency of the Grand March and “red revolution.” Sex as the domain of the personal tries to defend its individualized asset from the sheer public gaze to which the flattening and absolutist government subjects it. Conversely, as sex falls in line with the regime and becomes a show, therein lies the tragically unsexed idea of ‘heavenly,’ which Grand understands through the gross celebration of ‘normality’ occurring in the erotic paradise: “with the image of an all powerful Adam, able to raise his member without excitement—therefore without devilish female temptation, as one raises an arm or a leg” (15).

The misused values of communism under Soviet invasion and Clement Greenberg’s historical retrospection about kitsch as a “debased and academized simulacra” share an obvious parallelism. Post-1948, the Communist Party, corroborating with Stalin’s “Socialist content in national form,” had started to espouse folk art with open-arms, turning even a traditional marriage into an emblem of popular art. No creative conception could thrive in isolation from the movement. Against such engulfment of folk culture by the universal (and originally urban) culture of communist kitsch, Tomas and Tereza clearly go back to the parishes precisely to reclaim that pure space where neither the autocratic force nor the avant-garde vision hijacks one’s everyday. They take on the role to fill the void of the countryside, whose original inhabitants have been mostly inveigled by the lure of a cultural-diversion-of-some-sort without actually internalizing what could be called a “genuine culture” (Greenberg 10). In the case of Ludvik and Jaroslav, there is a sharp fall from this ‘romanticized local,’ who see the most hideous passing of the Rides of Kings in Brno. With drinks, a volatile mob and the actual king missing from the procession (“all I could see was actors, and on their faces masks pulled on to represent cretinous masculinity, arrogant ruthlessness and brutishness”: Ludvik 293), the scene is like an apparition haunted by the absence of its own body. The kitsch that Dorfles describes as “being vulgarly reproduced and known not for their real value but for a sentimental or technical substitute of these values” (19) is precisely the situation of Rides of Kings in the modern-day. Fattening itself on the corpse of a fully matured tradition, it signals an esoteric code no one has the patience
to understand. As Ludvik says: “For many centuries young men have been riding forth in Moravian villages . . . with strange messages whose writ in some unknown language they pronounce with a moving loyalty and a lack of comprehension” (274).

Under such a regime, the impossibility to sieve music from noise, merriment from boisterous carousing, native folklores from their vulgarized modernizations becomes apparent. Thus, from ‘Our Ride’ that used to be a demonstration before the German officers to “the old, deserted, ousted king . . . without heirs” (The Joke 287), the party seems to have treaded a long, meretricious journey. Ludvik’s aversion for this Rides of Kings comprising motley costumes, painstaking officiousness and spontaneity and the hullabaloo of traffic and riders, plainly hint at the vague future of the party. A similar tyrannical jollity of Russian occupation in Czechoslovakia can also be recognized in Sabina’s repugnant encounter with music in a steelworks construction site: “Music roared out of loudspeakers on the site from five in the morning to nine at night. She felt like crying, but the music was cheerful, and there was nowhere to hide, not in the latrine or under the bedclothes: everything was in the range of the speakers” (Unbearable Lightness 93). In order to cover its spurious and duplicate merit, kitsch here invigorates itself with the power of immediacy, thus making a populace shed its objective distance and revel in the common weakness of myopia. This is then the opposite of the avant-garde Greenberg defines as a poetry or art for its own sake. In its vigorous baffling of the sense organs and shouting with “the veins standing out on their necks” (The Joke 259), kitsch, unlike the avant-garde, balances its ephemeral life on the edge of the challenge to convince the world of the ‘Cause’ of its existence.

While pointing out that kitsch by its hyperbolic mechanism had haunted Czechoslovakia for quite some time with the mirage of Communism, Kundera also sees it as the necessary, albeit fake glue that holds together the promise of human attachments and the sanity of a surrogate home. In Unbearable Lightness, the seeming lightness in leading a window-cleaner’s life that Tomas thinks as a holiday from his own, later looms as “a long-lasting preoccupation with merely weightless things” (160), such that the maximum length of this holiday can only be two years. It is the exact counterpart of the lightness that saves Sabina’s free fall into a goal-less weightless void, after she hoodwinks her parents, husband, country and love. While the classic ideal of romanticism and thereby the “heaviness” the author ascribes to Tereza is indeed seated on aesthetic lies and a “duplicate” way of living, he also makes us wonder: could this idyllic facet in her kitsch cut into Tomas’ erotically annulled body and make it bluntly look into the irreparable source of its crisis? As Steinby puts it, “Despite its absolute freedom and ‘nonnecessity,’ by giving life the required weight love can make it bearable to someone who otherwise would be condemned to the lightness of existence” (160).

Even as Kimball criticizes Kundera for calling his novels primarily love stories in which political contents serve as “incidental
embellishment or atmosphere,” (Kimball) he misses out on the author’s resistance against the diminution of a Czech layperson to a singular political kitsch of the collective. Celebrating interpersonal relationships through oddities of love and hate at the era of Soviet occupation becomes a resurrection of the mundane that in its eternal pose of self-defence against the State had either ceased to be or at its best remained a negation of the public version of communism. As Misurella reflects, such relationships do not replicate Dante’s elevated notions of Sin and body, but help “in determining what is essentially human, what is essentially self” (55). In a way, Kundera tells us that too much lightness, intellectual or otherwise, like too much ersatz living, can after all become unbearable. His avant-garde characters best know why.

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“Pop/Corn”
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In “The Lair of the Bachelor,” George Wagner reads *Playboy*-commissioned designs for a series of “masculine” domestic interiors. *Playboy*, says Wagner, “was always dependent on the spatialization of the lifestyle imagined in its pages” (195); the architectural drawings it published function as a means of “imagining sites for the *Playboy* lifestyle” (198). These plans—renderings of fantastic spaces designed to meet the needs of the magazine’s equally fantastic bachelor—appeared in *Playboy* between 1956 and 1970. Wagner notes that each space signalled by the *Playboy* floor plans, architectural elevations, and commentaries exists only as an immaterial, speculative structure; he notes as well the connection between the spatial fantasy elaborated by the magazine and the capitalist ideology both subtending and subtended by it. “The bachelor,” writes Wagner, “lives completely within the world of commodities and the market” (202); his bachelor pad is both “an icon of a liberated social position” as well as “of material acquisition” (204). The bachelor consumes gadgets, outfitting his home with up-to-date, specialized technology, and all to a single end: his seduction of women.

Wagner reads *Playboy*’s imagined interiors as elaborate woman-traps: spatial offspring resulting from the cross between technology and male sexual predation. According to commentaries accompanying artist’s renderings of these interiors, each functions as an engine designed to aid the bachelor in his pursuit, capture, and subdution of women. The magazine’s exegesis emphasizes the difficulty of the hunt, and the skill the wily bachelor must bring to bear upon it; its analysis of the spaces it imagines focuses on the helpful features each prospective trap proffers. As a result of this emphasis on the methods and mechanics of the capture of women, the commentaries Wagner analyses offer no clues regarding the method by which either the bachelor or a species of mediating technology might *eject* a woman from the bachelor’s domestic space. For example, Wagner notes that the description of the *Playboy* Penthouse Apartment jumps directly from the final moments of seduction, as “[s]oft mood music flows through the room and the stars shine in the casements” while the bachelor “snuggles down” with his latest conquest, to
the start of a new day, [when] the chime alarm sounds . . . : reaching lazily to the control panel, you [the bachelor] press the buttons for the kitchen circuits and immediately the raw bacon, eggs, bread and ground coffee you did the right things with the night before . . . start their metamorphosis into crisp bacon, eggs fried just right, and steaming fresh java. (201-02)

Wagner observes that “[t]he woman is never there in the morning, but the eggs and bacon are” (202). Yet given the multiple controls in place to ensure the woman does not leave—indeed, to compel her continued attendance on the bachelor—we must ask how it is possible that the tenant of the Penthouse Apartment finds himself serving a mechanical breakfast for one. Apart from the heavily implied obvious, what occurs between the moments of snuggling down and of consuming crisp bacon? When, and how, does the woman leave?

The missing description of her departure represents a substantial lacuna in the catch-and-release program *Playboy* sets out, since the bachelor’s status as such depends less on his ability to snare women than on his ability successfully to return them to the wild. Indeed, the maintenance of his very manhood demands her exit: Wagner indicates that “the domestic fantasies of *Playboy* are meant to compensate” for a number of fears surrounding dominant cultural constructions of domestic space (197)—constructions situating a man’s home as “appropriated” by women and children, taken over “as the domain of wife and family” (195). As evidence of these fears, Wagner cites Philip Wylie, who asserts (in his 1958 *Playboy* essay, “The Womanization of America”) that “America’s females [have] pushed and heckled their way into every private male domain;” Wylie laments what he labels “the encroaching ‘taffeta tide’—the feminization of the suburban domestic realm”—that “[t]he American home, in short, is becoming a boudoir-kitchen-nursery, dreamed up by women, for women, and as if males did not exist as males” (qtd. in Wagner 197-98).

He describes this trend as “spatial and architectural emasculation,” announcing gloomily that in its wake, “[m]en have become spatial expatriates” (qtd. in Wagner 198). As a corrective to this de-territorialization of an entire sex, *Playboy* proposes within its pages the carving out of all-male (and all-man!) domestic spaces in which the members of bachelor nation can nestle mechanically down. The bachelor “is fantasized as a free agent” whose home is not only “a space of imagined liberation,” but also one “in which technology serves as an extension of sexual desire” (199).

If the space is to continue as a site of liberation, however, its mediating technologies must facilitate not only the gratification of the bachelor’s sexual desire, but also his disconnection from others, especially women. It is no surprise, then, that after identifying desire as the only “palpable condition” of *Playboy*’s architectural enterprise and enumerating both the tangibles and intangibles after which the bachelor hankers, Wagner specifies the woman
“who seems to want to bolt” as the item topping the single man’s wish list (202). But since the fantasy of the Playboy apartment-as-seduction-prosthetic depends upon the continued (fantastic) existence of the free-agent bachelor, and since the free-agent bachelor only remains so if he can successfully avoid sustained connection with women, the entire Playboy house of cards is ultimately dependent not on the bachelor’s desire for the woman who will bolt, but on the bolting woman’s desire to flee. The collective schematic constructed piecemeal by Playboy over a decade and a half, then, signals that a particular construction of female rather than male desire founds the entire enterprise. And, unfortunately for the bachelor, at least one of the supplementary texts Wagner cites suggests that the bolting woman—whose behaviour must forcefully be shaped through coercion and electronics if our free-agent friend is finally to bed her—is at least as fantastic a construction as both the technologically-insulated bachelor and his Playboy pad.

As a counterpoint to Playboy’s disquisitions on the single man’s ideal domestic space, Wagner offers his readers Helen Gurley Brown’s Sex and the Single Girl (1962), in which the soon-to-be editor of Cosmopolitan magazine imagines the single woman’s ideal apartment. Gurley Brown partially confirms the power dynamic inherent in Playboy’s architectural commentary when she advises her readers that men “expect to corner you and gobble you up like Little Red Riding Hood” (qtd. in Wagner 203); seduction-as-predation, then, is Gurley Brown’s as well as Playboy’s theme. We might reasonably expect Gurley Brown’s text, then, to offer advice to bolting women—pointers on how best to evade the bachelor’s clutches, perhaps. These expectations, however, are thoroughly confounded: Gurley Brown encourages her female audience to facilitate rather than to avoid male predation. She counsels her reader to think of herself as a “star sapphire” whose “apartment is [her] setting,” since “[a] beautiful apartment is a sure man-magnet” (qtd. in Wagner 203). In Gurley Brown’s reading, predatory seduction is what every unmarried woman should encourage by setting herself up in her own apartment, since “if you are to be a glamorous, sophisticated woman that exciting things happen to, you need an apartment, and you need to live in it alone!” (qtd. in Wagner 202). Like the exegetes of Playboy’s fantasy architecture, Gurley Brown situates domestic space as a prosthetic to wield in the service of seduction. Her explicit advice to women, in the brief excerpt of Sex and the Single Girl Wagner quotes, is to facilitate that seduction on their own turf. Her implicit counsel, however, suggests that any answer to the question, “Your place or mine?” will do: her text teaches women to snag men by making men think they’ve done the snapping. Gurley Brown encourages the single girl to trap the bachelor by performing her own capture—she encourages women to occupy simultaneously both positions in the predator/prey binary.

So what happens when Playboy bachelor encounters Cosmo girl on his turf rather than hers? According to his literature, she will attempt to avoid seduction by bolting; according
to hers, however, bolting would be silly. While his apartment may not be the optimum setting for her “jewel,” it will nonetheless suit. In it, she is a glamorous, sophisticated woman in a glamorous, sophisticated place—a woman whose magnet has attracted a man, and to whom exciting things are about to happen! Surely, she doesn’t wish to bolt . . . ? What happens, then, when the bachelor’s only condition of desire for his fantasy space is not met—when the woman he thought was prey turns out to have predatory plans of her own? To offer one answer to this question, I turn to a recent incarnation of the fantastic bachelor and his equally fantastic home.

Barney Stinson, one of the main characters of the television sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (HIMYM, 2005-present), inhabits the twenty-first-century version of the *Playboy* apartment. His Manhattan aerie is the technological extension of himself—an engine composed of disparate parts allowing him literally to signal his purpose with everything he owns; as we are unceasingly reminded, his purpose is first to seduce and then to discard as many women as possible. Unlike the *Playboy* bachelor, however, Barney needs no prosthetic assistance to keep women from fleeing his home to avoid seduction, since the only women invited into it in the first place are those who have already been seduced. More important to Barney than seduction itself is the maintenance of the condition that permits his seductions to continue: his primary concern is in preserving his bachelorhood. When, in HIMYM’s season two episode, “World’s Greatest Couple,” Barney grudgingly agrees to let his friend Lily stay with him for a few days, he informs her that in his apartment, she is “in the heart of bachelor country. And, as a woman, you are an illegal immigrant here. Now, you could try to apply for a sex visa, but that only lasts twelve hours—fourteen, if you qualify for multiple entry. Ha!” In contrast to *Playboy*’s architectural focus “on a set of controls that instrumentally assisted the seduction” by preventing the bolting of women (Wagner 211), Barney’s apartment is designed around a set of controls that ensure women’s forcible departure. His home is a prosthetic designed to evict female guests, and thereby instrumentally to end seduction.

