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From the Editor



Editing *Popular Culture Review* for the last 27 years has been a labor of love. I would like to acknowledge the support of UNLV's College of Liberal Arts and Department of English as well as PCA/ACA and, most recently Policy Studies Organization.

Thank you all,
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Introduction

The second issue of the year 2000 *Popular Culture Review* takes us around the world, and forward and backward through time within diverse cultures and subcultures. From an historical summary of an important Chinese custom to race relations in the U.S., from the future of film to the idiosyncracies of collectors of archaic, discarded goods, the topics discussed provide readers with a range of fascinating and controversial opinions on contemporary issues.

The status of race relations since World War II is forefront in this Summer issue. Joy Nishie and Erika Engstrom comment on racist practices toward Japanese Americans during World War II, as well as attitudes towards Japanese Americans after the war, in their analysis of the first Hollywood film to portray Japanese American soldiers, *Go For Broke!*. Charlene Register takes a unique approach to character analysis in her biographically-informed study of a still publicity photo of actress Dorothy Dandridge. Register's article also provides a "picture" of Hollywood's role in American racial stereotyping and discrimination practices in her study of Dandridge as a black female screen star in the 1960's.

Keiko Nitta and Renford Reese analyze hip hop or rap music, albeit from very different perspectives. Nitta's article explores rap songs as counter-narratives to mainstream social and historical commentaries of U.S. life. Her term, "strategic self-commodification" provides a complex and provocative sign for understanding the "Gangsta" image and the ways in which Black males identifying with this image both embrace and disrupt the mass commercialization of their music. Renford Reese discusses ways in which rap's appeal crosses racial and ethnic boundaries, through its internationally accessible language and the styles in dress that young people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds have adopted. He views rap as having the potential to mend race and ethnic relations throughout the United States.

Ross Talarico's "drive through the city" presents a quick and controversial look at race relations via an analysis of a VW Jetta television commercial. Readers should have a range of reactions to his conclusion as to the reasons for a white yuppie couple's drive through an urban American city. Gwendolyn Foster examines the work of African film director Bassek Ba Kobhio, offering his film on the life of Albert Schweitzer, "The Great White of Lambarn," as an example of a complex, oppositional gaze to the familiar, white, imperialistic and colonizing one.

In different cultural arenas, Wheeler Winston Dixon reports on our "fully digital future" with the onset of laser-projection, digital video systems and other 21st century innovations in the film industry. Jan Baetens traces the changes in the world of comics in Europe since its non-individualized, "postmodern" turn in the late 1980's through rejections of pm in a recent return to a "modern values" move-

ment. Daniel Grassian looks at Hunter S. Thompson's infamous hero, Raoul Duke, as a surreal, noir-like "Hard Boiled Detective" while presenting yet another "colorful" description of the home town of PCR, Las Vegas.

Pop artist Jasper Johns is the subject of Deborah Cibelli's article discussing the art community's age-old argument regarding "high art" and Popart that is commercially successful. Michael Siu joins the family values debate in his study of the recent changes to — and commercialization of — an ancient Chinese custom, the bestowal of "red packets" on younger family members by their elders. And finally, on lighter notes, John Donlon offers an historical perspective on the art of striptease, from Adah Menken's 1861 performance from the back of a horse to the recent gender-bending acts of transvestite strippers while Matthew Stolick provides an amusing summary of "the camp sensibility" of collectors and their collections of superfluous, silly items. There you have it. Enjoy!

Juli Barry
Assistant Editor

Chinese Red Packets: Reflecting Changes of Cultures and Relations

The Chinese have always taken 'family' as a basic and core element of society and paid attention to the relationship among family members. A clear and strict hierarchy gave senior members of a family an elevated, non-arguable status and authority over junior members (Baker, 1979). Younger members must respect and follow their elders' orders without questioning. The great Chinese educator and thinker, Confucius, also stated that elder and younger should keep in a 'strict order' (in Chinese is "*zhang you you xu*"). However, this did not mean that the elders should not care about the younger members. In fact, documents from the *Chou* Dynasty (1122 - 255 B.C.) state that to care for younger members was a duty given by heaven to a family's elders.

The Chinese people, particularly seniors and elders, seldom express their feelings of love towards family members verbally or openly. According to H.L. Ho, "Only by examining some behaviours, traditions and customs carefully can we understand the rationales behind intricate human relationships" (Ho, 1992: 11). One of the predominant customs among the Chinese is the tradition of presenting red packets to members within a family. This quiet, personal expression of love provides us with insight into the familial relationships among the Chinese.

Since the *Ming* Dynasty (1368 – 1644 A.D.), parents and senior family members placed coins tied by a piece of colourful string, in the form of a dragon, under their children's pillows on New Year's Eve. This kind of money was called *ya-sui-qian* ("*qian*" means money) (Xian Dai Han Yu Ci Dian, 1983: 1437). They gave their children money because they believed this would bring luck, dispel evil from the house and work, and express thanks to all of the little ghosts inside a house (Tun, 1965; Zhang, 1994). Later, people started placing the coins in a piece of red cloth or red paper, and later in a small red paper envelope.

These days, people do not follow the tradition of placing red packets under pillows on New Year's Eve only. Since people take the red packet as a symbol to represent good luck, happiness, and blessing (Welch, 1997: 38), they present them on occasions associated with wishing happiness, luck, and blessings: New Year's Eve, New Year's Day, birthdays, wedding days, the first day of school, of a school examination, or of a new job, upon leaving prison or hospital, or as thank-you for gifts, and in appreciation of services. A special packet is also given after the taking of a woman's virginity. In short, red packets relate to the expectation and wish of all good things, and the elimination and prevention of bad things.

Although most Chinese live in a modern world which focuses on rational and technological thinking, very seldom do people break the custom of presenting red packets at the New Year. This is because the tradition directly symbolizes the hope for luck in the coming year. In Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s, even though the living standard was not high, parents still presented red packets to their children, even if the amount put inside was minimal. In fact, particularly the poorest Chinese are not willing to risk neglecting the tradition in order to test the “truth” of their beliefs (Fan & Shang, 1988).

Wishes and Blessings of Senior Family Members

Seniors presenting red packets to younger family members, and married couples presenting red packets to unmarried ones, are standard practices that have not changed among the Chinese. Yang points out that “this presentation consists of the meaning of the wishes and blessings of the senior family members” (1992: 142). Younger members, however, never give red packets to their elders, even at the beginning of the New Year. If they should do so, their action would be interpreted negatively, as impolite and disrespectful. Even at a birthday banquet for a senior family member, while a junior family member might submit a gift to the elder, it could not be red packet.

Traditionally, the red packet reflected status differentiation and rank identification. It was presented from the top/high level to the down/low level within a family (Yang, 1992). In the southern part of China, a man could present a red packet to his wife, but never the other way. When presenting red packets to children in a house, the sequence of recipients should also follow the family hierarchy: from the children of the first wife to the children of other wives; from the eldest son to the youngest son, and sometimes the adopted sons, and then the grandsons; and from the sons to the daughters.

The time sequence of giving was also structured. Within a family, the eldest family member should have the right to present red packets first. The male members also presented in the first priority. For example, a grandfather (if he is the eldest member) should present red packets to his sons, and then the sons could present them to their own sons.

Since red packets were presented and received from the higher level within the family hierarchy to the lower level, their significance was more one of “granting” than of “submission”. Because of this meaning of granting — without compulsion — the tradition of giving red packets implied appreciation and kindness more than a symbol of thanks.

Social Changes in the Custom

Since red packets symbolize good luck, the tradition and custom has been extended to other festivals and occasions, particularly those associated with traditional Chinese worship activities that have been directly and indirectly related to an expectation of a better life (Tao, 1993: 16-17). Moreover, givers of red packets have gradually re-interpreted the practice as an expression of a higher *social* status. For example, employers present red packets to their employees; and ladies present red packets to hairdressers and beauticians.

Today, the giving of red packets departs from its traditional function as a physical and material practice expressing family members' and relatives' love, to a contemporary function as a "performance" and "re-enactment" of a tradition under social pressure (Wang, 1995). Most people present red packets not only because of their concerns and wishes for their children or their junior relatives in the same family/clan, but also as a means of influencing how people — outsiders — view them.

Furthermore, contemporary Chinese pay less attention to the original strict relations between givers and recipients. It often happens that the giver of a red packet does not know or recognize his/her recipient. As mentioned by Ng and Ingram (1983), "If a person goes to a friend's home to visit during the days of the celebration of New Year, and there is someone else visiting in the home who has children, even though he does not know them, he must also give lucky money" (90). In fact, Chinese people have come to expect others to present red packets at New Year's celebrations. It is easy to imagine how embarrassed a man would be if another person gave a red packet to his children, but he did not reciprocate this kindness. So, Welch (1997) cautions us that "during New Year, never venture out-of-doors unprepared — without a small stack of packets in your pocket — as you never know who you will meet" (p. 38).

Money Orientation

Although over the course of time people have altered the custom by combining a piece of red paper with propitious words and money, money has always been the major content of red packet. However, more attention has gradually been paid to the amount of the money given rather than to the original reasons for giving the red packet. In Hong Kong, for example, many children are concerned whether the contents of a red packet consist of paper money or coins and thus they lose the importance of the original meaning of receiving red packets. Because paper money represents a higher amount, people like to receive red packets that are lightweight. In fact, a common complaint with regard to a red packet with a coin inside is: "it drops on the floor with a *dinging* sound". Most of the time, this kind of *dinging* sound makes people very embarrassed.

Chen (1996) comments that the amount of money a person puts inside a red packet totally “depends on how close [they] are to the recipients or their family” (p. 3). But the important question is whether it should be the only criterion for people to *value* a red packet and the only focus of this tradition and custom. If people judge the degree of love and closeness of relations only according to the amount of money inside a red packet, the initial meaning of the tradition has been distorted and/or destroyed. The original idea of the money as a *means*, without any concern for amount, of expressing the love and concern of senior family members for their descendents would thus become a *gauge* to compare and contrast degrees of love and closeness of relationships.

Evolving Meanings of the Red Packet Exchange

Welch (1997) points out that presenting red packets is “an exchange activity” — you give me how much I will/should return the same to you. So, the modern rules of the giving of red packets depends on ‘how much you gave my children last year’ (Chen, 1996: 3). As mentioned earlier, the practice of giving the packets began as a means of conveying good wishes and blessings to younger family members. When a father puts *ya-sui-qian* under his children’s pillows or gives red packets to his children, he does not expect anything in return from his children. In the past, parents presenting red packets to children would add some words, such as “To grow strong and healthy,” “To be a good man,” or “To be clever and hard working in study.” This kind of encouragement and blessing was the only expectation from the senior family members — the red packet givers.

Although the sentiments expressed in these notes are still important in many Chinese families, the present practice of giving red packets seldom reflects them. The contemporary practice only functions as an exchange of goods (money) on the New Year. When giving red packets to a friend’s child, the most important thing to remember is the number of children the friend has, and not the tradition of bestowing wishes and blessings.

The changing concept of exchanging of red packets also affects how children view the senior family members of their own families. Nearly all of the parents presenting red packets to their children these days still do not expect a return from them. However, many children focus upon the amount of money given to them. They think the traditional meaning of the red packets, as well as other New Year activities, is outdated. They value the red packets in a quantitative manner, associating the degree of love with the amount of money that they receive (Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 1984).

In our modern, technological world, young people seldom believe red packets can actually bring them luck (Fan & Shang, 1988). However, most still like red packets and see seniors’ presenting red packets as a *must*. Because of

cultural changes, we seldom see children waking up early on New Year's Day. They also seldom take the family relation hierarchy seriously, but they agree that the seniors should be the red packet givers. So, we still see children stretching their hands out to ask for red packets on New Year. And, we commonly hear the children say: "*Kung Hei Fat Choi, li-shi dou lai*" ("Wish you wealthy! Red packets given to me") at each New Year.

Today, just as young people count the number of gifts on Christmas Boxing Day, Chinese children compare the amount of red packet money received with their friends. They are proud of how much their parents or senior relatives have given and view a greater amount as reflecting the family's wealth. They also use it as a criterion to value/compare their family seniors' love, concern and closeness. In Hong Kong, it is common to hear young people's complaints to their friends about the meanness of their senior relatives in presenting red packets. In short, they do not see the red packet tradition as an additional *grant*, but take it as *compulsory*.

Since the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), paper has been the most popular material used for red packets. In the mid-1980's, some manufacturers began producing plastic red packets. Compared with paper red packets, plastic red packets are always thin and transparent. This physical property allows the recipient to easily see the amount of money inside, or at least to make a guess at the amount of money (i.e., a note or a coin; or the value of a coin). Although our early childhood education teaches children that good manners dictate that recipients not open the packets until they are out of sight of the giver (Welch, 1997: 38), children's detection and their immediate facial expression often embarrass family members. In order not to cause this immediate embarrassment during the presentation of red packets, many families prefer to use a paper packet which can cover or hide the contents inside.

Another advantage to using a paper red packet pertains to the fact that no one really establishes how much money should be put inside. However, when times change, people in different wage brackets set different "market prices" for their levels of giving, though this is not compulsory. For example, the present market price for the average working family in Hong Kong may be 10 to 20 dollars (7.8 HK dollars approx. equal to 1 US dollars) each. These market prices illustrate that the content inside the red packet is more important than everything else. Thus, a red packet with a one-hundred-dollar note presented by a stranger is more important — with a higher *value* — than one with a ten-dollar note, even it is presented by the recipient's parents. And if a child should receive such a gift, his or her parents can be spared embarrassment if the packets are paper, and thus, unable to be publically examined.

New Needs, New Products and New Relations

Fan and Shang point out that “since festival is an organic part of social cultures, it must be regulated and restricted by different social cultures” (1988: 54). Additionally, when cultures change, festival also changes. While some festivals disappear as new ones are formed, others decrease in importance, and become more simple, and simplified. On the other hand, traditions and customs of some festivals increase in social importance, and become more complex. These changes sometimes result in the disappearance of the original meanings of the festivals (Ho, 1992). Fan and Shang also add that as “some festivals extend their new customs and activities, this can result in more complex cultural internal meanings. Some festivals leave their origins, develop new contents and bring new meanings for the new era” (1988: 55).

Certainly the exchange of red packets provides a good example of cultural changes. Originally, the red packet exchange was a simple custom and only served as a means to carry out senior family members’ care and blessings towards their juniors. Yang (1992: 143) comments that this practice served as a “healthy realization of love” among different generations within a Chinese family. But with the changes in time and social structures, red packet exchanges have changed in practice, allowing for more diverse functions. The changes are mainly because of *new* needs and *new* expectations of life, as well as the *new* nature of relationships among family members.

Before the 1950s, it was rare to see any decoration other than painting and Chinese calligraphy on the covers of red packets. The packets usually were represented by a plain packet in red colour. In the early 1960s, however, manufacturers began to print some propitious words and lucky Chinese symbols and images on the covers (see Figures 1-3). At that time, the graphics were still simple and symbolized the meaning of traditional wishes and blessings. But in the 1970s, businessmen started to print corporate logos and names on red packets as promotional items (see Figures 4-5). In the early 1980s, some manufacturers even produced red packets with particular Chinese surnames (Chinese characters) on the packet covers. Even more recently, trendy graphical designs began to appear (see Figures 6-7). These changes brought a new function to the red packet custom. Far from its original means of granting luck and good will, the practice now works to bring psychological and emotional satisfaction to both givers and recipients.

Red packets printed with surnames on the cover allow individuals to show their personal identity. However, many people do not like to use this kind of red packet as they do not want their gifts to be distinguished by the recipients. These givers carry on in some sense, the original intent of the custom: the idea that the giving is of utmost importance, not the amount given. If one gives packets with a personal surname emblazoned on the cover, the recipient, upon opening his or her packets later at home, will be able to note the amount given by a particular giver.



Figure 1: A traditional red packet. The traditional Chinese sailing-boat and propitious words mean a blessing of smooth life.



Figure 2: A red packet in the 1980s. The three Chinese words meaning happiness, luck and wealth.

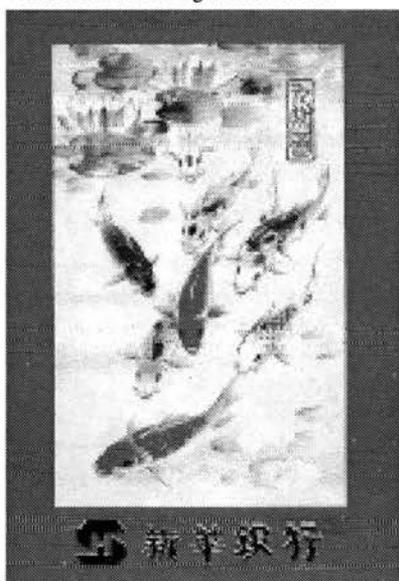


Figure 3: A red packet in the 1980s with lucky colour images (Sin Hau Bank Limited).

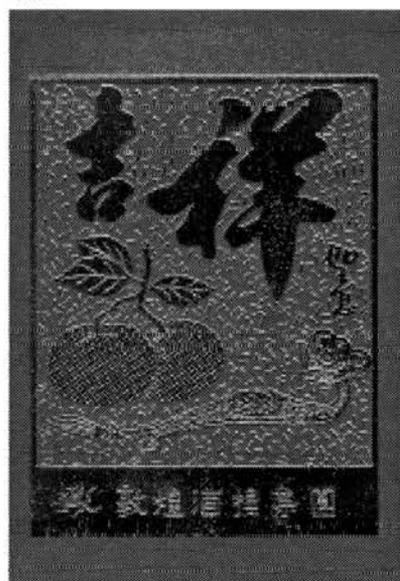


Figure 4: A red packet of a Chinese restaurant. (Treasure Restaurant Company Limited).

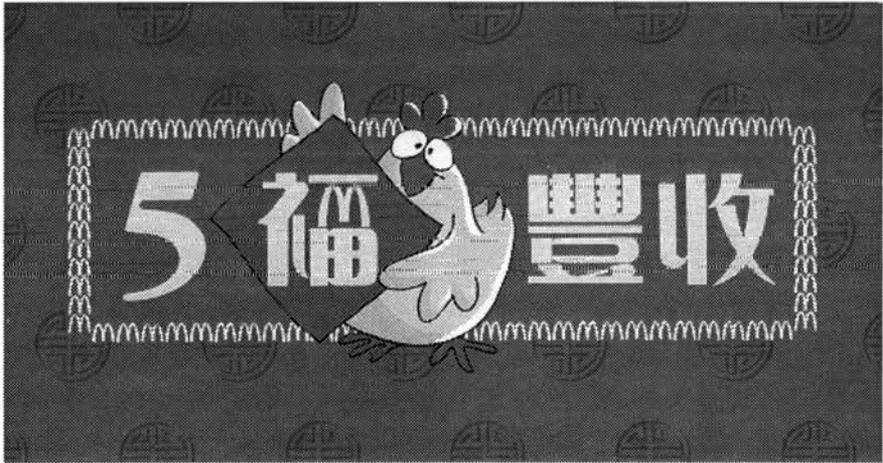


Figure 5: A red packet of the foreign corporation, McDonalds. (McDonald's Restaurant - Hong Kong Ltd).



Figure 6: A red packet with a trendy Japanese cartoon image. *Chibimaruko-Chan*. (Sun Hing Company Ltd).

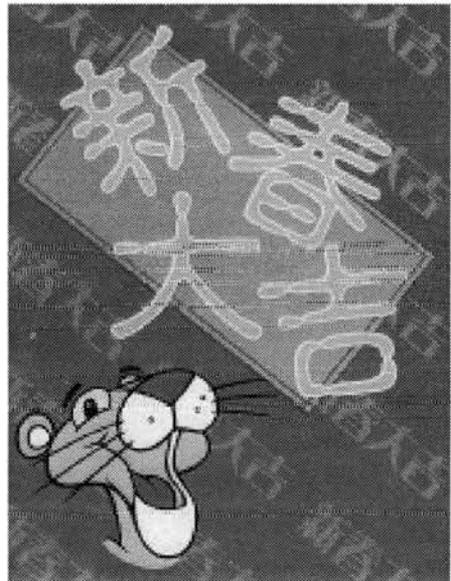


Figure 7: A red packet with a trendy USA cartoon image. *Pink Panther*. (Regentprint International Ltd).

In addition to surname-identity red packets, some modern designs appearing in the early 1990s have attracted young people — both givers and recipients. These red packets all have fashionable and trendy images on the covers, such as Japanese and USA cartoon images. This kind of red packet attracts young people because its design not only allows it to work as a functional object executing a traditional meaning, but also to provide other satisfactions — “psychological and emotional satisfactions” — when giving and receiving money (Belk, 1987; Featherstone, 1991; Hoshino, 1988; Lury, 1996).

The success of this marketing lies not only in providing alternative ways of consumption, but also in eliminating some of the disadvantages of surname-identity red packets. Usually, people give the more trendy red packets (purchased at a higher price) to close relatives. While the amount of money given is generally greater than other relatives’ and friends’ gifts, the givers do not feel embarrassed about the amount.

In the future, we will no doubt witness more red packets with elaborate designs. We can also expect clever business people to produce more varieties of these red packets to suit wider market demands. However, the changes in physical properties — the packaging of money — cannot significantly alter the original functions of the red packet exchange tradition. They will only serve the superficial, consumptive desires of the current culture. Such marketing exploitations obscure the original objectives of red packet giving. They also reinforce in children as well as in adults the growing tendency to value a received red packet only in terms of the amount of money inside.

Love and care among family members are still (and will always be) important within Chinese cultures (“Family Relations,” 1993; Mitchell, 1972; Skynner, 1995). Therefore, understanding and exploring new ways to carry out senior family members’ love and care is essential. In the past, the tradition of giving red packets sufficed for this expression of love. However, as I have shown, this is not the case in today’s consumer culture. Although we still have this tradition, and we can still reenact the practice with each New Year, Fan and Shang (1988: 56) remind us that the *practice* of festivals is a continuously-changing process and we are forced to adapt our “ways of practice” of the past to the contemporary world (Ho, 1992: 18). With new developments in society, we have new needs and expectations for life.

Because of changes in lifestyles, standards, and ways of communication, personal relations have inevitably changed. In a family, the roles of senior members and junior members are different from before. Familial ways of communication have also changed. Today, it is doubtful that parents would still seriously believe a red packet can dispel evil from their children’s lives, or that a girl would not complain to her parents if she received a red packet with a lesser amount of money than her

brother. Parents also are more likely to express their love verbally to their children than in the past, and a wife may now play a more important role and make most of the decisions in a family.

Therefore, we cannot expect the function of red packet exchanges to remain as in the past, only serving as a *ya-sui-qian* to give thanks to the small ghosts inside a house. However, by reviewing the present practice of red packet presentation and re-considering the meanings behind this traditional practice, it seems we, as people living in a money-orientated society, should not focus all of our attention on money in a such meaningful tradition and custom. We should find out how the practice may continue to serve a function of warmth and affection — a welcome “re-newed” tradition in this exceedingly impersonal world.

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“Breaking” Hollywood’s Stereotype of the Japanese American: The Significance of the Film *Go for Broke!*

Once the United States became involved in World War II, Hollywood made numerous films about the “barbaric” and “savage” side of the Japanese (Dick). But in 1951, almost 10 years after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer produced a movie that would remind the nation that Americans of Japanese descent also had a part in winning World War II.

This article focuses on the first Hollywood film to tell the story of the Japanese American soldier, *Go For Broke!*, which premiered in May, 1951. Written and directed by Academy Award winner Robert Pirosh, the 92-minute black-and-white film told the story of the most heavily decorated U.S. Army units of World War II, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and 100th Infantry Battalion, comprised of Japanese Americans.

Here we examine *Go for Broke!* as a popular culture artifact that provides not only a history lesson of the Japanese American role during World War II, but also a message of racial tolerance, of importance almost a half-century after its release. We also explain the film’s significance in terms of Hollywood’s portrayal of Asian Americans, as it redefines the image of Japanese Americans in the post-war years.

Japanese American Internment and Formation of the 442nd

The December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor had repercussions for more than 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast of the United States. Pre-existing stereotypes and racism combined with wartime hysteria fostered an extreme distrust of Japanese Americans (Mackey and Hunzicker). As Daniels notes, “The war time abuse of Japanese Americans, it is now clear, was merely a link in a chain of racism that stretched back to the earliest contacts between Asians and whites on American soil” (3).

By February of 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the Secretary of War or any military commander to establish military areas and exclude any or all persons. The first Japanese Americans were evacuated to 10 sites in California, Arizona, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, and Arkansas. Forced to leave behind the jobs, homes, property, and possessions they had worked hard to attain, the Japanese Americans were incarcerated in internment camps. Their loyalty was questioned, but few chose to oppose the evacuation. Renteln, in “A Psychohistorical Analysis of the Japanese American

Internment,” points out four major stereotypes of Japanese Americans: “highly un-American, inferior citizens, sexually aggressive, and part of an international menace” (632). These views of Japanese Americans, in turn, dictated policies and public opinion about them. Renteln asserts, “A deeply rooted fear of sexual congress between the races consciously and unconsciously motivated some of the actions” leading to internment (632).

Also in 1942, the U.S. government declared all Japanese American men of draft age as 4-C, enemy aliens; they were forbidden to enlist in the armed forces (Crost). However, due to the anti-discrimination measures of the Draft Act, Japanese Americans already in Hawaii’s National Guard could stay in. Eventually, they comprised the first all-Japanese American Nisei military unit, the 100th Infantry Battalion. In 1943, the War Department decided to allow young Japanese American men both in the mainland internment camps and in Hawaii to volunteer to serve, and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team was formed. The 442nd and its units became the most highly decorated in World War II (Crost). Before the war’s end, it would participate in eight major European campaigns (Crost) and earn: “8 Presidential Distinguished Unit Citations, and 18,143 individual decorations including one Medal of Honor, 52 Distinguished Service Crosses, 560 Silver Stars and 28 Oak Leaf Clusters in lieu of a second Silver Star, 4,000 Bronze Stars and 1,200 Oak Leaf Clusters representing a second Bronze Star, and at least 9,486 Purple Hearts” (Brokaw 351). In a 1945 editorial, part of a series that would later earn him a Pulitzer Prize, journalist Hodding Carter wrote about the contribution of the 442nd, and the injustice of racial prejudice in the U.S. Of the 442nd, Carter pointed out: “In all of the United States Army, no troops have chalked up a better combat record” (98).

After Japan’s surrender in 1945, Japanese Americans were released from internment camps all over the mainland United States, with the last camp closing in 1946. The communities they spent years building and prospering in before the war no longer welcomed them with open arms. Animosity toward Japanese Americans continued even though Japanese Americans died fighting in Europe, and no proof of disloyalty by any Japanese American was ever found.

Asian-Americans in Film: Japanese Portrayals

Prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hollywood was already making anti-Japanese movies such as *Patria* (1917) and *Pearl of the Army* (1916) (Dick). This grew worse after Pearl Harbor. As Dick notes: “Hollywood wasted no time in implementing America’s ‘Slap the Jap’ policy. By the spring of 1942, the racial epithets were flying fast; ‘monkey’ was the most common along with its variants, ‘monkey people’ and ‘ringtails.’ When ‘rat’ was used, it was prefixed by ‘yellow’ and ‘slant-eyed’” (230).

After Pearl Harbor, Hollywood's portrayals of the Japanese became even worse, and films linked them to the Third Reich, calling the alliance "Nazi/Nipponese": "Not only were the Nazis and Japanese partners in espionage; they also knew in advance about Pearl Harbor, which, according to Hollywood, was one of the biggest open secrets in history" (Dick 231). The numerous movies characterizing the Japanese as the antagonist during the post-Pearl Harbor years include *We've Never Been Licked*, *Remember Pearl Harbor*, *Salute to the Marines*, *Betrayal from the East*, *Behind the Rising Sun*, and *Blood on the Sun* (Dick).

Hollywood portrayed the average Japanese as "slight of build, smiling, and — most important — a wearer of horn rim glasses that create a saucer-eyed look" (Dick 230). These images were cast freely, as noted in the 1942 film *Across the Pacific*. Actor Victor Sen Yung played the character Joe in the movie, although he was not Japanese. "Oriental" actors often shuttled between roles of Chinese allies and the Japanese enemy due to major casting problems in the 1940s: "the American authorities had herded all the West Coast Japanese into detention camps" (Tiana 38). No ethnic Japanese actors were available to portray Japanese villains. To solve this dilemma, Chinese and Koreans were cast in these roles, since "all Asians look alike" (Tiana 38).

In his study of racism in World War II documentary films, Garrett asserts that these documentaries, including military training films, followed Hollywood's lead in depicting the Japanese stereotype, especially in terms of physical features. Portrayals of the Japanese as the "enemy" in these films also included the exaggerated Asian features of buckteeth, "bandy" legs, and big spectacles. Coupled with a prejudice already in place in reality, such films furthered anti-Japanese sentiment toward those Japanese of U.S. birth and citizenship:

The many derogatory references to the physical differences of the Japanese have the effect of making everyone of Japanese descent an enemy; unlike the racially similar Germans, who could be divided into 'Nazis' or 'good Germans,' all Japanese became simply 'Japs.' This officially sanctioned attitude toward racial differences explains why those Americans of Japanese descent were also vilified... (Garrett 75).

Garrett points to the few films that focused on or mentioned the Nisei soldiers of the 442nd. In 1942, the U.S. government's War Relocation Authority, which oversaw the internment, produced a short film on the 442nd, titled *Go for Broke* (Garrett). However, the documentary did not mention racism (Garrett); rather, it "seems to have been made to show white Americans the great contributions made by Japanese-American soldiers in combat," serving more as a propaganda

film to justify the presence of non-white troops, as did the documentary titled *The Negro Soldier* (Garrett, personal correspondence).

Another documentary, *Our Job in Japan*, did mention the distinguished war record of the Nisei soldiers in Europe (Garrett). However, the mass media during that time only helped to cultivate the anti-“Jap” attitude toward Japanese Americans: “many Americans, submerged in a flood of hate from newspapers, cartoons, public figures, and the powerful images of photographs and films, could not look beyond appearances” (Garrett 75).