As Barney gives Lily a tour of his apartment, he explains to her its ethos, stating, “I don’t want to be in a relationship. That’s why I make it crystal clear to every woman who walks through that door that this is not a place to leave a toothbrush, this is not a place to leave a contact-lens case, this is a place to leave. “ In fact, though, Barney doesn’t have to make these things crystal clear: “Whenever a girl wakes up here, I never have to tell her to go build her nest somewhere else,” he says, since “my apartment does it for me.” The prosthetics embedded in Barney’s domestic space functionally cohere into a streamlined woman-ejection device. As the tour proceeds, Barney points out the component parts of this collective machine: there is the king-sized bed only half-covered with a full-sized blanket, and featuring a single pillow (“Everything about this bed,” he explains, “says,
‘Our work here is done.’); a bathroom, sans hairdryer, in which hangs a single towel (“You know where I keep that stuff? Your place.”); a toilet seat, spring-loaded so as perpetually to be up (“The coup de grâce! Patent pending.”); and an extensive, “professionally lit” pornography collection housed on the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lining the hallway (“Girls see this, they can’t get out of here fast enough.”). But all of these technologies come to naught when Barney, modern playboy, brings home Dawn, HIMYM’s contemporary version of Gurley Brown’s single girl.

The discomfort-by-design Barney’s apartment offers to female guests fails to faze Dawn. No blanket for her on the bed? No problem—the room’s chill cannot disturb her slumber, since she spends the entire night awake, staring at Barney as he sleeps. No towel for her, either? Again, no problem: Dawn doesn’t “buy into the myth that we need to shower every day.” In Barney’s world, “a fridge full of groceries or fresh coffee in the morning” signals a relationship; accordingly, his pantry is empty. But Dawn (you guessed it) doesn’t mind: “I’m boycotting coffee. You may as well drink the tears of a Columbian peasant farmer. God, I love this place! It’s a good thing I don’t have a job, because I could stay here all day!” Even Barney’s last resort—his prodigious, garishly lit pornography collection—fails to do the ejection trick. Dawn merely reads the collection as evidence of Barney’s open sexuality, which is, as she lets slip, “one of the reasons I love you. Did I just say that? Oh, well—cat’s out of the bag! I love you.”

In Dawn, Barney encounters a woman who refuses to bolt, and who thereby exploits the weakness built into the bachelor’s domestic fantasy. Her rejection of flight is paired with her refusal of the capitalist ideology underwriting the construction of Playboy’s fantastic bachelor: Dawn doesn’t need things. She is proof against the effects of the technology and gadgets in Barney’s antirelationship arsenal. As a result, not only do his machinations with blankets, pillows, towels, and hairdryers have no effect, his employment of technological gadgets (in the form of a rigged toilet seat, or remotely-controlled light and sound systems) is similarly ineffective. No consumer items exist that will insulate Barney from Dawn—that will mediate his relationship to her in such a way as to promote his own convenience and the security of his free-agent status. The borders of bachelor country have been thoroughly breached.

At the precise moment that Barney’s bachelorhood is most threatened by Dawn’s unrelenting presence, Lily enters the apartment. Mistaking her for Barney’s wife, Dawn is finally persuaded to evacuate the premises: she bursts into tearful recriminations and storms out. Her exit triggers Barney’s great discovery: “Wow,” he exclaims to Lily,

That was close. That hippie chick wouldn’t leave . . . She was freakishly immune to everything in my apartment, except you . . . Huh, you’re better than porn! . . . How’d you like to extend your stay here? All you’d have to do is pretend to be my wife, and scare off the occasional one-night stand.
In the wake of Dawn’s departure, Barney enlists Lily as a species of technology, recruiting her into the prosthetic architecture of the apartment itself. Dawn’s immunity to Barney’s existing stratagems has revealed the exceptional fragility of the construction “bachelor.” Lily’s masquerade as Barney’s wife, then, will provide an additional protective layer for this delicate being, not by signalling its existence overtly (as do the porn collection and the always-up toilet seat), but by thoroughly camouflaging it. Women like Dawn cannot target a bachelor if no bachelor appears to exist. Lily becomes a woman-deterrent device, part of the mediating machine keeping Barney’s domestic space safe from antibachelor incursions.

Her equivalence to just another of the bachelor’s machines is clear when we recall the portrait Wagner (via Playboy) paints of the bachelor as the solitary consumer of a mechanical breakfast for one: Lily’s first actions as Barney’s houseguest are to stock his refrigerator and to surprise her host with a breakfast of crisp bacon, eggs fried just right, and steaming fresh java. Her induction into the machine, then, takes place through its kitchen circuits, which increasingly become the focus of the protect-Barney’s-bachelorhood project. Lily’s first planned intervention as Barney’s “wife” takes place over another breakfast: after she scares off the woman who spent the night, she slides into the seat the woman has abandoned and shares with Barney the pastries, fresh fruit, orange juice, and coffee laid out on the table. Barney’s gradual relaxation into “married” life is signalled by his growing appreciation of the most important meal of the day: “I have to say, it’s kind of nice having food around here for a change,” he tells Lily.

But in his appreciation of a fully stocked pantry, and in sharing breakfast with the “machine” whose function is simply to prepare it, Barney begins to undo his own bachelorhood. Other changes rapidly accrue, documented in a brief montage of domestic bliss (one that includes a “properly” feminine orgy of consumption as Lily spends Barney’s money): throw pillows, area rugs, flowers, and fresh produce appear in the Stinson pad. Under the direction of his “wife,” Barney’s bookshelves are emptied of pornography and filled with books, and his bed is fully dressed with king-sized linens and multiple pillows. As this montage concludes, we watch Barney and Lily curl up on the now-cozy bed to watch Letterman. The next morning, they are shocked—although we are less so—when they wake up together. The greater shock for Barney, however, comes when he realizes that although they’ve slept together, they haven’t had sex.

“I don’t sleep in the same bed as a woman and not make a move!” he rails at Lily.

How could . . . ? You! You spooned me against my will! . . . We redecorated my place. We stayed in on a Friday night to watch Letterman, and then slept together and didn’t have
sex. Oh my god, we’re in a relationship . . .
You were supposed to be the vaccine, but
you gave me the disease. You gotta go.

In the “divorce” settlement, Lily keeps the cus-
tom-made Italian sheets. The series narrator
tells us, as the episode concludes, “And that’s
the story of how Aunt Lily furnished her apart-
ment.” Her ejection from the bachelor pad in-
cludes the bachelor’s rejection of the changes
she effected: the basic conditions of the bach-
elor’s home are, with her departure, reset.

But domesticity in the form of hetero-
sexual partnership, signalled by the feminine
consumption of home furnishing goods, is not
all that must be rejected by the bachelor if he is
to continue to uphold his position as Playboy’s
ideal reader. He must not simply remain unat-
tached; he must also remain obviously mascu-
line and straight. “A bachelor,” writes Wagner,

is a single man, but some delicacy has always
been required in the discussion of why the
bachelor is single . . . [W]e know that in the
shadows of the cocktail party, the speculation
is that the bachelor is a loser, or even worse—
he’s a queer. And as a result, the décor of the
bachelor must be carefully calibrated not to
send off the wrong signals. (196)

Wagner’s assertion is echoed by Bill Osgerby, who
traces the development of a masculine tradition
of conspicuous consumption through the late
nineteenth century and into the mid-twentieth.

Osgerby notes that despite the fact that “the
nineteenth century saw an extensive ‘bachelor
subculture’ evolve based on the network of eat-
ing houses, barber shops, tobacconists, tailors,
city bars and theatres that prospered on the pa-
tronage of affluent young bucks” (101), and de-
spite the success of Esquire magazine (launched
in 1933 to cater to “masculine identities based
upon the pleasures of consumption” [101]), at
the time of Playboy’s 1953 inaugural issue,
feminine connotations surrounding con-
sumerism were still pronounced. Self-con-
scious consumption, therefore, remained an
uncertain field for masculine identities keen
to maintain their credentials of heterosexual
manhood. Hence Playboy’s nude pictorials
were crucial. The pin-ups served to mark out
the magazine as an unmistakably masculine
and heterosexual text, allowing readers—
secure in the knowledge that their ‘manly’
identities would not be compromised—to
cruise freely through the magazine’s bounty
of fashion and furnishing.5 (100)

As such, it is no accident either that the home-
decorating purchases in “World’s Greatest Cou-
ple” are assigned to Lily rather than to Barney,
or that Barney as one incarnation of the Playboy
bachelor is so ruthlessly, misogynistically het-
erosexual: Barbara Ehrenreich’s observation
that “the breasts and bottoms” of Playboy’s sig-
nature nudes “were necessary not just to sell the
magazine, but to protect it” applies equally aptly

“Pop/Corn”
to Barney and his signature parade of disposable women (qtd. in Osgerby 104). Lily-as-home-decorator works to neutralize any suggestion of effeminacy on Barney’s part, but according to the *Playboy* formula, all potential suggestions of bachelorly queerness must also be excised. This is easier said than done on *HIMYM*, however, since both queerness and the threat of loser-dom are built into Barney from the series’ outset.

In the show’s pilot episode, Ted reveals his deepest fear: that he’ll end up like Barney, who is something of a running joke during the early years of the show (Lily calls him “the dumbest single person alive”)—that he’ll be “that weird, middle-aged bachelor” Marshall and Lily’s kids will “call Uncle Ted” (“Pilot”). As he vacates the apartment he shares with Lily and Marshall so that Marshall can propose marriage to his long-time girlfriend, Ted feels his “loser” single guy status keenly. And in the context of *HIMYM*, it’s a short step from single/loser to single/queer. In the pilot episode, the show presents its committed bachelor as a man who cruises other men in public washrooms (Barney introduces himself to Ted over the urinals in a bar’s mens’ room). Later in the pilot, Barney kisses Marshall full on the lips to demonstrate to Ted the action he (Ted) should have taken with Robin (a shocked collective gasp erupts from the show’s recorded audience). From the moment we meet Barney, then, the spectre of the queer bachelor lurks beneath the over-the-top heterosexuality the character performs. But in “World’s Greatest Couple,” that spectre is rather forcefully (and ham-fistedly) directed away from Barney and onto Marshall—as though the bachelor’s potential queerness is so potent that it cannot simply be kept under wraps but must instead be physically relocated. As the Barney-Lily “matrimony” storyline develops, a parallel story featuring Marshall’s side of the Lily-Marshall breakup plays out.

Marshall, beginning to climb out of a deep depression, wishes to resume the activities he had previously enjoyed as part of a heterosexual couple, only to discover how difficult those activities are for a single man to undertake. Marshall wants to go to Sunday brunch; he wants to make use of his Alanis Morissette concert tickets; he wants to attend a Broadway performance of *Mamma Mia!*—none of which he feels comfortable doing alone. But Marshall’s friend Brad has also recently been dumped, and the two men decide to do brunch and attend the theatre together. As Brad rhetorically asks, “Why can’t two single bros go out and rock brunch, Sunday-morning style?” Naturally, Marshall becomes a target of ridicule for Robin and Ted, who are dating at this point in the series’ storyline. In “World’s Greatest Couple,” we see Robin and Ted most often in the domestic space of Ted’s apartment, usually snuggling on the sofa. They mock Marshall’s connection with Brad, while Marshall simultaneously denies any romantic relationship—and in fact, there isn’t one. Robin and Ted, however, represent in this episode a judgmental, prescriptive heteronor-
mativity that Marshall desperately fails to live up to, as evidenced by his increasingly “radical” queer rhetoric:

Okay, you know what? You two are just threatened because I’m a single guy moving in on your couples’ turf. Well guess what? It’s my territory now. I’m peeing all over brunches, fancy dinners, and musicals. That’s right. Brad and I are taking back Broadway.

Marshall’s rallying cry, “I don’t care what either of you say. I am going to the Popover Pantry with Brad. We’re here, we hungry, get used to us, Brunch!” fails, however, to move his judges: like Lily and her designer sheets, Brad’s ultimately got to go. But if Marshall fails the heteronormative test in this episode, it is worth noting that Barney also fails it—and not only in “World’s Greatest Couple,” but in every episode leading up to it. Repeatedly overshot ting the mark, he caricatures masculine heterosexuality by performing it to excess, too virile to be successfully partnered in a reproductively heterosexual pair.

Although Barney Stinson is not precisely the bachelor Playboy imagines, he appears precisely to be the one the Playboy fantasy creates—the free agent who both disavows intimate relationship with men while using every means at his disposal to resist sustained connection with women. The series’ creators employ queerness as a shifting signifier that both pervades and glances off the Barney character; they also employ a properly masculine strategy of consumption to build Barney’s “den of seduction” (Playboy qtd. in Osgerby 105). The prosthetic technologies built into his home—those woman-deterring gadgets and toys—mark Barney as a late-capitalist masculine consuming subject par excellence. As such, his home—Playboy’s mid-twentieth-century bachelor pad, enacted onscreen in 2006—signals masculine heterosexuality, solving the “problem” not of female resistance to seduction, but of female resistance to seduction’s end. The bachelor, enacted, is concerned in his domestic space with sending queerness packing, and, rather than cajoling those women who would otherwise bolt, with forcefully removing those women who won’t. The bachelor pad in practice, then, is a prosthetic less of erection than of r/ejection.

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1 The one bachelor pad appearing both in Playboy and in reality is Hugh Hefner’s mansion. Wagner points out that although schematics for the mansion are not published in the magazine, we may catch a glimpse of it through the living-room window in the drawing of the bachelor’s townhouse that appears in Playboy’s May 1962 issue (208).

2 Again, the exception is Hugh Hefner’s fully realized Playboy mansion, which features a trap door in the living room floor, “through which,” writes Hef, “you can drop twelve feet into a kidney-shape indoor pool. ‘That,’ I’ll tell my visitors, ‘is where we throw the old discarded girls’” (qtd. in Wagner 212). At first glance, then, the mansion seems to come equipped with a device (however objectionable) for evicting
women. However, the mansion’s trap door doesn't actually remove a woman from the premises, it merely relocates her; in addition, the presence of the under-living-room pool echoes the indoor pool featured in plans for the bachelor’s weekend hideaway (Playboy, April 1959), which functions as a kind of aquarium “further[ing] the themes of containment: the woman becomes a zoological specimen, confined and observed within the pool” (Wagner 205). No instructions are provided for how the specimen might be released from its watery captivity.

3 Tangible desires: possession/consumption of the electronic gadgets and stylish accessories marking the bachelor as “in the city, but insulated from it by altitude . . . controlling his world remotely,” so that “security, convenience, and desire are electronically intertwined” (202). Intangible desire(s): erasure of fears of the potential for psychic castration signalled by the “encroaching ‘taffeta tide.’”

4 The premise of HIMYM is deceptively simple: a man in his fifties tells his children the story of how he met their mother. That man is Ted Mosby; his story, which continues to unfold, has now stretched through eight and a half seasons of television. Although Ted ostensibly tells his story in 2030, the “how I met your mother” portions of each episode—which comprise more than 90 percent of the show’s screen time—are set in the month and year in which each episode originally airs.

In the show’s pilot episode, Ted begins dating Robin, a Canadian ex-pat attempting to break into broadcast journalism, and we are introduced to Barney, a misogynist bachelor who has, by the time we meet him, seduced and discarded more than a hundred women (the season four episode, “Right Place, Right Time” sees Barney celebrating his 200th conquest). Barney is situated as a Lothario from the first moment he appears onscreen: in the first lines he speaks, he rhetorically asks Ted, “You know how much I like half-Asian girls?” (“Pilot”). In the season two episode with which this essay is concerned, the character Lily has broken up with Marshall and is destitute after having given up her teaching job to pursue her dream of attending art school. She finds herself temporarily homeless and briefly moves in with Barney. The two play, after a fashion, with domesticity and matrimony.

5 In the late nineteenth century, masculine pleasure in self-conscious consumption also needed to be accompanied by displays of “manliness.” The anonymous writer of “The Lair of the Bachelor,” an essay published in the July 1887 edition of The Decorator and Furnisher, describes the five-room New York apartment maintained by “Mr. Herman Oelrichs, the agent of the North German Lloyd Steamship Company” as filled with “costly and delicate bric-à-brac” supplanting the more usual décor associated with the stereotypical bachelor (“boxing gloves and foils,” “racing prints on the walls,” “a poker table, with its usual paraphernalia, a miscellaneous assortment of pipes,” “and everywhere countless pairs of slippers, wrought by fair hands to give ease to the tired and lonely occupant”). The writer asserts that “the bachelor apartment of today is a totally different affair” than the sad, sere masculine
spaces formerly occupied by unmarried men. He or she notes that in Oelrichs’s and others’ apartments, “we have pictures, lounges, faience, carvings, books, etchings, the piano or the violin, but generally with some one predominant feature to mark the owner’s taste”—one New York bachelor has decorated his lair with “a collection of India shawls that would arouse envy in the most placid and contented of woman-kind.” Perhaps as a result of the potential crossing of gender lines signalled by the recognition that both men and women might desire the objets the writer describes, he or she takes care to assure readers of the virile masculinity of the one bachelor she or he identifies by name, describing Oelrichs as “[a]n athlete himself,” who “doubtless when the spirit moves him to ‘punch some one’s head,’ betakes himself to the Athletic Club” (121). Oelrichs is a manly man, then, and all the etchings in the world won’t soothe his savage masculine need to knock a dude out.

6 Barney is played by Neil Patrick Harris, an openly gay actor—New York magazine dubs him “Hollywood’s First (Openly) Gay Breakthrough Star,” lauding his ability to play “a womanizer” (Nussbaum 1). Certainly, at the metatelevisual level, one of the pleasures of watching Harris-as-Barney derives from awareness of the disjunction between Barney’s personality and Harris’s public persona. Harris was not publicly out when HIMYM was created and launched, but his sexuality was not a secret to friends and family (Nussbaum 5). Since he was invited to audition for the role of Barney by a friend, casting director Megan Branman (Dransfeldt), and since he’d attended cast events with his partner, presumably his sexuality was also not a secret to the show’s cast and crew. When “World’s Greatest Couple” aired in October 2006, Harris was a month away from publicly outing himself via interviews in People and Out magazines, and on Howard Stern’s Sirius Radio show, in a preemptive series of moves to prevent a “scandalous” tabloid-style outing by Perez Hilton (Nussbaum 5).

7 Six episodes later, the relocation of queerness will be more permanently registered in the series’ overarching text: in the tenth episode of season two, “Single Stamina,” we meet James, Barney’s gay and black half-brother. In the character of James, race intersects with sexuality to forcefully assert difference and to shield Barney—presumably for the remainder of the show’s run—from any whiff of queerness. But just in case James’s racialized embodiment isn’t enough to do this trick, the show’s writers bring dialogue to bear on the matter as well. When she learns that James is gay, Robin is surprised: “Never in a million years would I picture you with a gay brother,” she tells Barney, as though the sheer force of his heterosexuality should be powerful enough to tamp down all potential homosexuality in his ambit.

8 The pair do almost spend the weekend at a B&B in Vermont to attend a wedding (“Two single guys on the prowl . . . it’ll be like Wedding Crashers!” Ted jeers), and the show’s writers play up the homosocial/sexual potential of such a trip: after Brad convinces Marshall to attend the affair, he triumphantly tells him that when he called to book a room, “There was one [. . . ] left, and we got it! Walt Whitman suite, bro!”
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Negotiating Space, Class and Masculinity in *How I Met Your Mother* by Kristen Shaw

Pop and corn—the interrelated themes of this issue of *Word Hoard*—are concisely explored by Sally Colwell in her article exploring the bachelor pad as it appears in the “corny” pages of *Playboy* magazine and in the spaces of thoroughly “pop” television sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*. Colwell’s article, “From Playboy Penthouse to High-Rise Playboy: The Bachelor’s Evolution,” deftly reveals the underlying insidiousness of pop/corn, insofar as these images—perhaps more easily precisely because they pass as harmless “fluff”—get under our skin, simultaneously informing and (re)producing particular cultural norms. While Colwell’s article focuses predominantly on the intersection of gender and sexuality, and how these identities are (re)produced through particular spatial representations, my response is inspired by Colwell’s brief assertion of the connection between capitalist ideology and the prosthetic technologies of the bachelor pad. Examining the episode of *How I Met Your Mother* that provides the basis for Colwell’s own article, I argue that the idealized masculinity of the straight, white, upper-class bachelor emerges and is normativized in relation to ethnic and working-class “others.” These opposing representations of masculinity are made visible through equally disparate spatial imaginaries: the streamlined luxury of the bourgeois bachelor pad stands in stark contrast to the abject spaces where “improper” masculinities emerge, threatening to dissolve the barrier between public and private on which bourgeois notions of heterosexual domesticity depend.

Colwell’s article begins by outlining George Wagner’s analysis of masculine interior designs produced for *Playboy* magazine between 1956 and 1970, interior spaces that “function as a means of ‘imagining sites for the Playboy lifestyle’” (101), a lifestyle centered on the seduction of women. Colwell succinctly summarizes Wagner’s central thesis, that “Playboy’s imagined interiors [are] elaborate woman-traps: spatial offspring resulting from the cross between technology and sexual predation” (101). What is missing from Wagner’s account, Colwell argues, is an account of how these spaces depend, not only on the ability to ensnare women, but to *eject* them after the sexual act is completed. An essential component of these spaces, she argues, is their ability to facilitate the removal of women after seduction is complete. What happens between the eve of
seduction and the morning after, where the bachelor is described as solitary once again, free to enjoy his coffee and bacon without disruption? Departing from Wagner, Colwell here brings us to her central two-part argument, arguing, first, that “the bachelor’s status as such depends less on his ability to snare women than on his ability to successfully return them to the wild” (102), and, secondly, that “the entire Playboy house of cards is ultimately dependant not on the bachelor’s desire for the woman who will bolt, but on the bolting woman’s desire to flee” (103).

In the section that follows, Colwell describes ways that female desire actually does infringe on this fantasy of the technologized bachelor pad, asking, “What happens [. . .] when the bachelor’s only condition of desire for his fantasy space is not met—when the woman he thought was prey turns out to have predatorial plans of her own?” (104). Colwell works out a potential answer to this question through a fascinating analysis of an episode of the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*, in which Barney Stinson’s bachelor pad is invaded by his friend Lily Aldrin. As Colwell remarks, Barney’s bachelor pad is a “stream-lined woman-ejection device” (104), a “prosthetic” outfitted with a series of technological gadgets that facilitate the ejection process and secure his private domestic space as the “bachelor country” he declares it to be. While Barney is at first resistant to Lily’s presence, Colwell brilliantly argues that Lily herself is enlisted as a species of technology, becoming a prosthetic by playing the part of Barney’s wife when his other devices fail at ejecting his sexual conquests (104). This apparently ideal situation is ruined, however, when Barney allows Lily to begin making small changes: a throw pillow here, a colourful rug there, and fresh fruit in the fridge, to name a few. These changes result in Barney committing a grave sin for a bachelor normally on the prowl: staying in on a Friday night to watch Letterman. As Colwell notes, Barney “begins to undo his own bachelorhood” (106), and it is only by ejecting Lily that “the basic conditions of the bachelor’s home are [. . .] reset” (107). In order to reiterate his bachelor identity, Lily—who is tellingly described as giving Barney “a disease”—must be removed.

The final section of Colwell’s article centers on the argument that *Playboy*’s ideal bachelor must not only remain single, “he must also remain obviously masculine and straight” (107). The spectre of the queer bachelor must be excised at all costs, which is made possible through the performance of a properly masculine (*i.e.* heterosexual) sort of consumerism. Colwell expands this argument by examining the second storyline of the episode, in which Marshall’s relationship with another recently-single male friend is coded as potentially queer, a “bromance” that is both mocked by Ted and Robin and represented as a dangerous form of homosocial male bonding. This threat is largely a result of the kinds of “effeminate” consumerism they partake in together: going for brunch, attending an Alanis Morissette concert, and partaking in fancy steak dinners. Like Barney, who must reaffirm his bachelor identity by
expunging the feminine influence from his carefully curated domestic space, Marshall must also “break up” with his male friend and avoid the kinds of consumerist behaviours that suggest queerness lurking beneath a normative heterosexual surface.

Throughout her article, Colwell deftly navigates a number of important and fascinating topics, examining the interrelation of gender, sexuality, and space. However, an interesting aspect of this episode which is not addressed by Colwell is the extent to which the representation of an “ideal” spatialization of the (technologized) bachelor lifestyle epitomized in Barney’s apartment is made possible through the contrast between Barney’s pad and the spaces that are represented as abject and undesirable spaces, and, by extension, sites of undesirable masculinity. Lily only ends up at Barney’s apartment—the “heart of Bachelor country”—because the only apartment that she can afford on her own has her living in horrible conditions. The newly-single Lily can only afford an actual bachelor pad, crammed full with a toilet, bathtub, and 3-in-1 kitchen appliance. The dirty and run-down apartment is populated by rats and, as Robin notes, “different cultures!” in the form of Lithuanian neighbours who cook, gamble and cut each other’s hair in the hallway. Eternally positive, Lily remarks that she is learning Lithuanian because of her neighbour, who is heard yelling (what we assume are expletives) through the wall.

Lily eventually transplants herself to Barney’s sleek pad, the sterility of which serves to represent a “proper” kind of upper-class masculinity that, even if it is not amenable to “feminine” touches associated with heterosexual domesticity, is nevertheless preferable to the kinds of abject masculinity on display in her former, temporary abode. As Colwell notes throughout her article, Barney’s apartment serves as the spatialized representation of a normative white, middle-upper class heterosexual masculinity, but what I would add is that this representation is bolstered by the previous representation of a literally leaky space that is associated simultaneously with vermin (Ted notes that her “roommate is a raccoon”) and foreign bodies out of place and out of sync by virtue of their ethnic otherness and lower class position.

The apartment’s “leakiness” is rendered literal when Lily tries to pull down her makeshift Murphy bed, accidentally destroying the wall that separates her apartment from that of her Lithuanian neighbour. The neighbour stares at her incredulously, eating a bowl of cereal off his pronounced stomach. This event is the last straw, compelling Lily to seek shelter with Barney despite his reservations. This scene—and the contrast between the leaky apartment and Barney’s self-contained bachelor pad—reveals the extent to which the proper bachelor pad depends on a particular partitioning of public and private space. Barney’s bachelor pad is a thoroughly private space, unavailable even to his friends, as, to quote Ted’s voice-over at the beginning of the episode, “none of us had set foot in his apartment” before this incident with Lily. The self-contained insularity of Barney’s apartment stands in stark contrast to Lily’s apartment building, where the lines between

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public and private are frequently trespassed—the Lithuanians cook, gamble, and cut each other’s hair in the hallway—activities typically relegated to private spaces, associated with both the maintenance of the body and with illicit social activities.

Whereas these ethnic and lower-class “others” are associated with an unrecoverable leakiness and danger—which is, by extension, linked to a particular kind of improper and undesirable masculinity—the climax of the episode’s narrative shows that Barney’s pad and his masculinity are also penetrable, but only in an acceptable way. Lily’s ability to “convert” Barney suggests that despite the technologized prosthetics he employs to keep his bachelor pad free of “feminine” accoutrements, with enough prodding, all bachelors can easily slip into the imperfect perfections of white, heterosexual bourgeois coupledom, symbolized by the throw pillows, the fresh fruit and coffee, the Friday nights watching Letterman on a 300-inch TV in a giant king size bed. While the spatialized representation of non-white, working class masculinities further normativizes Barney’s particular brand of masculinity, his aggressive singledom is made all the less threatening by the climax of the episode which suggests that even the most staunch bachelors (and bachelor pads) can be converted and made amenable to what Judith Halberstam calls “straight time” (and space), ways of life that align with normative white bourgeois heterosexist ideology. Alternatively, the kind of abject masculinity on display in Lily’s apartment is represented as fundamentally dangerous—this is a form of masculinity incompatible with bourgeois values and capitalist ideology.

Furthermore, an essential characteristic of the bachelor pad—as is visible in both the Playboy-commissioned interior designs and in How I Met Your Mother—is, as Colwell aptly notes, not only the ability to engage in a “properly masculine” sort of consumerism, but also to have the luxury of private space in the first place, particularly in a city like New York (where the show is set). This is a privilege that, as HIMYM perhaps unwittingly foregrounds, is specific to a particular class of predominantly white men, and is a privilege that someone like Lily—who is a kindergarten teacher and aspiring artist—cannot afford on her own. This episode shows her during a period of transition, the only period of the series where she has broken up with her long-time partner, Marshall, and can therefore no longer afford to live in a more comfortable building. As a light-hearted sitcom, Lily’s struggles to find decent housing are, of course, transformed into comedic hurdles. However, I think it is also telling that the majority of the episode focuses on Barney and the now-single Marshall struggling to maintain their respective versions of masculinity, predominantly through negotiating particular spaces, rather than on Lily’s struggle to find her own, non-precarious space.