Genesis of *Go for Broke!*

By 1951, Hollywood already had begun to focus on the Cold War and the threat of communism and moved away from making anti-Japanese films. The head of production at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Dore Schary (the producer of *Go for Broke!*) showed interest in “developing a story with a Japanese-American protagonist” (Pirosh). Writer Robert Pirosh found the idea intriguing, and tried to create a story about a “Nisei character, perhaps a university student, a beautiful girl entirely surrounded by Caucasians who would, of course, be portrayed by dependable contract players” (Pirosh 3).

But instead he found “the story of her brothers and her sweetheart and her parents and three hundred thousand other Japanese Americans here and in Hawaii back in 1943 when the ugly flame of race prejudice was being fanned by war hysteria” (Pirosh 3). It was this story that became central to Pirosh’s directorial debut.

***Go for Broke!*: A Summary**

“The proposal of the War Department to organize a combat team consisting of loyal American citizens of Japanese descent has my full approval. The principle on which this country was founded and by which it has always been governed is that Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry.”

—President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

(Quotation appears during the opening sequence of *Go for Broke!*)

Go for Broke! closely resembles a military training film. It opens in 1943 at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, where mainland Japanese Americans called “kotonks” (the sound of someone’s head being knocked) and Hawaiian-Japanese Americans or “kanakas” are stationed. Although the two groups shared the same ethnic background, they held animosity toward each other, as Crost describes:

Mainlanders considered the men from Hawaii inferior because of their pidgin English and happy-go-lucky ways. Islanders thought the mainlanders were 'stuck-up' because of their correct English and polite manners (67).

In the film, this dislike is evident in their verbal exchanges: the mainland Japanese Americans express bitterness about their families being interned in concentration camps while the Hawaiian Japanese Americans contend with Pearl Harbor. However, both groups want to prove their loyalty to the United States.

Lt. Michael Grayson (Van Johnson) is a newly commissioned Texan officer assigned to train and lead the all-Japanese American, or Nisei (second-generation Japanese born in the U.S.), unit. He displays an overt discomfort as he arrives at Camp Shelby and sees the Japanese American soldiers. Immediately he asks Col. Charles W. Pence (the name of the real-life commander of the 442nd, played by Warner Anderson) to transfer him back to the 36th Infantry Division, comprised of his fellow Texans. Grayson uses the term "Jap" to describe the soldiers, but Pence sternly informs him that these men are "Japanese Americans or Nisei," and the Caucasian officers, like him, are "haoles" and not "white men." "Haole," a Hawaiian term, literally means "foreigner," but its connotations often point toward only "white" people. Pence goes on to explain to Grayson (thus, the viewer) the internment of Japanese Americans: "The Army was facing an emergency at the start of the war and the possible invasion by Japanese troops. The Japanese Americans were evacuated from the West Coast. No loyalty check, no screening, nothing." But at their initial meeting, Pence fails to convince Lt. Grayson that the Japanese Americans would make good soldiers.

The movie characterizes the Japanese Americans as "misfits" who, perhaps, need the guidance of a strong Caucasian figure. They are disheveled and shown gambling, playing the ukulele, or complaining bitterly about their situation. Though done in a comical way, their size serves as a means to compare their physical characteristics to their taller, Caucasian counterparts. Writer-director Pirosh makes the point in one scene in which Grayson trains the Japanese Americans: marching, they must walk quickly to maintain their stride to that of their Caucasian leader because of their height differentiation; they barely clear the obstacle course waterholes; and they cannot overcome high walls. Eventually, however, the Nisei soldiers "clean" up their act with the help of Grayson and become soldiers.

While the film focuses on the Nisei soldiers and their Caucasian leader, several scenes feature the interaction between two characters in particular: Sam and Tommy. Sam (Lane Nakano) is a mainland-Japanese American whose family and sweetheart are interned in Arizona. Tommy (Henry Nakamura) comes from

Hawaii; his parents were killed during Pearl Harbor. In epitomizing their respective backgrounds, these two characters depict the true 442nd soldier:

Tommy: We show ‘em. We show ‘em us buddhaheads good soldiers. Good Americans.

Sam: That’s the idea. I hope it works.

In the film, the term “buddhahead” serves both as an insult and a term of endearment for the Nisei. Crost explains the term: “Mainlanders called Islanders ‘buddhaheads,’ a term of contempt derived from the Japanese word ‘buta,’ meaning ‘pig’” (67).

After finishing their training, the unit goes to Europe. The underlying desire of the Japanese American soldier in this movie is to fight in the Pacific against the enemy that looks like them. They want to prove that they are “good Americans.” And these soldiers prove their patriotism time and again during combat in Italy and France. They “go for broke,” the Hawaiian Japanese slang expression for “shooting the works in a dice game” (Carter); it serves as the 442nd’s motto, exemplifying the Nisei’s “all or nothing” fighting attitude and *esprit de corps*.

The theme of racial prejudice, embodied in the actions and attitude of Grayson, subtly encompasses the unfair treatment of other minorities. During the 442nd’s time in Italy, Capt. Solari (Dan Riss), one of the officers of the 442nd introduced at the beginning of the film, informs Grayson that his old unit, which he has tried to rejoin during the course of the film, has shipped out:

Solari: Looks like you’re stuck with us for the rest of the war.

Grayson: A guy gets into fighting the Japs and winds up fighting with them. That’s a hot one when you come to think of it.

Solari: Oh, I don’t know. A lot of us have parents who were born in enemy countries—Italian Americans, German Americans...

Grayson: That’s different, sir, and you know it.

Solari: Why?

Grayson: Well, it’s...

Solari: The shape of their eyes? Or is it the color of their skin?

Ironically, Grayson finally gets his wish to rejoin his old unit when the 442nd lands in France and is assigned to the 36th “Texas” Division. Grayson becomes a liaison officer and leaves the men he trained and fought with. However, by this time Grayson seems to have turned around, finally learning to trust the Japanese American soldiers in combat. Toward the end of the film, he becomes a staunch defender of the Nisei soldiers and even goes as far as to knock out one of

his fellow 36th Infantry soldiers, Sgt. Culley (Dan Haggerty), who loudly calls them "Japs" in a bar. He gives his buddy the same lecture he received when he first arrived at Camp Shelby about using the correct terminology: they are not "Japs," but "Japanese Americans."

The film's climax depicts the famous rescue in 1944 of the First Battalion of the 36th Infantry, called the "Lost Battalion" after it had been cut off by the Germans in the Vosges mountains in France; Grayson is among the trapped soldiers. Eventually, the very soldiers he did not want to train or lead rescue him and Culley. Upon encountering the 442nd soldiers, Culley exclaims: "Man, I thought I'd never be so happy to see a bunch of Japs!" Then, realizing his faux pas, corrects himself: "Pardon me, Japanese. I mean, 'Neesee.'" He then tells Sam about the fistfight he had with Grayson over the word "Japs."

With the "Lost Battalion" rescued, the film shows the 442nd soldiers "coming home" to New York Harbor. The film's last scenes include actual footage of a military ceremony, with President Truman attaching a Presidential Unit Citation onto the 442nd's colors (Crost 306). A voiceover narrative of his speech accompanies the video. The U.S. flag waves in a close-up, with the faces of the Nisei soldiers superimposed over it.

Reaction to *Go For Broke!*

"I can still remember my exhilaration, as a teenager in the 1950s, of seeing 'Go for Broke' at the Waikiki Theater. Even with Van Johnson as the lead, these were 'my people' portrayed as heroes and fools, idealists and cynics, the fiery and docile, the eloquent and inarticulate."

Franklin Odo, Ph.D., Director of Ethnic Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa (Chang 11)

Apart from anecdotal accounts and only brief notations in books about World War II films, little research about the film itself exists. It did receive media attention after its premiere in late spring of 1951, with reviews in the popular press. Overall, critics gave positive reviews of the film (Alpert, Crowther, McCarten), and pointed to its themes of tolerance toward minorities, especially the Nisei soldiers' meritorious achievements on the battlefield even while their families back home faced discrimination and incarceration in the internment camps: "Beside being entertaining, the picture should be enlightening to those Americans who tolerated the wartime program of tossing non-combatant Nisei into prison camps euphemistically known as relocation centers," wrote John McCarten in *The New Yorker* (93).



Bosley Crowther, writing in the *New York Times Film Reviews*, deemed the film “a respectable and rousing tribute to the men of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team” that “presents a forceful lesson in racial tolerance and friendliness” (2524). A *Newsweek* review called it a “belated tribute to the nisei who formed the 442 Regimental Combat Team.” At the beginning of the movie they, “look like a hopeless collection of vest-pocket sad sacks, but they develop into coordinated GI warriors a good deal faster than Grayson acquires the understanding that the questions of race and color have nothing to do with a soldier’s loyalty or valor” (Rev. of *Go for Broke!* 89).

According to *Time*, the film’s “message of tolerance and fair play come through in the action, if sometimes a bit crudely...” (Rev. of *Go for Broke!* 108). The movie would have been “even better if its makers had not tried to improve on the truth with hokum that Hollywood palms off in the name of showmanship” (108). A review in *Scholastic* magazine noted that because the film served as a tribute to the 442nd as a whole, its lack of a story focusing on an individual soldier or battle made it “dramatically weak” (“Following the Films” 30). The film redeems itself through the “heavily-underscored point that these Nisei soldiers had two battles to win: they were not only fighting for the U.S., but fighting to prove to their countrymen their right to be American citizens” (“Following the Films” 30).

At least one critic pointed out that the story of Grayson’s “conversion” reflected somewhat of a cliché. A review in the *New Republic* noted that studios in Hollywood have a formula for making movies about racial tolerance:

The typical race picture (or racial incident within a picture) is today handled as follows: The hero is a handsome and winning young man with the one scar on his personality, an abiding hatred for a particular minority...he is forced to associate with a group of these despised people...then one of them does him a signal service — usually saves his life — whereupon the hero bursts into manly tears and embraces as many former scapegoats as his arms can conveniently encircle. (“Movies: On the Beach” 23).

Yet, the cinematic merits of this movie did not go unnoticed. In 1952 it received Academy Award nominations for Best Writing, Story and Screenplay.

Though film critics lauded its storyline and message, its impact on society is uncertain. In the academic arena, the numerous books that interpret and critique World War II movies mention little or nothing about the film. Like the men of the 100th Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team, this film goes virtually unnoticed.

“Breaking” the Japanese American Stereotype

Director Robert Pirosh wanted real Nisei to portray the 442nd soldiers, but he could not anticipate the difficulty of finding Japanese American actors, even some six years after the war’s end: “There were no Japanese-American actors, I was told, except for a few old-timers in Hollywood and one in New York” (Pirosh 3). The director needed men of military age, preferably Army veterans, but could find none with any professional acting experience.

Eventually, the film’s technical consultant, Mike Masaoka, a veteran of the 442nd and at the time the national director of the Japanese-American Citizens League, helped Pirosh in getting the film cast: “Among those selected were a Hawaiian importer, a college psychology student, two civil service employees, a high school professor, a real estate agent and a gardener” (Pirosh). None had acted before due to lack of opportunities: “They weren’t wanted on stage or screen” (Pirosh 3). The success of the film hinged on the use of Japanese American actors. Hollis Alpert, in the *Saturday Review*, noted that “it is the Nisei actors who are to be most lauded even though many of them are of the non-professional type” (30). As John McCarten wrote in the *New Yorker*: “...it is the Nisei to whom the picture is most indebted for its air of authenticity” (93).

After the numerous movies before and during that war that depicted cartoon-like stereotypical Japanese, *Go for Broke!*, in its portrayal of the Nisei soldier, in a sense “broke” the image of the Japanese—and certainly the Japanese American. As portrayed in the film, these soldiers embodied a wide range of personalities. These portrayals only reinforced the idea that Japanese Americans were “real” people, no different than other U.S. citizens.

The film also broke the stereotype of the World War II American hero: the Caucasian soldier. While the Japanese Americans were not able to go into combat in the Pacific theater, their contribution on the European front had a much more direct impact on the spread of Nazism. The 442nd and 100th Infantry Battalion tours in Italy and France and the units’ recognition as the most highly decorated in U.S. military history provide evidence for the Nisei soldiers’ bravery.

In terms of physical stereotypes of the Japanese American, *Go for Broke!* shows that the American soldier need not meet the idealized physical attributes of being tall and broad-shouldered, and having a long stride. Instead, the film accentuated the physical characteristics of the smallness and short stature of the Japanese American soldier who had the face of the enemy, without using caricatures. It took what viewers might consider as shortcomings of the Japanese Americans’ physical presence and emphasized the fighting spirit of the Nisei soldiers. The film challenged the stereotyped, Hollywood version of the American “G.I. Joe,” and offered a portrait of U.S. citizen-soldiers who, despite the circumstances of their families and loved ones in their own country, continued to defend American ideals and values.

Conclusion

Go for Broke! embodies a historical and cultural significance. First, it serves as a filmic means by which to preserve and communicate the experiences of the 442nd's veterans. Second, the movie contains images of Japanese Americans that significantly differ from the way the movie industry has depicted this minority; it serves as a counterpoint to the stereotypical anti-Japanese portrayals in other World War II films.

Go for Broke! also finds a special niche within the milieu of films about Asian Americans, by serving as one of the first films to openly mention the internment experience of Japanese Americans. Though not released until 1960, the film *Hell to Eternity* dramatized the plight of the interned Japanese Americans. It told the true story of Marine hero Guy Gabaldon, who was orphaned at a young age and spent his childhood as the ward of a Japanese American family before World War II. When his adoptive parents are sent to the camps, he questions why the same fate did not befall German- and Italian-Americans (Dick). Other, more recent films that focus on the Japanese American internment include 1976's *Farewell to Manzanar*, based on the autobiographical book by Jeanne Wakasuki Houston, and *Come See the Paradise*, released in 1990.

In this context, the film provides another aspect by which to study the Japanese American experience during the 20th century. A future research suggestion in this area includes a comparison of several World War II films with *Go for Broke!* and a qualitative analysis of their content. Researchers could also study the film's significance by assessing how it embodied the 442nd's actual experiences and camaraderie and its message's effect on public attitudes and knowledge about the Japanese American soldiers' contribution during World War II. Additionally, future researchers can study its place in the history of films about Asian Americans, who still face limited exposure and stereotypical roles in the movie industry (Chao).

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The Evocation of Death in Dorothy Dandridge's Photograph: The Reading of a Still

Dorothy Dandridge was problematized because of her race, sexuality, and the politics of a hegemony that rendered African American women screen stars unable to escape being racialized and sexualized. Yet Dandridge became one of the most commercially photographed African American women in post World War II America. Because of the star status she achieved in the cinema world, Dandridge became a marketable commodity, and her stardom subsequently translated into a commodity that was exploited, reproduced and marketed to the public for mass consumption. Dandridge was commodified by white Hollywood; she posed for still photographs that attempted to capture her as she was and is still remembered, but who, according to Christian Metz, “no longer is” (83). As one critic described photography, “By drawing attention to the moment of creation, that is literally freezing the subject in time and place, photography does not simply reproduce the real but validates the impression of reality — the photographic image appears truthful” (Benzel 3). Thus it was for Dandridge, rendered an object of the gaze by white Hollywood because of her racial and sexual construction, as her body became a site by which white males could explore their own fantasies. Not only does Dandridge’s photograph reproduce the real as she elicited the male gaze; it similarly captivates how she internalized the gaze by projecting this gaze onto herself — a self so consumed by the continual exploitation of her racial and sexual construction that she became suicidal. It is well understood that death is not inseparable from photography; Metz contends that the very nature of photography signifies death as it captures a single moment in time that has passed and can no longer be retrieved (83-4). I suggest that this photograph of Dandridge was indeed symbolic of death — not just of any death but of Dandridge’s own death.

The Dandridge photograph I have chosen is one that I managed to acquire in Los Angeles at one of the many enterprises specializing in movie stills, posters, and other collectibles. This photograph, although reproduced elsewhere, has never been critically read (“Island in the Sun,” 32). The photographer and the year in which the photograph was produced remain anonymous. Dandridge, however, is totally stripped of anonymity and the mature visage that she reveals certainly dates the photograph to late in her career, when she had achieved some degree of acclaim and success as a screen actress. The way she is positioned within the frame, in addition to the contrivance of her pose, combine to make it a promotional photograph

taken to elevate her career and star status while allowing spectators, in the words of Metz, to “fetishize” Dandridge (85-6).

If this photograph is symbolic of Dandridge’s death, a review of the relationship that co-exists between photography and death as articulated by Metz seems called for. It should be noted that in this reading of the photograph my understanding is either greatly enhanced or diminished by superimposing a theoretical paradigm that has grown out of colonial discourse. Metz postulated that photography was closely related to death because: (a) they share immobility and silence; (b) photography evokes memories of those victimized by death; (c) a photograph “is the instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time”; and (d) a photograph maintains the memory of the dead as being dead (83-4). Metz further contends that a photograph parallels death in that it is immediate and definitive, thus, with respect to Dandridge’s photo, Dandridge is captured in a single and definitive moment of time that can never be recaptured or reclaimed (84). In the aftermath of her death, it is only through such photos that we will ever know Dandridge, an African American woman, and an African American star. Metz similarly argues that photography is a mirror of the aging process of an individual because of the photo’s ability to capture a single moment in time (84). For Dandridge, the photograph crystallizes her in time, thus, forcing us to reflect on what occurred both before and after this moment. And because the photo is a still, Dandridge is frozen in time, as our memory is jolted into recall for the before and the after of that moment.

Roland Barthes similarly connected death with photography and argued that “the reading of [a] photograph is thus always historical; it depends on the reader’s knowledge just as though it were a matter of a real language, intelligible only if one has learned the signs” (28). Barthes at the same time commented on the paradox of reading a photograph based on its denotative and connotative message thus usurping the issue of “how then can the photograph be at once ‘objective’ and ‘invested,’ natural and cultural?” (20). With respect to Dandridge’s death, Dandridge’s photo becomes emblematic of death; were it not for her death, this photograph would have no lasting value.

Adding to this discussion, Walter Benjamin points to the fact that:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of the long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it (243).

Thus, Dandridge's photo allows us to vacillate on this continuum between the there-and-then and the here-and-now as we seek to foreground an individual backgrounded by time and history.

More recently Carol Mavor, drawing upon the previous scholars in the same vein, argues that not only is death connected to photography because it seizes a moment in time but death or the "morbid sense of mortality" can be read in a photograph (Mavor 49). Mavor explores how death is captured in photographs through sleep and the positioning of the body. Thus, Mavor's reading gives further significance to the representation of death in Dandridge's photograph.

An examination of the death of Dandridge as constructed in this photo must of course take into account Dandridge's alleged suicide and the circumstances surrounding her death. These underlie the discursiveness of this photo and call for a recapitulation of the story of her death. Some four months prior to her death, Dandridge left a note outlining her will. Reprinted in the *New York Times*, it read,

In the case of death - to whomever [sic] discovers it - don't remove anything I have on - scarf, gown, or other...Cremate me right away - if I have anything, money, furniture give to my mother Ruby Dandridge. She will know what to do. Dorothy Dandridge ("Forty-four Word Handwritten Will of Miss Dandridge Filed" 58).

That Dandridge outlined her will only a few months prior to her death, and considering that she had been diagnosed as suicidal gives credence to the view that she may have had premonitions and even a predilection toward her own death. Her death is still shrouded in mystery because of the multiple theories that persist regarding how she died. When Dandridge was found dead in her apartment (8 September 1965), conflicting reports circulated: she died from an injury, or her death was caused by murder, suicide, or drug intoxication. Following Dandridge's death, the Los Angeles Coroner's office, allegedly under pressure to release a report on her death, produced a preliminary finding suggesting that because she had suffered a broken bone in her foot resulting from an injury sustained in a gym several days prior to her death, fragments of the bone infiltrated her blood stream and may have caused her death ("A Fracture Fatal to Miss Dandridge" 27). In an amendment to her death certificate, authorities later revealed that Dandridge's cause of death was from acute drug intoxication from the ingestion of Trofranil, an anti-depressant that apparently had been prescribed for her because of her severe bouts with depression (Death Certificate). Her friends insisted that Dandridge was murdered, they refused to believe that suicide was the cause of her death (Robinson 72). Thus, the complexity of Dandridge's death itself enhances the symbolism of her photo.



Because “photography and film both always bear the work of death, the pausing to freeze, mummify, ‘corpse-ify’ whatever body they capture or pose...”, it is conceivable that this photo of Dandridge similarly connotes death through the body (Petro 73). Dandridge’s body became the signifier of her own internal contradictions as these contradictions surrounding her death are transfigured into her photograph. Dandridge’s suicide is visible in her forced happiness pose — eyes straining to glow, lips opening enough to be suggestive of a smile of complexity — an “I am yours and yet not yours” stare. Fear of murder is conveyed in the striking contrast of her pose, with one arm elevated suggesting that she is warding off her attackers, while her other arm rests at her side with her shoulder extended suggesting that she is inviting the attentions of any who could inflict harm. Even the red (or orange as a derivation of red) dress and lipstick she is wearing in the photo signifies a plurality of meanings; in this instance, red signifies death consistent with the Chinese custom of “eating...red sorghum during mourning time ...” (Trinh Minh-Ha 90). Dandridge’s death represented in this photo may be a mirror image of her actual death, but what the photo cannot tell us is its cause. Her death, says Earl Conrad, co-author of her autobiography, “was not suicide, [but] was a murder that took a lifetime” (Dandridge and Conrad viii).

Death is subtly conveyed in the moles — blots that highlight the sexual beauty of her face — suggesting that her skin remains unblemished except for these two dark spots, the darkness of death. And even her necklace simulates a fetal position, a position often associated with death, as it is linked to birth. This necklace, encircling Dandridge’s neck, though not a literal strangulation, is a figurative strangulation, suggesting the exploitative coiling she endured in the patriarchal institution of Hollywood.

Dandridge’s admittance to the Hollywood industry was hard won; to gain a level of acceptance as a screen star was a status denied to most African Americans. Even as a star, however, she was marginalized in the industry and became the doubly determined cultural “Other” because of her race and sexuality. And that otherness itself is similarly inflected in Dandridge’s photograph. Both Dandridge’s sexuality and her race were the basis for her being represented as “Other.” Being “Other,” however, is not without its own contradictions; as Trinh Minh-Ha articulates it, being designated as “Other” connotes some sense of privilege, which is problematic in itself. Applying Minh-Ha’s views, I see Dandridge deliberately designating herself as an Other, “a form of self-location and self-criticism within established boundaries” (Trinh Minh Ha 186). She no doubt was subliminally aware that it was necessary. Without understanding the “dialectical relation between acceptance and refusal, between reversing and displacing,” she felt overwhelmed and consumed — questioning the power of Hollywood (Trinh Minh Ha 186). But to be designated as “Other” is to be fraught with change; an inescapable pattern

invites both new negatives and new positives as they contest those previously established. When Dandridge accepted this identity, she participated in her own exploitation; yet, when she resisted being marginalized, she rejected it. By accepting her otherness Dandridge was placating the cinema industry; she became the sexualized and racialized being they desired. By resisting her otherness (refusing to complete a motion picture that exploited her racial and sexual construction) she became stigmatized as an undesirable, as one who was difficult to work with and as one regarded problematic as an actress. She was constantly trapped between these two competing identities. The internalization of this conflict between acceptance and rejection of this otherness could be interpreted as the death of the self — again, a death that is represented in Dandridge's photo.

The otherness that Dandridge internalized and that we see manifested in her death is also apparent in her body. While Dandridge's skin color suggests that she is of African American origin, her skin can be read as a fetish signifying a range of associations that can be made of African Americans. In the racial bigotry of the language of that period, the lightness of her skin signified whiteness and therefore, life, while her darkness signified blackness and therefore, death. Such contrasts were augmented in the photo by the shadows created by the lighting that brightens one side of her face and body while deliberately darkening the other side. Upon closer examination, Dandridge's face appears to be much lighter than her neck, leaving unanswered the question of whether the photo, through a highlighting effect, has caused this implied whiteness or whether Dandridge wore facial cosmetics to appear lighter when photographed. Dandridge's racial construction has been subverted, and when we take into consideration that even though she was African American, her copper-toned complexion could allow her to represent any number of ethnicities, it becomes readily apparent that not only was Dandridge's ethnicity deliberately diluted, but also that she was being promoted as something "Other" than African American. Dandridge's racial construction is further problematized by the fact that although she was an African American, she possessed European features (evident by the thin nose, etc.). She simultaneously symbolized Eurocentric standards of beauty.

If Dandridge, classified as African American because of her color, is coded as something other than African American, she then becomes the "Inappropriate Other." Already "Other" in race and so-called black sexuality, she has blurred the lines by presenting herself as belonging to an unknown ethnicity, this opaque quality allowing her to become "inappropriate." No longer identifiably African American, she had her racial construction manipulated to appeal to a broad audience, both those who accepted only white and those who might be fascinated by any woman of color.

If the photo then becomes symbolic of a mirror by which Dandridge could

view herself, then according to Lacan, the photo becomes symbolic of the formation of Dandridge's ego-ideal as she attempted to transform herself into what she witnessed in the mirror. Dandridge wanted the mirror to reflect whiteness so that she could marry a white man — white men, however, marry only white women. Dandridge wanted to transform herself not so much into a white woman but into a figure who possessed the signs of white womanness so that white men would want to marry her. In order to achieve this mirror image, Dandridge had to kill the outward signs of her blackness in herself, a process already begun by Hollywood, as the tension between her interiority (blackness) and exteriority (whiteness) — or between self and other ensued (Regester).

Color as a construct of race becomes compounded with sexuality. Freud himself used the dark continent trope to refer to female sexuality. Thus, black women, because of their blackness, automatically became sexualized. As Dandridge, confirming these views, muses, "So many white men think there is nothing sweeter than having a brown boff on the side, under wraps, taken in the dark or kept behind the scenes" (107). Dandridge — because of her Africanness — is automatically objectified because of her sexuality, and in the words of Laura Mulvey becomes the object of the male gaze which "projects its phantasy onto the female figure..." (11). Mulvey's views, however, although not entirely applicable with respect to race and sexuality, are applicable when she argues:

Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the film noir); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence over-valuation, the cult of the female star). This second avenue, fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself (13-4).

In posing for this photograph provocatively, Dandridge understood that she was inviting the male gaze and that she was constructing herself as an object of desire. That Dandridge was deliberately striving to connote desirability is apparent in her posture and demeanor, with her slightly opened mouth and low-cut blouse.

Inextricably related to her exoticism is a plant that is generally associated with jungle terrain or rain forests. Thus, Dandridge's desirability is constructed not only by her physical appearance but also by the selection and positioning of objects in the photo; Dandridge appears to be stepping forward from the shadows of an exotic plant. Unfortunately, Dandridge internalized this gaze and these effects and projected them onto herself, thus inviting her own death; a death that is presaged in this photo.

Dandridge internalized the gaze; however, she found being constructed to convey desirability a problem because she still thought her desirability was subverted because of her blackness. Richard Dyer argues that only whiteness can convey desirability and more specifically blonde white females (42). Applying this to Dandridge, although she was constructed to convey desirability because of her sexuality, she was rejected because of her blackness. Recognizing this intensified her desire to capitulate to whiteness. Fanon contends that "All these frantic women of color in quest of white men are waiting...they will become aware, one day, that 'white men do not marry black women.' But they have consented to run this risk; what they must have is whiteness at any price" (49). And indeed, Dandridge, reflecting on her life as she had engaged in futile relationships with white men, acknowledged her obsession, stating, "Hell bent on marrying a white man, I don't know what I wanted to prove" (192). Fanon argues that ego-withdrawal could conceivably help to disrupt this pattern of behavior but is not useful for blacks, since they require white approval. He added, "They must have white men, completely white, and nothing else will do," and once this symbol of whiteness is obtained, the black woman is metamorphosed; "she [is] white. She [is] joining the white world" (57-8). Returning to the photo, I see Dandridge's obsession with white men again inscribed in the positioning of her body, while her face, nose, and breasts all point in one direction toward the brilliance of the light, which can be equated with her desire for whiteness. The shadows created by the light cast darkness on the part of her body that remains stationary. Thus she has shielded part of her body, representing her flight from blackness. Even the positioning of the body, as Dandridge appears off-frame, is in direct opposition to the way Americans customarily read — from left to right. Dandridge's position disrupts our traditional eye movement.

The photo represents Dandridge as an African American woman who has been characterized as "Other," a photo in which the configurations of race and sexual constructions have been transfigured. Lowering a scrim over these configurations, Dandridge complexified her image, transforming it from simply "Other" to "Inappropriate Other," and later inviting death. In conclusion, therefore, this photo is a representation of Dandridge's death. Dandridge actually foreshadowed this at one point, reflecting on her predisposition for self-destruction:

"Some people kill themselves with drink, others with overdoses, some with a gun, a few hurl themselves in front of trains or autos. I hurled myself in front of another white man" (184).

As a spectator, perhaps I have developed in the words of bell hooks an "oppositional gaze;" perhaps my transgression of the sexual and racial construction of Dandridge allows me to see Dandridge as the real African American star that she was, struggling to overcome the confines of the dominant hegemony of Hollywood. My knowledge of Dorothy Dandridge, merely reading texts about her life and those of friends and critics was, I now know, severely limited. Now, reading this photograph, my understanding of her exploitation by others and by self has been greatly enhanced. The photo is about her death.