The implication, instead, is that women are naturally “at-home” in domestic spaces, whereas men must constantly engage in a series of strategic negotiations to re-stake private
space as their own. This relates to Wagner’s argument, cited and examined by Colwell, that the “domestic fantasies of Playboy are meant to compensate’ for a number of fears surrounding dominant cultural constructions of domestic space—constructions situating a man's home as ‘appropriated’ by women and children, taken over as ‘the domain of wife and family’” (Wagner in Colwell 102). In this sense, Lily is, to reiterate Barney, the female “disease” that takes over the domestic sphere, reinforcing what Wagner calls “spatial and architectural emasculation” (Wagner in Colwell 102). This perspective of the private sphere as the woman’s domain has, obviously, enabled the (re)production of harmful gender stereotypes, but it also suggests that while women are always and naturally at home in the private sphere, impulsively adding throw pillows, colourful rugs, and cantaloupes like Lily does, men must always stake out their claim to domestic space, albeit, through a careful negotiation (as Colwell notes) of gendered and spatial codes influenced by socio-economic status. Unlike the Cosmo girls mentioned by Colwell, who have “predatorial plans of their own” (104) and disrupt the fantasy of the ideal bachelor as a result, Lily’s “desire” is not sexual, nor really desire at all. Rather, the episode represents Lily’s home-making as a naturalized feminine inclination towards (desexualized) heterosexual domesticity.

This reminds me in particular of the phenomenon of “man caves.” As an enthusiastic and shameless lover of home renovation reality shows, I am constantly surprised at the popularity of these spaces, which typically take the form of a basement where (predominantly married) men are allowed a space of their own to watch sports, drink beer, and temporarily escape from family life. Naturally, man-caves are a class-specific privilege, but they also reinforce the notion that the rest of the home is the domain of women. In this sense, man-caves act as a contemporary mutation of Playboy’s bachelor pad, defined as they are by the absence of women and children who, to reiterate Wagner’s point, are perceived as having “appropriated” the domestic realm from men. Jokes about being “whipped” (i.e. controlled and therefore emasculated) by their wives are abundant in renovation shows, and the man-cave is represented as the consolation prize enabling domesticated men to retain some of their dignity. Like the fantastic bachelor pads of Playboy and How I Met Your Mother, the phenomenon of man-caves is yet another example of how space is gendered and serves to reiterate and reinforce particular gender, class, and racialized identities.

In Female Masculinity, Judith Halberstam argues that “masculinity […] becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white middle-class body” (2). This argument justifies Halberstam’s analysis of alternative masculinities, but it also suggests that it is non-white, non-heterosexual, non-middle-class depictions of masculinity that frequently serve as models of deviance against which normative masculinities are established as ideal and “natural.” As I argue above, it is the ethnic and class difference of Lily’s immigrant neighbours that bolster the representation of Barney and Marshall as safely
masculine. Their respective “slip-ups”—Barney allowing Lily to infiltrate his pad, Marshall engaging in a suspiciously queer relationship—are represented as hurdles that they must face but will ultimately overcome by the end of the episode, reinforcing both as stalwartly masculine in the “right” ways. It is precisely these happy endings that make “fluff” taste so good—but which also, more frequently, leave a bad taste in our mouths. Analyses like Colwell’s are vital precisely because they investigate these hidden undercurrents that both reflect and reproduce normative ideologies and the spatial orders that reinforce them.
Works Cited


“Pop/Corn”
Everyday Abstract:

As a remedy to the banality of the modern urban experience, the surrealist collective *SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL* conceived of the *dérive*: the unplanned, improvisational meandering through urban space. Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* examines the commercialization of individuals’ interaction with the city in a way that complicates the Situationist’s notion of the dérive as entirely free of ideology. In this paper, I examine how the tourist industry attempts to recuperate the sense of engagement with the “unexplored” that formed the motive for the Situationist’s original project. Linking theories of tourism put forth by Carolyn Cartier, Jon Goss and D.M. Lasanksy to the everyday life theories of Michel de Certeau, I argue that the posture of distance adopted by the tourist allows for an idealized experience of the self in relation to space, since the tourist, by temporarily condensing his/her existence into the enclosed spaces of the suitcase, the hotel room, the resort or the tourist bubble, temporarily relinquishes his/her broad networks of everyday social, familial, and work-related commitments in favour of a mode of interaction with space based solely on desire.

The tourist’s engagement with touristed space is an attempt to reclaim a sense of the utopic in the everyday by surrendering their ideological connections. The irony of this attempt, however, lies in the heavily commodified nature of touristed space, the material trace of which can be found in the tourist souvenir collection, which gathers together the fragmentary traces of memories that may cover a vast temporal/spatial range into a presumably coherent whole. I draw on the simultaneously panoptic and fragmentary example of the snowglobe to illustrate the repressions upon which this process relies, and which could be to blame for the at once hypersensitive and exhausted experience of the modern everyday described by Georg Simmel in “Sociological Aesthetics.” Finally, drawing on the work of Marita Sturken, who argues for kitsch as a healing response to national traumas, I suggest that kitsch may also function as a
means of coping with the traumatic realization of the impossibility of the archival fantasy of a panoptic view of the everyday.

Theorizing the everyday and its relation to the archive is largely an act of re-acquaintance with space, time, and its material traces. Groups like the Situationist International and social critics like Walter Benjamin have figured the everyday through material culture and the modern urban experience. The surrealist project of attempting to locate the marvellous in the everyday is taken up, and, to a degree, contested by Benjamin, who suggests that capitalism and the commodification of the everyday inhibits one’s ability to engage with urban space in a way that is free from ideology. What these theorists do not fully consider is how the tourist industry attempts to recuperate a sense of engagement with the “unexplored.” I refer to this process as the touristic experience of the everyday: the desire, through travel and tourism, to defamiliarize oneself of one’s everyday experience and reclaim the surrealist fantasy of uninhibited engagement with space. By linking the touristic experience of the everyday to theories of material culture put forth by Georg Simmel and Michel de Certeau, this paper will also suggest that the tourist souvenir collection enacts the panoptic fantasy of the archive, but that the centrality of kitsch to the tourist souvenir aesthetic both acknowledges, and attempts to recover from the trauma of one’s inability to fully achieve this fantasy. Thus, the tourist subject position occupies a complex relation to theories of the everyday, of material culture, and of the archive, in that it adheres to the surrealist fantasy of a utopic experience of space but manifests this desire through heavy commodification: both of space, and of the souvenir items that occupy the tourist’s personal archive. The “kitsch comfort” of the souvenir collection illustrates the individual’s acknowledgement of, and attempt to recuperate from, the increasingly fragmented and commodified experience of the urban everyday, and the impossibility of achieving the archival fantasy of resolving this fragmentary experience into a coherent whole.

For cultural theorists like Walter Benjamin and the surrealists who preceded him, the modern everyday urban experience is one of drudgery resulting from capitalist power imbalances. As a remedy to the banality of the modern urban experience, the surrealist collective Situationist International conceived of the dérive: the unplanned, improvisational meandering through urban space. Necessitated by the monotonous experience of the workingclass everyday, the dérive defamiliarizes the walker to her/his everyday urban environment, and in offering to the wanderer the opportunity to give himself over to the “play of affects and attractions of an urban psychogeography” (Highmore 139), opens up the possibility for “a utopian remaking of social relations” (Smith 104). This notion is at once taken up and complicated by Walter Benjamin, who, in his Arcades Project, imagines the Paris arcades as a “phantasmagoria” (10) of consumption that evidences the commercialization of individuals'
interaction with the city. His description of the glass-roofed passages shows a city that “teems with bodies, images, signs, stimulants, movement” (Highmore 61) in which “a person enters in order to be distracted” (Benjamin 7), and in so doing, reveals the degree to which the forces of consumerism transform the city into a collection of commodities from which the wanderer, or flâneur, may pick and choose. This process both aligns his work with the psychogeographical and complicates the notion of the dérive as a process by which one may break totally free from ideology. Though his work does not explicitly engage with the discourse of tourism, the idea of the historical and spatial qualities of the city being consumed as commodities is of particular interest to the tourist subject position. Like the flâneur, the tourist, in her interaction with the city, comes into her experience of the urban space without the “burden” of the complex network of socio-economic conditions that shape it.

The tourism industry has as its main objective the recuperation of one’s ability, in essence, to perform the dérive. Carolyn Cartier speaks of the tourism industry as primarily the trade in the seduction of place, in which “the unknowns of the journey” are marketed toward individuals, encouraging them “to travel to a place, encounter its landscapes, and open up to its possibilities of experience” (5). The tourist, like the flâneur, “flirts with space” (9) in a way that is detached from its socio-economic context and that is guided, supposedly, by whim. But given that tourism is not unique to the “proletariat” and that often tourists are not completely unaware of how the commercialization of city space shapes his/her flânerie (indeed, many tourists intentionally seek out the conspicuously inauthentic in places such as Walt Disney World, Las Vegas, and all-inclusive resorts), the purpose of tourism appears to extend beyond the attempted erasure of ideologies that entrap the individual into monotonous modes of existence. The tourist who, for example, takes an open-air bus tour of Harlem, or who visits an “all-inclusive” resort without venturing outside its gates, encounters the destination for a finite period of time and only to the degree to which it continues to exist as the tourist’s own idealization, divorced from class struggle. This distance not only allows for an idealized experience of space but an idealized experience of self, since the tourist, by temporarily condensing his existence into the enclosed space of the suitcase, the hotel room, the resort or the tourist bubble, temporarily relinquishes the broad networks of everyday social, familial, and work-related commitments. Seduction—defined by Jean Baudrillard as the process by which “the most ‘superficial’ aspect of discourse . . . acts upon the underlying prohibition (conscious or unconscious) in order to nullify it and to substitute for it the charms and traps of appearances” (152)—is an apt term for the desire and promise of a unified, or “whole” experience of place offered by the tourism industry, as this unification depends upon the repression or temporary nullification of one’s knowledge of the economic and social forces that shape one’s path through the

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urban environment. The touristic experience of place is thus, in essence, a utopic fantasy of the everyday.

Of course, tourism is not limited to the “all-inclusive” resort, and our analysis of tourism as an attempt to recapture a sense of the utopic in the everyday must address broader notions of escape through tourism. The act of visiting a new city, for example, is distinct from resort travel, and yet is based on pretenses of relinquishment; only this time, the touristic experience of the everyday is manifest not via the act of disengagement of cutting oneself off, but rather by the desire to view in an idealized manner that the tourist, who comes to occupy the role of spectator, imagines to be all-encompassing. This phenomenon may be understood further through Michel de Certeau’s identification of the desire to view the urban everyday from a remove that erases its messiness, which he characterizes as an escape from (or repression of) the forces of urban everyday experience that dissolve distinctions of identity. In “Walking in the City,” de Certeau states:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp. One’s body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators . . . His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. (250)

For de Certeau, this view represents that of the urban planner, who must “disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them” (250). But it could just as easily represent what the tourism industry promises: the panoptic view of space that allows the individual to transcend his/her body, which comes to be replaced with the spectral, (and especially, for the tourist, photographic) eye/I. The view from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center becomes a metaphor for the tourist’s desire to transcend the “messiness” of the everyday, and read the everyday landscape like a text. But by virtue of the tourism industry’s contribution to the economy of a given city, as well as they ways in which tourism can shape the urban environment itself by the construction, for example, of the “clean, safe and attractive environments in which to entertain” known as the “tourist bubble” (Lasansky 2), the tourist is just as caught up in the “anonymous law” (de Certeau 250) (i.e., capitalism and consumerism) which governs one’s path through the city as its native inhabitants. In fact, the blurring of the distinction between tourist and native experience of the urban everyday may be seen as not just implicated with, but a
direct outgrowth of, the commodification of the everyday. Cartier describes the phenomenon of “the tourist ed landscape” (2), which recognizes “the messiness of tourism as a category of activity, experience, and economy. In the touristed landscape people occupy simultaneous or sequential if sometimes conflicted positions of orientation toward landscape experience and place consumption” (3). As landscapes and cities are increasingly marketed for “consumption” by tourists, the shopping experience becomes increasingly tied up in the notions of escapism and the exotic (consider the Paris Arcades as a climate-controlled city-in-miniature or a mall as a space for potted trees, fountains, and artificial waterfalls), thus expanding the notion of escapist practices beyond the uniquely touristic, and allowing it to be applied as a more general theorization of everyday experience.

While the touristic experience (i.e., seduction) of place may be seen as a continuation of the surrealist project to locate the marvellous in the everyday—a process that is complicated by the tourism industry’s ties to the commodification of urban space, the tourist souvenir collection makes tangible what de Certeau identifies as the utopian fantasy of the panoptic view of the city. de Certeau identifies utopic freedom in “this pleasure of ‘seeing the whole,’ of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts” (249), which is at odds with the “messiness” of the street-level city, that is, the complex network of socio-economic tensions that form the urban landscape. The archival fantasy of freezing what is constantly in flux is manifested in the tourist souvenir collection. One type of souvenir, the ubiquitous, mass-produced miniature snowglobe, is the focus of a study by Marita Sturken, and is a particularly significant enactment of this archival desire. In words that echo de Certeau’s fantasy of the view from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, Sturken suggests that “[w]e look into the world of each globe as if looking from a godlike position onto a small world” (2), and that their miniaturized and often sentimental contents “offer a sense of containment and control over an event” (2). The purchasing and accumulation of these types of souvenir objects by tourists enacts the primary fantasy of the archive—the panoptic view of the whole—not just by their condensation of emblematic images into a sort of Benjaminian montage, but in their condensation of fragments of memories into one totemic object. It is the material trace of the fantasy of a touristic experience of the everyday, that is, innocent, idealized, and detached. In the words of Lasansky, the souvenir “represents the capacity of the commodity to substitute for the entire field of object relations, for a lost world of immanence that is re-stored in the souvenir shops of tourist consumption, and so brought into private possession” (57). The souvenir is the most seductive of commodities; the tourist consumer is not deceived by the snowglobe’s inauthenticity, but instead consciously substitutes the inauthenticity of its contents for the actual lived experience of place. But the irony of the snowglobe is that it is at once fragmentary and panoptic: the idealized view of the cityscape presented by

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the snowglobe depends on the selective inclusion and exclusion of elements, which renders it a fragment of the unified impression of place it attempts to capture, and which highlights the limits of the archival process in bearing witness in a static and unified way to what is inherently subjective, fragmentary, and always in flux.