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Strategic Self-Commodification As Resistance: The Complexity of Media-Transmitted African-American Cultural Attitudes

Erotics of Gangsta: The Background of the Issue

In February 1994, the National Board of Directors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People “unanimously voted to condemn ‘gangsta rappin’” (“NAACP”).¹ Gangsta Rap is a sub-genre of rap music, which emerged in the South Bronx around 1974. Inspired by West Coast inner-city youth culture, in particular “the gang culture and street wars of South Central Los Angeles, Compton, and Long Beach,” Gangsta Rap has been acknowledged as one of the central phenomena that marked the extensive commercial progress characterizing the second wave of rap music (Perkins 18). On the other hand, artists of this genre have been incessantly criticized by the mainstream media, politicians, and white middle-class liberal organizations—like Tipper Gore’s Parents’ Music Resource Center—because they “glamorize” violence, including sexual abuse of women and the use of guns and drugs.²

Recently, however, various academic studies and discussions have been accumulating: they investigate the racial politics and social critique hidden under Gangsta Rap’s fighting signifiers. Tricia Rose in *Black Noise* argues that “rap’s social criticism opposes and attempts to counteract the ways in which public educational institutions reinforce and legitimate misleading historical narratives and erase from the public record the resistance to domination that women, people of color, and the working classes have persistently maintained” (105). Implied here is that rappers’ expressions stem directly from their resentment of actual inner-city experiences of discrimination, impoverishment, and victimization by authority as represented by police brutality. Yet more significantly, Rose’s interpretation sheds light on rappers’ anxiety that those experiences will be erased by the dominant epistemology, which constructs the mainstream American social texture, unless they articulate them in the form of rap music.³ Former Public Enemy member Chuck D’s well-known reference to rap as “Black CNN” clearly represents the role of rap music as an information source for those who are in the periphery of modern American society.⁴

However, if mainstream society has no exegetic intentions toward rappers’ politics of self-expression for critiquing the “common sense” of American social structure, then those “violent” words will be understood literally and thus comply textually with the existing stereotypes of African Americans. The NAACP’s concern

about the negative influence of Gangsta Rap suggests this point: they declared that “[w]e condemn the words, lyrics and images that degrade, disrespect and denigrate African-American women with obscenities and vulgarities of the vilest nature” in mentioning the feminist achievement of the co-founder of the organization, Ida B. Wells (“NAACP”). Indeed, as Michael Dyson argues, the misogynistic and homophobic rhetoric used by some Gangsta Rappers can be equated with the patriarchal premise of the Republican policy (184): the conservative media and politicians have deliberately utilized controversial descriptions of existing violence in rap’s discourse to both exclude and discipline the African-American community.

According to the July 10, 1995 issue of *Fortune*, a series of criticisms of rap music, as exemplified by Bob Dole’s, caused the decline of the genre’s sales in 1994. To demonstrate “misogynist rap” musicians’ own response to the decline of their market share, the author of the article, Faye Rice, continues: “Hard-core rappers are now rhyming kinder and gentler. Bad boy Tupac Shakur’s tender ‘Dear Mama’ lyrics might even give Republicans pause: ‘Mama, I finally understand for a woman it ain’t easy trying to raise a man/ You always was committed/ A poor single mother on welfare’.” This article clearly exemplifies the misrepresentation of the problem of power that rap’s politics of expression signifies. Rice’s citation of this particular fragment uncannily highlights the figure of the black man blaming himself for causing his mother’s impoverishment. Moreover, when she names this tone a “Republican pause,” the writer presents her own Republican misinterpretation of the song: Tupac Shakur would be apologizing to the “moral majority” for his delinquency in wasting the federal budget as well as disgracing the hegemonic “family value.” The concept of the “welfare mother,” doubly metaphorized as the “welfare queen” by Ronald Reagan, designates black single women who have children; the discourse gains its cultural efficacy from the hyper-sexualization of those women, while signifying the image of spoiled black men, without introducing any policy for dismantling the racial factor of their unemployment.

In this way, the hegemonic interpretation of rap music has normalized the socio-political argument on this cultural art form that begins with displacing the source of exploitation from the racist social structure to the black man. It is also true that several female rappers have critiqued male rappers’ frequent use of misogynistic words such as “bitches” and “hoes” to designate women: for instance, Queen Latifah — called the “Angela Davis” of hip-hop due to the feminist point of view in her works — sings in her “U.N.I.T.Y.” that “[i]nstance leads me to another flow/ Everytime I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or ho.” Yet as Latifah’s paradoxical feminist thesis, “unity,” signifies, rap’s erotics is not subsumed into the simplistic formula of gender conflict. Thus, the question becomes: *who are more seriously victimized, black men or women?*

The case of gender relationship in the dominant representation of hip-

hop culture paradigmatically suggests a two-fold politics: 1.) the hegemonic culture industry's racializing of gender conflict; and 2) the coincidental suppression of women practitioners of hip-hop. Since the media attempt to construct a single image of hip-hop, one that "glamorizes" sex and violence, they exclude all topics except lyrics that feature those acts from the actual hip-hop practice. Particularly, figures of women who collaborate with men in fertilizing this art are subjected to exclusion, because such a reality would form a counter-image to the vicious gangster. In this regard, Nancy Guevara argues that "the elision of women from the hip hop image" collaborates in reproducing a stereotypical portrayal of male dominance and female subordination as the black gender relationship (49). According to Guevara, "[t]he undermining, deletion, or derogatory stereotyping of women's creative role in the development of minority cultures is a routine practice" that determines "the overall distortion of hip hop" (51, 50). In this view, the conflation of racial and gender politics effectively misrepresents both genders in the group: man as sexist and hostile, woman as absent. By utilizing some male rappers' misogynist lyrics, the media succeed in camouflaging the ideological combination that sustains the discourse of irrecoverable sexual domination in the black community. As this situation suggests, an investigation of the power relationship between the media and rap music provides a useful framework for describing the complex field of domination in the postmodern sphere of info-media.

It is these situational, conceptual, and discursive dynamics surrounding the production and consumption of rap music and hip-hop culture in the U.S. that I would like to consider in the present study.⁵ This problem is essentially connected to the electronically mediated reproduction—mainly through tele-visual and digital sound recording systems—of urban (originally black) youth culture and the figures of rap musicians themselves. This essay investigates how the mass mediation of rap music became the source of momentum for the emergence of a paradoxical mode of resistance to the dominant culture: strategic self-commodification. In order to approach this issue, I will first look at the historical context in which rap has acquired its cultural visibility, in terms of the tension between rappers' politics of self-expression and the racial order that conditions the institutional evaluation of the genre. Next, I will analyze several arguments on the consequence of rap's commercial success that conditioned the style of Gangsta Rap. While exploring Gangsta Rappers insight into the possibility of manipulating the image of African Americans in the hyperreal field as the basis of their strategic self-commodification, finally, I will indicate a limitation of Gangsta Rappers' self-commodification in relation to the postcolonial requirement for the reconstruction of identity. Rap is a case demonstrating that the mass media have changed the patterns of those who benefit from the symbolic resources they proliferate. In the late-capital media society, control of symbolic resources is not a matter of a simple domination-

subjugation dichotomy. Rappers and the power of media control contest each other for representational resources disseminated by the media. In this complex process, rappers both lose and gain the meanings indispensable for maintaining their socio-political goals. However, due to the intrusion of the force of capitalist social distinctions, this contestation can in no way be a purely semantic one.

Visibility and the Burden of Representation

The representation of African-American cultural attitudes in the mainstream media has engendered various social effects. On an artistic level, one of the essential techniques of rap, “sampling”—a method that incorporates portions of a rhythm or phrase from existing records into a newly programmed sound context—came to be problematized as a violation of copyright. Rap was free from this legal issue when sampling was implemented by anonymous DJ’s in less public contexts, including the street and house parties of the 1970s.⁶ Simultaneously, the intention of social critique that determined the original growth of rap music was suppressed by the discourse producing the “official truth” of middle-class society. John Fiske’s theory of the “media event” is useful to explain the construction of the dominant image of rap; rap’s reified images, audio-visually produced and reproduced, come to possess their own realities in each mediational framework—no matter how different the narratives attached to the representations may be. Furthermore, the realities are evaluated by the mainstream discourse community, which supplies the legitimate interpretive codes with the framework functioning as a Foucauldian regime of truth (Fiske 1-4).

The multifarious effects of rappers’ presentation of their political intentions, however, prevent us from concluding this analysis with a simple neo-colonial story of the white media’s misrepresentation of one black art form. In a 1991 interview with Havelock Nelson and Michael Gonzales, Fab 5 Freddy, who originated hip hop along with several pioneers and successfully promoted rap music from Brooklyn parks to clubs in downtown New York and finally to MTV, clarifies the significance of hip hop’s affiliation with the nation-wide media, in light of the dominant tendency to exclude black figures from the culture industry in the 1980s:

Around May 1988...Peter Dougherty was telling me there were a couple of proposals to do a rap show at MTV, where he was a producer. That was something I never thought would happen because MTV still wasn’t playing Black music except for Michael Jackson, Prince.... (xiv)

Implied in this depiction is the rappers’ struggle to win not a local but a general acknowledgment of their music as a legitimate aesthetic form. In this regard,

the success of hip-hop culture on MTV cannot be contained within the ultimate business success of the white-owned culture industries in utilizing particular African-American cultural attitudes. In other words, rappers have promoted a wide recognition of “black culture” despite the mainstream media’s middle-class-oriented negative interpretation of the genre.

Emphasizing this liberating role of the market, James Lull observes the “success of black popular culture” through electronic mass mediation:

The technical nature of electronic media resonates sensuously with the oral qualities of black culture.... The market certainly doesn’t eradicate racism—some critics claim it only exploits minority races in many ways even more—but it undeniably provides unprecedented access to black cultural space. (83)

Taken together, Fiske and Lull indicate the dual function of the mainstream mass media concerning the representation of rap music. While Fiske’s point clarifies the distortion of rap’s image in accordance with white knowledge of black culture, Lull provides a positive evaluation of the public recognition of rap’s presence as a result of mass mediation. Lull’s perspective foregrounds the tactical skill of rap musicians, who have succeeded in exercising cultural power from a relatively marginal position. Nonetheless, his analysis does not clarify the role of the market in the present discussion.

Even though the market itself “undeniably provides unprecedented access to black cultural space,” cultural objects and commodities circulating in the market are evaluated by various institutions, such as corporations, politicians, the media, and the majority group of consumers. The reasons for their preferences, selections, rejections, and redistribution of specific items may, accordingly, stem from the hegemonic notion of acceptability. In other words, those who have the power to manipulate the market place also have the power to judge the moral value of an object, not simply its commodity value. That the major media have denounced rap as distributing messages dangerous to American society at large is explicable by this logic. Rap musicians’ strategic self-commodification has been informed by this tension circumscribing the effect of their expressional styles in the mainstream media as well as the culture industries. The mass mediation of hip-hop culture creates almost unpredictable opportunities for technological reproduction of the practitioners’ images, which then become fragmented from the context of their resistance to the dominant culture. Representations of sheer anger in the media might, therefore, be intentional self-expression. But they are certainly moments of commodification, in which only particular images are recreated as cultural icons—signifying the actuality of their lives—and invested with a standard of value judgment.

Stuart Hall's theory of articulation illuminates this problem concerning the fragmenting and resolidifying of rap musicians' images. According to Hall:

An articulation is...the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? So the so-called "unity" of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary "belongingness." (53)

Hall implies that the articulation is the site of contestation for a unified discourse producing a specifically intended meaning. For rap musicians, social criticism is impossible without the articulation between their expression of anger and the recognition of the deprived urban living condition. Indeed, the debate over rap's negative effect on society begins when rappers' expression is disarticulated from racial and class distinctions in society. The visibility that rap musicians have won in the mainstream media is, therefore, accompanied by the greater risk of isolating their gangster image, as signified in their stereotypical attitudes, styles, and lyrics, from the social and material context that caused their emergence. When their "culturally particular" attitudes are cut out of the texture of their inner-city lives and subsumed into the hegemonic discursive framework, their image is rearticulated in terms of its logic connecting the representations of rap exclusively with crime and thus the need to police.

Rappers' strategic self-commodification as a contemporary mode of resistance, therefore, produces various ironic effects, including the fact that their description of the social reality encompassing inner-city life matches and thus unwittingly reinforces the connection between social decay and the black community in the dominant imagination. The tactical nature of that strategy is, however, obvious in light of the fact that rappers keep using rebellious self-representations, instead of creating an antithetical self-portrait that might modify the gangster image. Returning to Fab 5 Freddy's remark on the importance of the promotion of rap music from a local sub-cultural scene to the mainstream, we can infer that the media-savvy rap musicians are provoking misinterpretations and scandals by their self-portrayal. As an act of resistance, rap music certainly involves a paradox; that is, the actuality of their performance is activated not by understanding, but by the refusal, misunderstanding, and confusion of the cultural hegemony. Houston Baker presents an analysis that helps to explain the possible background of this theory of strategic self-commodification. Baker appreciates

rappers who began to organize social movements—including STV (Stop the Violence Movement) and HEAL (The Human Education against Lies rap coalition)—promoting an awareness of the negative image of black youth, as a result of their sensitive response to the media coverage. Yet at the same time, Baker states, “it is also time to ‘fight the power’ as Public Enemy knows—the power of media control. In their classic rap ‘Don’t Believe the Hype,’ PE indicates that prime-time media is afraid of rap’s message, considering it both offensive and dangerous” (59, 93).⁷

This vein of argument on Gangsta Rap indicates that the issue of mimesis and origin in the age of hyperreality complicates rap’s goal of social critique. Since the rap lyrics are the source through which the media locate the destructive sex and violence of the inner-city culture, their paranoid fear that the textual will incite the actual suggests an interesting mimetic inversion. In classical literary theory, the world and literary production are assumed to be hierarchically ordered. According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, “[t]ragedy is essentially an imitation...of action and life” (1450a). In contrast, according to the media’s world view, social life will imitate the rapper’s literary production. This mimetic inversion manifests what Marx calls ideology, in which “men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura” (47). In the context of these classical and early modern materialist world views, the locus of rap music, intersected by the media and late-capital commercial culture, becomes clear. If postmodernity can partly be attributed to the dissolution of the categories of text and life, the rap “phenomenon” is certainly postmodern.

Hyperreality and the Question of Authenticity

In an interview with Terry Gross discussing the L.A. uprisings of 1992, Ice-T states that he somehow predicted the occurrence and that the messages inscribed in his records reflect his prediction. Ice-T replies to a question by Gross, who defines his style as “inflammatory lyrics” in order to establish a discursive link between rap music and the catastrophic visual image of “his [Ice-T’s] neighborhood go[ing] up in flames”:

I know it was going to happen sooner or later and I’m not surprised at all. {...} See the problem with this is, America was not prepared for so many people to be so angry....My attitude is, if you weren’t prepared for this...then it’s your fault. (126)

Both Gross’s and Ice-T’s emphasis on his South Central origins suggest the premise that rap lyrics represent the sense of exclusion and exploitation that the inner-city residents feel in their everyday lives. The connotations implicit in each of their discourses are, nevertheless, very different. While Gross does not try to extend her

capacity of understanding Ice-T's opinion outside of the discussion about the existence of "rap-related" violence, Ice-T repeatedly suggests the necessity for mainstream America to hear the messages and warnings rap musicians deliver.

Interestingly, both of them authenticate the content of rap music and indicate its reality in terms of the uprisings that actually happened in the material world. To do so, Gross tries to contain the signs contributing to rap's narrative—as seen in a phrase from Ice-T's "Cop Killer": "fuck the police for Rodney King"—her notion of violence within a categorical social injustice. On the other hand, Ice-T proclaims the "hard-core" of his rap, that is, the empirical basis that provides its message with informational validity. He also explains a legitimate cause of retaliation. Implied in this remark is rap music's *raison d'être*, which is now regrettably supposed, by many critics and rappers, to be largely lost due to the mass mediation and commercialization of the rap industry. Therefore, the tension between the white journalist's criminalization and the rapper's coarse expression of his social concern for the inner city ultimately enters into the question of how one appraises the empirical authenticity of rap music.

The expectation of authenticity in rap's message informs debates over what is truly political and what is hypocritical in the hip-hop culture. According to one camp, market forces have diverted the artists' creative motive in order to compromise with the mass audience's taste. For example, Marvin Gladney writes, "Works of the Black Arts era and hip-hop both provide a distinct and conscious connection between artistic expression and the frustration of Black people existing here in America, and indeed in the world" (293). He argues that this aesthetics, crystallizing through the experience of Black resentment, does not simply mean to "draw pictures of the urban blight, but seek[s] instead to stimulate thought and discussion concerning the issues raised in the music" (292). In addition, Rose's observation, which basically shares the same commercialism/ authenticity dichotomy, further pinpoints the way in which the mass mediation and commercialism of rap music has cause the gap between the media's stereotyping of rap as criminal and the rapper's original socio-political purpose, as demonstrated in Gross's interview with Ice-T:

To participate in and try to manipulate the terms of mass-mediated culture is a double-edged sword that cuts both ways—it provides communication channels within and among largely disparate groups and requires compromise that often affirms the very structures much of rap's philosophy seems determined to undermine. (Rose 17)*

The loss of rap's "authenticity" might be simultaneous with its commercial success

and with the dominant media's infixing the gangster image in rap music. This analysis then suggests that the present rap "phenomenon" is a media event, or a "hyperreality" in the sphere of "televisuality" in Fiske's sense (Fiske 2).

Jean Baudrillard's theory concerning the dissolution of representation into simulation in contemporary society further helps us to unpack the postmodern condition surrounding rap, the media, and the audience. Even though Gangsta Rap is a media construction, this fact alone hardly curtails its established commercial appeal. For, despite Gangsta Rap's constructedness, audience members cannot help but read signs of reality, or simulate their experience of reality, by accessing the representation of it through rap. Regardless of the arbitrariness of the signs in Gangsta Rap, audience members receive some sense of reality from its representations; and it is basically impossible to experience the real outside of the constructedness of the model in this situation. Yet, more fundamentally in a realm of constructed simulations—including the society in which the televisual reality of "gangster" prevails over the actual social problems concerning minority lives—there is no single absolute standard for judging the epistemological adequacy of the one-to-one relations between sign and object, which are for Ice-T, the rap message and black social experiences.

Baudrillard declares the end of epistemology based on the subject-object relationship, mediated through signification. For, in a realm of constructed simulation, there is no standard for judging the epistemological adequacy of sign to object. Nonetheless, according to Baudrillard, social order requires a certain sense of reality to provide grounds for truth, falsity, and rational distinction, upon all of which power depends. This is the moment at which "the power of media control" emerges (as in the way that Public Enemy proposes); at the same time, as Rose argues, the connection between rap music and violence is authenticated. In this ironic inversion, power must derive its reality from the dominant representation to establish, at least, some possibility of an intelligible distinction between the senses of true and false. As a consequence, the agency of power of the media propagates simulation, or a hyperreality (Baudrillard 39-46).

This hyperreality does not mean that musicians called Gangsta Rappers do not really exist. But rather, as Dyson puts it, this concept explains "the genre's essential constructedness, its literal artifice"; now "many 'gangstas' turn out to be middle-class blacks faking home boy roots" (179). Analyzed in this way, the activity of Gangsta Rappers seems to exemplify the scheme of strategic self-commodification. They have, in a sense, fabricated particular black images complicitous with the dominant stereotypes. However, they seem not to be concerned about the absence of "real life" in their representations, because for them, the representations themselves, in reality, generate money and attract mass attention. This is their paradoxical way of resisting the dominant culture by

colonizing the postmodern space of info-media. Gangsta Rappers are subjects who are well informed about the fluidity of signification in real life vis-à-vis the optical power of mass-mediated images, a power that engenders a practical effect on their own artistic activities. This situation suggests that a crucial impact of the mass media upon the power structure of contemporary society is the diversification of who gains profits by utilizing the media's capabilities. It is the mass media that duplicate and disseminate the signs implicit in represented material and thus, produce the efficacy of self-commodification.

The actual problem with which inner cities are faced, however, seems to be more serious than what Gangsta Rappers' simulation of "home boys" can represent. For instance, Mike Davis suggests that the minority gang figure in the white imagination produces an intense paranoia providing political authorities with an imagined justification to destroy the inner-city community. According to Davis, in April 1988, the police action "Operation HAMMER" resulted in the arrests of 1,453 Black youth in South Central Los Angeles, which is more than the number arrested during the Watts Rebellion of 1965. As the unusual number indicates, they were arrested "mostly for trivial offenses like delinquent parking tickets" (268). With regard to "the contemporary Gang scare" that certainly produces harmful effects for inner city residents, Gangsta Rappers' personal exploitation of the mainstream culture industry cannot create a practical solution to inner city oppression. Even though rappers benefit from manipulating self-representations, black youth arrested without a legitimate cause are victimized by such misrepresentation by institutional power. Implied here is the inadequacy of postmodernist manipulation of signs as a realistic strategy of changing the social positions of those who are actually menaced by institutional oppressions.

More significantly, Gangsta Rappers' media politics, through its spontaneous participation in the media's recreation of African-American identities, undermines the original purpose of rap music: presentation of counter knowledge about contemporary society through life-experience. Again, Gangsta Rappers' strategic self-commodification is the model that presumes the dominance of the hyperreal over the real; therefore, this postmodern reaction to the media society does not raise the issue of the legitimacy of the gangster image itself. In other words, this method of resistance only concerns itself with how one can utilize or reappropriate an image as a symbolic resource for musical creation. The limitation of Gangsta Rap's resistance is thus inevitably problematized in terms of contemporary debates about identity politics in a multicultural society. Ironically enough, strategic commodification, which has been enabled by the postmodern dissolution of the text-life as well as object-subject categories and by multiple expressions of black culture, suspends the question of identity, an integral issue concerning the recognition of multicultural social constituents. If one tries to rely

solely on the postmodern mass media to subvert the existing power relationship, the central issue tends inevitably to be the deconstruction of identity—as either authentic or hypocritical.

Ice-T's intentional authentication of his identity suggests that the question of identity haunts the site of rap music creation based on the massive exposure of black culture in the postmodern culture industry. Insofar as the image of African Americans is articulated with violence, the limitation of Gangsta Rap's resistance becomes inevitable: its paradoxical self-image generates a certain identity-effect. The asymmetry of power between the disciplinary institutions and black youth invalidates a rapper's performative commitment to the process in which the black identity-effect crystallizes itself in the media. If one tries to rely on the postmodern mass media to subvert the existing power relationship, her/his central objective should be to disclose the constructedness of identity, which ultimately allows her/him to control the process of its construction. The blindspot of the rapper's postmodern manipulation of African-American images is, however, the fact that their image itself is a cultural capital not equally distributed. In this context, NAACP's opposition to Gangsta Rap seems to be based on their anxiety about its possibility of creating subaltern subjects silenced by both the mainstream culture and the visible counter-cultures, in addition to the possibility of the hegemonic cultural gatekeeper's distortion of rappers' messages.

The mass media have a strong potential to be the most powerful agents of intellectual colonialism, due to their ability to acquire, (re)produce, classify, and circulate knowledge. Rap music, on the other hand, exemplifies the present-day contestation over the validity of knowledges and representations between a cultural agent and the mass media. Rappers' fighting words—generally perceived as violent—coincide with the intensity of both physical and symbolic violence the dominant society has inflicted on the inner-city culture. The metaphors “Black CNN” and “under ground reportage” state clearly that rap music itself is the network of the counter-interpretations of social institutions in the periphery of modernity. However, the mainstream media's cannibalization of rap's message into “sex and violence” exclusively has unavoidably diversified some rappers' goals.

The contradiction between authentic and commercial rap then seems to be an expression of a tension that hip-hop, as today's major cultural force, inescapably has to face. In 1997, the San Francisco-based rap group, *Spearhead* released a record entitled *Chocolate Supa Highway*. In its liner notes, the lead vocalist Michael Franti writes: “The Chocolate Supa Highway is the other side of the information superhighway....Hip-hop is our world-wide internet.” The older metaphor echoes in Franti's. The imagery resonating in the metaphor, furthermore,

implies an alternative information sphere contesting the gigantic institution of the information superhighway.

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Notes

1. For a chronological background of the development of hip-hop, see Perkins 1-45.
2. For instance, Bob Dole, in defining his position in public policy for the 1996 presidential campaign, criticized violence exclusively in Oliver Stone's films and rap music.
3. This interpretation also appears in John Fiske: "[T]he rappers explain that they are giving information about Black experience and warnings about Black anger. Violence is incited not by rap, but by white ignorance of Black social conditions..." (186).
4. Similarly, Ice Cube once explained that "[w]e call ourselves underground street reporters. We just tell it how we see it, nothing more, nothing less" ("Gangsta Rapper" 39). See also Fernando.
5. For the etymology of the term "hip hop", see Costello and Wallace: "Hip-hop's an older synonym, coined by rap pioneer Kool Herc [DJ] to describe the heavily danceable Jamaican scattin..." (21).
6. Regarding the legal issues arising from the process of rap's development from a street culture to a national music genre, see Perkins 7-9.
7. Whereas Baker sees both STV and HEAL as "profitable" attempts dealing with problems neglected by "white law," Rose interprets the existence of such groups as a black community's self-discipline that fits "comfortably into the social pathology discourse that explained rap-related violence in the first place" (139-140).
8. On the other hand, in reviewing Rose's *Black Noise*, Baker suggests his disagreement with the authenticity/commercialism dichotomy, when he asks, in passing, "does 'double platinum' signify 'inauthenticity'?" ("Reviews" 672).

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The Critical Reception of *Painted Bronze* by Jasper Johns: Art Posing as Product

As a Pop artist, Jasper Johns has produced art that has accommodated all types of media, including sculpture, and is inclusive, relying upon extra-artistic sources taken from popular culture (Alloway 119). At the same time his art can be assessed as abstract and distinct from low art. Johns' work has been celebrated both for its critical content related to popular culture and for its formal innovations distinct from subject matter. The opposing forces of the avant-garde approach with appropriation from mass culture (following a process discussed by Walter Benjamin) and self-referential modernist practice (exemplified by the criticism of Clement Greenberg), in which formalism dominates as a concern, can be seen as a dialectic for Johns. It must be viewed within the context of consumer society where art poses as a product marketed in a commercialized art gallery system that professes to assess value in terms of the uniqueness of a work of art (Crow 215-16; Baudrillard 52). The critical reception of Johns' early Pop art object *Painted Bronze: Ballantine Ale Cans* (figure 1), a sculpture painted to resemble a consumer product, proves the difficulties in trying to reconcile high art with mass culture¹. For critics it was expedient to avoid the question of originality — an issue raised by the appropriation of an image from popular culture — by emphasizing the high prices the sculpture commanded in the flourishing art market. A study of the criticism of *Painted Bronze* will illustrate the way in which the early commercial success of the sculpture was used for over four decades to show that the work had value as formally significant modernist art.

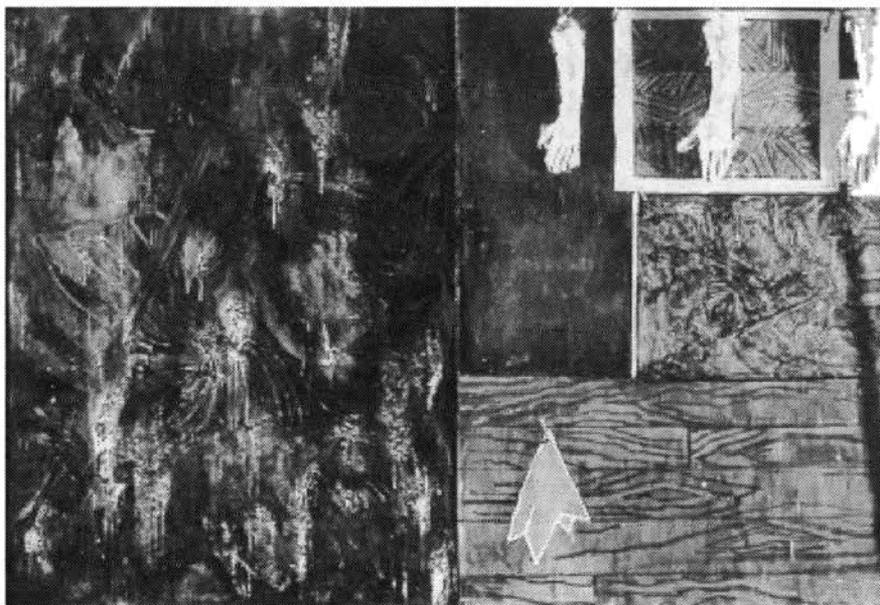
In 1964 Johns recalled that he made *Painted Bronze* to resemble ale cans in order to test his dealer Leo Castelli:

I heard a story about Willem de Kooning [that] he was annoyed with my dealer Leo Castelli, for some reason, and said something like, 'That son of a bitch; you could give him two beer cans and he could sell them. I heard this and thought, What a sculpture—two beer cans. It seemed to me to fit in perfectly with what I was doing, so I did them and Leo sold them (qtd. in Swenson 40-43).

The sculpture was purchased by Robert Scull for \$960 and was later auctioned in



Painted Bronze: Ballantine Ale Cans ©Jasper Johns/VAGA, New York, NY



Perilous Night ©Jasper John/VAGA, New York, NY

1973 for \$90,000, almost a hundred times the purchase price².

With the enormous profits generated by the work, it was considered ironic that Johns lived and worked in the old Provident Loan Society Building on Houston and Essex streets in New York during the late 1960s and early 1970s and that he kept his art in the old vault of the renovated bank. Upon turning down an offer, Johns once observed, "I always wanted to sell a painting for a million dollars" (qtd. in Johnston 27). Such statements, coupled with his actions, suggest that Johns believed the prices for his work could be manipulated by reducing output and limiting the sale of existing items. In 1954, at the age of 24, Johns destroyed all of the art in his possession (Mamiya 12). By 1960, Emily and Burton Tremaine, Frederick Weisman, Ben Heller, and Robert Scull were all fighting over paintings. These collectors even began to negotiate with the artist for paintings before he had even started them (Tomkins 62). In a similar vein Johns became an astute collector of his own work and once *Painted Bronze* was sold, he created a duplicate for himself (Feinstein 139).

From the very beginning of his career Johns was not averse to employing techniques from commercial marketing to promote his art. While collaborating with Robert Rauschenberg under the single pseudonym Matson Jones, Johns created window displays for Tiffany's and Bonwit Teller that were sometimes used to sell his art (Mamiya 134-36). Gene Moore, display director for Bonwit Teller and Tiffany's, paid the artists \$500 for each window display they designed. In one window, the display resembled a tableau typical of Dutch still life painting while another employed a stand of cut and uncut trees as pedestals for jewelry³. Johns' paintings *Flag on Orange Field* (figure 2) and *Small White Flag* were exhibited for sale much like other consumer goods in the windows at Bonwit Teller during 1957-58 (Crichton 36).

Within the context of the more traditional art market, Johns' stellar record of selling nearly all the paintings in his first gallery exhibit established his prominence in the art world and allowed him to take center stage. Similarly, *Time Magazine* in 1959 equated Johns' cachet with the acceptance of his work and the sale of his paintings at national and international exhibits:

Jasper Johns, 29, is the brand-new darling of the art world's bright, brittle avant-garde. A year ago he was in Manhattan, he has exhibited in Paris and Milan, was the only American to win a painting prize at Carnegie International and has seen three of his paintings bought for Manhattan's MOMA.... (qtd. in Crichton 38).

Once news of his exhibition record and marketability circulated, his art was acquired

by the influential collectors Ben Heller, James Thrall Soby, Nelson Rockefeller, Philip Johnson, Dorothy Miller, and Alfred Barr.

The artist's quick rise to fame was noted by the collector Ben Heller who criticized the "Johns myth" around 1959:

Johns has been as much a pawn in the current world game of power politics as the bearer of a new or individual image. As a result of this....[he] risks the subtle, swift and cruel fate befalling one who becomes a fad. He has perhaps suffered as much as gained by his notoriety and success. (qtd. in Crichton 37)

According to Heller, originality made work by Johns highly marketable, but the very same commercial success could result in over-exposure and curtail long term success. Although Heller's warning proved to be unnecessary as Johns' visibility within the art world continued to enhance his reputation, one reaction to the charge that commercial success might lead to faddishness was for the artist and critics to conflate popular taste with aesthetic value. Accordingly the Ballantine ale cans of the *Painted Bronze* were used to equate the reception of art with the consumption of alcohol. The idea for this visual pun referring to consuming art was developed in Johns' "Sketchbook Notes" published in 1965, which postulated that, "'Looking' is and is not 'eating' and 'being eaten'" (Johns 185).

Other Pop artists, including Claes Oldenburg, were more overt in asserting that the comparison of saleable art with consumer goods demonstrated art had greater value — "since the works could not be mistaken for the original consumer products but had to be acknowledged as art for sale" (qtd. in Mamiya 46)⁴.

The greater acclaim that was accorded to original art over mass-produced commercial goods informs the commentary praising *Painted Bronze* in terms of the artist's commitment to craftsmanship⁵. Critic and social historian Max Kozloff, critical of commercial success, commented on the skill Johns needed to copy the cans and the transformation of the mass-produced consumer goods into a unique work of art:

With those laboriously hand-painted versions of the manufactured: flags, targets, and beer cans, in which he is not the least anxious to conceal the traces and imperfections of brushstrokes he makes the mass-produced unique. (qtd. in Crichton 43)

Painted Bronze was made using plaster of paris in what Johns has described as a

complicated process. "Parts were done by casting, parts by building up from scratch, parts by molding, breaking and then restoring. I was definitely making it difficult to tell how it was made," the artist observed.

The sculpture was then cast in bronze, reworked when it came back from the foundry, and finally painted (Johns 192). The procedure followed what would become Johns' famous dictum, "Take an object, do something to it, do something else to it." (qtd. in Albrecht 162-63)

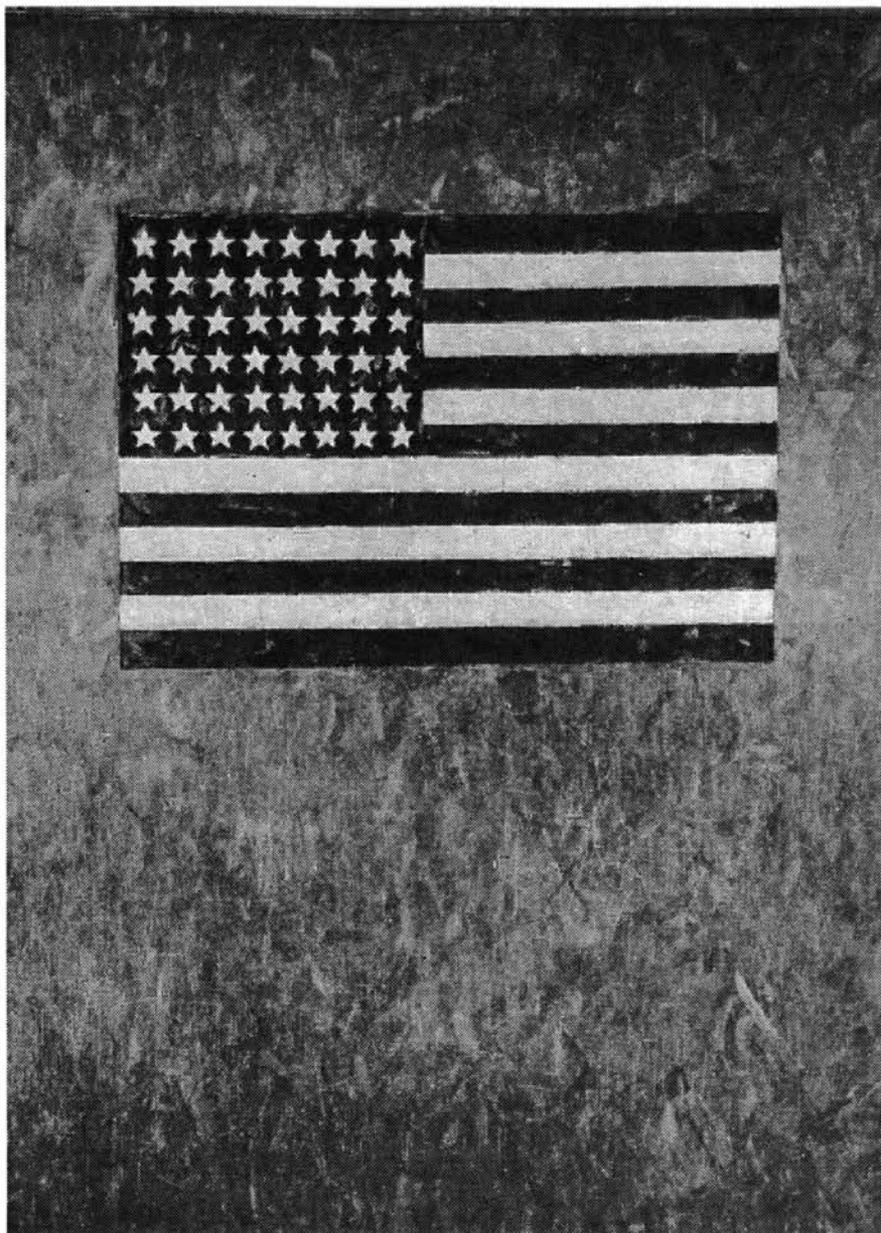
Roberta Bernstein interviewed the artist for her dissertation and offered this explanation of the media and the subject matter of *Painted Bronze*: "Johns used the Ballantine Ale Cans most likely because it was a personal favorite, but also because of the simplicity of the can's label design and because of its bronze colors, which imitates the traditional sculptor's material Johns used" (Bernstein 122). For Johns, the cans were studio objects as well as commercial forms since he used empty beer cans for mixing paint⁶.

In her conversation with the artist Bernstein also learned that one of the original cans remained in Johns' studio. As she noted: "Johns told me that one of the original ale can models was lost or stolen; he still has the closed one" (Bernstein 45, 223). The fate of the opened can helped illustrate that the two cans in the sculpture, measuring 5 ½ x 4 ½ inches, could be separated because they were cast separately and could be lifted off the base. Pointing to differences between the two, Bernstein observed the open can was hollow and light in weight and contrasted with the solid bronze closed can which was heavy (Bernstein 54). Kozloff commented on the two cans when he noted that the ale "appears to have been emptied from one punctured can and never to have entered its totally solid composition in *Painted Bronze*, 1960."⁷

A similar phenomenological reading of the sculpture was offered by Andrew Forge:

We don't see real cans 'through' the sculpture. How could we — which beer cans would we choose? Nor do we see an organization of cylinders and cubes. What we see is precisely the thing in front of us, an object which appears incredibly to resemble a beer can, but which is ultimately itself an absurd object. (qtd. in Kozloff 31)

Irving Sandler examined the relationship between the art and its popular referent when he argued that Johns was concerned with "...the definition of art and not art: 'real' objects and 'art' objects; with the connection of verbal and visual images...of what is conceptualized and what is seen, that is, with the complex and ambiguous process of experiencing art."⁸



Flag on Orange Field ©Jasper John/VAGA, New York, NY

These critics were not alone in focusing on formal properties to discuss the art as an object. Referring to his paintings, Johns celebrated the abstract nature of his work:

I think one is ready to accept the illusionistic painting as object and it is of no great interest that an illusion has been made. I think the object itself is perhaps in greater doubt than the illusion of the object. (qtd. in Kozloff 3)

The above criticism discussing art and object during the seventies minimized the popular elements and emphasized the physical properties of the work. With this shift in focus the discussion moved away from social commentary, and subject matter, when addressed at all, was increasingly interpreted as autobiographical.

The self-referential reading of Johns' art has been so pervasive in the later assessment that even the ale cans were personalized. In 1976 the art historian Leo Steinberg equated the Ballantine ale cans with the North and South: "When Johns made bronze sculptures out of two cans of ale, one of them weighing less and pierced at top, was designated as empty, the other as full; one (with the Ballantine sign at the top) was Confederate; the other Yankee" (Steinberg 35). The identification with North and South is based on the fact that the open, slightly smaller can has its top marked with the three-ring sign and the word Florida; while the top of the closed can is blank (Bernstein 54).

Contemporary critics continue to view Johns' art as an expression of his personal and creative life. Johns' reuse of imagery over the course of many decades implied for the critic Charles Stuckey, writing in 1997, that "nostalgia and memory, as manifestations of self-identity are indeed ongoing topics in his work" (Stuckey, "Johns: Hidden and Revealed" 34). According to this reading, certain motifs such as the flags and ale cans are a form of recycling and reworking the popular imagery in earlier work.

Similarly, subject matter from the history of art has been interpreted as part of Johns' personal symbolism. The depiction of a fallen standard among the soldiers sleeping during Christ's Resurrection from the Isenheim altarpiece represented in Johns' painting *Perilous Night* (1982) (figure 3) has been assessed in light of the artist's long established interest in flag imagery. The formal resonance of the flag in *Perilous Night* would inspire the art critic Christopher Knight in 1996, for example, to employ poetic terms to proclaim, "The flag was a radical representation of social experience spoken in art's language of idiosyncratic private pleasure" (Knight 82).

Certainly the American flag is ubiquitous in the art criticism. In 1964 the first flag painting was credited to a dream Johns had that he painted an American flag⁹. Another theory, proposed by Charles Stuckey during the 1976 bicentennial, is that the American flag refers to the historical figure of Sergeant Jasper, a soldier from the artist's home state of South Carolina who was said to have saved the flag during the revolutionary war (Stuckey, "Johns: Yet Waving" 5).

Once this autobiographical approach is accepted, personal references abound. It is possible, for example, to find another allusion to the American flag in the painting *Perilous Night*, insofar as the words "perilous" and "night" occur in verses from the *Star Spangled Banner*. However, it would be wrong to persist in the trend to establish further parallels between Johns' early and late work. The references to the personal dimension of Johns' art diminish the dialectical play between formal issues and critical content, thus greatly reducing the complexity of the commentary. In contrast, criticism that has discussed the commodity character of the art and readings that have affirmed the formal values of artistic practice developed by Kozloff, Forge, and Sandler acknowledge some of the problems of reconciling the formal strengths and originality of Johns' art with the subject matter from popular culture. By avoiding dialectical synthesis critics can explore the formal contributions as well as the relationship of the art to popular culture.

The absence of a formula in the most evocative of the criticism resembles Johns' own interest in ambiguity. Johns' famous images which explore figure/ground relationships such as the mother-in-law/wife from a drawing by W. E. Hill published in *Puck* in 1915 and used by the American psychologist Edwin Garrigues Boring, and the vase/profile based on the perceptual images of the Danish psychologist Rubin, c. 1920 and Gestalt psychology, provide visual analogies for the dynamic shifting between the formal and critical readings of Johns' art (Johnston 36). The multiple levels of interpretation that occur in the readings of the form and popular content recall the ambiguity and contrariety the artist John Baldessari has found in Johns' work when he observed, "He [Johns] has the ability to entertain paradox, to entertain two opposing ideas in his mind at the same time and make them work" (qtd. in Pacheco 50).

A survey of the criticism forty years after the initial success of *Painted Bronze* has shown that the most compelling of the remarks encompassed both the formal and extra-artistic content of Johns' work. Early reviews of *Painted Bronze* were limited to presenting Johns' commercial success as evidence of the artistic significance of Pop art. During the seventies critics acknowledged the popular subject matter while also discussing the formal qualities of the work in terms of the modernist tradition. Some formalist criticism emphasized the self-referential nature of his work while continuing to conflate art that was popular and commercially successful with aesthetic achievement. Accolades for Johns' monumental success

are repeated in the most recent criticism; however the autobiographical reviews ignore the issue of appropriation from mass culture and prize originality, reducing each new work to an insular product of the artist's creative genius.

The criticism demonstrates that the early work by Jasper Johns remains engaging. The critical reception of his art from the early 1960s on is equally instructive for examining the significance of the art market and for ascertaining the surrender by critics to the physical presence and form of *Painted Bronze* as an art object evaluated as merely posing as a commercial product.

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Notes

1. Johns selected the subject of *Painted Bronze: Ballantine Ale Cans* in 1960, a year before Andy Warhol used Campbell Soup cans in his paintings. See Bernstein 55.
2. The auction prompted Ivan Karp to say of Scull: "The man's visual involvement was really there- you can't take that away from him- but he behaved toward art the same way he behaved toward his taxi business. There was always a contest about the price, and he would take a long period of time to pay." Quoted in Tomkins 61.
3. For *trompe l'oeil*, still life and *vanitas* themes in Johns' oeuvre from the 1960s, see Bernstein 74-89, 111.
4. James Rosenquist, who arrived at art from advertising, addressed appropriation: I think we have a free society, and the action that goes on in this free society allows encroachments, as a commercial society. So I geared myself, like an advertiser or a large company, to this visual inflation — in commercial advertising which is one of the foundations of our society. I'm living in it, and it has such impact and excitement in its means of imagery. See Huyssen 261.
5. Kozloff stated: "To have seen Johns in his studio, as I once did, [notes Kozloff] laboriously painting the Ballantine label on a bronze cylinder, using an actual label as his 'life' model, is to have the point apparently confirmed" (qtd. in Crichton 43).
6. Paintings depicting brushes and paint include *Field Painting*, 1963-64; *Studio*, 1964; *Eddingsville*, 1965 and *Decoy*, 1971. *Decoy* was also used as the basis for a lithograph closely reproducing the Ballantine ale cans. The ale can reproduced in the lithograph is a closed can measuring 4 ¼ inches while the height of the actual can made as part of the sculpture is 4 ½ inches.

Johns, quoted in Bernstein, said of *Painted Bronze*:

You have a model and you paint a thing to be very close to the model. Then you have the possibility of completely fooling the situation, making one exactly like the other, which doesn't particularly interest me. (In that case you lose the fact of what you have actually done)...I like that there is the possibility that one might take one for the other, but I also like that with a little examination, it's very clear that one is not the other (54).

7. Kozloff 30-31, described Johns' fashioning of materials further: "In *Painted Bronze*, 1960, the rim is even covered with a metallic silverpaint, in contrast to the red enamel underneath and the underlying bronze surface. It is a juxtaposition of metal on metal, and hence of 'objectness' in two forms: liquid and solid."
8. Earlier Sandler said of the flag, "It showed that an image doesn't just represent a thing that isn't at hand; it is something in its own right, too" (183).
9. Johnston, citing Alan Solomon's catalogue essay for Johns' 1964 Jewish Museum Retrospective, 61.

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1. Jasper Johns, *Painted Bronze*, Museum Ludwig Koln Collection. Photograph courtesy Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Koln. @ Jasper Johns/VAGA, New York, NY, 1960, oil on bronze, 14 x 20.3 x 12 cm (5 ½ x 8 x 4 ¾ in)
2. Jasper Johns, *Flag on Orange Field*, @ Jasper Johns/VAGA, New York, NY, 1957, encaustic on canvas, 168 x 124.7 (66 x 49)
3. Jasper Johns, *Perilous Night*, Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection. Photograph @ 2000 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, @ Jasper Johns/VAGA, New York, NY, 1982, encaustic on canvas with objects, 1.705 x 2.442 x .159 (67 ⅞ x 96 ⅞ x 6 ¼)

S/he's Got It All: Myths, Mechanics, and Mystery In Cross-Dressing Striptease and Burlesque Performers

High Dancers and Cross Dressers

The process of doing research into the social history and cultural significance of striptease and burlesque in the United States (since 1850) routinely uncovered the idea of faux, fake, or ersatz dancers—male performers dancing as female without the collusion of the spectator. There is, of course, also a reality of cross-dressing performers filling the role of female on the boards.

“S/he’s Got It All” briefly outlines the enduring belief, among consumers of apparently heterosexual striptease events, that many of the performers are men. It also deals at some length with the mechanics, explained by cross-dressing entertainers, involved with the creation of this second layer of fiction (the first layer being the quality of intimacy brought about by transcending the “normal” protocols of decorum) (Donlon, 1997). The article is closed by discussing, and suggesting explanations for, the apparently enjoyable aroma of mystery the belief in ersatz exotic dancers bestows on individual audience members.

Do Strippers Offer a Real Good Show, or a Good, Real Show?

In a typical striptease performance today, Coco, or Pepper, or Cinnamon, or Tabasco, or Tiffany, or Vanilla, or Cameron slinks out onto the runway, propelled by the insistent beat of loud, bassy recorded music. S/he shimmies and s/he shakes, s/he quivers and s/he quakes, s/he slithers across the stage’s worn linoleum “on her belly like a reptile,” as one mc put it.

Beginning in fanciful raiment or complex motley, ending in the buff or, more likely, in some sort of G-string or sequined brief, strippers get very well paid for strutting their stuff all over the United States. It is generally intuited that the disproportionally high income potential awaiting a successful dancer provides the main incentive. One performer, who worked her way through prestigious Brown University as a stripper, recently commented that, ironically, no job for which her costly degree prepared her paid nearly what she earned on stage (Mattson, 1995). And “TondaMarie,” appealing the IRS decision to refuse accepting her breast implants as a business expense, pointed out that her earnings zoomed from a decent \$500 to \$700 a week to \$704,000 in the twenty- week period following the

enhancement. Basic garden variety strippers are likely to earn more than LSU Instructors with Ph.D.s, hot house headliners more than full professors or department chairs, and the varietal stars more than presidents of large universities. The economic incentive can be substantial.

Adah Menken and Stage History

Striptease has come a long way since the breathtaking audacity of Adah Menken — who, tied to the back of a horse, and clad in pink tights, set the crowds beyond the hissing arc lights into gales of enthusiasm (Mankowitz, 1982). There is, on the other hand, little to differentiate today's striptease reception from that of the past. Back in 1861, when Menken performed what is considered to be the "first public striptease act ever witnessed in a theater" according to Wolf Mankowitz, biographer of Dickens and Poe, the audience watched with almost religious attention.

So did the audience in this century, ogling the early Mae West in her shocking diaphanous gowns (Leonard, 1991), Josephine Baker, the jazz Cleopatra, in her banana skirt (Rose, 1989), Vegas show-girls in their sky-high headdresses, Madonna in her rocket bra (Andersen, 1991), and the nineties's popular girl-girl acts playing the circuit. Reporting on "tittie" bars in Hawaii, travel writer Paul Theroux noted that "there was as much veneration in [the man's] goggling at a woman's averted private parts as you would find in most church services" (Theroux, 1992, p. 489).

Nonetheless, Philip O. Sijuwade, a sociology professor, believes that strippers, with their parti-colored, sequined, Brazilian slings and bulging saline bags, struggle to create a sense of false or *counterfeit intimacy* in these performances (Sijuwade, 1995). The fancy costumes, so quickly shed, the fabulous use of chocolate syrup, wild animals, and sophisticated, computer-controlled lighting systems are there, he says, to help draw customer and performer closer emotionally if only for a brief moment. There is more to it than sipping a diet coke and watching acres of toned flesh come to light.

In part because of this, "rationality is maximized in performances explicitly designed to be counterfeit" (Sijuwade, 1996, p. 396). Those actions and movements which seem the most authentic are the most artfully created, he claims. The spectator, research readers are told, enjoys the spectacle in part because great care is taken to present an intensely personal display with a supreme degree of practiced acumen. Extending this idea just a bit embraces the phenomena of secretive cross-dressing.

Sijuwade's perspective claims that topless clubs are otherwise normal or ordinary spaces in which performers create a bogus or counterfeit sense of intimacy. Since the folkloric idea that women display sexually and men display with resources has been powerfully tested and supported, there is much to say for the theory that "real" strippers offer a performative version of a biological reality.

Richard Bauman suggests that performance be understood,

...as a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. (Bauman, 1986, p. 3)

Dance, regardless of gender, should be seen as a performance loaded with communicative units, especially in the proper setting. While most restaurants and bars or lounges maintain a domestic sense of what tourism theorist Dean MacCannell calls "front" and "back" region relationships, strip clubs aim to blur or reduce the appearance of this barrier while, it is true, reinforcing it by slavish reliance on traditional roles: men give resources to gain access to women. No doubt extra frisson is introduced by the robust mythology that many of the dancers are, in fact, men. Certainly, for performers involved in this species of display, risk of failure also goes up.

It is to be understood that two forms of performative events are at play: the actions of the dancers and the actions of the customers, engaged in discussing or reconfiguring past performance. The vigor with which the claim of a male-for-female presence is made by audience members to one another seems to indicate a strong willingness to support and help perpetuate the theme. There seems to be no question that a certain number of burlesque and striptease performers are, in fact as well as in the desire or imagination of the spectators, men in drag.

While the emotional tone established may be called *counterfeit intimacy*, the performance skill involved is obviously serious and entirely authentic, in the sense that real conventions are being followed. Conventions of the form virtually demand high heel shoes (and also rely heavily on such standbys as suspenders, stockings, and merry widows as well as the particular artifice of the transvestite).

In the case of cross-dressers, a battery of practical, cosmetic presentations are devised. If some specialists in the field insert big bags of saline in order to gain enormous purchase on the imagination, drag practitioners use additional folk-communicated, special-task technology.

During the process of field work for a proposed book (a social history of striptease in the United States) a recurrent theme emerged which was particularly curious. The men who spoke about their experiences as audience members were almost never reluctant to talk — in fact, a second theme to be traced might deal with the secondary performative nature of these events. The experience allowed the consumer to acquire fodder for future story telling sessions. For example almost all these respondents could recall a memory involving their doing too much:

spending too much, going too late, staying too late, buying too many drinks for others, buying too many drinks for themselves.

The theme under discussion in this article involves a perception of trickery. Very often, as these respondents grew to feel comfortable perhaps, they would in turn ask for a response. “How many of the strippers,” they wanted to know, “were really men in drag?” (Note: often the phrase is “. . . men dressed up.”) At first blush this seems an impossible question. Certainly a skilled, even a merely capable, male cross-dresser might generate a fictive female using the full panoply available from cosmetic prosthetic devices, to modified clothing, to unabashed miming of movement and body language. But most of these elements are quite literally out of the hands of a typical performing stripper (who by definition strips away much of this material). Could a powerfully stimulated, and certainly alert and focused audience of heterosexual males be mis/led in these circumstances?

Looking into these stories or tales of male cross-dressing striptease artists it was intriguing to find that a very large portion of all men queried on the topic¹ were at least willing to accept the possibility that these virtually nude performers could in fact be men passing as women. A surprising number of men, and some women, were willing to share their own stories involving the existence of male cross-dressers functioning in the role of female exotic dancer without the audience’s knowledge.

Of course, many had narratives of experiences or of received stories about cross-dressers in cabarets, with talented performers creating an “aura” or sense of a female presence (typically a celebrity) on stage. That is not the subject of this article.

Most respondents seemed to fully understand the ramifications of the assumption. That is, the acceptance that in actual fact men dress as women and perform a striptease under the motivated gaze of excited viewers. Accepting these received narratives as true means that the recipient accepts the tangible, physical reality of the effort involved and of the willingness to risk very real danger.

After all, these performers display very fully before a highly observant crowd. Moreover, since the striptease lounge may exist to create a powerful if short term tissue of intimacy (Donlon, 1997; Sijuwade, 1996) between performer and gazer, bankrupting this contract puts the performer in real physical jeopardy — and it is not necessary to remind anyone how difficult it is to run in stiletto heels.

Tracking the Locus of the Tales or Facts

In some important ways this orbit of narratives, beliefs, or stories shares characteristics of the urban legend². Most respondents report that they heard about, or occasionally believed, that some strippers are ersatz, as it were. None of the

respondents for this research has so far actually witnessed the unmasking of such an imposter. Yet there is often a great deal of detail given in the narrative and, it seems, there is usually a strong desire that the story be believed once it has been offered. As might have been predicted, the traveling carnival is often the site of these bogus exhibits³. Not only is the carnival a traditional site of imagined or real trickery and scofflawry, it has the benefit of being mobile. Thus, any question about why no record exists of the incident is automatically answered: they left town before the sheriff could do anything about it.

Unfortunately, the carnival is often a liminal zone. Carny life had, and largely still has, a cultural milieu attractive to fringe dwellers. If these incidents of male cross-dressers pretending to be female strippers (again, not a *La Cage Au Folles* type transvestite review) did take place, the carnival midway might well be a place for them. This reasoning raises a problem. Take, for example, the urban legend that earth worm rather than beef was being used in a particular hamburger. A fundamental question would still remain — Why? Earthworm is substantially more expensive than cheap, Argentine beef. What would be the motivation to lose money in order to put one's self out of business? Likewise, there is every reason to believe that a transvestite review, along *La Cage au Folles* lines, would frequently be more profitable than a straight striptease. Why would these unusual events be offered?⁴

One respondent who'd worked her way through graduate school stripping, including doing out-call dancing at Michigan deer camps, said she'd never even heard such a thing, adding: "No, I honestly can't say I have ever met a man [or a] customer in a club that thought any of the girls may be men. I also have never met a man performing as a woman in a straight club. It would be very hard to do, t-bars are pretty small and tight — you would be hard pressed [I don't think she meant this literally] to hide that. I have met plenty of cross-dressers performing in gay clubs. But they don't strip."⁵

What Some Transvestites Say

Several good memoir sources exist covering this topic. These are sometimes quite explicit and, for the doubting Thomases, apparently a photographic record of sorts also exists. It is important to keep in mind that the performative component of this data set makes it extraordinarily difficult to separate fictive elements from fact. Pointedly, several of the older sources do relate the anecdotes of passing for female strippers while on the carny circuit. Of course, as suggested above, there is a fine carny tradition of fooling the rube.

Almost certainly the most famous group of transvestite performers were those associated with *The Factory* and Andy Warhol's several films. Holly Woodlawn recalls being arrested early in her career, saying that [she] "had no idea

what a strip search was, and became quite upset since the only experience [she] had was dancing topless as a go-go girl” (Woodlawn, p. 14). Later

Woodlawn enlarges on her life as a stripper:

Tamara [a hormone queen] was a crazy Cuban who worked as a belly dancer in straight bars around Manhattan as well as upstate. Julie [another transvestite] loved to tantalize straight men, and got the idea of becoming a stripper. Tamara gave her some pointers but told her her tits were too tiny. “A big bust means big tips, doll,” said Tamara, who jiggled her generous double-D’s for dollars at Wanda’s Strip-O-Rama in New Jersey. Well, Julie was destined to become a star juggler herself, and traveled to Yonkers for a new pair of honkers. (Woodlawn, p. 93-99)

According to Woodlawn, Julie, with her new if synthetic jugs, made good money and was having fun. On a visit, Holly and Julie saw a “go-go girls wanted” sign and Julie urged her friend to try for it. Woodlawn secured that position and began dancing:

I wore bikini panties with florescent flowers I had made out of crepe paper, strategically placed around my crotch to hide any flaws in my character. It really wasn’t that difficult to pull off, since all I had to do was tuck myself between my legs. (Woodlawn, p. 99)

Stripping does call for attention to at least two anatomical problems posed by the proposition of a male passing for a female.

Men have played female roles in traditional theatrical and stage productions far longer in the Western tradition than have women. In fact, the entry of women to the field was coupled with a strong social stigma (strippers are still branded as prostitutes in spite of copious statistical and common sensical refutation). Moreover, drag and camp shows have been popular for decades if not centuries⁶.

It is important to remember that the focus here is upon transvestite entertainers successfully performing as female strippers in an unaware heterosexual setting. Professor Don Paulson’s research (1996) shows a good deal of clandestine cross-dressing taking place. One respondent claimed that,

. . . young gay men went to Seattle burlesque houses in the 1930s to cruise and to watch the women dancing in the line. The queens — the gay men — and the women in burlesque were always friendly and would go together to speakeasies after the shows. Sometimes, men would be hired to join the chorus lines in drag to dance and even to strip, although the secret was usually kept from the audiences. (Paulson & Simpson, 1996, p. 7-8)

Still, chorus line work and legitimate stage stripping, up yonder past the kleig lights and under the proscenium's protective bower, is way different from the intimate bump-and-grind of a runway club.

Meanwhile, transvestite shows, such as the enduring *Jewel Box Review*, were popular. For example, in early 1950 the JBR played the *Turf Club* in Denver. Booked for two weeks, it packed the house for eighteen. A competing strip bar took advantage of the publicity to run counter advertising pointing out that, "The *Tropics* features all girls — real girls — and *Native Dancer*" (Paulson & Simpson, 1996, p. 88). *Native Dancer*, a famous race horse of the period, was, in this case, a headlining stripper. On the sly or not, female impersonators developed methods of perfecting their craft. One retired performer recalls that,

[an experienced dancer] made my G-string. It had a thin elastic string that would go inside the skin, in the folds. My testicles would go up into the sockets and my penis would be pulled flat between my legs by the G-string. (Paulson & Simpson, 1996, p. 107)

While this method works, and is apparently approximately standard within the community, it did have certain problems, being a sort of best of a bad situation cosmetic fix — "the larger the penis the harder it was to pull off. After awhile, it would become uncomfortable and it was hard to sit down and could be quite painful" (p. 107).