In considering the tourist souvenir collection as a manifestation of the desire, through the tourist experience of place, to envision a unified and idealized self, I turn to Georg Simmel, whose work constitutes “an ‘everyday’ aesthetics of the fragment” (Highmore 35) in which “the particularity of the everyday is made to register more general social forces” (37). Simmel invests great value in the “everyday” object, noting in “Sociological Aesthetics” that “[e]very philosophical system, every religion, every moment of our heightened emotional experience searches for symbols which are appropriate to their expression. If we pursue this possibility of aesthetic appreciation to its final point, we find that there are no essential differences among things” (Simmel 1968: 69). Under this theoretical framework, fragments of the everyday such as mass-produced tourist souvenirs can be seen as possessing “material traces of human intentions and actions, or the social relations of its ‘production’” (Goss 56). Aside from creating, through serial repetition and repeated consumption of the souvenir, an imagined link to a shared experience of place, the souvenir also creates a sort of touristic “canon”; the tourist souvenir contributes to the mythologization of place, which then seduces the potential tourist into visiting that place. As the tourist economy develops, it begins to commodify and shape the urban environment so that the desire to redeem the ideological freedom of the dérive is less and less possible. In this act of “touristing” the cityscape, the souvenir remaps and recreates the urban environment just as much as the “spirit” of that environment gives rise to the souvenir. Thus, the tourist souvenir is never unimplicated in its environment, and can never authentically represent the idealized view of space it presents, just as the tourist can never fully achieve the detachment from everyday experience of place she seeks.

The tension inherent in the snowglobe’s attempt to recuperate the disparate fragments taken to be emblematic of a particular place, and to condense these fragments into something which represents a panoptic view of that place may be taken as symptomatic of what, in his essay “Sociological Aesthetics,” Simmel diagnoses as the “neurasthenic experience” of the modern everyday, characterized by “[e]xhausted nerves which are drifting between hypersensitivity and lack of sensitivity,” and which “can be excited only by the most opaque forms and rudely accurate details, or else by the most tender and starkest stimuli” (80). He goes on to describe the Berlin Trade Exhibition of 1896 as a collection of “heterogeneous industrial products,” which are “crowded together in close proximity” and whose effect is to “paralys[e] the senses” ([1896] 1991: 119). Simmel’s description, according to Highmore, “reads like an allegory of the commodification
of the urban everyday” (40). Under this characterization, commercial spaces like Benjamin’s Paris Arcades, which juxtapose numerous commodities into a sort of montage, and tourist destinations like Las Vegas and Disneyworld, which condense a multitude of miniaturized and synthetic aesthetic elements in order to envelop the tourist-shopper in the exotic, both become a means of enacting the archival desire to see everything at once and to see it at a distance, removed from its everyday context. Though he does not state it explicitly, Simmel could very easily be offering here a description of the kitsch aesthetic that is so embraced by the tourist souvenir industry, linking the garishness of the mass-produced souvenir object to the increasingly commodified experience of place. The souvenir collection gathers together the material traces of memories that may cover a vast temporal/spatial range into a coherent whole. However, this attempt to recuperate the fragmentary in the panoptic—an archival fantasy that is essentially impossible to realize—could be to blame for the at once hypersensitive and exhausted experience of the modern everyday Simmel describes.

In her book, Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero, Marita Sturken links the kitsch aesthetic, specifically that which comprises tourist souvenir collections, to the need in American culture to maintain a state of innocence in the face of national trauma. Though often dismissed, due to its tendency toward mass-production, imitation, and garishness as “the lowest form of culture: ‘not-art’ and ‘inauthentic’” (Nobel 82), kitsch sentimentalism, according to Sturken, is a form of “comfort culture” (5) that allows Americans to occupy a “tourist relationship to history” (4)—that is, an “innocent pose and distant position” in which one “participates uncritically in a culture in which notions of good and evil are used to define complex conflicts and tensions” (10). Kitsch, she argues, offers to the consumer a position of simultaneous distance and proximity, which provides a means to feel one has been authentically close to an event, that one has experienced it in some way. In these sites of tourism, history is understood to be something that is consumed and experienced through images, memory is thought to reside in commodities such as teddy bears, and memorials are accompanied by gift shops. (12)

The investment in the notion of innocence in the face of national traumas such as 9/11 is, according to Sturken, a key factor in the justification of America’s entrance into armed conflict (which must always be seen as retaliation), and in the notion of American exceptionalism more generally. Kitsch objects like souvenir teddy bears, T-shirts and snowglobes embody this sense of innocence. But why does kitsch inhabit the tourist souvenir industry to such an extent, and what is its link to the souvenir as an embodiment of idealized space? One of Benjamin’s goals in his Arcades Project was to come to an understanding of the everyday by

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way of an alternate historiography based on the collection of fragments, in a way that is akin to “the nineteenth-century collector of antiquities and curiosities” or to the “ragpicker” (ix), whose objects come to take on an aura of symbolic importance, such that the interpretation of the everyday becomes “something like dream interpretation” (ix). In a discussion of the tourist’s attempt to locate the utopic in the everyday, kitsch comfort becomes a response not just symptomatic of Simmel’s notion of sensory paralysis, but a healing response to it, allowing a relationship of “distant proximity” to the hyperstimulating environment of the commodified everyday.

Understanding the everyday in terms of one’s engagement with material culture has been the project of many cultural theorists. The modern experience of the everyday cannot be divorced from one’s engagement with the commodification of one’s environment, nor can archival theory be understood separately from how this commodification affects the material trace of the everyday. The tourist experience of the everyday may be seen as a special case of the attempt to regain a sense of the “marvelousness” of the everyday in the wake of increasing commodification of the urban landscape. But as this commodification comes to blur the distinction between tourist and non-tourist, the process of “doing tourism” becomes caught up in the same “anonymous law” (de Certeau 250) that shapes the dérive. The touristic experience of space is thus a utopic fantasy—an attempt to experience the everyday in a way that distances the individual from socio-economic realities of place. This posture of detachment is reified in the souvenir collection, which enacts the archival desire to unify the messiness of everyday experience in a self-contained object. In this light, the kitsch aesthetic that is so central to the tourist souvenir industry may be viewed not only as a comfort to specific instances of national trauma. It may also be viewed more broadly as a comfort to the trauma that comes with the recognition of the impossibility of fully achieving the archival fantasy of a panoptic view of the everyday. The Situationist International had as their goal the reclamation of the marvellous in an otherwise monotonous experience of the everyday. With the oscillation between this mode of experience and the increasingly fragmentary nature of the everyday experience of commodified urban space the tourist as a category of identity attempts, albeit with limited success, to cope.

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Works Cited


“Pop/Corn”
Keywords and Keyboards: 
the City in the Age of Total Tourism 
by Adina Arvatu

Argument

What follows is a series of variations on motifs introduced by Joyce. These variations (Bach called his Klavierübungen, ‘keyboard exercises’) were prompted by some unstable conceptual compounds that she has recourse to in her piece—that we all have recourse to when we engage in cultural criticism. The issue of vocabulary (of ‘keywords’ as culturally central, but complex and contested concepts) is as relevant today as it was for Raymond Williams. Yet, in the spirit of Williams’ analyses, it is worth pointing out that ‘keyword’ itself is no longer the same word, or is less likely to evoke the same practices as it did in the 1950s, for instance, when Williams started accumulating his material. Of the two senses of the word—the ‘significance’ and the ‘search’ sense (Durant 3)—the latter is more likely to be activated for contemporary readers, through its association with their everyday online activities. The first half of my title thus alludes to the manner of my engagement with some of the keywords (the everyday, the dérive, space, utopia) introduced by Joyce, whose very ambiguity and instability—teetering as they are between the actual and the virtual, the critical and the fanciful (romanticized), the material and the imaginary—I believe describe the very situation of cultural criticism today.

The second half of my title takes up the object of Joyce’s discussion, but reformulates it with the help of a very short and intriguing piece by Boris Groys, “The City in the Age of Tourist Reproduction.” In it he distinguishes between two phases of modern tourism—romantic and postromantic—and outlines the impact of both on the character of the city form, which, he argues, was not only “intrinsically utopian” (101), but also “antitourist” (101) at its beginnings. Cities, he explains, have always been “projects for the future” (101), and in separating themselves off from the rest of the world, and especially from the countryside, they situated themselves “outside the natural order,” i.e. in the ou-topos (101). The city “dissociates itself from space as it moves through time” (101). This stylized historical-anthropological account of the
origins of the city in utopian desire becomes then the basis of comparison with the city as we know it. According to Groys, the first phase of modern tourism, which he terms ‘romantic,’ is responsible for “spawn[ing] a distinctly antiutopian attitude toward the city” (102). And that is because

The romantic tourist is not in search of universal utopian models but of cultural differences and local identities. His gaze is not utopian but conservative—directed not at the future but at past provenance. Romantic tourism is a machine designed to transform temporariness into permanence, fleetingness into timelessness, ephemerality into monumentality. [. . . ] The touristic gaze romanticizes, monumentalizes, and eternalizes everything that comes within its range. In turn, the city adapts to this materialized utopia, to the medusan gaze of the romantic tourist. (103)

Groys’ formulation itself could raise a romantic objection of sorts, because of its adversity to the materialization of utopia, and its implicit valorization of endlessly open possibilities (a feature of ‘political romanticism’). In this, he is not alone: as David Harvey once noted, “for many contemporary theorists [. . . ] that is where the concept [of utopia] can and should remain: as a pure signifier of hope destined never to acquire a material referent” (Spaces of Hope 189). I shall return to ‘utopia’ towards the end of the paper, precisely because an adversity to materialization does not prevent the materialization of other, undesired utopian schemes (and Harvey’s discussion of neoliberalism as an utopia of social process in Spaces of Hope2 will help drive the point home). Here, it merely serves as context for the next step in Groys’ argument, which I believe deserves some scrutiny.

And this next step consists in describing the current phase of modern tourism, which he characterizes as “postromantic, that is, comfortable and total” (105):

rather than the individual romantic tourist, it is instead all manner of people, things, signs, and images drawn from all kinds of local cultures that are now leaving their places of origin and undertaking journeys around the world. The rigid distinction between romantic world travelers and a locally based, sedentary population is rapidly being erased. Cities are no longer waiting for the arrival of the tourist—they too are starting to join global circulation, to reproduce themselves on a world scale and to expand in all directions. (107)

Countering worries about the ‘globalization of nothing’ and the ‘McDonaldization of society’3 owing to such generalized, total tourism of cultural and material forms, Groys insists that cultural differences and local identities (i.e. the object of desire for the romantic tourist) do not disappear but rather “have also embarked on a journey, [and] started to reproduce themselves and to expand” (107). In this, he sees a
reorientation of utopian desire, whose satisfaction is no longer “sought in time, but in space” (106). Indeed, for Groys, “Globalization has replaced the future as the site of utopia. So, rather than practicing avant-garde politics based on the future, we now embrace the politics of travel, migration, and nomadic life, paradoxically rekindling the utopian dimension that had ostensibly died out in the era of romantic tourism” (106-07).

While seductive in its simplicity and optimism, Groys’ schema should make us pause. By positing globalization as the ‘site of utopia,’ does Groys not allow himself to be seduced by free-market utopianism and forget “what happens when the utopianism of process comes geographically to earth” (Spaces of Hope 177), i.e. the concrete material and moral degradations that the neoliberal utopia imposes on the vast majority of the world’s population and environment? The materializations (sittings) of free-market utopianism are not ‘happy’ places. (Groys, in all fairness, does allow for a “dystopian dimension of this utopia” of globalization, which results in a “homogeneity bereft of all universality” [108]: but what prevents these travelling particularisms from generalizing as unjustly as bourgeois class interests were once said to universalize themselves at the expense of the proletariat? Groys does not say.) Also, it seems to me that, far from being replaced, romantic tourism has become nested instead within total tourism, a phenomenon highlighted by the promises of the tourist industry (a break away from the everyday, individualized services, unmediated, total ‘experience,’ authenticity, etc.). In what follows I seek to disturb the neatness and optimism of Groys’ argument, but without succumbing to despair in the face of total tourism.

Finally, much of what follows is an attempt at self-understanding. Joyce’s piece has compelled me to try and make sense of my own recent experience as a temporary resident of Macau, one of the two Special Administrative Regions (SARs) of the People’s Republic of China (the other one being Hong Kong). Though both are administered according to the constitutional principle of “one country, two systems,” which mandates that the two former colonies maintain their own democratic and capitalist institutions for at least 50 years after their handover (in 1997 and 1999, respectively), the differences between the two SARs are hard to miss. From surface and population to economic makeup and strength, they seem scales apart. Hong Kong is (still) the major financial center of the region, whereas the main (almost sole) industry in Macau is tourism—especially gambling, or the ‘gaming industry,’ as it is euphemistically called. Tourism is very much the daily bread, and inevitable like it.

Dérive And The Everyday

“It’s hard to be down when you’re up,” read a poster on the 110th floor of one of the World Trade Center towers sometime in the 1970s (Photo 1). We owe this report to Michel de Certeau, who mentions it in passing (92) to underscore the basic idea motivating his project of focusing on ‘everyday practices’ as concrete
ways of doing things (*arts de faire*) that push back against the relentless encroachment of Officialdom on everyday (urban) life. This idea seems commonsensical enough: the view from above—of the urban planner and the city manager—is different from the view from below, precisely because the latter is not so much a ‘view’ as it is a peculiar form of blindness (de Certeau 93) that affects us all as participants to the bustle of the city. Observer/actor, reader/writer, insight/blindness: a fairly easy to survey (and rather classical) kind of distribution of positions and ‘powers,’ most of them seemingly accruing to the top. That is why it is hard to be down when you’re up: what is at stake is not a logical contradiction, but rather the rhetorical appeal to—and seduction of—capitalization.

For de Certeau, who was writing in the 1970s, the panoptic view from the top floor of the World Trade Center—which until recently allowed one to map Manhattan from on high and make a spectacle of its “extremes of ambition and degradation,” “expenditure and production” (91)—was emblematic of the strategic (totalizing) but ultimately voyeuristic “form of rationality currently dominant in Western culture” (xi). It was “the exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive” (92), of the “lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more” (xi): “The panorama-city is a ‘theoretical’ (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices” (93).

In contrast, The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city: they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it. (93)

Unsurprisingly, there is tension between the two perspectives,* and this tension has always been
there, yet only in modernity, on de Certeau’s ac-
account, has it increasingly been experienced as
contradiction—i.e. as a polarity between, on the
one hand, the apotheosis of scopophilia and, on
the other, the proliferation of minute practices
that the theoretical ‘drive’ needs to reduce, re-
press, etc., in order to come into its own.

The two bookends of this historical pro-
cess of contestation detectable especially at
the level of spatial practices are the humanist
utopias of the sixteenth century—as modes of
“perspective [. . . ] and prospective vision” (93)
which “inaugurate [. . . ] the transformation of
the urban fact into the concept of a city” (94)—
and the contemporary decay of “the Concept-
city” (95), which marks a “return of practices”
(95), understood primarily in spatial terms (96).
Picking up on Foucault’s analyses of power and
disciplinary spaces, de Certeau takes everyday
practices to have a structuring or determining
role for any (re)articulation of social relations
(96), and not only a structured or determined
character. Indeed, therein lies their tactical
strength (in contradistinction to the strategic
impositions of power): everyday practices are
“models of action characteristic of users whose
status as the dominated element in society
(a status that does not mean they are either
passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic
term ‘consumers’” (xi-xii). As de Certeau insists,
when “pushed to their ideal limits, these proced-
ures and ruses of consumers compose the net-
work of an antidiscipline which is the subject of
[his] book” (xv).