Robin Raye, an exotic dancer and stripper on the female-impersonator circuit, comments that audiences familiar with the performers "real" gender were in part amused by the "fool the eye" aspect. According to Raye:

How we tucked away our genitals was always the gossipy discussion at the tables. Jackie Starr and I did it basically the same way. We pushed our testicles up into the sockets and a pouch held our penis back between our legs so it would be flat

looking, then tied back by the G- string. (Paulson & Simpson, 1996, p. 118)

Skippy LaRue offers slightly more detail on the arcane art of masking sexual markers:

[I'd] make a G-string out of a cloth table napkin. It was strong, not like a regular G-string. Then you put your testicles up into the sockets very carefully. You take your penis, wrap it in half a Kleenex, then tie the Kleenex with elastic as tight as you can, pull it back between your legs and up between your cheeks even tighter, make a loop, just at your tailbone, then pull the elastic around your waist and tie it at the back. The string gives you the lips. Then you've got a pussy. (Paulson & Simpson, 1996, p. 118)

Because the entire orbit of performance is essentially based on creating an illusion, it is impossible to get past the concern that the narratives flowing from these oral histories might also be, at least in part, fictive. Even the stripper world adheres to fairly standard notions of probity. Thus, there is likely to be a fair degree of what might be called privacy associated with "suiting up."

Today, the classic era of transvestite cross-dressing is largely a thing of the past. For decades, the grand dames of the profession have been replaced by "lip-cynch silicone Sallys," relying on high camp, the old timers say, more than talent and legerdemain. Interestingly, today's striptease performance consumer will still enjoy gossiping about men passing for women (at least away from the totally nude clubs, which foil even the tightest elastic). The big topic of conversation now concerns the sexual preference of the performers — currently often presumed to be female but lesbian.

Center for the Study of Controversial Leisure

Jon Donlon

Notes

1. To date this is a fairly small number of men, chosen as a sample of convenience, and of (apparently) female dancers mostly, but not entirely, working in South Louisiana.
2. For Brunvand (1981) urban legends are "realistic stories concentrating on recent events (or alleged events) with an ironic or supernatural twist. They are an integral part of white Anglo- American culture and are told and believed by some of the most sophisticated 'folk' of modern society - young people, urbanites, and the well educated" (p. xi).

3. Or, as Feiler (1995, p. 287) puts it sweetly, "notoriously inaccurate circus personnel." According to a private conversation with Professor Charles McCaghy at the 1997 American Culture Association meeting in San Antonio, the "pole" featured in most contemporary striptease clubs is a residuum from the tent pole of carnal days.
4. At least two good explanations do exist. First, the exhibition of prowess, and, second, the fact that many oral histories which do claim that a dancer "passed" on stage reflect on a period when legal repression would have prevented the exploitation of a talented transvestite troupe.
5. This quote has been reconfigured from e-mailease.
6. While sexuality may be fairly firmly established, gender and sexual activity is wonderfully elastic. Gender is largely constructed in a particular echelon of "society" at a particular time. Hanson (1995) discusses the confusion caused when "Charles Daugherty, a 26-year-old, five-foot, eight-inch, 160-lb male, enrolled as a junior at a Colorado Springs, Colorado, high school, posing as a girl" (p. 110). The cross-dresser successfully tried out for the cheerleader squad.

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The New Horizon of the Moving Image: Digital Production in the 21st Century

As we approach the 21st century, the filmic medium itself is about to undergo a complete transformation. Video imagery is becoming cheaper and more pervasive, increasing the ease of both production and exhibition. At the same time, the portability and flexibility of low cost video production gives new voice to those ignored by the mainstream cinema, yet, paradoxically, the increased costs of distribution make it ever more difficult for alternative cinema/video works to reach an international audience. 16mm film is dead as a production medium; 35mm will almost certainly follow, perhaps within the next three to five years, signaling a significant shift in the production and reception process of that which we call the cinema.

Editing of film is no longer done on film itself; that vanished in the 1970s. For ease, cost effectiveness, and for its multiple capabilities, the AVID system, among others, has become the new standard for film editing. Indeed, many new films are being shot entirely on digital video, such as Thomas Vinterberg's brilliant film *Celebration* and Bennett Miller's *The Cruise* (both 1998), and then blown up to 35mm for theatrical distribution. Soon 35mm projection may well become obsolete, leading to an entirely new digital video era of image production and exhibition, almost precisely 100 years after the birth of cinema.

In the early years of the 21st century we will finally do away with film altogether, replacing it with a high-definition matrix of dots and pixels laser-projected on to a conventional theater screen, and audiences will overwhelmingly accept this transformation without comment. The cinematograph, after all, is essentially an extension of the Magic Lantern apparatus — light thrown on a screen — and it has had dominion over the entire 20th century.

Now, in the new millennium, different systems of image storage and retrieval will replace the allure of film as surely as magnetic tape replaced optical soundtracks as a vehicle of cinema production. We will be witnessing a silent revolution of images, in which the digital creations of a new breed of "directors" will be as real and substantial to us as Humphrey Bogart, Leonardo DiCaprio, Bela Lugosi and Jean Harlow are to 20th century audiences and archivists. This, indeed, is the "holy grail" of many industry executives and computer imaging technicians; the creation of an entirely synthetic "personality" for the screen, whose image can be entirely controlled by the needs of corporate desire.

The future of the moving image as narrative entertainment, independent art form, and/or commercial message itself is not in doubt, although what form the

moving image apparatus itself will take in the coming century is another matter altogether. There already exist a number of video imaging systems where resolution and image quality genuinely rival that of 35mm film, and with the general introduction of video imaging instead of photographic image capture, the motion picture industry will be taking a giant leap forward into the future.

Since nearly all films are now subjected to a digital "clean up" process on their route to final distribution, in which the original photographic images are transformed into a series of dots and pixels, manipulated in a variety of methods, and then re-transferred on to 35mm, the total digitization of the moving image cannot be that far off, nor will it be an apocalyptic event that utterly changes the face of image storage and reproduction in a noticeable fashion.

Rather, as video imaging increases in ease, portability and image quality, the already blurred line between cinema and video will vanish altogether, just as digital compositing has replaced traditional "mattes" in motion picture special effects. With more films, videos, television programs, and Internet films being produced now than ever before, and with international image boundaries crumbling thanks to the pervasive influence of the world wide web (a technology still in its infancy), we will see in the coming years an explosion of voices from around the globe, in a new and more democratic process which allows a voice to even the most marginalized factions of society. Indeed, a host of web sites already exist for independent and experimental filmmakers today, including *Always Independent Films*, *Atom Files*, *Bijou Café*, *The Bit Screen*, *IFilm*, *Shortbuzz*, *The Sync*, *Underground Film*, *Urban Desires*, *Zero One Films*, and numerous other locations in cyberspace. Together, using streaming video technology, these sites offer literally thousands of films for viewing and downloading, ranging from such classics as Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) to such newer efforts as Michael O'Reilly's interactive *City Halls* (1999) (Smith 18, 20, 21). Whether or not they will capture a significant audience, as I'll discuss later, is another matter.

Using such web-based playback mechanisms as RealPlayer G2, Quicktime 4, Windows Media Player, Flash and Shockwave, at least one portion of the viewing experience of the future will almost certainly be found on the web, particularly as the web merges ever more seamlessly with television (Smith 22-25). A rash of recent corporate media mergers, particularly the Time Warner/AOL merger, demonstrate that the boundary line between conventional television and web-interactive TV is fast disappearing. Along with a shift in home-based viewing delivery systems, conventional theatrical screening methods are changing as well.

As the cinema ends its first century of active development and gestation, we can see that it has always been in a process of becoming something new, changing and adapting with each new circumstance and shift in society. From silent flickering images thrown on a screen, the cinema formed a voice through the efforts of Alice

Guy, Thomas Edison, Lee de Forest, Vitaphone, and other allied processes that have brought us into the Dolby stereo age of digital sound and image processing. From black and white paper negatives, the cinema has moved swiftly through silver nitrate film, safety film, 3-strip Technicolor, Eastman monopack color film, moveable mattes, split-screen “doubling,” until it now stands on the threshold of the final video transformation, where the film camera ceases to exist, and is replaced by an entirely digital imaging system that will soon replace conventional 35mm production and exhibition process. As critic James Sterngold recently noted,

“Within two years, movie theaters are expected to begin installing the first generation of digital projectors. And reels of 35-millimeter film – which are several feet in diameter and very heavy – would, at long last, disappear, to be replaced with electronic projectors that use magnetic tape or discs.” (C1)

Using the new “light valve” projection system, Texas Instruments and JVC have both created new machines that use high-definition digital video projection to throw the image onto the theater screen, and exhibitors, as a group, are enthusiastically awaiting the change. Said the president of one large chain of multiplex theaters, “we can’t wait for the day we’re unshackled from the 35-millimeter prints” (Sterngold C2).

The advantages for studios and distribution companies are also obvious. No more shipping of prints, no more theft of prints. With the use of satellite technology, the “movie” to be screened can be directly downloaded from a satellite, then stored in computer memory at the theater, ready to be screened as needed, without the rips, tears or scratches that one would find in a conventional 35mm print. Electronic encryption of satellite signals will make piracy all but impossible. One method, as described by Robert Lehmer, “uses a 128 bit algorithm which changes every 1/3 of a second. It would take a super computer six months and between \$4 to \$6 million to break the code” (Willis 15). So for reasons of cost, security, and ostensibly of image quality, it seems that digital projection as a way of life in theaters is now only months away.

While films will still originate on 35mm film for a short time in the future, it seems inevitable that we are headed for a fully-digitized future in the area of moving image production, reception and distribution. And the quality of new “light valve” projection image is being enthusiastically embraced by filmmakers, as well. Notes Martin Cohen, the director of post-production at Dreamworks SKG, “I went into one demonstration where the only way I could tell the difference between the film and the electronic version was that the film one had that jittery movement and the electronic one didn’t” (Sterngold C2). This new technology, which has been

looming on the horizon for some time now, will represent as much of a revolution to motion pictures as the coming of sound, or color; the elimination of film itself from the process. Films will now be digitized immediately after post-production, and then disseminated in the cheapest way possible to an audience that probably won't even notice the difference.

Heralding this new development in digital cinema, George Lucas opened his film *Star Wars Episode One: The Phantom Menace* in four theaters on June 18, 1999, in an entirely digital format. Although at the time there were still some technical bugs to be ironed out, *Lucasfilm* went ahead with their all-digital presentation plans because they feel that the shift from film to digital projection is right around the corner. Not surprisingly, Lucas and his compatriots want to be first in line. "It's show time!" exclaims Rick McCallum, who served as co-producer on *The Phantom Menace*. "The quality is going to get better, but we're doing it now because, as George says, 'Why not push it now?' It's inevitable anyway" (Mathews 2).

The aesthetic and commercial stakes in this experiment are considerable, inasmuch as the studios and their distribution arms stand to save \$1.2 billion each year by embracing digital distribution, which will effectively do away with striking 35mm film prints for exhibition, and shipping them to the 34,000 movie theaters in the United States, to say nothing of the global total of 90,000 cinema screens worldwide (Mathews 2). "The whole industry is going to be keying on what happens at those four theaters" notes Paul Dergarabedian, the president of Exhibitor Relations Inc., a firm that tracks new technological developments within the motion picture industry. "Digital is a technology whose time has come, but how fast it happens is going to depend a lot on what people see. . ." (Mathews 2).

Lucas presented his own demonstration of the new digital process at the 1999 ShoWest Convention in Las Vegas, in which 35mm film and digital projection of the same image were shown side-by-side, to offer a direct comparison between the two mediums. As Michael Fleeman noted, the demonstration "revealed digital movie quality is now as good – and in some respects better – than film, with a cleaner, sharper image that won't show wear and tear with repeated showings. The only problem with digital (projection) appeared to be color, with white tones taking on a yellow tint, the blues becoming purplish, and skin tones giving actresses in the demonstration an artificial almost mannequin-like complexion" (50). Nevertheless, most audience members were favorably disposed towards the idea. "I was very impressed with the quality" said one large theater chain owner. "It's almost to the point that it's ready" (Fleeman 50).

Said Lucas, "I'm very dedicated and very enthusiastic about the digital cinema," as he stressed the "quality, the savings in cost, and the ability to do things that just aren't possible today" with dully digitized video projection (Fleeman 50).

Using the Texas Instruments digital projector, which “creates a screen image by bouncing light off 1.3 million microscopic mirrors squeezed onto a square-inch chip” (Fleeman 50), Lucas’s four-theater presentation of *The Phantom Menace* in fully digital format serves as the forerunner of Lucas’s plans to photograph and produce the next two *Star Wars* films entirely with digital imaging, entirely eliminating conventional 35mm film as part of the production, post-production, and distribution process. Using a new camera co-developed by Sony and Panavision, images will be shot digitally, processed digitally, and then “distributed from studio to theaters by satellite, over fiber-optic cable or on special discs” (Fleeman 50). While a number of differing digital imaging systems are being developed, most feel that the Texas Instruments light valve has the edge on the competition, simply because Lucas and his associates have already adopted it.

As Paul Breedlove, director of digital imaging systems at Texas Instruments comments, “at this point, it’s not a technical issue. The technology is ready. The industry just has to make its business arrangements and figure out how it will be put together . . . there’s a much smaller group of players within the movie industry that can make a decision and go forward. Lucas, Spielberg . . . people like that are going to decide the issue just by doing it” (Mathews 2). William Kartoizian, president of NATO, the National Association of Theater Owners, echoed Breedlove’s sentiments. “I wasn’t sure how inevitable [digital] was until Lucas spoke up at ShoWest. Now . . . it’s just a matter of how we make the changeover, and who pays for it” (Mathews 2). Adds Breedlove, “it’s the last frontier. They’ve fixed everything else . . . seating, sound, comfort. The only thing that hasn’t changed in the last 100 years is how you project the movies” (Mathews 2).

In recent months, this trend towards digital projection has accelerated. Recent releases such as *The Mummy* (1999) have been digitally screened in a number of theaters in Los Angeles and New York, and Robert Lehmer of Cinecomm Digital Cinema, the company responsible for the *Star Wars* trial run, feels that “the [digital projection] technology should start rolling into theaters in 12 to 24 months” (Willis 14). To further test digital projection, the distribution firm Miramax arranged a digital screening of the 35mm originated *An Ideal Husband* (1999) to gauge audience response to the new technology. According to Mark Gill of Miramax’s Los Angeles office, the exit cards revealed that “91% [of the audience] thought that digital was as good as or better than film. And this was a relief – everyone walks in a skeptic, never believing that video can be as good as film, but for the first time we’re finding out that’s not necessarily true” (Willis 15). Miramax picked *An Ideal Husband* precisely because the film was very much “the antithesis of a digital film,” as Gill put it, to demonstrate “the range and validity of this kind of technology” (Willis 15).

While the new digital projectors will cost at least \$100,000 apiece for

each theater to install, versus \$30,000 on a standard 35mm “platter” projector (Fleeman 50), theater owners will probably split the cost of the installation with a consortium of the major distributors, inasmuch as all sides will benefit, at least economically, from the changeover. Indeed, Robert Lehmer of Cinecomm confirms this scenario, noting that “our plan has us paying for the installation and retrofitting of cinemas [with the new digital projection equipment]. In fact, our business model is similar to that of Western Electric’s business model – when theaters made the shift to sound in the 1930s, Western Electric paid for it, and I think that’s the only way it will happen” (Willis 15).

While not wishing to appear apocalyptic, I feel that the changeover, once it begins, will be both swift and brutal, exactly like the switch from silent movies to sound films, as noted by Lehmer above. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, two competing methods battled for dominance in the marketplace: sound on film, and sound on disc. Sound on film, using optical sound tracks, eventually became the industry standard, but even the cost of switching from one medium to another, or of re-wiring the theaters for sound was insufficient to halt the switch in the face of overwhelming public demand.

Here, we have a slightly different situation, in that demand for the switch to digital seems to be dictated more by economic concerns than any other factor, and by a handful of technologically-entranced mainstream filmmakers, who nevertheless control a significant portion of the domestic and international box-office. But aesthetic concerns – matters of film grain, contrast, the entire magic lantern process of throwing light through colored plastic onto a screen – will fade and dwindle in the public consciousness, almost as if they had never existed. Already, films are routinely subjected to fully-electronic post-production, and then re-scanned back onto 35mm film for conventional theatrical projection; digital projection is only the next logical step in the chain. The new model of digital distribution, as described by Robert Lehmer, proceeds in the following manner:

At the distributor, a movie is encrypted and compressed, and that data file is given to us. We take it to our hub where we then up-link the signal and then transmit it to a satellite — we think the most economic method is satellite, but there are other options. The distributor tells us what theaters are authorized to receive that signal, and the signal is addressed to each authorized theater. The signal is then received at the theater via a small satellite dish, and it is stored on-site in our theater management system. At that point the theater takes over, and when it’s time for a screening, the signal goes to a projector where it is decompressed and de-encrypted. (Willis 15)

Film itself will be confined not only to the era of the 20th century; motion pictures shot and mastered on 35mm or 16mm film will now be relegated to the realm of the revival house and/or museum, curiosities from a by-gone age. Indeed, in the 21st century, when we speak of film studies, we may well be referring to a uniquely 20th century art form, when moving images were actually captured on photographic stock, as opposed to being created from pixels and electron beams. Digital is taking over. Already, Sony Pictures has produced an entirely digital feature by Mike Figgis, whose film *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995) was shot on Super 16mm. Entitled *Time Code 2000*, Figgis's new film was shot in a mere nine days, starring Holly Hunter, Kyle MacLachlan, Salma Hayek and Jeanne Tripplehorn in a completely improvised comedy lampooning (appropriately enough) the traditional Hollywood filmmaking system. And Bernard Rose, director of *Immortal Beloved* (1994), a somewhat over-the-top film starring Gary Oldman as Beethoven, has just completed a new fully-digital feature *ivansxtc* (2000), which Rose is publicizing on his own web site, filmisdead.com. Notes Rose, "the advantages are so many. They start multiplying exponentially when you start with the big one: you don't need to light it" (Ansen 63).

As David Ansen notes, this "means no electricians, grips, makeup department, generators. Digital is going to mean speedy productions, small crews, low budgets. And the small cameras are so inconspicuous, filmmakers can shoot on the street without a location permit." Actor/director Ethan Hawke is yet another digital convert: as of this writing, Hawke has just finished production on *The Last Word on Paradise* (2000), an entirely digital film shot on location at the Chelsea Hotel in New York, more than three decades after Andy Warhol immortalized the hotel in his epic 16mm feature, *The Chelsea Girls* (1966). Hawke feels that digital cinema "will raise the talent bar of filmmaking. It'll make filmmaking more like painting or the novel, in which case you need to be immensely more talented to do it. This is going to let the future James Joyces work in this medium" (see Ansen, 61, 63-64).

But while digital imaging makes films easier and cheaper to produce, the late-century demand for spectacle (which will certainly continue for some time) ensures that only those films produced by the dominant cinema will reach a truly international audience, in stark contrast to the situation that prevailed only 40 years ago, when a resolutely non-commercial film such as Michaelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* could still be certain of a theatrical release, if only because theatrical presentation was the only method by which producers could recoup their costs, or distribute the film at all on an international scale.

Then, too, the era of the low-budget film, in which Roger Corman's five day epics could compete on the same commercial basis with more costly major studio product are also a thing of the past; commercial filmmaking at the turn of

the 21st century relies on excess and spectacle above all other considerations, and what is left is relegated to the realm of television sitcoms, or equally formulaic mainstream films. Smaller “art films” will continue to proliferate in the major cities – New York, Paris, London – but their hold on the provinces has evaporated. Even with the ease and low cost of the digital age of production, distribution is still the most important, if not the deciding factor, in who will see precisely what films, and where, and how. As Carl Rosendahl of Pacific Digital Imaging comments, “for independent filmmakers, that fact remains that if you want your film in broad distribution, you still have to partner with a studio. You can make a great film but you can’t get it into 3,000 theaters without being able to back the film with millions of dollars of advertising. Most filmmakers can’t do that, so they need the studios” (Willis 16).

As an example of this, Stefan Avalos and Lance Weiler’s *The Last Broadcast*, a digital feature film produced for only \$900 for both production and post-production, despite glowing reviews and a satellite-downloaded electronic presentation at Cannes in 1999, failed to find mainstream distribution, and thus had minimal impact. However, the similarly-themed *Blair Witch Project*, directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, was picked up by Artisan Releasing and went on to gross more than \$100,000,000 in domestic rentals alone, simply because the filmmakers had better access to distribution channels, and perhaps greater negotiating ability. Many who have seen both films feel that *The Last Broadcast* is in every way superior to *The Blair Witch Project*, but outside of festival screenings (Rotterdam, Cannes) most people will never get the chance to make the comparison. In short, access to a major distributor is still the deciding factor in the success or failure of a film, no matter what its production values, and/or reviews.

Yet one can also argue that the moving image, while still controlled as a commercial medium by a few conglomerate organizations, has become with the use of inexpensive Camcorders and the like a truly democratic medium. The Rodney King tape, footage of the events at Tiananmen Square, and other documentary videotapes have altered the public perception of the formerly illimitable dominion of authoritarian regimes. It is impossible to hold back the flood of images created by these new technologies, and in the coming century, these images will both inform and enlighten our social discourse. The surveillance cameras now used in New York night clubs to provide low cost entertainment for web browsers can only proliferate; there is no surcease from the domain of images which shape and transform our lives. While the big screen spectacle will continue to flourish, a plethora of new image constructs now compete for our attention, often with a significant measure of success.

The monopoly of the television networks is a thing of the past; who is to say that theatrical distribution as we know it will not also collapse, to be replaced

by a different sort of experience altogether. IMAX films and other large-format image storage and retrieval systems mimic reality, but in the future, holographic laser displays, in which seemingly three dimensional characters hold forth from a phantom staging area, may well become the preferred medium of presentation, signaling a return to the proscenium arch, but in this case, a staging space with infinite possibilities for transformation. Powered by high-intensity lasers, this technology could present performances by artists who would no longer have to physically tour to present their faces and voices to the public.

The future of the moving image is both infinite and paradoxical, removing us further and further from our corporeal reality, even as it becomes ever more tangible, and seductive. The films, videotapes, and production systems discussed here represent only a small fraction of contemporary moving image practice, but they point the direction to work that will be accomplished in the next century. Far from dying, the cinema is constantly being reborn, in new configurations, capture system, and modes of display. While the need to be entertained, enlightened and/or lulled into momentary escape will always remain a human constant, the cinema as we know it today will continue to undergo unceasing growth and change. Always the same, yet constantly revising itself, the moving image in the 21st century promises to fulfill both our most deeply held dreams, while simultaneously submitting us to a zone of hypersurveillance that will make monitoring devices of the present day seem naive and remote. Yet no matter what new genres may arise as a result of these new technologies, and no matter what audiences the moving images of the next century address, we will continue to be enthralled by the mesmeric embrace of the phantom zone of absent signification, in which the copy increasingly approaches the verisimilitude of the original.

Although Hollywood will seek to retain its dominance over the global presentation of fictive entertainment constructs, a new vision of international access, a democracy of images, will finally inform the future structure of cinematographic camera in the 21st century. Many of the stories told will remain familiar; genres are most comfortable when they are repeated with minor variations. But as the production and exhibition of the moving image moves resolutely into the digital age, audiences will have even greater access to a plethora of visual constructs from every corner of the earth. We are now in the digital age where we were one hundred years ago in the era of the cinematograph; at the beginning. What happens next will be wondrous to see.

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Addresses of Web Steaming Cinema Sites Discussed In This Article:

Always Independent Film	www.alwaysif.com
Atom Films	www.atomfilms.com
Bijou Café	www.bijoucafe.com
The Bit Screen	www.thebitscreen.com
Film is Dead	www.filmisdead.com
Ifilm	www.ifilm.net
Shortbuzz	www.shortbuzz.com
The Sync	www.thesync.com
Underground Film	www.undergroundfilm.com
Urban Desires	www.desires.com
Zero One Films	www.zeroonefilms.com

A Drive Through the City: VW's Safe and Delusional Urban Setting

Here's a simple question: why is the young, white, middle-class population of America bombarded with and stricken by black-populated urban images via commercials, television programming, MTV, BET, etc.?

To attempt to answer the question, I am going to focus on a popular television commercial designed to promote the 1999 *Volkswagen* Jetta. It first appeared on Fox NFC's playoff game in January of 1999. It was created by Arnold Communications, which also created the prize-winning "Sunday Afternoon" *Volkswagen* Golf advertisement (a.k.a. the "Da, Da, Da" commercial) of the previous year – two young men, one black, one white, driving aimlessly around town in the afternoon and temporarily finding an old chair for what we might assume is an empty apartment. *Volkswagen*, in fact, is spending more than forty million dollars on its Jetta advertising campaign in an effort to desperately increase American car sales in the next ten years.

The engaging 60-second Jetta commercial begins with an opening shot of the black car driving towards the camera. It is beginning to rain, and we are treated to a view of wet asphalt, and legs passing by the camera's view. We get a good look then of the young couple inside their brand new *Volkswagen* – dressed quite conservatively and casually, seemingly out for a drive with no particular destination in mind. The woman slips in a cassette and settles comfortably into the scenario. The music begins with a catchy beat that is matched perfectly by the flap of the windshield wipers. As in all commercials the music is crucial to set the tone and mood of the piece – but this ad gives the music an even more crucial effect on the commercial as a whole: the beat of the music is not only repeated in the beat of the windshield wipers, but it is repeated in the beat of all the individual movements *outside the car* as well as all the urban characters in the city setting moving exactly to the same beat. The result is a harmonious connection between what is being experienced *inside the car* and all the activity *outside the car*. Everything around them conforms to the urban beat of their music, people walking, bouncing a basketball, even the image of a hand flashing its red warning to stop on the street light.

What, one might ask (though we never do ask in the uncritical passive state of commercial browsing), is this couple up to? Why are they driving slowly down an urban street peering at the seemingly innocuous activity around them? They are going slow, like tourists; but what is there to see? The scene is strictly urban, people working menial jobs, many sitting idly at midday with nothing to do

but converse, or dribble a basketball, or play with a yo-yo. So why are they there in their shiny new black car, driving slowly, looking uncomfortable but fascinated, in one shot their turn signal on as if they might be pulling over to the curb? At one point the female passenger watches out of the corner of her eye as two young men attired in wide-leg jeans walk down the sidewalk synchronized to each other and the ubiquitous music – music, we remember, which comes from inside the Jetta and conforms to everything going on in the urban scene around it. In another kind of encounter, featuring the same personnel, we might feel a certain threat of approach, but each momentary threat, such as the young black man seemingly approaching the car only to interest himself instead in the newspaper he is opening, seems to be diverted elsewhere. In fact, no one pays any attention to the car as it stealthily makes its way through the city streets. However, interwoven carefully and symbolically amidst the individual scenes as we move through this commercial's urban tapestry is the color *red*; it appears on the walls of buildings, among the apparel of the players on the street, in the flashing turn-signal of the Jetta itself, and especially on the heavy handed red hand-warning flashing on the signal light – all to the harmonious beat that brings together the interior and the exterior of the *Volkswagen*. Why the red-light warnings – *caution, stop, danger?* Why, in fact, would a commercial trying to persuade us to feel good about owning an automobile go to these detailed extremes in creating these symbols and scenes which obviously are there to momentarily remind us of the dangers of a young white entrance into an urban area?

Engagement. We are drawn to scenes that remind us of an elemental understanding of social and personal reality. The urban scenes prevalent on American television, MTV, BET, sitcoms and a host of commercials bring the middle-class white teenage consumer a constant representation of a sensual existence through black urban experience. The arena is, after all, the center of dance, rap, trouble, risk, sex, and drugs. If you're not alive there – and the "danger" only makes it more real – you're not alive anywhere, especially in the "virtual" safety of the suburbs. We are drawn there, like the couple in the Jetta, in order to experience a "life-affirming encounter." *Volkswagen*, via Arnold Communications, needs to engage a new generation, since sales must climb in the next ten years in order for *Volkswagen* to compete with both Japanese exports and American cars. They need to bring not just young consumers into the fold, but they need to get the attention of teenagers for the not-so-distant future – the way *Bud-wei-ser* gets the attention of kids who, ten years down the line, will know the name of the alcohol product through the adorable lizards as if it had been rhymed endlessly in a dozen Dr. Seuss books.

Of the over fifty percent of young adults who have tried illegal drugs in their lifetime, more than half made their connections through some urban channel

– more than that if one considers indirect purchases. A good answer to the question what is the Jetta couple doing that afternoon in an urban setting might be: *looking for drugs*. Doesn't it make more sense than anything else? At the conclusion of the commercial, they are taken out of their obvious "trance" by a truck passing and splashing water on the windshield – the music stops and the couple look straight ahead, still a little dazed, as if coming down from a high, and the young man says, "Wow, wasn't that interesting." The paradox is classic: the reality of the street scene is the source of the "high." The couple must pass through the urban experience in order to get a feel for living. This is, either literally or figuratively, a drug run...and it's all safe and comfy inside the *corporate shelter* of the *Volkswagen Jetta*.

There must be a reason why so much of our television experience centers on sanitized versions of urban imagery, while so little of our time and efforts go into thinking about the deep and extended problems of urban realities. To be engaged in urban existence without awareness or consideration of social realities, all for the sake of countering a feeling of lifelessness in virtual suburbia, is at least as destructive as trying to ignore such realities altogether. When the young man at the end of the Jetta commercial states how "interesting" it all is, there in the protective shell of the brand new *Volkswagen* with a super sound system, he is, I believe, despicable. But if that's too strong a word for a "harmless," daunting, catchy and extremely successful commercial, then perhaps I should say instead that he represents a generation or two of young people who believe life-affirming experiences can only be found in abundance in urban settings, that being high is a gateway to that experience, and that a corporate shelter, whether it be a Jetta, a pair of *Nike* sneakers, a coke, or a pair of *Dockers*, will be the ticket to a safe and convenient exit from any titillating turn down a street that is usually off-limits.

Ross Talarico

Towards a New Modernism in European Comics?

After the incredible developments in the “comic story” during the late sixties and early seventies, and the apparent consolidation of its new status and prestige during the period 1975-1985, a deep crisis has affected the European (i.e. continental¹) production. Collapsing sales rates, overproduction, the apparent absence of new voices, and the endless repetition of well known schemes caused the crisis to be so profound, that around 1990 even the economic survival of the sector seemed in danger. If recent data allows for a more optimistic view of the dynamism of authors and publishing companies (or at least of their capability of resistance), an analysis of the data cannot mask the important mutations which have taken place. Hence, a serious comparison between the situation of the European comic strip in 1966 (when comics were still a minor genre in an emerging market) and its current position (now that the genre has a new balance and possibly even a new growth) can hardly be made.

Moreover, the solutions given to the problems caused by last decade’s overproduction and creative exhaustion have not managed to restore the sector’s artistic development- its dazzling variety. Rather, they have aimed at saving at all costs the economic infrastructure which appeared in the seventies. The marketing machine apparently still works satisfactorily, but the medium itself has undergone such tremendous changes that the crisis of the “comic strip” has only been furthered.

The great expansion of the European comic strip from 1970 until the mid- eighties was given a boost by the concurrence of three main developments. The sudden diversification of production not only granted the traditional sectors of pulp and didactic youth fiction a vigorous adult counterpart, but also managed to open initially underground-inspired comics (for instance the famous “silly and mean” humour of magazines such as *Métal Hurlant* and *Circus*) to a wide range of mainstream narrative subgenres (e.g. those illustrated by *A suivre*).

The development of a new economic environment led to the promotion of new types of stories as well as new forms of sale and distribution (notable exceptions here are merchandising and advertising exploitations). Both authors and publishers became more professional and thus the creation of specialized shops rose dramatically. Increasingly, more host mediums were conquered: newspapers, weeklies, monthly magazines, albums (in hard back or paperback following the national traditions), and finally “real books”, which some Anglo-Saxon critics began to call *graphic novels* (this term is now well known in Europe too, although it has

never replaced the proper continental terminology, probably because of its connotations of seriousness, great length and small format, which was ill-suited to the great diversity of European production).

The rise of a proper metadiscourse led to the canonisation of the medium. The first fanzines were soon followed by a large collection of historic and/or theoretical publications on the one hand, and the creation of specific institutions on the other. Of notable distinction are the CNBDI (Centre national de la bande dessinée et de l'image) in Angoulême, France, and the CBBB (Centre belge de la bande dessinée) in Brussels, Belgium. The latter is a museum and conference centre, however the first also hosts an art school, a research and training centre, a small publishing unit and of course a festival, ironically baptised as the "Cannes of the comics").

Suddenly however, the vitalising effects of these factors diminished almost simultaneously. The market then faced blatant overproduction, as the critical interest for strips decreased and the necessary permanent renewal of the genre suffered a considerable delay. The cause of this decline seemed to be merely economic. However in reality, the public's lack of interest was concerned only with some very particular zones of comic production. First, the journals lost their attraction because their role was slowly being reduced to that of a pre-publication instrument (and of course the clients were no longer willing to pay double for the same). Second, the more difficult adult strip lost a large part of its readership, mainly as it was deprived of what had made possible the success of its ancestors, viz. the combination of graphic experimentation with anarchizing and liberating (sexual and political) content. Since both the journals and the adult production are clearly linked, the two crises reinforce each other, so that the withdrawal of the mythical journal, *A suivre* (1971-1996), was experienced by many (older) readers as the death of a certain idea of comics.

The crisis was not quantitative in the first place, but qualitative, and the *quantitative* measures rapidly taken (restriction of novelties, suppression of almost all not self-supporting collections) only made this problem more acute. Today's comics are looking for a wide audience, but yet exclude the public of the sixties and seventies and conserve only the infantile and juvenile pulp reader of the very beginnings of the European comic strip.

Since strips were thus under the menace of returning to pure entertainment, a second way of resisting the erosion of the genre was to insist upon the *qualitative* dimension. But here also, the measures taken have turned against the comic strip itself, as opposed to helping it find new inspiration.

But what exactly went wrong in the average comic strip production during the eighties? When a summary is made of the different reproaches it received by the creators themselves, four main weaknesses can be discovered². The technical

insufficiencies of the printing process regularly eroded the merits of the drawing. As the production was mainly printed on the cheap and not durable paper of dailies and weeklies, this was always a crucial issue for the artists³. *Mutatis mutandis*, the expansion of the TV-cartoon market, which in Europe pushed many publishers to concentrate heavily on the filmic recycling of great traditional series, is a good contemporary example of the repeated destruction of the graphic qualities in the continental comics.

A second reason concerning the defects of the script and, more generally, the lack of interest for the narrative dimension of the genre, was the decline in story writers. Many artists aspired to be “complete authors”, i.e. authors responsible both for the storytelling and the drawing. Yet, the disappearance of the story writer generally had a bad influence on the quality of the stories⁴. Only a small number of them managed, as Hergé did, to combine good drawings with good storytelling.

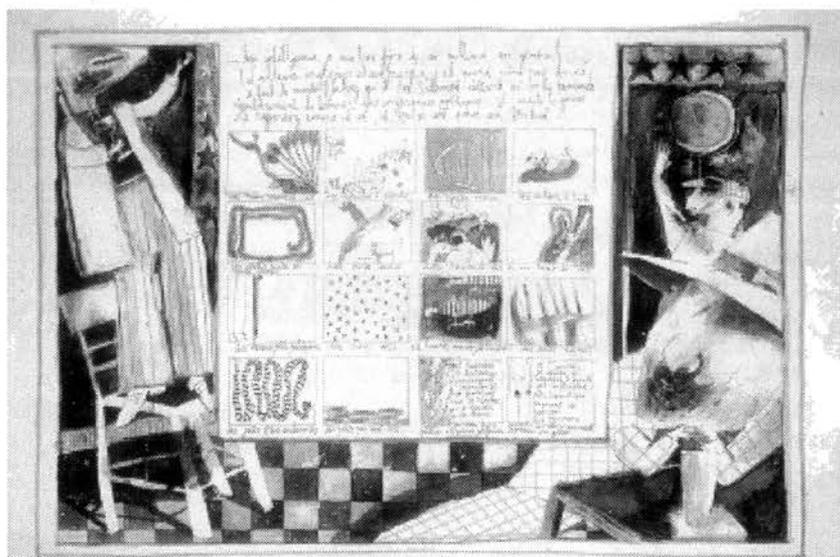
A third problem was the systematic repetition of excessively well-known models, which is particularly the case in the serialisation of every successful album. Some of the best authors lost a great deal of their talent as they adopted the model of series and serials: for instance, the wonderful achievement of *Le rendez-vous de Sevenoaks*, by Rivière and Floc’h (1978) was never been equalled by their later collaborations. And what to say of Andreas, who alternates masterpieces such as *Cyrrus* (1978) or *Le triangle rouge* (1996) with ambitious but endless and endlessly disappointing series which only aim at giving him and his family a modest lifestyle?

Finally, the deleterious tendency to cultivate the cultural otherness, or, strangeness, of the comic strip universe, with for instance a spectacular development of the collector’s items and gadgets market, condemned the genre to a new ghetto. This quartet of difficulties forced the artistically conscious and ambitious authors to renounce professionalism and return to total, but economically problematic, independence — the only way, it seemed, to guarantee a better control over all aspects of the creative work. Others radically changed their medium and began painting, filming, and writing. But not all authors were obliged to give up the economic advantages of the professional publishing companies. However, even when they continued working without paying heed to the frustrating division of labour of the traditional studio system, authors such as Schuiten and Peeters (the successful duo behind the long running series *The Dark Cities*) had to make many concessions, and completely new multimedia formulas had to be created (that Peeters and Schuiten could conserve their relative independence is a direct result of their decision to break through the frontiers of the traditional comic genres and to jump into new markets. They now consider themselves more multimedia artists than comic authors⁵).

Logically, the efforts to remedy the weaknesses of comic production were affecting all the aspects aforementioned: graphic and printing excellency,



Denis Depez Les Nébuleuses. 1997 éd. Fréon (Brussels)



Dominique Goblet Portraits crachés. 1998 éd. Fréon (Brussels)

storytelling, recreation of the models of the past and, finally, the social position and value of the genre. Nevertheless, in all of these areas the results continued to be both very complex and ambiguous. The difficulty of making a good script, for instance, seems rather easy to solve, but in practice this is far from certain truth. Wasn't the transition from sequel publishing in diaries and weeklies to album-length stories a perfect occasion to risk more ambitious types of narration? Unfortunately, this new direction interfered with the rise of direct colouring, the importance of which had become so paramount that there was hardly any room left for more narrative dimensions. Very soon, many readers were longing once again for the charms of the ancient series and sequels, yet as the prevailing host medium was now the book rather than the newspaper or the magazine, the defaults of storytelling only became more and more visible. In spite of their artistic pretensions, much European comics of the eighties could indeed be read as rapidly as Japanese mangas! The influence of the album model, together with the hypostazing of characteristics best known in the contemporary models, also caused the influence of the newly discovered old masters of the first decades in the century to remain rather superficial.

Second, the banal revitalisation of old schemes and examples had been turned into a set of explicit and systematic classification of stifling self-reference. In the eighties all respectable albums had to be saturated with every imaginable type of allusion relative to the leading models of yesterday's authors, i.e., the authors who were being read in the fifties, when the authors of today were young and were discovering the comics. However, this tendency of storytelling "in the second degree" has only given birth to a long story of epigonic repetitions and annoying "inside" jokes⁶. The technical perfection of the imitators (because they could draw very competently) was not sufficient to compensate for the defaults that such a citational practice inevitably raised. On the one hand large sectors of the audience were excluded and comic strips only addressed the happy few able to taste the subtleties of allusion, pastiche, and remake or other intertextual games, while those deprived of previous knowledge were perpetually disadvantaged. On the other hand, the generalisation of a nostalgic style and universe incarcerated the genre in an artificial world entirely separate from modern times. In the eighties and nineties even aspiring young authors displayed a natural attraction for the style and spirit of the years in which the great albums were released, which they used to read as children. They forgot however that in those comic strips social change was eminently present and visible!

Third, the recent prestige of the genre had to be consolidated by the invention of new types of institutions, which were neither academic or classically institutionalised, but able to produce and to perpetuate new frames of references, without freezing the popular dimension of the comics. Serious criticism had

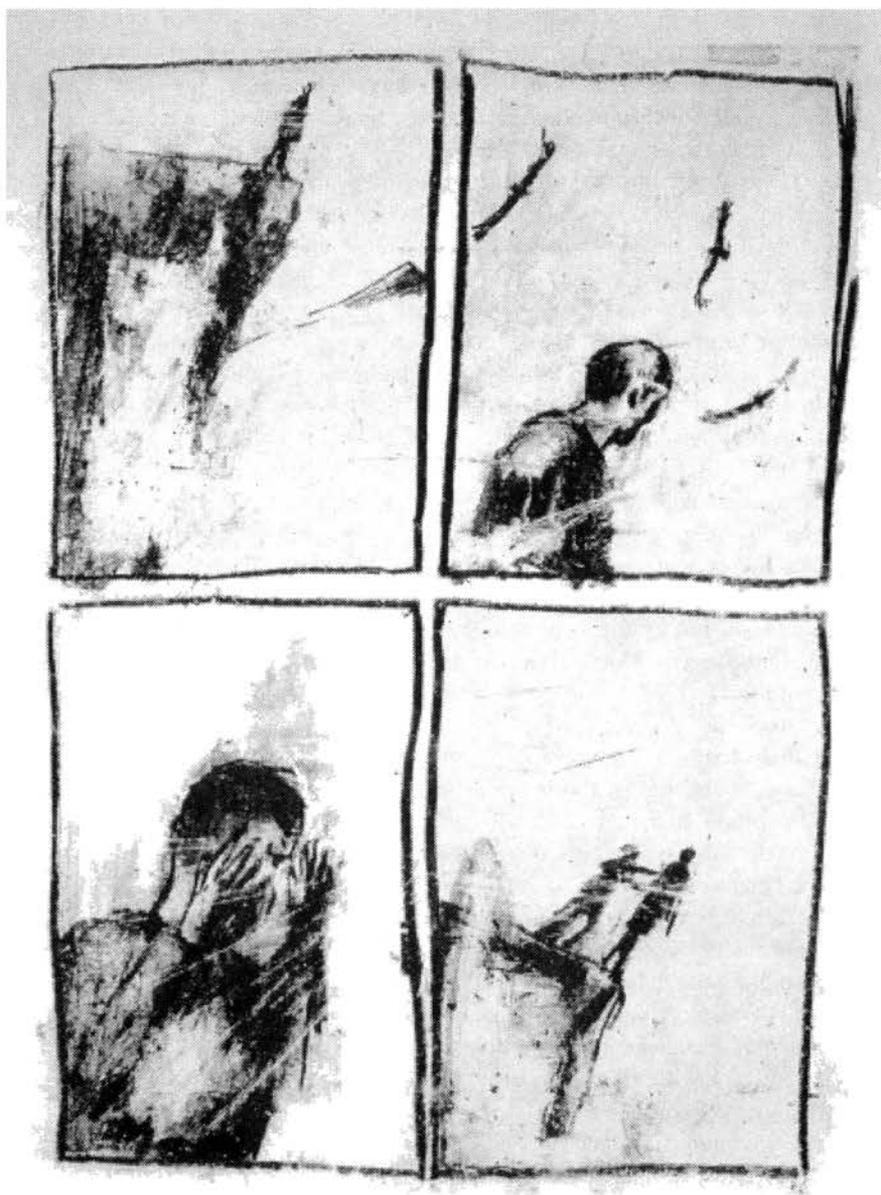
gradually disappeared since the late seventies. Even though there are now festivals, museums, prizes, etc., an impressive journal or other critical publication is lacking outside the very small circles of aficionados (and even there one finds a rather striking anti-intellectual refusal of all that which takes comics as seriously as they should be taken).

Since qualitative reforms did not have the expected results and also since quantitative market pressures continued to increase, it was to be expected that the comic strip sector had to react drastically to these new urgencies. Part of the operation was surgical: important concerns of the production were simply removed; several authors stepped out and established themselves as painters or filmmakers; still others were obliged to reduce their professional practices; some even had to give up comics, at least the type they used to make, because only the new manga market provided issues. But in two cases, the answer was far more inventive.

Taking into account the diminished prestige of the comics as a popular (youth) genre, some authors active in mainstream publishing companies such as Casterman, managed to break open the genre and to create real multimedia “works” (I use this word with premeditation since here the name of strips is presumably no longer appropriate). The famous series of Schuiten and Peeters, *The Dark Cities*, is a perfect illustration of such an adventure. Furthermore, it is not by chance that this type of production can no longer be seen as the privilege of one single “complete” author. On the contrary, Schuiten and Peeters have been inventing outstanding new forms and new types of collaboration — even with the public, which they considered a real partner in the elaboration of the whole series. Just as in SF, where fans have always played a creative role, the comic strip section of the *Dark Cities* undergoes today the metamorphosis suggested by its readers, while the more three-dimensional part of the project (such as the many exhibitions inspired by the “dark cities universe”), incorporates both the role of the reader and visitor as fundamental figures.

Besides this internal transformation of the mainstream production, there has recently been a real explosion of small scale, alternative groups of “complete” authors. Their situation is undoubtedly a little odd. Indeed, as “complete” authors unconditionally directed towards the creative possibilities of the genre, they are a living *anachronism* (as at the same time, they achieve much more than the mere reinvention of underground). But as editors, publishers, distributors and booksellers, they may be able to set up *completely new kinds* of marketing and, maybe, of making books.

Under the banner of Autarcic Comix, different groups of independent strip makers from all over (continental) Europe have been collaborating since 1993 on a very regular basis. Those groups are *Frigobox*, *Pelure amère* (“The bitter peel”), *La cinquième couche* (“The fifth couch”) and *Bill* (Belgium), *Amok*,



Vincent Fortemps Cimes, 1998 éd. Fréon (Brussels)

L'Association, *Le dernier Cri* ("The Latest Fashion") and *Ego Comme X* (France), *Strapazzin* (Switzerland) and *Boxer* (Germany). Their movement embraces all possible domains of strip making: production, publicity, marketing, sales and, last but not least, criticism and theory⁷.

One of the most striking features of the Autarcic Comix movement is its innovativeness, whereas the rest of European comics production remains so morose and gloomy. Even more important is the unusual coherence of the movement which reconciles the collective and the individual. However, it is easy to identify any plate of any of these artists and to acknowledge the particular value of his or her personal contribution. One also immediately recognises the all-pervading influence of a real "school". But in contrast with former European comic schools, such as the Franco-Belgian school of the fifties and sixties (Hergé, Jacobs, Martin), Autarcic Comix leaves much more room for its different "members" and is not sympathetic to the general spirit of contemporary culture. Autarcic Comix is a superb example of an overtly "anachronical", in this case anti-postmodern, movement. It may also be a symptom of a more profound change in society, now that more and more voices proclaim the end of postmodernism as the dominant ideology of our times. Nevertheless, what Autarcic Comix symbolises is not some kind of *post-postmodernism*, but a radical and also political comeback of typical *modern* values, which in Europe seemed lost by the mainstream adult comic production of the eighties.

In the following paragraph, I would like to give a small survey of what appears to be the "program" of this movement (and I honestly confess that I will do it with sympathy for the aims of the group). I will focus on the period in which the first great publishing activities were launched, i.e., around 1995, a period which showed a production more radical than what is emerging today. Whether this program was successful or not is a question which cannot be commented upon at this time because of its relative newness.

Let us first look at the anti-postmodern tendencies of Autarcic Comix. A prominent characteristic of the Autarcic Comix graphic style is its marked rejection of the mingling of techniques, materials and media, which is a distinguishing trait of postmodernism. Almost every artist of the Autarcic Comix movement is mainly interested in the exploration of the specific possibilities of the materials he or she chooses to work with. By means of this more straightforward use of the medium, the artists give expression to a personal artistic credo, but they also serve an important *pedagogical* objective. Indeed, several artists of the Autarcic movement are involved in teaching activities in popular and inner city areas, and their choice for the simple use of a simple medium has much to do with their political commitment in favour of the self-expression of minorities.

A second characteristic of Autarcic Comix is their very pronounced distrust of the postmodern hobby horse *par excellence*: the citation, or more precisely the

abuse of remake and allusion. Just as Autarcic Comix makes a strong claim on the formal coherence of the whole of its members, the movement is violently opposed to the new toy of cut/paste cybernetic culture: the computer aided collages of heterogeneous bits and pieces (in this sense one could say Autarcic Comix exhibits the permanence within contemporary graphics of a certain arts and crafts aesthetics). Of course, this suspicion of collage does not mean at all that there are not any collages, nor that computers and CAD-CAM are never used. It only means that intertextual games and references to other productions are *overtly* declared, so that the reader always knows what exactly is happening. Moreover, this course of action is not exempt from an ideological agenda. Collage is indeed a prominent bias of today's ads, and it is the resistance to this type of mercantile graphics that finally grounds the very parsimonious use of citations.

A third property of Autarcic Comix is the particularly acute historic consciousness of the movement, which implies a strong set of positive and negative evaluations of the anterior comic strip production. Some areas are censured to a very large extent. Thus, for instance, Autarcic Comix breaks with the long-time dominant reference frame of the "clear line" (the simplified and sometimes robotized graphic style of the Franco-Belgian school and its countless imitators). Simultaneously, other domains are strongly foregrounded. This cohabitation is fundamental: far from simply being copied or played with in a rather allusive manner, the plates and books of the new "masters" are confronted with the new works their example have made possible.

Finally Autarcic Comix does not think that history has come to an end or that the differences between ideologies are now softly fading away in order to give birth to a planetary quietness (this is indeed the way, shocking or astonishing for an Anglo-Saxon audience, postmodernism is seen by many European artists*). It is true that the art work of Autarcic Comix does not explicitly belong to the agit-prop tradition. Yet the political agenda of the group is rather clear, and the denunciation of social injustice permanent and explicit, and the responsibility of the artist is not a mere slogan. Do I have to repeat that such a feature is, in a European context at least, definitely *not* postmodern? The fact that a work speaks of AIDS, the homeless, rape, right-wing anti-abortion propaganda, etc., is a thorough sign of *modernity*.

It is of course too early to give a first global evaluation of the results of these new tendencies in European comics, which are now rapidly becoming institutionalised. It seems not impossible to predict however that the marginal activities of the small press production will soon have more mainstream features. Within a few years it will be easier to see if this transition proves fruitful for the medium itself, or if it is nothing more than the same old story of a once challenging group of authors adopting a middle-of-the-road attitude.

Notes

1. In this article I will focus *exclusively* on the continental production, which is very different from both the Japanese and Anglo-Saxon traditions.
2. I develop freely here some observations made by Benoit Peeters in the second part of his book, *La bande dessinée*, Paris, Flammarion, 1993 (probably the best general — and very broad — introduction to the subject).
3. Especially when one wanted (or was obliged) to include colour. The best known example here is that of E.P. Jacobs, the colleague and later concurrent of Hergé, whose ambitious colour drawings of the forties and fifties were severely damaged by the printing processes of the day.
4. For a more detailed critique of this loss of good storytelling, see Benoit Peeters, *La bande dessinée*, o.c. (part two of this work).
5. On their evolution, they wrote a book with a speaking title: *L'Aventure des images. De la bande dessinée au multimédia*, Paris, Autrement, 1995 (“The adventure of the images. From comics to multimedia”).
6. The phenomenon has been studied (and positively commented) by Bruno Lecigne in his book *Les héritiers d'Hergé*, Bruxelles, Magic Strip, 1982.
7. My survey is much indebted to material published by *Frigobox* (a Belgian journal combining art work and theory published in Brussels) and *Comix* (a French journal specializing in contemporary comic strip theory).
8. I would also like it to be noted that the comic community, contrary to what happens in the larger artistic community, is not organized on a planetary scale: if there is a global village in European comics, this village is mainly European and most of all French speaking.

The Half-Baked Cultural Detective: *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as Postmodern Noir

What is the function of a private detective? If we consider a logically deductive detective in the tradition of Sherlock Holmes or Auguste Dupin, the answer seems obvious: the detective typically pieces clues together in order to solve a murder, locate a valuable object, or find an adulterous spouse. The search is external to the detective, whose psychological character is essentially immaterial, as the detection is more of an intellectual game of object/clue scrutiny which leads to the apprehension and removal of the culprits. This “traditional” detective story details aristocratic society and the private detective is often a wealthy man, a discerning idler. A different kind of American detective emerges with the Hard Boiled Detective Novel. This new, lower to middle class detective ultimately looks for a broader social truth beyond his detection. The search may begin with a tangible object in society, but it concludes with the revelation of the sociological ruin of urban society and the subsequent emergence of a Modernistic American hero, who is more of cultural or sociological detective. This is Raymond Chandler’s archetypal hero who walks the mean streets of a city, “who is himself not mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid” (Chandler 992), but is ultimately secluded, cynical, and morally questionable. American film noir grew out of the Hard Boiled Detective novel and appropriated its heroic cultural detective into a noir hero. The further moral ambiguity of the noir hero mirrored the further moral ambiguity in American society. Film noir plunged deeper into the underworld of American ideology and heroism by directly portraying and often romanticizing the criminal/subversive world. It helped introduce the notion of the criminal as an alternative hero in the face of mass cultural or governmental corruption.

The Hard Boiled Detective Novel is considered to be a modernistic form of writing. Film noir is akin to a bridge between modernism and postmodernism, in that it begins the work of decentering or deconstructing morality and subjectivity of American male heroism and ideology. This trend towards deconstructing heroism and ideology culminates in Hunter S. Thompson’s truly postmodern *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In this essay, I will examine Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as postmodern noir that unmasks American ideology and morality in the tradition of film noir and noir fiction and completely blurs them in a disorienting, surreal postmodern noir landscape. By the time of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*’ publication in 1971, the heroic private detective had become

outdated. The socially isolated noir hero, suspended between lawful society and the criminal underworld is replaced by a postmodern journalist whose psychological identity is fragmented in an amorphous and ambiguous postmodern (under)world. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, noir, like a blinding, all-pervasive fog, has seemingly permeated American culture in entirety.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is political in its implicit deconstruction of individuals and society in early 1970's America. It reflects a cynicism after a cultural and ideological crash at the end of the 1960's (typically symbolized by the disaster of the Rolling Stones' free concert at Altamont in 1969, where one fan was killed and many others injured by the Hell's Angels motorcycle group who were hired as security). This cultural and ideological crash at the end of the 1960's mirrors the economic stock market crash at the end of the 1920's, in the replacement of economic or cultural optimism by a stark individualism based on pragmatic cynicism. The arena changes from wide social promise to individual aggrandizement. This is the perfect atmosphere for noir to thrive. The better known noir protagonists, Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade and Walter Neff date from the 1930's novels (and subsequent films) of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain. The Hard-Boiled Detective Hero, or noir hero, is the quintessential American modernist, filled with anomie and isolation, witness to social depravity. Although the categories of good and evil are complicated, there is still a moral distinction between the hero and the corrupt villainous criminal underworld. Film noir (especially later film noir) helps to shift focus to the criminal milieu and abnormal psychology in films such as *Gun Crazy*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Ace in the Hole*, and *Sunset Boulevard*, which portrays the deranged and the violent. The noir protagonist becomes criminal and dangerous, but still heroic in his quick acerbic wit and tough but romantic code of behavior. While the aim of noir is to create or reflect a specific disorientation or alienation, the aim of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is to create or reflect total, amorphous confusion and the breakdown of all ideology and potentially all hope of redemption. Instead of merely depicting the criminal milieu of a society, it questions the category of criminality as it applies to the individual and American culture. Effectively, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* deconstructs and implodes the notion of personal and social morality. In the postmodern tradition, it blurs and blends the categorization of culture, ideology, and morality within a spliced, self-referential narrative.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, like its preceding noir influences, is ultimately concerned with (dis)placing American constructs of male heroism and ideology in their respective societies. The noir hero is a darker adaptation of the heroic American frontiersman. The 1930's noir hero works within urban space — usually it is a relatively new and not fully urbanized American city (Los Angeles or San Francisco) that still retains the elements of an untamed, lawless rural space

reminiscent of the Wild West (Chandler's mean streets). With the population explosion of the Western cities from the 1940's through the 1960's, the new American frontiersman/noir hero needed to find a new space to conquer or inhabit. With film noir, the frontier shifts from social/public space to psychological/personal space. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* reflects the advance of the (now) postmodern American noir frontier, in an era in which social/public space has become indistinguishable from psychological/personal space. Noir has moved from reality to hyper-reality in the postmodern hyper-real city of Las Vegas and has become entrenched in American culture and ideology. Consequently, the American postmodern noir hero becomes a cultural outlaw, stepping outside the assigned boundaries of culture in an attempt to remove himself from the pervasiveness of noir.

Gonzo Journalism as Postmodern Cultural Detection

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is written in the literary style of the movement known today as the New Journalism (i.e., Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, and Joan Didion), a product of mid- to late 1960's American culture. The New Journalists (especially Mailer and Thompson¹) predominately write in a postmodern style heavily indebted to the wry, personally assertive language of the Hard Boiled Detective Hero and noir hero. The New Journalists asserted private consciousness or personal consciousness as the last stronghold in encroachingly distorted, noir America, which had become steadily dominated by mass media and popular culture on one side and an oppressive, potentially violent elder generation on the other side. They drew back from attempting to objectively depict the social world and emphasized the cultivation of their own psychologically amplified personalities as purposely distorted frames of reference.

Thompson calls his postmodern style of journalism, "Gonzo Journalism." According to Thompson, a Gonzo Journalist must always be a participant in the story that he covers. Effectively, he must have a distancing camera eye that can view himself obtaining the story, while he is obtaining the story. Gonzo Journalism is ultimately a form of deconstruction, where the "story" is portrayed from the framework of the reporter's own personal subjectivity. The logic of this is based on the acknowledgment of inherent bias in reporting. As Raoul Duke (Thompson's pseudonym in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) argues, "History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit" (179). Since all stories are subjective, the only worthy reporting is that which acknowledges its own subjectivity and fallibility. Thompson's ideal journalist is one who is ultimately aware of how he is (de)constructing his own version of "reality," which in turn, influences the public's image of "reality." In a hyper-real postmodern world, fact and fiction have become confusingly indistinguishable. The world has grown too complex and pervasive for a standard logical detective to make sense of it. In a postmodern world, the

hero must be somewhat illogical or deluded in order to understand or detect the hidden structures of an illogical postmodern world. This is a world appropriate for Thompson's Gonzo journalist Raoul Duke who is a veritable postmodern noir hero (or anti-hero) and cultural detective.

In a fragmented, postmodern style, Duke repeatedly splices his narrative with actual newspaper stories of excessive violence in American society. The newspaper stories reflect a distressing, revoltingly violent America, where a 19-year-old woman overdoses on heroin and is found dead in a refrigerator, and a 25-year-old man pulls out his own eyes on the influence of heroin. In another paper, Duke notices: "Five wounded near NYC Tenement... by an unidentified gunman who fired from the roof of a building, for no apparent reason" (94). In yet another article, an Army Intelligence specialist "said that the pistol slaying of his Chinese interpreter was defended by a superior who said, 'She was just a slope, anyway,' meaning she was Asiatic" (74). The TV news in the background is about "The Laos Invasion - a series of horrifying disasters, explosions, twisted wreckage, men fleeing in terror, Pentagon generals babbling insane lies" (29). How did American society come to this violent and chaotic condition? The traditional newspaper stories do not say. These stories do not have any commentary on society. To Duke, they are paltry stories seemingly plucked out of context without explanation or reason. Duke, as the postmodern noir hero, is inescapably drawn towards exploring the heart of darkness of American culture and society. He regards himself as a crusading cultural detective, hunting for the secret cultural truth that governs American ideology and behavior.

The American Dream and Postmodern Noir Nightmare

Raoul Duke may represent himself as a postmodern cultural detective, but he is more like a clueless detective, who is ultimately confused about his true subject of investigation and how to go about investigating it. Whereas the earlier noir hero is portrayed as an outsider, separate from society, Duke is too entrenched in his culture and society to separate himself from it. He is a product of America, subjugated by the cultural ideology of the American Dream, evidenced by his inflated sense of ego. In a key sense, his American Dream is his obsessive belief that he can find the American Dream and that he is sufficiently savvy to not only discover it, but communicate it clearly to others.