An important distinction that de Certeau
introduces—and that I want to retain for the
present variations on the theme of the city in
the age of total tourism—is between a (pri-
mary) process of space production⁹ and “the
secondary production hidden in the process
of its utilization” (xiii). More importantly, this
secondary production of space—as a submerged
poiesis which the persistent blanket-reference
to consumption (in analyses on both the left
and the right of the political spectrum) covers
over—is not (to be) limited to, nor primarily
identified with the activities of ‘counter-cul-
tural’ groups, precisely because such groups
tend to self-segregate and (at least aspire to) ac-
crue some form of social distinction or privil-
ege (xii). Consequently, superficial similarities
and recorded Lefebvrian sympathies aside, an
avant-gardist group like the Situationist Inter-
national with its programmatic-experimental
notion of dérive cannot serve as a paradigmatic
case for the everyday practices of urban users
(locals, tourists, migrant workers, etc.). Quite
on the contrary, the dérive marks the deliber-
ate (‘playful-constructive’) separation from
such everyday practices and situations: “In a
déivre one or more persons during a certain
period drop their relations, their work and lei-
ure activities, and all their other usual motives
for movement and action, and let themselves
be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and
the encounters they find there” (Debord n.p.,
emphasis added). In that sense, the déivre is
“quite different from the classic notions of jour-
ney or stroll” (Debord). Furthermore, “One can
déivre [sic] alone, but all indications are that the

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most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people who have reached the same level of awareness . . . ” (Debord; emphasis added). Awareness—of the ‘psychogeographical contours’ of the city (fissures and microclimates, fixed points and pas-sageways, flows and currents, etc.)—is key to Situationist urban drifting, whereas everyday practices plumb quite different depths and signally drop below the threshold of individual or group awareness.

The immediate benefit, I think, of de Certeau’s distinction for a critical-theoretical reflection on tourism as a culture industry, and for cultural criticism more generally, is precisely that it allows us to break with the assumption of an ever expanding and oppressive field of cultural sameness (consumption), on which much of the official discourse (on the left as on the right) is largely based nowadays. In principle, secondary processes of space production (‘spatial practices’) need not be limited to reproducing the orderings and hierarchies on which an existing cultural hegemony depends. Furthermore, such everyday spatial practices drop below the level of rational action theories (which generally take the individual agent as primitive), without thereby leading to the much-dreaded irrationality of the masses. If anything, they bespeak “an operational logic whose models may go as far back as the age-old ruses of fishes and insects that disguise or transform themselves in order to survive” (xi). Fish schools, insect swarms, mammal herds, murmurations (flocks of starlings in flight), etc., with their uncanny synchronized movements, display this kind of operational logic: they are critical systems, in the sense that they are poised to self-transform in order to respond maximally to environmental perturbations (e.g. predators). The awe-inspiring but fleeting order (Photo 2) is the result of self-organization (rather than centralization and control), which in turn depends on “behavioral correlations” that extend farther than the range of direct interaction among individuals.

Fish schools, insect swarms, mammal herds, murmurations (flocks of starlings in flight), etc., with their uncanny synchronized movements, display this kind of operational logic: they are critical systems, in the sense that they are poised to self-transform in order to respond maximally to environmental perturbations (e.g. predators). The awe-inspiring but fleeting order (Photo 2) is the result of self-organization (rather than centralization and control), which in turn depends on “behavioral correlations” that extend farther than the range of direct interaction among individuals. The ‘virality’ of cultural memes is likely based on such behavioural correlations, though it is sometimes hard to say to what environmental threat or perturbation it is responding. The Situationist drift, by contrast, is less a form of response to the urban terrain, and more an imposition of meaning or order on ‘found’ but ultimately indifferent objects and places: the Situationist drifters allow themselves to be seduced by the ‘attractions’ of the terrain, stage ‘encounters’ (i.e. direct interactions), and aestheticize everyday urban experience. In this sense, the Situationist behaves very much like a romantic: urban experience becomes an “occasion” (Schmitt 78-108) for aesthetic experimentation, not a basis for understanding transformative social action.

Thus, with a catchphrase of some currency nowadays, I would say that de Certeau’s everyday practices are an articulation of the hope for the re-politicization of urban life, while the dérive remains trapped in a form of romantic tourism that self-segregates from everyday urban experience in order to aestheticize it. This, in fact, explains why the tourist industry
has been able—so quickly and so thoroughly—to reclaim the dérive for its own purposes, since both privilege the mode of direct interaction, of ‘encounter,’ and (shock) experience (Erlebnis). A further decisive aspect of everyday practices comes to the fore in this context: urban users-cum-producers do not re-appropriate, or reclaim urban spaces, any more than birds re-claim or re-appropriate a park statue. We can still talk consistently about a ‘right to the city,’ as Lefebvre does, and even posit that this right of city inhabitants (citadins, not citizens) can be further specified as a ‘right to appropriation,’ as long as we understand that, “The conception of urban space as private property, as a commodity to be valorized (or used to valorize other commodities) by the capitalist production process, is specifically what the right to appropriation stands against” (Purcell 103). Superficially, it is “the use value aspect of urban space” (103) that both Lefebvre’s ‘right to the city’ and de Certeau’s ‘everyday practices’ are modeled on, though their ultimate referent remains value tout court, as a social relation that becomes visible and measurable only in its effects in the spheres of exchange and use (see below, the section on Space). The novelty of the discourse of rights that both Lefebvre and de Certeau seek to inaugurate comes from this discourse’s orientation away from issues of justification or legitimation (the Kantian questio quid juris) and back towards the quid facti of everyday urban experience. It is a description of

the microbe-like, singular and plural practi-
ces which an urbanistic system was supposed
to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay; [. . . ] the swarming ac-
tivity of these procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panop-
tic administration, have reinforced them-

selves in a proliferating illegitimacy . . .

(de Certeau 96)

In sum, everyday urban life is constituted by infraction—that is, it “invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others” (xii); at its most benign, it has the structure of an overdraft, rather than a deposit. In that sense, it has the effect of ruination (hence the ‘decay’ of the Concept-city): not the destruction, but rather a wearing-out of social forms and relations as embodied (localized) in urban spaces, until they become threadbare and see-through.

Space

The World Trade Center towers are down, and de Certeau’s account of everyday practices needs to be returned to its ground zero. Indeed, though intuitive, his analogization of everyday practices to enunciative acts on the linguistic model of performance rather than competence (xiii)—such that walking, for him the paradigm case for everyday practices, becomes an act of “pedestrian enunciation” (99)—imposes undue limitations on his approach. His proposal for a “walking rhetorics” (100ff), for instance, which assumes that “the ‘tropes’ catalogued by rhetoric furnish models and hypotheses for the analysis of ways of appropriating places” (100), carries with it a strong sense of patterning or, better

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yet, of ‘mapping,’ which de Certeau otherwise explicitly rejects. Unless we are willing to take such catalogue of tropes as not just incomplete but also interminable, admitting of ever new figures that may or may not be the result of a combination of previously encountered ones, the theoretical panopticism that de Certeau tried so hard to put out the door is invited right back in with the assumption that spatial practices are surveyable tropologically. The danger of aestheticizing everyday practices is thereby reintroduced as well. (Plus, mathematical and physical modeling of dynamic systems, as other ways of ‘mapping’ crowd movements during street protests, or flows of tourists, etc., probably have more to tell us about collective responses to an environment than classical tropology. What would the latter tell us, say, about the way in which pedestrians move through a busy public square as they try to avoid stepping into someone’s selfie, or photobomb it instead?)

To reformulate, the problem de Certeau struggles with is the very task of building a ‘theory’ from the ground up (rather than top down). Therefore, a supplementation of his approach can most meaningfully come from someone who, like David Harvey, is not only sympathetic to a Lefebvrian project of resisting the neoliberal restructuring of urban life and the attendant disenfranchisement of urban inhabitants, but also quite appreciative of the difficulties inhering in the task of redefining ‘theory’ such that the multiplicity of practices is maintained rather than reduced. More concretely, I believe de Certeau’s account of everyday spatial practices can be made more precise by seeking to specify, with Harvey, the kind (or kinds) of space that they are supposed to be producing.

To begin with, de Certeau’s distinction between place (lieu) and space (espace), while suggestive, proves unstable and insufficient. Thus, according to him, “A place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence” (117), whereas “A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables” (117). However, de Certeau’s characterization of a place (lieu) as “exclud[ing] the possibility of two things being in the same location (place)” and as being ruled by “the law of the ‘proper’” (117) seems to suggest, on the contrary, that the order governing the formation of a lieu cannot be ‘of whatever kind’ but rather only of a (classical) logical kind. De Certeau is consistent in privileging the other end of the polarity, namely space, which for him is a “practiced place” (117), but his own characterizations call for an evening of the balance, since place need not be ‘practiced’ to become space, but rather already presupposes (or articulates) a particular kind of space, i.e. one of individuation. Which is why I suggest we call it, with Harvey, absolute space:

Absolute space is fixed and we record or plan events within its frame. This is the space of Newton and Descartes and it is usually represented as a pre-existing and immoveable grid amenable to standardized measurement and open to calculation.
Geometrically, it is the space of Euclid and therefore the space of all manner of cadastral mapping and engineering practices. It is a primary space of individuation—*res extensa* as Descartes put it—and this applies to all discrete and bounded phenomena including you and me as individual persons. Socially this is the space of private property and other bounded territorial designations (such as states, administrative units, city plans, and urban grids). (*Spaces of Global Capitalism* 121)

Conversely, what de Certeau calls *space* (*espace*)—which is “composed of intersections of mobile elements,” or “actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it” (117)—also calls for qualification, precisely because it does not distribute as neatly as he assumes to the side of everyday practices. Pace de Certeau, ‘space’ is in fact to be found on the other side of his divide as well, e.g. as ‘actuated’ by the various capitalist processes (financial flows, circulation of commodities, etc.) that, at the time that he was writing but also, or perhaps especially since 1980s, have been restructuring urban centers and disenfranchising urban residents. In it, we can easily recognize *relative space*, the second in Harvey’s tripartite schema:

The relative notion of space is mainly associated with the name of Einstein and the non-Euclidean geometries that began to be constructed most systematically in the 19th century. Space is relative in the double sense: that there are multiple geometries from which to choose and that the spatial frame depends crucially upon what it is that is being relativized and by whom. […] At the more mundane level of geographical work, we know that the space of transportation relations looks and is very different from the spaces of private property. The uniqueness of location and individuation defined by bounded territories in absolute space gives way to a multiplicity of locations that are equidistant from, say, some central city location. (121-22)

More importantly, “All of this relativization […] does not necessarily reduce or eliminate the capacity for calculability or control, but it does indicate that special rules and laws are required for the particular phenomena and processes under consideration” (123). What this means, for a de Certeauian approach, is that the same way that a rhetorics of walking cannot but re-inscribe everyday practices in a space of visibility, making (relative) space an exclusive feature of such practices misunderstands the very processes (e.g. the rhythms of capital accumulation, or climate change) that they are supposed to resist and transform.

Thankfully, Harvey can also offer a potential solution to this difficulty. I would suggest that de Certeau’s ‘secondary production of space,’ which is hidden in everyday practices and obfuscated by the blanket-reference to consumption, concerns the third kind of space, on Harvey’s schema, namely *relational space*. His characterization of it is probably the clearest:

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The relational concept of space is most often associated with Leibniz who, in a famous series of letters to Clarke [. . .] objected vociferously to the absolute view of space and time so central to Newton's theories. His primary objection was theological. Newton made it seem as if even God was inside of absolute space and time rather than in command of spatio-temporality. By extension, the relational view of space holds [that] there is no such thing as space or time outside of the processes that define them. [. . .] Processes do not occur in space but define their own spatial frame. The concept of space is embedded in or internal to process. (123)

On this understanding, identity or individuality is no longer determined by the place it (alone) occupies in absolute space, but rather by “everything else going on around it” (124): “A wide variety of disparate influences swirling over space in the past, present and future concentrate and congeal at a certain point [. . .] to define the nature of that point” (124). In short, relational space is monadological (124), but we could also call it intensive, or—from yet another vantage—expressive.

That this is indeed the level at which everyday practices—as the paradigm for ‘consumer production’—are to be studied is made clear by de Certeau’s insistence that, “The examination of such practices does not imply a return to individuality [social atomism]. [. . .] A relation (always social) determines its terms, and not the reverse, and [. . .] each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact” (xi). Walter Benjamin’s flâneur is a good example of such ambiguous or unstable identities resulting from the intersection, in a particular place and time (nineteenth-century Paris), of a great number of incoherent and even contradictory relational determinations: cultured and aesthetically-astute, he (usually) is a detached observer of the comings and goings of the city, an aimless roamer putting his purposelessness on display while secretly hoping for a buyer. He is a romantic tourist at home. Hence, his complicity with (mimicry of) the commodity form: his insularity and near-idiomatic uniqueness (the word flâneur is best left untranslated, we are told) are the effect of processes of capital circulation and accumulation. Similarly, Lefebvre’s citadin (the subject of his proposal for a new form of urban politics) reveals itself, to a critical analysis, to be no less ambiguous and unstable: a subject whose political membership is no longer determined by citizenship but by inhabitance, whose political agenda is determined by class interests, but also environmental and social justice concerns, whose movements in geographic space blur the distinctions between locals and tourists (e.g. migrant workers, ‘precariat’), consumers and producers, etc., and whose empowerment and participation in contingent and urban-hegemonic politics could lead again to insularity and withdrawal from larger-scale political struggles (regional, national, global).