The word "Dream" hints to the fantasy or fantastical nature of the American Dream. Though many try, only a select few can actually achieve instant overnight success. This gives rise to a large number of failed dreams which become "The American Nightmare." The American Nightmare not only parallels the American Dream but also ultimately overshadows it, by the sheer lopsided amount of failures over successes. The American Dream/Nightmare dates back to Nineteenth Century

America where pioneers and adventurers often struck out in search of quick wealth, gold or land. With the gradual extinction of the wilderness and the subsequent shift from rural space to urban space, the search for the American Dream moved to the city — to the business, real estate, and entertainment industries where the new fortunes were being made. This always created a criminal shadow world of failed possibilities, a noir world predicated on the failed realization of the American Dream and revelation of the American Nightmare.

Relatively new Western cities like San Francisco and especially Los Angeles, became spaces where individuals went to make their quick fortune, to effectively achieve the American Dream. But as the cities solidify, the opportunity to achieve the American Dream lessens. A new space is needed and is created in Las Vegas to mass-produce the pursuit of the American Dream. Anyone can go to Las Vegas to gamble and theoretically achieve the American Dream. The association of gambling with achieving the American Dream connects addiction with American ideology. The American Dream becomes a noir revelation of addiction underneath the “clean” American character. Those who believe in the American Dream can become literally addicted to a faulty ideology that can be as destructive as any significantly addictive drug.

It is ironic but seemingly appropriate that Duke and his attorney become privy to the American Dream as deluded ideology/addiction, when they are themselves deluded from the effects of mescaline in the Circus-Circus, witnessing gamblers “still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino”(57). It is then that Duke tells his attorney that they have found the main nerve of the American Dream. His attorney replies, “I know, that’s what gives me the Fear”(48). Fear is at the center of acknowledging that the American Dream itself is corrupt, predicated by greed, avarice, violence, and addiction. Belief in the American Dream can help to exaggerate these potentially destructive impulses, which is what Duke arguably does, but he is aware of his drug-induced delusion while the gamblers he witnesses are not.

The American Dream that the gamblers pursue in a Las Vegas casino is a perverted version of Duke’s idealized pursuit of the American Dream. Duke repeatedly refers to Horatio Alger as a symbol of inspiration. Alger preached that by honesty, cheerful perseverance, hard work, and a measure of good luck, a poor person could achieve some kind of fortune or fame. This may be the “honest man’s” American Dream, which has been perverted over time or adapted to adhere to a modern or postmodern world. Duke is in actuality a veritable antithesis of Horatio Alger. Indeed, he calls himself a “monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger” (204) at the end of the novel. Yet while Duke is deceitful, lazy, and self-indulgent, he does position himself as a cultural detective. Duke is earnestly deluded that all of his

actions are aimed to uncover the larger truth of his assigned story which he hopes will be the larger truth of American culture, symbolized by the American Dream. Duke's gradual obsession to discover the American Dream leads him (and his attorney, Dr. Gonzo) to abandon Duke's second assignment of covering the Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Conference. He monomaniacally pursues the verbal "truth" of the American Dream just as the gamblers monomaniacally pursue the monetary "truth" of the American Dream. Duke's dissatisfaction with his job as journalist is apparent in the way he avoids his reporting assignments. He skirts what he considers to be the superficialities of journalism in favor of the core of American storytelling itself: expressing the American Dream. As such, he is like the ubiquitous American novelist trying to write the Great American Novel which has become impossible in a fragmented, postmodern world.

In reality, Duke's version of the American Dream is literally an escape from geographical, epistemological and psychological reality into a fictionalized, perverted state brought on during his drug-induced revelations and hallucinations. His American Dream is the constant possibility of escape and transformation, which is essentially a postmodern notion of a fluid psychological self that can be changed or deranged at will. Indeed, in Duke's words: "Every now and then when your life gets complicated and the weasels start closing in, the only real cure is to load up on heinous chemicals and then drive like a bastard from Hollywood to Las Vegas"(12). This may be a postmodern parody of Melville's prototypical American every-man, Ishmael, who proclaims at the beginning of *Moby Dick* that whenever he feels gloomy, macabre, and vindictive, whenever it is a "damp, drizzly November" (21) in his soul, he accounts it high time to get to sea as soon as he can. But whereas Ishmael seeks only to diminish his melancholia, Duke seeks to amplify his perverted identity and/or nullify his previous identity. Duke's drug taking allows him to manipulate his moods and identity at will. His identity is ultimately as amorphous and hyper-real as that of postmodern noir society.

The noir hero is typically threatened by *external* social disillusion or collapse, whereas Raoul Duke in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is threatened by *internal* psychological disillusion or collapse. Duke literally plunges into the underworld of his own psyche just as the earlier noir hero plunges into the underworld of urban society. However, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, there seems to be a relationship between social and personal degeneracy. In a truly postmodern vein, the distinction between the external social world and the internal psychological world is blurred. It is unclear whether Duke produces social "reality" or whether social "reality" produces his own psychological identity. Ironically, it is through Duke's psychological derangement produced by his prodigious drug taking that he becomes privy to the social degeneracy in American culture. Still, we cannot be certain to trust Duke's drug-induced chimeras because they may be

sheer delusion or hallucination. Distortion of the psyche to see a more real “reality” is in the tradition of nineteenth century French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud who wrote that, “A poet makes himself a visionary through a long, boundless, and systematized disorganization of all the senses.” (Rimbaud, 276). However, Duke certainly does not appear to be a visionary. Although he does hint towards possible hidden meaning in American culture, Duke’s aim in excessive drug taking is more like self-indulgent diversion. He does not (at least not initially) seriously intend to explore the nether regions of his society or psyche and his obsession with finding the American Dream seems to be a deluded, half-baked goal.

Postmodern Las Vegas, Hyper-reality and Criminality

The setting of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the city of Las Vegas is crucial, as Las Vegas is widely regarded to be the first truly American postmodern city. Robert Venturi’s seminal postmodern architecture book, *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972), presents Las Vegas as a postmodern conglomeration of “allusion and comment, on the past or present or at our great commonplaces or old clichés, and inclusion of the everyday in the environment, secret and profane” (53). Venturi presents Las Vegas as the postmodern city of the future, a pastiche medley of American architectural forms. He calls it an “archetype” (17), but it is more like a hyper-real archetype.

In the postmodern tradition, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* repeatedly blurs the distinction between fiction and reality. In Las Vegas, the surreal is indistinguishable from the real. Effectively, Las Vegas represents America for Duke - a surreal paranoid nightmare. Under the influence of various drugs, Duke and his attorney straddle a thin line between the drug-induced fiction of their own minds, the artificially constructed fiction of Las Vegas and the nightmarish quality of American postmodern culture. In the Circus-Circus gambling casino, Duke points out that you can stand in front of a machine and for \$1.98, your likeness will appear, 200 feet tall, on a screen above downtown Las Vegas. This unsettling thought leads Duke to the conclusion that “any freak with \$1.98 can walk into the Circus-Circus and suddenly appear in the sky over downtown Las Vegas twelve times the size of God, howling anything that comes into his head” (46). Not only is Circus-Circus blatantly materialistic, the ongoing entertainment there is shockingly violent, a surreal postmodern inferno, where “you’re down on the main floor playing blackjack, and the stakes are getting high when suddenly you chance to look up, and there, right smack above your head is a half-naked fourteen-year-old girl being chased through the air by a snarling wolverine, which is suddenly locked in a death battle with two-painted polacks” (46). Disgusted, Duke concludes that “this [Las Vegas] is not a good town for psychedelic drugs. Reality itself is too twisted” (47). Las Vegas is hyper-real in all senses — it exaggerates or liberates all dark

primal aggressive and narcissistic impulses.

Las Vegas is presented as a city that encourages depravity and excess. Duke and his attorney's outrageous behavior while drugged is hardly noticed, or passed over as drunkenness. "In this town, they love a drunk," (46) Duke says of Las Vegas, as inevitably drunks make both poor gamblers and good entertainment to the equally depraved clientele. Most importantly, Duke and his attorney seem to blend in with the crowds in Las Vegas. No one singles them out for outrageous behavior, even when they are under the influence of mescaline and fall and trip over themselves and other people while trying to enter the turnstiles to the Circus Circus. Rather, they are put through the turnstiles and let loose on the gambling floor by the Circus-Circus staff, who presumably hope that they will be in bad enough shape to lose a good deal of money. Ironically, in a city which seems as lax on law enforcement as Las Vegas, there is a huge penalty for the possession of marijuana: 20 years to life. Presumably, there would be at least an equal penalty for the more dangerous substances that Duke and his attorney take. Duke is aware of the potential penalty he could face if he is caught. However, he relies on the benevolent, but ultimately corrupt attitude of Las Vegas towards people with money or who seem important.

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson challenges our sense of reality in a postmodern society. It is not manifest whether there is a "true" or clearer reality lurking somewhere beyond the hyper-reality of Las Vegas and a steadily depraved, noir American society. However, the shift of space from Los Angeles to Las Vegas is important in the sense that Las Vegas is positioned as hyper-real postmodern space, which has become the heart of noir. Las Vegas has come to represent noir America, or the potential future of postmodern noir America. Los Angeles, the noir capital of old, is just the starting place for the descent into the postmodern American inferno of Las Vegas. Duke calls Las Vegas a "society of armed masturbators/ gambling is the kicker here/ sex is extra/ weird trip for high rollers" (41). It is a perverted society, but it is also Thompson's vision of America: an aggressive male dominated dream and nightmare. He compares Las Vegas to the army, where "the shark ethic prevails — eat the wounded" (72). This postmodern form of Social Darwinism is based more on arbitrary luck than on class, ethnicity, or inherent talent. The wounded are the unlucky gamblers and the culturally and criminally deviant, such as Duke and his attorney. Duke mentions that there is "no mercy for a criminal freak in Las Vegas" (72). Yet there is no better place for a criminal freak or deviant in America than Las Vegas, which attracts people in its glitter, pomp and lure of quick wealth. Indeed, Duke later says that "Vegas is so full of natural freaks — people who are genuinely twisted" (190).

Thompson's criminal freak must be intelligent: at least somewhat cognizant of the city's amorphous postmodern power structure, and able to lie and

cloak himself within the city's darkness and depravity. Indeed, it is through Duke's ingenuity that he and his attorney are able to run up an amazing hotel bill and continue their drug-induced escapades. Despite their perpetual derangement, Duke and his attorney are clever and relatively ingenious. When a cleaning woman, Alice, comes into their trashed, drug-filled hotel room, they quickly invent a story about being special detectives investigating a dope ring in the hotel. To guarantee Alice's silence, they promise her a thousand dollars a month for her surveillance of the hotel. It works magnificently well, with Alice apologizing and smiling as she leaves their room. In greed-dominated Las Vegas, money is the only real law. As Duke cynically suggests, "If Charlie Manson checked into the Sahara tomorrow morning, nobody would hassle him as long as he tipped big" (106). In his vision of Las Vegas, Duke summarizes a postmodern credo that implodes morality: "In a closed society where everybody's guilty, the only crime is getting caught. In a world of thieves, the only final sin is stupidity" (72). Duke suggests that Las Vegas is grossly atavistic but representative of American culture or what is at the core of American ideology. Ironically, it is through massive drug taking that he and his attorney become atavistic, monstrous, and are thereby able to understand and blend into Las Vegas culture.

The Postmodern Male Homosocial Nightmare

Previously, the noir hero has been positioned as tough, but there is a subtle hint of emotional scarring in his social isolation and emotional self-abnegation. This noir hero in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* adheres to a contradictory hyper-real combination of self-abnegation and self-liberation (or self-amplification). This identity contradiction is illuminated by the epigraph at the beginning of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which is a quote from Dr. Johnson: "He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man" (1). Duke may take an excessive amount of drugs in order to stave off the "natural" emotional pain of being a (hu)man. In other words, he may be self-abnegating. On the other hand, Duke may also consider man to be more naturally a beast, and therefore the emotional pain of being a man is an artificial pain at the repression of natural or primal instincts and impulses in "civilized" society. If this is the case, then Duke and his attorney take an excessive amount of drugs to help liberate or amplify their repressed natural or primal human traits of aggression and fear.

The earlier noir heroes tend to be caught in a state of emotional dormancy, but underneath their hard shells, there is a guarded or latent romanticism. In fact, this is what made them privy to emotional redemption or destruction by fatal or redeeming women. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Duke has effectively nullified his "better" emotions of compassion, altruism, and love. He is left with only the emotions of aggression and fright, fear and loathing. In Duke's world and

his vision of Las Vegas, the possibility of romance or even optimism is laughably ridiculous. When he turns on the radio, Duke scoffs at the song "Joy to the World," and lampoons the John Lennon song, "Power to the People." "Next we'll have Glenn Campbell screaming, 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone?'" he surmises (63). Duke's attitude goes beyond the noir hero's typical jaded romanticism to a virtual extinction of all romanticism.

Certainly, the world that Duke projects in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is strictly male-dominated and misogynistic — the female is purposely excluded. In most noir fiction and film, women play significant roles either as a femme fatales or as rejuvenating redeemers. Film noir has been described as a male fantasy/nightmare, but in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* we see only the nightmarish fear of women. Duke's misogyny comes out in extremity when he finds Dr. Gonzo with Lucy, a young unstable runaway from Montana, who paints portraits of Barbara Streisand. Duke is immediately threatened by Lucy. He describes her as "having the face of a pit bull" (111), and his first instinct is to reach for a mace can when he sees her. In Duke's male nightmare world, there is no room for women. Any woman, especially a young woman, is a personal threat. Duke reveals his extreme misogyny when he shockingly encourages his attorney to "peddle her [Lucy's] ass at the drug convention" (115).

Still, to his much-damaged credit, Duke is unlike most noir heroes who do not recognize the fatal woman until it is too late. Rather, Duke is cognizant of the damage Lucy could cause him and his attorney. Within minutes of meeting Lucy, he immediately codes her as the potential fatal woman: "We'd already laid the groundwork for a classic tragedy. The hero was doomed; he had already sown the seed of his own downfall" (122). Duke calls Lucy a "potentially fatal millstone on both of our necks" (117), and envisions a trial in which she accuses him and his attorney of force-feeding her LSD and raping her. If this novel were written in a traditional noir fashion, something to this effect might occur. However, unlike most noir heroes, Duke survives the threat of the fatal woman by abandoning her and excluding her completely from his world. Duke's noir nightmare is a male nightmare that must be worked out among other males. To some extent, there is a homosocial element to this, for women are not the ones who cause the male nightmare or have the potential to ameliorate it. The noir nightmare has become all pervasive and all-masculine. Ultimately, it reflects Duke's solution of extreme psychological and social isolation in the face of the dangerous threat of postmodern noir. Duke's exclusion of women eliminates any possible weak spot where his individuality might crumble and he might become prey to postmodern noir.

The Contemporary Status of Noir in America - Postmodern or Retro?

In the past ten to fifteen years, there has been a resurgence of the noir tradition or vocabulary in films. Dating back to the success of *Blade Runner* (1982) and *The Terminator* (1984), a retro-noir or neo-noir period has blossomed in America, spawning such recently successful films as *Die Hard* (1986), *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Under Siege* (1990), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Get Shorty* (1995), and *Dark City* (1997). These films may be considered postmodern in the sense that they flamboyantly deconstruct or parody the traditional film noir. Neo-noir movies typically contain a morally ambivalent, borderline criminal protagonist, who is actually a pale representation of the modern or postmodern noir hero. The neo-noir "hero" is not a cultural detective, nor do the movies attempt any serious cultural detection. Unlike *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, neo-noir has little or no encroaching sense of postmodern noir that equally threatens the protagonist and American society. Rather, the deeper noir threat is contained and becomes somewhat playful, parodic, and ultimately superficial. While earlier noir has always been entertaining on some level, it has a deeper purpose to shockingly tear away superficial layering, revealing a horrific core of psychological and sociological degeneracy.

Postmodern works introduce the added dimensions of hyper-reality and self-reflexivity, where the distinction between the external social world is blurred with the internal psychological world. In order to understand postmodern culture and the pervasive spread of noir into hyper-reality, postmodern works should further explore hyper-reality. Postmodern noir is more fitted to a surreal visual landscape such as Las Vegas, or those significant dreamscapes portrayed in Michael Rappaport's *Local Color* (1979), Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) and *Blue Velvet* (1987). The hyper-reality of these films allows the viewer to feel the dark isolation and perversions of its characters amidst the eerie beauty of its hyper-real panorama. In a surreal postmodern landscape, they question sociological and psychological "reality," instead of merely entertaining the viewer as neo-noir films tend to do.

In fiction, postmodern noir has developed past the writings of the new or postmodern journalists and is crystallized in what is currently known as "cyber-punk" fiction. The "cyber-punk" literary genre can and perhaps should be interpreted in the vocabulary of noir. Its protagonists employ the tough acerbic language of the noir hero in their technological interface and subsequent isolation from the empirical world. Furthermore, its protagonists may be the new fictional postmodern noir heroes who are attempting a technological derangement of themselves out of being human in the tradition of Raoul Duke in *Fear in Loathing in Las Vegas*, but with technology, not drugs².

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas was published in the early 1970's, soon

after the ideological crash of the 1960's. Its background of shock and horror may be due to an overwhelming sense of a recent loss of unrealized enthusiasm. In the subsequent atmosphere of social and personal disillusion amidst the escalation of the Vietnam War, there was a lightning-quick spread of noir into reality and hyper-reality. The same lightning-quick spread of noir that followed the stock market crash at the end of the 1920's led to the beginning of the Hard Boiled Detective genre. Quickly deteriorating social conditions make for the darkest, most socially provocative noir, where the violence and horror is based on the dashed American dream. While neo-noir explicitly portrays violence, in the best noir films and fiction, violence is considerably more implicit than explicit. The most shocking, affecting violence is a look of defeat, abandonment, or emotional loss in a character whose psyche is shattered or whose dreams ultimately destroy him. This deep emotional or psychic wounding is more realistic and moving than the obligatory shooting scenes in neo-noir. Earlier noir heroes portrayed by Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney had that paradoxically hard, but vulnerable look of the psychological damaged hero who is actually dangling by a thin thread in a morally ambiguous society that is threateningly dissolute.

In 1990's America, there is no longer the sense of potential social disillusion that there was in the 1930's and early 1970's. The contemporary noir or neo-noir work has lost its sense of social immediacy and has become primarily a form of entertainment or spectacle. Neo-noir has the pomp but little of the social pertinence of earlier noir, as it tends to focus on quick memorable one-liners,³ special effects, and dominating mood music which overshadows the explicit violence⁴. In the end, one learns little about contemporary society or psychology in these movies. The cultural detective/outlaw has become more of a hackneyed, insubstantial detective/outlaw, whose "heroism" is "proven" by his unctuous wit and his violent massacre of a overly exaggerated criminal menace. Furthermore, the neo-noir hero is ultimately too tough to be believed, as his psychological character is rarely or only briefly exposed. Ultimately, what makes the traditional noir protagonist heroic is a realistic combination of weakness and ambiguity in his attempt to overcome or deal with his limitations and the limitations of his society by living by his own personal code. The neo-noir world is hyper-attractive and its heroes tend to be either hyper-heroic or flat, two-dimensional characters who do not have the psychological depth to fathom the noir revelation of horror underlying American society and its inhabitants.

The best noir films and fiction allow the viewer to experience the insecurity, alienation, and disorientation of their protagonist(s). Neo-noir is more of an adrenalizing roller-coaster ride of shocking violence and special effects. Ultimately, neo-noir's recent popular resurgence may have destroyed its essential worth. Having been picked up by major movie corporations and purposely tailored as money-

making entertainment, noir has been commodified and is no longer radical or counter-cultural. The space for genuine postmodern noir fiction and film is in cyber-punk fiction and surreal experimental independent films. In the provocative movies and novels of Jim Jarmusch, Hal Hartley, David Cronenberg, David Lynch and Gregg Araki, William Gibson, and Neal Stephenson, we see authors and directors unafraid to confront the insidious spread of postmodern noir in American culture, through the use of an appropriately surreal or cybernetic landscape. Just as Hunter Thompson, almost thirty years ago, deeply explored the social and psychological conditions of his time, so do these artists. Their intention is not to be commercially successful. It is to shock viewers into awareness of amorphous, latent postmodern noir that seems to be always lurking in some shape, underneath the facade of American culture and ideology.

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Notes

1. In *The Armies of the Night* (1968), Mailer inflates his personality in the face of encroaching political chaos, or noir. While Thompson's exaggeration of the self is comically self-deprecating, Mailer's is comically pretentious. The atmosphere of noir in *Armies of the Night* is minimal compared to *Fear of Loathing in Las Vegas* — noir has significantly spread in those three crucial years in American history.
2. Seminal cyber-punk fiction writer William Gibson has created intriguing protagonists in *Neuromancer* (1984) and his subsequent novels that are actually updated versions of the noir hero battling the technological or computerized spread of noir in postmodern society. Cyber-punk writers Bruce Sterling and Neal Stephenson also continue in Gibson's tradition of appropriating the noir hero into a technologically advanced and/or computerized landscape.
3. For instance, Samuel L. Jackson's, "That's one tasty burger" in *Pulp Fiction*, Detective Exley's prophetic "Rollo Tomasi" in *L.A. Confidential*, or the hackneyed cliché of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator*, "I'll be back!"
4. Quentin Tarantino's inclusion of the song "Stuck in the Middle with You" in *Reservoir Dogs* when one character cuts the ear off of another character, underscores the violence of the scene. This is more chillingly and effectively done by David Lynch in *Blue Velvet* where Dennis Hopper's character sings Roy Orbison's "In Dreams," before he goes on a psychotic binge.

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The Post-Colonial Vision of *The “Great White” of Lambaréné*

Bassek Ba Kobhio’s film *The “Great White” of Lambaréné* (1994) is a striking example of an African decolonized gaze at imperialism and whiteness through the use of a black oppositional gaze. Ba Kobhio, who is emerging as one of the most important and influential voices of the New African Cinema, was born in Cameroon in 1957. Initially, Ba Kobhio set out to become a writer. He became a widely published short story writer and novelist, winning a prestigious prize for the best short story in French in 1976. Ba Kobhio subsequently went on to university schooling, and received a diploma in sociology as well as philosophy. While he was pursuing his studies, he started to work part-time as an assistant film director, and literary critic, and eventually enrolled in the cinematography department of the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Ba Kobhio’s first major cinematic credit was as assistant director on Claire Denis’s film *Chocolat* (1987), which also examines the process of colonialist agency. Ba Kobhio directed his first documentary film in 1988, and his first feature film, *Sango Malo*, in 1991. Of his work in *The “Great White” of Lambaréné*, shot on location in Gabon and Cameroon, with post-production accomplished in France, he commented that “I wanted to produce a fragmented film, because time initially rules by constraint, by rape (the start of the film corresponds with the omnipotence of the ‘Great White Man’), then, as Africa progressively gains the upper hand, African life takes over” (press release, 1). As bell hooks notes in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*:

Spaces of agency exist for Black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. Subordinates in relations to power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that ‘looks’ to document, one that is oppositional. (199)

An oppositional gaze is employed by many Black filmmakers of the African Diaspora, from Spike Lee to Julie Dash to Ousmene Sembene. Most often it is called upon to resist further colonized images of African and African Americans. In *The “Great White” of Lambaréné*, however, the oppositional gaze is employed as a means to problematize the spectacle of the great white imperialist figure of Albert Schweitzer and in a larger sense, received notions of whiteness itself,

especially with regards to power relations, African history, and the memory of white supremacy in post-colonial Africa.

In colonial films, whiteness has been presented primarily in the stable forms of such figures as the “great white hunter,” the “great white doctor,” the “great white civilizer” with occasional departures from these formulas and completely inaccurate and self-serving portrayals. In this post-colonial African film, however, whiteness is perceived and established by the African oppositional gaze, and is dismantled of its privilege and its centeredness. Instead of observing the “great white man” from the position of white first world privilege and political positionality, the gaze is reversed and the ethnographic spectacle of the film centers around the study of the perception of the “Great White” of Lambaréné.

As Bassek Ba Kobhio notes, Africans perceive whites through a series of notions that are perhaps as strongly defined as the notion of African-ness as perceived by the white gaze. “Africans perceive whites as being caricatures, theatrical, obsequious, affected, ruled by time in their everyday lives and by death in the future” (press release, 1). Bassek Ba Kobhio both demonstrates this perception and problematizes it in many ways in this film. *The “Great White” of Lambaréné* dismantles the colonialist version of the life of Dr. Albert Schweitzer (played by André Wilms), and tells his story through the eyes and gaze of a young African named Koumba (Alex Descas), who grows up under the care of Schweitzer and is inspired to become a doctor like the “great white” man himself. Schweitzer is examined, therefore, from the point of view of a youth who grows into political understanding and eventual conflict with the internationally famous humanitarian. The film ends with the two men locked in conflict, their relationship defined by post-colonial realities, and Koumba is left to bury Schweitzer in Lambaréné with honor, as if he had been a chief, as if he had been his father. Tellingly, Schweitzer’s wife, Héléne (Marisa Berenson) is almost entirely marginalized by the film’s narrative, which treats her as a figure of absence throughout the film. In contrast, Schweitzer’s and Koumba’s actions are foregrounded throughout the work, as Schweitzer fails to comprehend his own unyielding colonial instincts, and Koumba gradually realizes that he must strike out on his own to achieve true cultural independence from the “Great White.”

Though whiteness is rarely examined in first world films, it takes center stage in this extraordinary film and it is divested of its imperialist power. As Richard Dyer notes in *White*:

The white spirit organizes white flesh and in turn non-white flesh and other material matters: it has enterprise. Imperialism is the key historical form in which that process has been realized. (15)

The film depicts Albert Schweitzer as the ultimate figurehead of white supremacy, which masqueraded as “benevolent” and “great” within the colonialist system. Here, we observe the “great white” imperial man as paternalistic, disrespectful, egotistical and ultimately blind to his own failure to connect with the very people he claims to love. His failure is tragic. His depiction is not at all one-sided, however. Schweitzer conforms to African perceptions of whiteness: he is sometimes a caricature, theatrical, obsequious, affected, ruled by time and by his own inability to view life through a decolonized gaze, but he is nevertheless portrayed as a human being who is multi-faceted and beyond white stereotype.

To some degree, *The “Great White”* leads us to the conclusion that Albert Schweitzer was unable to define himself and unable to move beyond the boundaries of whiteness and a white imperial mentality. His paternalistic attitude towards his employees, and especially Koumba, the young boy who announces his intention to become a doctor, is a critique of whiteness. There is a strong subtext in this film that suggests that white blindness made it impossible for Schweitzer to truly respect cultural difference. For example, Schweitzer’s arrogance and paternalism is displayed by his lack of desire to learn the languages of Africa, or to learn from African medicine men. In addition, Schweitzer is limited by his white imperialist understanding of sexuality and kinship systems. Early in the film, for example, Schweitzer treats an African woman who has gonorrhoea. He lectures her on sexuality, “It’s not like food! You can do without.” What he totally misses is that he has shown her a lack of respect, and asked her to disobey her husband.

At another point in the film, Schweitzer visits a respected griot, or storyteller, out of desperation, seeking the secret of the iboga. Schweitzer’s attempt to purchase the secret is summarily refused. The griot explains that he cannot sell Schweitzer the information, and besides, the medicine is owned by the people and he must have the permission of the chief. Though seemingly in control of his hospital compound, Schweitzer expresses in this scene his own fear of that which he cannot comprehend, of the forces he calls the “darker powers.” In a subsequent scene, Schweitzer’s wife Héléne is teased by one of her servants for being afraid of the cries of the forest animals in the night. “They eat men,” the servant teases Héléne, who seems very ill at ease throughout the film, confined by her position as Schweitzer’s silent wife, a witness to events that she cannot control or predict.

Schweitzer is not only trapped by his whiteness but he is defined by it in ways that mean he must continue the upkeep and maintenance of being the “Great White Man.” This is remarkably demonstrated by the sequences involving Schweitzer playing the organ and trying to drown out the sounds of African drums outside his window. It is both pathetic and telling that Schweitzer literally tries to erase the sound of African culture, either with European music, particularly Bach, or the sound of his own voice, lecturing on the “greatness” of the Bible. As an

interloper who has never bothered to investigate African culture or language while attempting to “civilize” his patients, Schweitzer is a figure of both intolerance and tragic self-delusion.

In a hilarious and politically charged sequence, Schweitzer is viewed lecturing Africans on the spiritual nature of work. His words are supposedly translated for him, but there is a remarkable difference between his messages and the subsequent translations. Schweitzer explains:

We are not saved by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. We must follow it with active commitment. Therefore work in any conditions is an act of salvation.

The translator, however, offers a different version of the text: “Fornicator or drunk, you are sure to have a place in heaven if you work.”

The scene not only points to the fact that Schweitzer is limited by language. It highlights the fact that translation itself is limited, because of the vast cultural differences between white European spirituality and African spirituality. Schweitzer’s defective vision is circumscribed by his white European Christianity, even as it motivates him to literally work himself to death in an environment he finds utterly alien. Schweitzer’s chosen world is lacking both sufficient Western cultural resources to satisfy his own desires, as well as stable financial backing. Thus Schweitzer is doubly cut off from the society he seeks to minister to.

The critique of whiteness is not limited, however, to or by Schweitzer. Several African figures specifically address the evils of whiteness as they are attached to white colonialism. Mikendi, who returns from the war to tell stories of racism he and other Africans experienced at the hands of the French, becomes increasingly politically committed to African independence. He becomes a griot to Koumba. “I hate these whites. I hate them,” Mikendi shouts. Mikendi advises Koumba to go abroad, attend medical college, and become a doctor. Then Koumba can return and take over the administration of Schweitzer’s hospital. “Let no white hand strike us again,” Mikendi admonishes him.

Chief Mata also directly challenges white supremacy and Schweitzer’s white imperialist mentality. When Chief Mata asks Schweitzer why he came to Africa if he hates Blacks, Schweitzer responds, “I came to save the Blacks,” but Chief Mata sees through this imperialistic rhetoric. “You want to rule this kingdom alone and make us all your subjects.”

But perhaps most critical of Schweitzer is Bissa (Magaly Bertly), his African wife, betrothed to him by Chief Mata. Schweitzer refuses her sexual advances and she asks him if it is because of her skin color. “You give Africans nothing,” she says, and he responds, “I do. My life. My work.” She states, “Well,

perhaps you give, but you don't share." It is Bissa who also points out to Schweitzer that though he has seen thousands of African patients he made no attempt to understand the African languages.

Schweitzer is unable to understand the changes in the African people that came with independence. He does not attend the festivities to honor independence day and he is shocked when Koumba returns, trained as a doctor and a lawyer, and comes in the official capacity to take over the administration of the hospital. Schweitzer's response to independence is to retreat into his role as the "great white," and he becomes even less tolerant and more paternalistic and abusive towards the Africans. He forms a relationship with the drummer who he has been trying to drown out, but he is the teacher, not the student, never bothering to understand what he may have learned from the African people in terms of music, language, spirituality, or culture. Even this relationship is fraught with paternalistic overtones. He buys a trumpet for the drummer and gives it to him. Yet, at the same time he refers to him as "the tom-tom maniac." The complexity of this post-colonial relationship is rendered with great understanding of both sides. It is beautifully orchestrated by the camerawork and design which places the drummer outside the walls of Schweitzer's colonial outpost, a prison of his own making, in a way, but also a prison of whiteness and colonial privilege.

Schweitzer's response to independence is to retreat into the past and fervently deny that his status as colonial white great man is in question. At about this time, Schweitzer is being considered for the Nobel Peace Prize. The arrival of a white journalist, Ingrid Lombard (Elizabeth Bourguine), marks the arrival of post-colonialism in the world of Albert Schweitzer. For the first time, Schweitzer is attacked and criticized for his behavior, but Schweitzer's initial response is to embrace the moment of the journalist's arrival as an opportunity for rebuilding himself into the "Great White." Though at first he says there will be no photographs, soon Schweitzer is posing as the "great white doctor" in a series of self-revealing postures of nineteenth century photographic portraiture.

Schweitzer's lack of respect for the African people is evident in the scene in which he and the journalist use Africans as human props. Schweitzer and the journalist pose a group of Africans in a boat with Schweitzer "as if returning from a great trip." This scene is a particularly important deconstruction of the politics of ethnographic photography and imperialist control of images of African people. It is a self-reflexive moment in a film that emerges from a decolonized gaze. To suddenly switch to the colonizing gaze of the journalist's camera is to jolt the viewer out of the decolonized gaze and into a position of examining the positionality of the colonized gaze. This is a deeply pivotal moment in the film, for it enacts on the screen the remarks of Trinh T-Minh-ha, who writes that the goal is "not that merely of correcting the images whites have of non-whites, nor of reacting to the

colonial territorial mind by simply reversing the situation and setting up an opposition that at best will hold up a mirror to the Master's activities . . . the question is that of tracking down and exposing the voice of power" (144).

The photograph session is followed by a dinner in which the journalist begins a blistering verbal attack of Schweitzer, including criticism of his administrative policies, his activities as a spy for the Germans in World War II, and his brutality towards indigenous people. Schweitzer refuses to answer the journalist's allegations, but his trusted nurse, Berta, speaks for him, stating, "Don't you punish children in your country?" Here, Berta is exposed as a fervent racist, referring to Africans as children. Later in the film, when she has been divested of all authority, she shouts abuse at her former African patients. "Tell this white woman she must respect us now," an African man says in response.

The problematization of Berta and Schweitzer's white paternalistic missionary status as racist and paternalistic culminates in Koumba's remark that Schweitzer "only wanted to share in our hell in the hope of reaching heaven." The decolonized African will no longer tolerate being called a primitive or a native, nor will he tolerate the white supremacist myth of the great white doctor/missionary — and he deflates that myth and the man with this statement.

Ironically, upon his death, Schweitzer is made a panther prince and given a proper African funeral. The African people are not trapped by the limits of whiteness in the way that Schweitzer has been. *The "Great White" of Lambaréné* demonstrates the Pan African capacity for moving beyond cultural difference, while recognizing it. Schweitzer, on the other hand, is seen as a dying remnant of empire, trying desperately to hold on to a phantom authority he never really possessed. Bassek Ba Kobhio's film is thus a study in microcosm of the entire process of the overthrow of the colonial presence within the African continent, and Schweitzer's presence within the colonial system is seen in a new light.

Far from being the bringer of wisdom and spiritual redemption, Schweitzer, in his refusal to teach medicine to his assistants, in his refusal to learn the language of the people he ostensibly serves, and in his brutal treatment of his patients, whom he often operates on without benefit of anesthetic (see the opening tooth extraction sequence for a devastating example of this), is the tool of a colonial government which seeks to both enslave and degrade its unwilling constituents. The hagiographic Schweitzer of Western colonial legend recedes from our collective vision, as Bassek Ba Kobhio's far more realistic portrait of the man emerges. In *The "Great White" of Lambaréné*, the historical record of colonialized Africa is re-written by those who suffered under the oppression it imposed.

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From the Fringe: the Hip Hop Culture and Ethnic Relations

The “hip hop culture” has permeated popular culture in an unprecedented fashion. Because of its enormous cross-over appeal, the hip hop culture is potentially a great unifier of diverse populations. Although created by black urban youth on the street, hip hop’s influence has become worldwide. Approximately 75% of the rap and hip hop audience is nonblack. The music and all that goes with it has moved from the fringes to the suburbs and into the corporate boardrooms. Indeed, McDonald’s, Coca Cola, Sprite, Nike and other corporate giants have capitalized on this phenomenon. Although critics of rap music and the hip hop culture seem fixated on its dominant messages of sex and violence as well as on its harsh language, this genre offers us a paradigm for mending ethnic relations. In the 1950’s and ‘60’s, the “Beat culture” challenged the status quo in ways that unified liberals and prompted change. In the same vein, the hip hop culture has challenged the system in ways that have unified individuals (particularly youth) across a rich ethnic spectrum. This paper will discuss the development of the hip hop culture, the cross-over appeal of hip hop, and the potential of this culture to mend ethnic cleavages in our society.

Today, rap is the fastest growing music genre in the U.S., accounting for more than 10 percent of the \$12.3 billion music sales in 1998 (Alexander, 1998, p.B1). The overall hip hop culture has been established by this musical art form. The language (street slang), dress (baggy pants, caps worn backwards, expensive sneakers), and style of the hip hop culture have all evolved from rap music (Lewis, 1998, p.E3).

Soundscan, a company in Hartsdale, N.Y. that monitors music sales, validated the widespread popularity of rap when it noted that at the end of 1998, 9 of the 15 albums topping the pop charts were rap. At the end of 1998, three of the top selling albums were rap acts: *Jay Z*, *Outkast*, and *A Tribe Call Quest*. According to the Recording Industry Association of America, rock music accounted for 32.5 percent of the industry’s \$12.3 billion in sales during 1997. But this figure is down from 46.2 percent a decade ago. Meanwhile, rap music’s share of sales has increased 150% over the last ten years and is still rising (Hilburn, 1998, p.6). These figures re-affirm the fact that rap is replacing rock and roll as the most popular genre of music among youth (Srauss, 1998, p.E1). Ten years ago, in the suburbs teenagers blasted music from such rock artist as *The Byrds*, *The Doors*, *The Eagles*, *Van Halen*, and *Guns ‘N’ Roses*. Today, teenagers are listening to rap music from such artist as *Jay Z* and *Outkast* (Hilburn, 1998, p.6).

Busy Bee Starski, DJ Hollywood, and DJ Afika Bambaataa (founder of the Zulu Nation in New York) are the three New York artists who have been credited with coining the term “hip hop” (Fernando, 1994, p.IX). The genre began in the 1970’s with funky beats resonating at house and basement parties, and in the streets of New York (Dickinson, 1998, p.D3). Geneva Smitherman notes that the foundation of rap music is rooted in the “Black oral tradition of tonal semantics, narrativizing, signification, playing the dozens, Africanized syntax, and other communicative practices” (Smitherman, p.3, 1997).

One can trace the commercial history of rap back to 1979 when the *Sugar Hill Gang* produced the enormously successful song entitled, *Rapper’s Delight*. The raw beginnings of contemporary rap music can be traced even further back to the Bronx in the mid 1970s (Fernando, p.IX, 1994). Rap music provided a way for urban black youth to express themselves in a rhythmic form. The music, along with graffiti and breakdancing, was the poetry of the street.

As interest in rap music grew, so did its messages. The collective message of rap told candid stories of the urban streets — stories of drugs, violence, and crime. No matter how hedonistic the message, urban youth found a platform to outwardly express their rage towards “the system” — which was embodied in the police forces of New York, Chicago, and other big cities. Hence, vicious verbal attacks on police behavior reflected urban youths’ most intimate conceptualization of the system.

According to Patricia Rose, writing in *The Journal of Negro Education*, rap music began to blossom after the release of *Rapper’s Delight*. It was “discovered” by the music industry, the film industry, and the print media. Artists such as *Run DMC*, *Whoodini*, and *The Fat Boys* helped what seemed like a fleeting phenomenon to persist in changing popular culture (Rose, 1994, p.3). *Krush Groove*, a highly successful movie depicting the life of rap music, further elevated the music into the mainstream. This movie earned Warner Brothers \$17 million worldwide and a gold soundtrack. Most importantly, the movie highlighted for the general public the power and potential of this art form (Potter, 1996, p.39).

Street language is transmitted to the hip hop culture through rap music. One can hear a Chinese or Filipino hip hopper using the same slang as the African American hip hopper. Irrespective of their ethnicity, hip hoppers use adjectives such as “dope,” “da bomb,” “legit,” “hittin,” and “all that,” to describe something that is excellent. The word “nigger” is one of the most popular words of hip hoppers. Contrary to the traditionally derogatory meaning of the word, hip hoppers use the word as a term of endearment. One can hear a white, Asian, or Latino hip hopper saying, “TJ is my nigger,” which means “TJ is my good friend.” The vernacular of this culture changes constantly. What might be a cool statement today, might be “played out” (outdated) in a year.

Street language has become a pidgin language of sorts. Even if hip hoppers have different first languages, they can still understand the slang of hip hop. Hence, this culture is bounded linguistically. I can personally recall my trip to Japan in 1995 in which my friend saw a Japanese teenager with a Snoop Doggy Dog (famous rapper) cap on — the teenager could barely speak English but he was fluent in street slang.

Why has the hip hop culture transcended ethnic boundaries? The urban street prep seems like an oxymoronic term. However, urban hip hoppers adorn themselves with the most unlikely preppy labels. Clothing styles that include such bourgeois labels as Tommy Hilfiger, Nautica, and Ralph Lauren, seemingly contradict the image of the fearless street soldier (Hochswender, p.131, 1996).

According to Michiko Kakutani (1997), young urban blacks have co-opted the dress of upper crust whites as a manifestation of their lack of power in American society. While actual material success may be unattainable, the rationale for adorning expensive Polo shirts, blue jeans and sneakers is to present an image of success. Conversely, suburban white kids scoff at the material success of their parents and their parents' friends. One way to express this disdain is by identifying with the renegade image of the street. Many white kids are

...cultural tourists who romanticize the very ghetto life that so many black kids want to escape. Instead of the terrible mortality rate for young black males, they see the glamour of violence. Instead of the frustration of people denied jobs and hope and respect, they see the verbal defiance of that frustration (p.18).

Kakutani suggests that this vicarious outlet of symbolic expression explains why white suburban males have become the largest audience of gansta rap. In the 1950's popular culture was dominated by the "Happy Days" scene. Black leather jackets and greased hair represented the zeitgeist. In the 1960's, the hippie and bohemian look had the greatest influence on pop culture followed by the polyester and bell bottoms of the 1970's and the preppy influence of the 1980's. The 1990's have been dominated by hip hop fashion (Carlstone, p.17L, 1997). This fashion consists of baggy pants worn very loosely, baseball caps worn backwards (NBA, NFL, or successful university athletic teams), oversized rugby or polo shirts, and expensive tennis shoes. Hip hop fashion, unlike the fashion of other generations, has uniquely cut across almost every ethnic boundary. Indeed, a significant number of African Americans, Whites, Latinos, and Asians youth between the ages of 12 and 22 dress the same (Lewis, 1998, p.E3).

Before rap music, the music of Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Bob Marley, and more recently, punk rock, galvanized the rebellious spirit of youth across the

U.S. Now what seemed to be a passing trend, chronologically fitting between heavy metal and alternative rock, has become the chosen platform of rebellion for youth (Hilburn, 1998, p. 6; Stauss, 1998, p.E3). According to Russell Simmons, hip hop's first millionaire entrepreneur and chairman and CEO of Rush Communications, one reason rap is so popular stems from the resistance it has been met with. The more resistance surrounding a product, and the more controversy generated by its popularity, the more people are going to want to buy it. The heated debates that took place in the late 1980's and early 1990's and the movements to censor the lyrics of rap music initiated by individuals such as Tipper Gore and C. Delores Tucker only spawned sales of rap music (Lewis, 1998, E3). In fact, the infamous group "2 Live Crew" benefitted from their highly publicized court case based on First Amendment infringement rights ("Is Rap Music Here to Stay?" p. 56).

A good example of how rap and hip hop have cut across ethnic boundaries can be found in the Asian community. In Los Angeles, there is a blossoming Asian American rap scene, consisting of groups like *Bubula Tribe*, *Undercover*, *Asiatic Apostles*, *Brotherhood from Another Hood*, the Seoul Brothers, *Lani Luv*, and the *Boo-Yaa Tribe*. These groups represent various styles. Messages range from social issues such as hate crimes against Asians to relationships between blacks and Koreans in nearly every major city (Perkins, 282). White rappers such as *The Beastie Boys*, *3rd Bass*, and *Vanilla Ice* have also had success in the industry. *Cypress Hill*, *Fat Joe*, and *Big Punisher*, are Latino artists who have impacted the hip hop culture as well ("Is Rap Music Here to Stay?" p.59). The overall message of this music is the same. It is cool, didactic, and unabashedly rebellious. According to Russell Simmons,

Hip hop has transcended beyond just music. It has become a lifestyle and/or a culture for people worldwide. Hip hop is an attitude and hip hop is a language in which a kid from Detroit can relate to a kid in Hong Kong. Seventy-five percent of our audience is nonblack kids. Now you have kids in Beverly Hills are now sensitive to situations in Compton (CA) ("Is Rap Music Here to Stay?" p.59).

Simmons goes on to state that although racism still exists in our society, it was not strong enough to thwart the collective enjoyment of rap by the youth of America and around the world.

The overwhelming success of the hip hop culture has prompted various industries to pay attention to its appetites. Sit-coms such as the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *Martin*, *Malcolm*, *Steve Harvey*, and *The Jamie Fox Show* all capitalize on this popularity. In the past, black humor appealed to few outside of this population;

now it is widespread. Movies such as *Boyz N the Hood*, *New Jack City*, *Jason's Lyric*, *Juice*, and *Menace II Society* are rugged movies that depict the reality of the urban streets while movies such as *Friday*, *Boo! Call*, *I've Got the Hook Up* and *Wu* are comedies that have depicted the humor that is still strangely ever present in on the treacherous urban streets. All of these movies have been highly successful in cutting across ethnic boundaries (Fernando, 1994, xviii).

Magazines such as *Vibe*, *Blaze*, *The Source*, *Rap Pages* and *Stress* were created to appeal to the growing hip hop culture. Because of its multiethnic popularity, *Vibe* magazine's circulation has risen to 606,237, a 17.1% increase from 1997 to 1998. Advertisements that appear in these magazines run the gamut from small unknown companies to powerful companies that are household names (Alexander, 1998, p.2B).

Vibe's editor-in-chief, Danyel Smith states, "Although *Vibe* may seem like a black magazine, its perspective and appeal are much broader than its covers would indicate. *Vibe* is a multicultural music magazine based in the African American culture and sensibility" (Moore, 1998, p.E1). Magazines such as *Vibe*, along with the aforementioned sit coms and movies, have done a remarkable job of "keeping it real", speaking – in its own language — the imagination of this culture (Alexander, 1998, p.2B).

One of the many positive consequences of the hip hop culture is that it encourages corporations to recruit a diverse cadre of employees. Hence, recruiting minorities who understand and represent the pulse of this culture becomes an imperative. The African American market alone has \$325 billion in buying power (Levine, 1997, p.144). A myriad of organizations that appeal to the hip hop culture have diversified for competitive advantage. It makes good business sense. For example, half of Universal Music Group's employees are members of minority groups. This organization is number one in the market share in the U.S., Europe, Latin American and Australia. The record label's overall market share is 23 percent globally and 25 percent in the U.S. (Philips, 1997, p.D1:2; www.universalstudios.com/music/).

92.3 *The Beat* is the most popular radio station in Los Angeles. It appeals to a broad, multi-ethnic hip hop population in the greater Los Angeles area. The station has taken advantage of its appeal by launching initiatives to bridge ethnic cleavages by hosting several community panel discussions on issues such as Asian-bashing, hate crimes, and African American and Asian relations. In the Fall of 1997, this radio station sponsored a "No Color Lines" essay contest for Los Angeles high school students. The participants were asked to write, in 92 words or less, what the words "no color lines" meant to them. I was asked to judge this contest. The following are two student responses.

Contestant #19

“What No Color Lines Means to Me”

To understand “no color lines,” one must see what a blind man sees – nothing; he hears and feels, and thus, is able to *really* see each person’s heart. As a Chinese-American Student, I have been spit on and told to “go home.” I have been excluded because I am “yellow.” But we can take our first step toward eliminating such acts of racism by looking through the eyes of a blind person. This way, we can surmount the color barrier that prevents us from discovering the kindness that is within us all.

Contestant #21

“What No Color Lines Means to Me”

Lost, in LA, I feared the homeless black man following me. Ashamed, I discovered it was the trash can he pursued in hope of food, not me. I’m no racist. I’m a girl who learned the meaning of “no color lines” the hard way. It is not pointing fingers at those who display hate and ignorance aloud. It is looking in the mirror and finding that spot hidden which holds all the ugliness and prejudices we’ve developed, and doing everything in our will to overcome them — being blind to further our vision.

While there were seven hundred participants in this contest, I was struck by the common concerns and the common language of this diverse group. Reading these essays, I realized the potential of this population to mend ethnic relations. One of the most positive aspects of this essay contest was its encouragement of a diverse population of high school students to think about ethnic relations and the importance of *their* roles in enhancing these relations.

If messages of love, peace, anti-racism, and human uplift are resonated among the hip hop population, this music can have an enormous impact on ethnic relations in our society. In the 1950’s and 1960’s the “Beat Culture” spoke of love yet challenged the status quo in ways that did not compromise their rebellious spirit. In the same vein, it is possible for the hip hop culture to keep its rebellious street flavor and speak to issues such as love and respect for all. It is possible for rap artists such as Master P, Wyclef Jean, and Busta Rhymes to empower America and the world’s youth just as Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and Bob Marley did. Artists such as the late rapper Tupac Shakur have rapped about compassionate issues without losing the rugged flavor of the streets. In his song,

"I Wonder If Heaven's Got A Ghetto," Shakur sings:

I see no changes, all I see is racist faces misplaced
hate makes disgrace the racist...I wonder what it takes
to make this one better place...take the evil out the
people (then) they'll be acting right cause both black
and white are smokin crack tonight and the only time
we deal is when we kill each other, it takes skill to be
real, time to heal each other....

Millions of hip hoppers all over the world have heard these lyrics. If more artists concentrated on positive messages such as this, the impact could be revolutionary. Unlike any other subculture in American history, the hip hop culture has transcended ethnic boundaries. Because of its eclectic audience, it has the greatest opportunity to build ethnic bridges and mend ethnic relations. Hip hop has taken hold and permeated significant regions of the world. The clothing, music, mannerisms, and lexicon are unmistakably the same in New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Zurich, Milan, and Tokyo. Indeed, this culture has the potential to make it cool not to commit hate crimes, not to discriminate, and not to be racist.

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Thrift Stores, Garage Sales, and Flea Markets: Pop Culture, “Camp” and Ethics

In general, someone with a camp sensitivity implicitly recognizes that no matter how something is typically seen, it can always be re-invented, made to mean something else. Using cans of *Spam* for book ends, the front of a *Frosted Flakes* cereal box for a postcard, or a pine tree air freshener as a necklace are all examples of this.

To understand and use the term “camp” requires a certain disposition and attitude. “Campers” mock cliché and what is (blatantly) marketed to the public. Style without content is detected and enjoyed. Campers take spirited trips to the thrift store and rescue the actual items used to perpetuate popular metaphors and a public awareness. This stuff represents people’s emotional investments in the past. As such, it serves as an incredibly important tool through which to define those of a past generation.

Many fast food restaurants have little gimmicks and prizes that are so ridiculous that I just have to get them, even though I hardly ever frequent these places (it seems quite campy to go to these places and buy the promotional items without buying any food!). One of these promotions was Taco Bell’s creation of its own credit card. With this card, I was awarded points every time I bought food. Free food was given to the customer for a certain number of points. I was quite excited about this promotion, not because I cared about the free food, but simply because I thought it was quite campy to have a credit card for Taco Bell. It felt the same as when I find a lava lamp or polka-dot elephant ash tray at the thrift store. I just have to have it, but really don’t plan to use it. I show the card, lamp, and elephant off to my friends, and they get a good laugh out of it.

One of the best places to find “camp” items is a thrift store. Here, old languages have all been dumped off and left- past fads, styles and ways of living *abandoned*. The term “abandoned” is important for anyone who is trying to understand what “camp” means. Consider what it is like to find something that has been *abandoned*. The term makes one think of “rescuing” or taking care of this something which has just been left for someone else to have (for whatever reason, we don’t know). It actually seems to be the moral thing to do, to appreciate and possibly find a new meaning for the abandoned object. Also, one feels lucky to have found such a prize. The ashtray I find at the thrift store may be something I get for someone else, who would appreciate it the way I do (someone with a camp sensibility). It would be just as cool (if not more cool) to get the ashtray for my friend if he were a *non-smoker*.

Those who frequent thrift stores revive the abandoned stuff of past generations. In this way they are artists, giving new meanings to the artifacts of old. They are taking things that still have “legitimate” intentions and uses, and stylizing them. Camp items represent either some way-of-being which has passed away (including old ways of talking, thinking, dressing), *OR* current ways-of-being which are blatant attempts to control the thought of the current culture/public all reinterpreted to be stylish because the serious message fails.

Old metaphors, fads and styles come cheaply and can be found anywhere. For those who aren’t wedded to keeping up with current style and fad, thrift stores are the ideal places to shop. It is fun to find items that are cheap, have a history and a personality, and merely need to be *brushed off* so that they can find a place in our lives. Going camping to find things to *do a job* is missing the point. Camp items do not primarily “do a job,” but rather primarily exemplify a way of life. This way of life is defined by how one behaves and by the “stuff” with which one surrounds oneself.

For example, assume that a certain gentleman needs a butter dish. He therefore goes to the thrift store to find one. Already, as he is looking for something that will serve a specific purpose, he is not experiencing the thrift store with a camp sensibility. That is, he is likely to settle for something which will serve the purpose of housing butter, whether or not the butter dish is campy or not. However, if a person lets others (who also have a camp sensibility) know that he is on the lookout for a butter dish, then one of these others is likely to come across a *campy* butter dish. The butter dish to be found out there will be stylish first, efficient second. Shaped like an automobile, train, or Graceland, the butter dish will have some personality which makes it campy and worth having.

The camp sensibility enables one to see her existence in a way that does not demand staying abreast of current culture. Instead, she can enjoy that which has been, and in the process create something new. Every time I locate something camp, I do so as a representative of the current popular culture.¹ It is a common misconception that an individual needs to actively participate in a popular action to be representative of that culture. Individuals using the language of that culture in any way are arguably a part of that culture. Both the camp-sensitivity and many people who call themselves “retro” can be seen as escaping from pop culture. However, the “retros” are attempting to deny their embeddedness in the current culture, whereas the “campers” would admit that they are of a current culture and therefore able to have a special camp experience of things from another generation.²

One is of a culture just by virtue of living in it. By being of a culture, one brings into the thrift store a culture, and invites a “clashing” with other cultures, other styles and fads. Such a “clash” is not stressful, but exhilarating. Previous meanings and ways of life are appreciated, and new ones are created “before your very eyes!”

Popular culture has moved beyond the nihilism inherent in much of the influential existentialism of the early twentieth century. The view that truth is subjective is no longer widespread; everyone must take “radical responsibility” for his or her actions, and the world and our place in it are absurd. Today’s camp sensibility is life-affirming, positive, and, when strictly lived, free of the need to justify the lifestyle which is being lived. The camp sensitivity is the disposition of the person who has acknowledged that past generations lived different kinds of lives, lives including different values and beliefs. These are just ways-of-being, none more *inherently* valuable than the others.

Inherent value, as commonly thought of, makes no sense (that is, as valuable apart from the interests of people, cultures, and traditions). What makes sense is the way things are commonly experienced by those with a similar sensibility or disposition. That which is given meaning by those who have such a sensibility or disposition becomes, with the passing of time, something called tradition, and is thought of by them as having inherent value. The camp sensibility includes the recognition of inherent value as something *given to* traditional ways of being in the world. Then, the traditional is stylized and reinterpreted so that it is valued and participated in for reasons other than that for which it was intended. The butter dish becomes a piece of art which happens to function as a holder of a certain dairy product, and a religious sermon becomes a dramatic performance, akin to Shakespeare in the park, which happens to function as a tradition that brings families and communities together.

Those with a camp sensibility feel more freedom to make fun of themselves. As a result, campers typically seem to do two things: first, they admire and appreciate those who act outrageously (through dress, counter-culture-speak, lifestyle, etc); second, they identify themselves by opposing their antithesis — the status quo.

Camp represents a quiet taunting of those who thought they had found the right or proper way to be in the world, only to “phase out” later on. Those who currently think this of themselves are likewise considered to be campy. If someone recognizes that he is apt to be seen as campy and does not lose sight of this, he can still be campy, but not as much as the one who is ignorant of this fact, and attempts to be serious. For example, Pamela Anderson-Lee, as an actor who takes herself seriously (with breast augmentations and all), is an incredible camp figure. Her camp characterization rests upon her appearing to take herself seriously as an actor. If she knew all along that she was not a serious actor (at least in her role on Bay Watch), she could still be considered campy — but not as campy as she would be if she were *ignorant* of her failure to represent any content at all. The same sort of thing can be argued of *The Backstreet Boys* as musicians, Chevy Chase as a talk-show host, most politicians, and others of similar “talent” for living as style without content.

Ethical Implications of “Camp”

This section *describes* the implications of the camp sensibility for the general ethical stance assumed and defended by our society.³ Quite simply, all talk of religion and ethics which has a grounding in (or even an implication of) a universal truth or otherworldly powers are prime targets for those with a camp sensibility. As stated above, camp items are those which take themselves too seriously and fail to maintain such seriousness. As religions and authorities of all kinds propose to assume a moral high-ground, we who are proposed to attempt to find their justification for such an assumption. However, we have found nothing but tradition, superstition, and/or utilitarian/pragmatic justifications for these types of behaviors which we have been taught since childhood. We are being *sold* things that are peddled as inherently valuable. But, as a result of the lack of justification for this inherent value, these systems become all style and no content; hence, they are not taken seriously and become prime targets for the camp subculture. Things with inherent value are an endangered species, killed (that is, redefined or reinterpreted) by those who are taking these artifacts and making them mean something entirely unintended by the originators.

A major implication for all current systems of ethics in light of the growing camp sensibility, is clear. They will have to include a justification for their views. Otherwise these systems will be used for something other than originally intended. If no strong justification can be found, only those that “make the most sense” and are accepted by the culture as having “content” will be taken seriously. More and more traditions in ethics will be challenged, especially those that have previously been accepted based on their traditional-status alone. Those systems which both propose to justify themselves, and fall short of justification, will be seen as all style and no content.⁴ Consider the televangelist as an example of someone who dresses up in traditional and orthodox garb intending to speak “the truth.” Those with a camp sensitivity are likely to enjoy the performance, but will see it as art, and not as a statement of “truth.”

The same can be applied to ethical systems as well. Claims of ethical superiority, of valuing the world and human lives in “the right way” and proposing a social system of positive and negative reinforcements for particular behaviors, are all symptomatic of the ethic which the camp sensibility enjoys and redefines. These are not simply ways of acting which a person has accepted as just the way she does things in the world, one way among many. These are ways that are being defended *seriously* by proponents of these ethics. It is this seriousness about the ethics promoted and justified which makes them campy.

A more implicit ethic, one based on a standard of openness to difference, and one which considers authenticity to be important, may replace not only the codifications of ethics of old, but the cost/benefit analysis of utilitarianism as well.

This proposal could be considered in light of my earlier argument that objects can be valued not simply for their purpose or use, but also for their stylishness.

We are all encouraged as children and young adults to adopt certain styles and fads. Later in our lives, we come to see that these styles and fads are now found only in thrift stores, garage sales and flea markets. To this observation we add our beliefs and values, and the result is that we come to believe that our ethics are quite similar to our past, abandoned interests. Someone with the camp sensitivity is not out to discover answers to metaphysical questions and has grown away from focusing on ethical dilemmas. The camp sensibility encourages creativity and results in solidarity and prods us to recognize the power we have to make the unique things around us the things we value the most.

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Notes

1. As Hilda Nelson emphasized to me in discussing this paper, there are “cultures embedded within cultures,” and continual clashes in our lives. I am not attempting to specify the boundaries of any particular culture, but only highlighting the point that there are ways of life that we identify with certain cultures, and that these ways of life are available to us in the world of camp.
2. There is a distinction to be made between parody, camp, and retro that I do not make here in the interests of space, but which is worthy of discussion.
3. Justification in ethics, as I see it, is a problem for all theories which ultimately finds its support in utilitarian and pragmatic grounds. Therefore, I am not defending the ethics of the camp sensibility here. Furthermore, as I am implicitly sympathetic to the ethics of the camp sensibility in this essay on camp, any justification presented would arguably violate my own camp sensibility.
4. Note that what is important is that the systems propose to justify themselves.

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