What would be the direct benefits of my proposed clarification-cum-supplementation of de Certeau’s analysis? First and foremost, it
tells us that—understood relationally—everyday practices are only measurable in their effects in absolute and relative space-time. To get a better grasp of what that means, we can take Harvey’s mapping of Marx’s three key concepts of value in Capital onto his tripartite division of possible conceptualizations of space (Spaces of Global Capitalism 141f.). As Harvey points out, “Everything that pertains to use value lies in the province of absolute space and time” (141): workers, equipment, factories, infrastructure, etc. Just as everything having to do with exchange value needs to be understood in a relative space-time framework, because exchange is all about circulation (of commodities, money, people, etc.). But

Value is [... ] a relational concept. Its referent is, therefore, relational space-time. Value, Marx states (somewhat surprisingly), is immaterial but objective. [... ] As a consequence, value does not “stalk about with a label describing what it is” but hides its relationality within the fetishism of commodities. The only way we can approach it is via that peculiar world in which material relations are established between people [... ] and social relations are constructed between things [... ]. Value is, in short, a social relation. As such, it is impossible to measure except by way of its effects. (141)

This allows us to better understand de Certeau’s claim at the beginning, according to which a secondary process of production is ‘hidden’ in the process of utilization and ‘concealed’ by a blanket-reference to consumption (exchange): the expressive relationality (value) of everyday practices can only be observed and measured in its effects in absolute and relative space-time, and especially in the way in which they fissure and open up these spatiotemporal frames themselves. Which means that, to understand such practices and build a theory thereof, all three spatial frameworks (absolute, relative, and relational) are necessary: “no priority can be accorded to any one [of them]” (142).

Furthermore, because values (social relations) require excavation, as it were, all kinds of competences—political-economic, philosophical, anthropological, literary, etc., but also and perhaps especially those ‘subjugated knowledges’ that Foucault posited as a foil to global theories— are necessary in order to interpret their spatial effects. Thus, de Certeau’s emphasis on performance at the expense of competence in his characterization of everyday practices (i.e. their blindness) should not be taken as a symptom of a starkly unequal distribution of competences between theory and practice (with knowledge and power accruing to the former at the expense of the latter). Rather it signals the irreducible embeddedness of theory in practice, and hence the transformative potential of overlooked, devalued, economically-suppressed practices that in myriad ways dis-place hegemonic social orderings and spatialities.

Lastly, what an emphasis on everyday practices seems to me to suggest is a shift in our understanding of culture (as both Kultur and
Bildung). One way (attenuated but still present in post-industrial, First World countries) is to think of Kultur as individualized and embodied in institutions (localized), and of Bildung (education) as the engine of social self-differentiation or self-distinction at both individual and supra-individual levels. (Identity politics, which is based on bounded territorialities, privileges the absolute spatio-temporal framework and translates into a patrimonial approach to culture.) Another way (predominant under neoliberalism) is to think of culture on the model of exchange and capital accumulation: Kultur thus becomes an ‘exchange of ideas’ where patrimonial goods are liberated from the law of the place, as de Certeau would say, and reinserted into circulation, while Bildung is understood as investment (money especially), acquiring and putting into circulation symbolic assets (skills), capitalization, etc. (The spatio-temporal framework thereby privileged is the relative one: there is no stronger de-territorializing force than capital.) There is, finally, a third way, and it seems to me that therein lies the emancipatory hope that de Certeau’s everyday practices articulate—and all the other analyses (Benjamin, Lefebvre, Harvey, to mention just the ones touched on here) that take culture as a value-concept (a Wertbegriff, as Weber once called it), that is, a relational-expressive concept. It is the hope of a lived and living culture understood as a critical system, i.e. a system poised to self-transform to better respond to environmental threats, rather than a hegemonic order built by command and control. Balzac’s line—“Hope is Memory that Desires”—could in fact be a motto for this attempt at a transvaluation of the value of culture, in response to its objective devaluation under conditions of patrimonial and especially neoliberal administration. Hope, memory, desire: the relational (intensive, expressive), value-ridden aspects of the everyday, on which all dreams of a better life, all utopias are built (including capitalist ones). As constitutive of the social imaginary that bridges history and individual biographies, they are the engine of social transformation. Perhaps the contemporary problem of theory (social, political, critical, literary, etc.) is not so much to awaken from, say, the phantasmagorias of the nineteenth, twentieth, or even twenty-first centuries, but rather—lest we let our lucidity become another form of enchantment—to start asking, how do we dream better dreams?

Utopia

It may seem odd to talk about Macau under the heading of utopia. And yet, it is the only way that I can make sense of this place, which for little over a year attracted and repulsed me in equal measure. As I prepare to leave it, I cannot but ask myself: have I been a tourist all this time? As a member of the so-called ‘precariat,’ dreaming of a less precarious situation than what the everyday affords me, do I not confirm Groys’
diagnosis that “we now all live in a world where living and traveling have become synonymous, where there is no longer any perceptible difference between the city’s residents and its visitors” (108)? What kind of ‘right to the city’ do I have (if any)? And when did I have it (if I did): after I spent more than a year in the city?20

Macau is washed by the waves of tourists the way its shores are washed by the waves of the South China Sea: constantly, but with the occasional storm and stress of popular holidays and feast days.21 Tourism and tourists are here unavoidable. But so is utopian desire. Macau is an open archaeological record of various utopian plans as they touched ground, materialized as built spaces, and then decayed. Walking around the city becomes an exercise in reading (however distractedly) and re-describing this record.22

The oldest European (Portuguese) colony in Asia (1557) and the last to be handed over (December 20, 1999),23 Macau stands at the “spatiotemporal intersection of the failed projects of Maoist socialism and Portuguese empire as well as the twin dreams of a local phantasmagoric consumer utopia and a Chinese socioeconomic hybrid of ‘market socialism’” (Simpson 1054). Furthermore, as Simpson aptly notes, “Spatial production,24 not linear temporal evolution, defines the city” (1055), in the sense that all of these partially materialized and then failed utopian projects do not erase one another but rather coexist in often startling proximity on this minuscule island city. It is this startling proximity that allows Simpson to offer a ‘reading’ of Macau as a juxtaposition of four coexisting “moments” (or, with another keyword, archives): “socialist fossil, colonial ruin, capitalist dream, and utopian wish” (1053).

Memory (fossil/ruin), dream, and wish: this Benjaminian threefold spells out those intensive (or expressive-relational) aspects of capital that only become apparent in certain juxtapositions of past and present (‘dialectical images,’ or images of obsolescence) that bring “to consciousness the rapid half-life of the utopian element in commodities” (Buck-Morss 293) and the spaces of capital. However, to understand this utopian element and reactivate its emancipatory potential, it may be useful to distinguish, with Harvey again, between “utopias of spatial form” (Spaces of Hope 159-73) and “utopias of temporal process” (173-79), or of development. The first kind is the most familiar (e.g. More’s Utopia, Bacon’s New Atlantis, but also nineteenth-century utopian schemes like Fourrier’s or Blanqui’s), and the kind that de Certeau had in mind when he spoke of the emergence of the Concept-city in the sixteenth century. Such an utopia of spatial form is “an artificially created island which functions as an isolated, coherently organized, and largely closed-space economy (though closely monitored relations with the outside world are posited),” where—to put the contrast in stark, simplified terms—“spatial form controls temporality, an imagined geography controls the possibility of social change and history” (160). The aim of such utopias is social harmony and stability (hence, their
critical edge *vis-à-vis* the actual political and social states of affairs contemporary with them), and in pursuit of that goal they operate a whole series of exclusions, generally of any social force or process (especially market and capital forces: money, wage labor, capital accumulation, etc.) that could be disruptive of the perfected social and moral orders they are proposing. (It is this kind of utopia of spatial form that Groys had in mind when he posited that the city form was originally anti-nature and antitourist.)

Other than perhaps the old walls of Macau (built and fortified starting in the sixteenth-century, now mostly collapsed), there is little to remind one of this kind of utopia here, unless we are prepared to regard the Fisherman’s Wharf—a theme-park and shopping complex built in 2005-2006, partially on reclaimed land, and featuring “themed reproductions of a Roman Coliseum, Tang Dynasty Chinese architecture, buildings from Amsterdam, Lisbon, Cape Town, and Miami, and an exploding volcano” (Simpson 1055)—and all casino-hotel-mall-and-wellness complexes in Macau (also themed) as exemplars of “degenerate utopias” (*Spaces of Hope* 164ff.). Like Disneyland (Marin’s paradigmatic case of such degeneration, resulting from the deliberate dulling of the critical edge of the utopian impulse), such mega-complexes “eliminate the troubles of actual travel by assembling the rest of the world, properly sanitized and mythologized, into one place of pure fantasy containing multiple spatial orders” (*Spaces of Hope* 167). However, I suspect that they would be better described as *mimetic* spatial forms in which the neoliberal utopianism of the free market (as a particular form of an utopia of temporal process) comes down to earth, that is, materializes itself as built environment. (This would confirm Benjamin’s insight into the atavisms of modernity: the newer market utopianism takes on the idealized spatial forms of older, anti-market utopianism to support its ideological claims of emancipation, prosperity, equality, etc.) This is precisely why, as Harvey points out, such degenerate utopias “instantiate rather than critique the idea that ‘there is no alternative’” (168), the mantra of neoliberal thinking.

If utopias of spatial form are an idealized way of imagining and producing space—as “a container of social processes and as an expression of moral order” (*Spaces of Hope* 174)—then utopias of process represent “idealized versions of social processes [. . . ] expressed in purely temporal terms” (174). They are “placeless teleologies”: “Whereas More gives us the spatial form but not the process, Hegel and Marx give us their distinctive versions of the temporal process but not the ultimate spatial form” (174). And they are distinctive, according to Harvey, precisely because the logic informing the unfolding of the historical and social process is, in Hegel, of the ‘both-and’ kind (*Aufhebung* names both the destruction and the preservation of the old in the new), whereas in Marx it is of an ‘either-or’ type (the new order abolishes the old). The dominant utopianism of process today, as in Marx’s time, is the utopianism of the market, first given expression by Adam Smith in 1776, in which “individual desires, avarice, greed, drives, creativity, and the like could be
mobilized through the hidden hand of the perfected market to the benefit of all” (175), and further refined and entrenched by neoliberal economics since the 1980s. Interestingly, market utopianism appears to be an ‘either-or’ kind of proposition (the market is supposed to supplant all forms of social cohesion and state powers) but in fact operates after the logic of ‘both-and’ (since it in fact requires both the restriction of certain functions of the state and the expansion of others, to ensure that the framework for free market and open trade is legally codified and enforced).

Contemporary Macau is to a large extent the product of China’s adoption of market socialism. Proposed by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s ahead of the talks for the reunification with Hong Kong and Macau, the constitutional principle of “one country, two systems” (socialism on the mainland, capitalism in the two former colonial enclaves) enshrines precisely this odd utopianism of social process according to which “China must pass through a capitalist stage in order to attain true socialist utopia” (Simpson 1057). The surprising aspect of market socialism, however, is not so much the fact that it renounces the ‘either-or’ logic of Marxist (or even Maoist) orthodoxy, but rather that the ‘both-and’ logic it overtly espouses does not lead to what Harvey calls the ‘romanticism of endlessly open possibilities.’ On the contrary, it generates a *proliferation of economic and social experiments* that take very peculiar (and uneven) geographic and spatial forms—Special Economic Zones (SEZs), Special Administrative Regions (SARs), Free Trade Zones (FTZs), etc. (The explanation, I suspect, lies in the fact that, unlike utopians of democratic process like Lefebvre or de Certeau, the Communist Party has no trouble assuming the authoritarianism required by the geographic and spatial materializations of their hybrid utopian scheme.)

Thus, like so many coastal Special Economic Zones (SEZs) set up, since the 1980s, in The Pearl River Delta and elsewhere on the mainland, the two SARs of Hong Kong and Macau have the status of economic laboratories of the PRC. Unlike the SEZs, however, they pose peculiar political challenges in virtue of their surviving democratic structures, some more ‘live’ than others. Hong Kong again takes the lead, with a strong tradition of public debate and militancy for democratic rights. Macau, on the other hand, seems for the most part to confirm W.H. Auden’s verdict in the 1930s:

> A weed from Catholic Europe, it took root  
> Between some yellow mountains and a sea,  
> Its gay stone houses an exotic fruit  
> A Portugal-cum-China oddity.

Rococo images of Saint and Saviour  
Promise its gamblers fortunes when they die,  
Churches alongside brothels testify  
That faith can pardon natural behaviour.

A town of such indulgence need not fear  
Those mortal sins by which the strong are killed  
And limbs and governments are torn to pieces.  
Religious clocks will strike, the childish vices  
Will safeguard the low virtues of the child  
And nothing serious can happen here.

(“Macao,” *Collected Poems* 145)

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In the fast-tracked development of Macau post-handover, brand names have joined the ‘rococo images of Saint and Saviour,’ and the international-themed, neo-rococo casinos and malls testify that money too can pardon natural behaviour. The social infantilization of consumers (locals and tourists alike) seems to have seamlessly taken over from the religious infantilization of the colonized, as the history of colonization itself has been patrimonialized and commodified by the private-public partnership between the tourist industry and the government of Macau. (The old city center of Macau, composed of Portuguese government buildings, Catholic churches, piazzas, etc., was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2006.) With few exceptions, there are no notable popular movements of resistance to the ‘occult’ levels of capital accumulation and political disenfranchisement in Macau: it would seem that Auden was quite right, and nothing serious could ever happen here.

Simpson’s striking characterization of Macau’s economic resurgence post-handover and especially post-liberalization of the gaming industry in the 2000s is thus quite apt: “For so long the subject of afterthought and oversight, the lack of attention to which served pragmatic ends for both Portugal and China, tiny Macao is now at the center of China’s development largely because of its location at the periphery” (Simpson 1054). Its marginality and insularity serve the strategic goals of China’s hybrid utopianism, which beginning in the 1980s, under the reformist leadership of Deng Xiaoping, has left the Maoist ‘industrialization without urbanization’ behind and set new the revolutionary goals for the Communist Party: “The socialist market economy’s role would be […] to accelerate the modernization of the country’s ‘means of production’ and create a new majority class—the modern, industrial proletariat. Only then could the Party accomplish the transition from capitalism to socialism—a second, ‘truer’ revolution” (Chuihua et al. 79). Yet, rather than a productive class with a cohesive social makeup and bond, this ‘new majority class’ is more and more groomed to behave like a mass of consumers. In an ironic inversion of Maoist reeducation programs, Macau is now “a didactic laboratory for nascent Chinese consumerist pedagogy” (Simpson 1072). Thus, if China’s realignment has in fact solidified the global neoliberal belief in the ‘inevitability’ of the market, planned or free (since the so-called free market too requires the cooperation of the State, not its dissolution), and if Macau is, indeed, “exemplary” (Simpson 1074) for this belief—if, in other words, it is a space of globalization, with all the inequalities (social, political, economic, environmental, etc.) attendant on the materializations (sitings) of market utopianism—how could it also be a ‘space of hope,’ in a sense that would go beyond the utopia of consumption it is becoming at such a dizzying pace?

This is where I believe de Certeau’s focus on everyday practices could come into play. Macau’s historical marginality—manifest in its geographic location, its economic irrelevance to the Portuguese empire for most of the twentieth century, its political convenience for both pre- and post-1949 China—is now symbolic
of that ‘marginality of a majority’ (de Certeau xvii) which pertains to the “cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, [and that] remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself” (xvii). I can think of no better example of such ‘cultural activity of the non-producers of culture’ than the insignificant scene I witnessed one day on the gambling floor of the Venetian, one of the two most exclusive and opulent casinos in Macau: an old ‘mainlander’ (the non-neutral moniker applied to tourists from mainland China) in brown plastic slippers as she slowly but without hesitation made her way towards one of the baccarat tables (minimum bet of ca. 50 euros), holding a tall glass of milk. Her ‘activity’ (barely an action on a classical sociological account) and appearance (likely the result of long years of forced rusticated existence under Mao and his socialist utopian scheme) had the effect of throwing into relief the phantasmagoria of the Venetian as a setting and siting of Chinese market utopianism.

Such marginal and contingent cultural activity, which constitutes the tactical side of consumption and comprises all “the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong” (xvii), could be seen as a collective response to the abstract (strategic) equivalences and huge material inequalities of market economy. It is the flip side to the glib-side of total tourism: a universality of marginality (de Certeau xvii) in response—yet rarely in explicit opposition—to globalization’s ‘homogeneity bereft of all universality’ (Groys 108). If the hope is that this universality of marginality could become the basis of a new emancipatory urban politics, of new and unforeseen forms of solidarity that could counter the self-segregating and alienating tendencies of official culture, if that indeed is the hope, then Macau—this disunified collection of diachronic and synchronic particularisms which often translate into tensions at precisely the level of everyday practices—may yet have what it takes: a memory that still desires.

Independent Scholar

1 The ‘search’ sense occurs in text editing, database management systems, programming, etc., as an index or parameter that allows one to identify and retrieve a particular kind of information. The ‘significance’ sense has to do with the importance of the word for opening up, or deciphering something else (as a ‘key’ or a cipher); by extension, it refers
to something of great importance. Though the two senses are not always easily separable without further context, “There is [ . . . ] an important difference between [them] that concerns how you view what happens once you’ve found an instance of your keyword. In one case, your search is over. In the other, it is just beginning” (Durant 3).

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See pp. 173-81 esp.

Both books by George Ritzer, published in 2004 and 1993, respectively.

HK: ca. 1,100 sq km, population of ca. 7 mil. Macau: ca. 31 sq km, and ca. 600,000 population.

“...largest trading economy, with the mainland of China as its most significant trading partner” (HK government’s fact sheet at [http://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/facts.htm](http://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/facts.htm), accessed June 6, 2014). Unoficially, there are plenty of fears and speculations as to what effects the opening of the pilot Free Trade Zone in Shanghai in September 2013 may have on that status, and what China’s long-game might be with respect to political and economic re-integration after the 50-year period.


*The Practice of Everyday Life* was first published in 1980 as *L’invention du quotidien: 1. Arts de faire* (Gallimard).

Their inequality is apparent in the fact that the view from below lacks precisely ‘perspective’, *i.e.* (critical) distance and grasp.

De Certeau speaks here of the production of an image, but his point generalizes easily, once ‘image’ is understood as a particular representation of space *cum* space of representation. Of course, the direct context of de Certeau’s focus on everyday practices is Henry Lefebvre’s very influential *Critique of Everyday Life*, and especially *The Production of Space* (1968/1991). Lefebvre distinguishes among perceived space (*le perçu*), conceived space (*le conçu*), and lived space (*le vécu*), where the first is the material space we encounter and explore with our senses, the second refers to mental constructions (representations) of space, while the third integrates both at the level of lived meanings, emotions, *etc.* in our daily interactions (hence, *le vécu* refers to a plurality of spaces of representation). De Certeau’s everyday practices are especially relevant at this third level.

See Cavagna *et al.*, 11865.

“The turn of one bird attacked by a predator has an influence not only over the neighbors directly interacting with it, but also over all birds that are correlated to it. Correlation measures how the behavioral changes of one animal influence those of other animals across the group. Behavioral correlations are therefore ultimately responsible for the group’s ability to respond collectively to its environment” (Cavagna *et al.*, 11865).

See Chapter IX (“Spatial Stories”), pp. 115-30, but esp. 118-22 (subsection on “Tours and Maps”), where he distinguishes between “the itinerary (a discursive series of operations) and the map (a plane projection totalizing observations), that is, between two symbolic and anthropological languages of space. Two poles of experience. It seems that in passing from ‘ordinary’ culture to scientific discourse, one passes from one pole to the other” (119). De Certeau’s distinction, however, with its marked preference for the pole of ‘ordinary’ culture, remains problematic. Itsf scientific (based on urban anthropological analyses of oral narrations), this distinction appears symptomatic of the circularity of cultural criticism as Adorno once diagnosed it: “The cultural critic is not happy with civilization, to which alone he owes his
discontent” (17).

13 Here I will be working mostly off of his Spaces of Global Capitalism (2006) and Spaces of Hope (2000).

14 See Purcell, esp. 99-101, for a review of this line of argument in a cross-section of critical discourses (geography, political economy, urban studies, etc.) on globalization as infringing on democratic processes.

15 Both are Harvey’s examples, and while he stresses the disjunction between the frameworks necessary for understanding these processes, he also points out that “Comparisons between different spatio-temporal frameworks can illuminate problems of political choice (do we favor the spatio-temporality of financial flows or that of the ecological processes they typically disrupt, for example)” (123).

16 “The flâneur is the creation of Paris” (SW 2: 263), Benjamin notes in “The Return of the Flâneur,” his review of Franz Hessel’s Spazieren in Berlin.

17 Foucault is a major presence in de Certeau’s book, one of the many parallels and affinities between the two thinkers being a shared antipathy towards ‘global’ theories, e.g. Marxism or psychoanalysis. What is important to note, however, is that their antipathy does not concern the content of psychoanalytic or Marxist analyses, their methods, or even individual categories, but rather the emphasis—very much in evidence in the 1970s in France—on the ‘scientificity’ of such analyses: in other words, they are concerned with “the effects of the centralizing powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organised scientific discourse within a society such as ours” (Foucault 84). My proposal for a supplementation of de Certeau makes sense if we adjust for historical distance: Harvey’s ‘historical geographical materialism’ of Marxian inspiration—especially his theory of uneven geographical development—marks (though not alone, of course) the moment when Marxism itself returns as a ‘subjugated knowledge,’ as a welcome foil to the pretensions of scientificity and ‘inevitability’ of neoliberalist theories of the market.

18 There is both reason and rhyme to this sequence, as Harvey’s ‘historical geographical materialism’ seeks to integrate both Benjamin and Lefebvre.

19 Harvey is very fond of it, and quotes it often, most prominently in the epigraph to Spaces of Hope.

20 At the 1991 World Tourism Organization (WTO) Ottawa Conference on Travel and Tourism Statistics, tourism was defined as: “The activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes” (par. 19, p. 1, of the WTO technical manual on the Collection of Tourism Expenditure Statistics, available online at http://pub.unwto.org/WebRoot/Store/Shops/Infoshop/Products/1034/1034-1.pdf, accessed June 6, 2014).

21 According to Macau Daily Times, the April 9, 2014 edition, “the number of people crossing the Macau border reached 1.25 million during the three-day Ching Ming Festival” (5). According to the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC) of the government of Macau, “attributable to the Easter holidays, visitor arrivals increased by 10% year-on-year to 2,636,614 in April 2014,” while “in the first four months of 2014, visitor arrivals reached 10,326,780, up by 9% year-on-year” (http://www.dsec.gov.mo/Statistic/TourismAndServices/VisitorArrivals/VisitorArrivals2014M04.aspx, accessed June 6, 2014).

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With different goals in mind and unequal results, this is what J. Tambling and L. Lo, the authors of *Walking Macau, Reading the Baroque* (2009), set out to do.

For the historical-political context of Macau’s handover, see Porter (1999).

Spatial production takes stark forms here and quite literal: Macau stands at ca. 31 sq km currently, up from ca. 11 sq km in 1912. This near-tripling in size is due to massive post-handover and post-liberalization land reclamation projects such as the Cotai Strip, advertised as Asia’s Las Vegas, which now links the islands of Coloane and Taipà and houses the monumental casino-hotel-mall-wellness complexes The Galaxy and The Venetian.

Harvey adopts this category from Marin (1984).

Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* 163.

The closest to Macau (right across the border from it) is the Zhuhai SEZ. For the (still) fraught relationship between the two territorial units, see Edmonds (2002). The whole Pearl River Delta region, which includes Macau and Zhuhai, but also Hong Kong, Shenzhen (another SEZ, inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping himself), Dongguan, and Guangzhou, is “set to develop by 2020 into a sprawling metropolis with a population of 36 million” (Simpson 1060).

*Photo 3:* Stairwell connecting the shopping and gambling floors of the Venetian, Macau. Provided by author.
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“Pop/Corn”


Here at *Word Hoard*, we do not much care for repetition, empty sentiment, or the prison industrial complex, for that matter. Looking back at the call for submissions for “Pop/Corn,” we may have also appeared to be a deeply suspicious bunch of curmudgeons who approach even the tastiest of offerings with equal measures of concern, scepticism, and general unease. We were tired of hearing about the redemptive power of pop, camp, corniness and kitsch, and we wondered (perversely) if our suspicions about fluff had any substance to them. The call itself was peppered with wordplay—an unusually comic turn for a journal whose previous two issues were concerned with graver material—and when we playfully tasked our contributors with adding gravity, depth, and weight to our dialogue we were, as always, treated to a diverse collection of unexpected responses and an entirely new set of questions. Much to our delight, these responses also deftly interrogated the original presumptions that shaped the call for papers. Our good-natured teasing about fluff’s pernicious underpinnings and hefty consequences becomes, in retrospect, yet another response to the topic of “Pop/Corn” worthy of cross-examination.

Why were we suspicious? Why did our call for papers point to comedy and innocuousness, and demand that our submitters cater to our taste for the tragic? Allan Pero’s discussion of Camp reiterated our reservations, suggesting that “there is persistently . . . a sense in which art is engaged in deception, in playing a joke on the wide public” (10). As self-reflective as it purports itself to be, academe nevertheless tends to foster certain ubiquitous impressions about taste, truth, and criticism; academics are capable of spotting the punch line and can mark the joke and the joker for what they are. This also allows us to believe that we can anticipate the effect (and affect) of our own jests should we feel inclined to make them, effectively imbuing our humour with a degree of intellectual and social utility. Perhaps this was why the topic of “pop corn-ography” made us uncomfortable: where comedy exists as an instrument that helps us identify bullshit, Camp is “the enemy of

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Kitsch is the most pernicious of all prisons. The bars are covered with the gold of simplistic, unreal feelings, so that you take them for the pillars of a palace.

Pascal Mercier, *Night Train to Lisbon*
identity . . . the enemy of utility” (Pero 11). Unlike Camp, kitsch is almost overwhelmingly utilitarian. Mobilizing sentimental excess in order to reduce affective labour, kitsch’s prime directive is to diminish the distance between object and subject. Yet even given the “absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption” (Benjamin 395) that should make kitsch the target of easy laughs, here, too, comedy becomes a stale counterpoint and inadequate mechanism for grounding kitsch in an analytical framework. Ashlee Joyce proposes that kitsch may have simply beaten us to the punch—an acute awareness of kitsch’s failure to compensate for missed connections with authenticity and, indeed, the suggestion that “authenticity” is itself preposterous is built into kitsch objects, experiences, and aesthetics (9). In other words, while Camp and kitsch evoke suspicion, they may be the one kind of fluff that is not trying to fleece us, and not trying to pull the wool over our eyes.

When Joyce invokes Michel de Certeau’s panoptic vantage point from the one-hundred-and-tenth floor of the former World Trade Center in her discussion of kitsch, my mind does not race to join de Certeau in his Icarian vision of Manhattan. Instead, I accompany Joyce on her search for souvenirs and immediately think of the outrageously garish decorative cheese plate that was, for a short time, available at the 9/11 Museum Gift Shop. Long since pulled from the shop by museum officials after being deemed crass and inappropriate by patrons, the plate took the shape of the United States as it would appear cartographically and bore three hearts to mark the sites at which the September 11th attacks took place (Chung). Tourists looking for such a souvenir today may instead purchase instead a smaller rectangular tray and matching gift box patterned with the World Trade Center’s signature architectural tridents. At only thirty-five square inches and with the implicit reminder that this object is a “commemorative tray,” this souvenir has less room for cheese (literally and figuratively) and is meant to be more tasteful (“Tridents”). Is there a time and place for this particular brand of kitsch? It is tempting to think that we could discern the harmful from the harmless, the repulsive from the redemptive, and I do hope that we have not lured you into this issue under the false pretence of making such distinctions clear or even extant. Despite our initial preoccupation with the dangers of short-term satisfaction at the expense of long-term value, a symptom of academe that Laura Penny points to in her interview, we do not find this “missionary position” (28) and others like it especially seductive.

Instead, I encourage you to flirt with the various responses to “Pop/Corn” found within the pages of this issue and on its cover. Created by artist Hinson Calabrese, the three images that introduce our issue—microphone, ear of corn, and burning cigarette—stand alone without context save for their juxtaposition with one another. I tend to join Penny on “Team Nietzsche” in that I take the desire for meaning-making as an unavoidable compulsion, particularly in academic settings (31). If the gilt prison of kitsch

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can be mistaken for “the pillars of a palace,” as Mercier suggests, I find myself approaching the vertices on our cover as Sally Colwell’s article approaches bachelor pads: what kind of erections are these, anyway? Are they restraining our interpretations? Do they interfere with our ability to read these symbols within a kitschy or campy aesthetic? Do they still leave a bad taste in our mouths? I am intrigued by the possibility that the “Pop/Corn” issue functions as a sort of microphone, which, as Calabrese reminded me, both invented and amplified pop culture. We seem to have broadcasted, loud and clear, that a broad spectrum of times and places for kitsch, corn, and camp exist across disciplines and genres. Jokes and mischievous call for submissions aside, the “Pop/Corn” issue walks the line between low- and high-brow, between “Miles-Davis-casually-smoking-yet-another-cigarette” cool and “B-movie” corny, and between “cultural kale” (Penny 37) and guilt-less pleasure.

Is the issue itself kitschy? Would it be such a bad thing if it were? It is not for those of us at Word Hoard to have the last word on “Pop/Corn,” or to put words in your mouth. We look forward to meeting you again in our upcoming fourth issue.

Diana Samu-Visser, Managing Editor
with
Will Samson
Mélissa LeBlanc
Nahmi Lee

“Pop-Corn”
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