



# POPULAR CULTURE REVIEW

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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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## From the Editor's Desk

As of this printing, preparations are underway for the 25th Anniversary meeting of PCR's parent organizations, the Far West Popular and American Culture Associations, February 22 – 24, 2013, at the Palace Station Hotel in Las Vegas. We plan a truly gala event with all the warmth and friendliness that have always characterized FWPCA/ACA meetings. H. Peter Steeves will open the conference with one of his wonderful multimedia presentations on Friday evening, the 22nd. Other special speakers and events will be announced as planning progresses.

Speaking of anniversaries, 2012 marks my 50th Anniversary at UNLV, which will be marked by a party at UNLV's Alumni Center on October 10th. If you are in the neighborhood and wish to attend, contact me for details.

Please enjoy the wonderful variety in this issue of *Popular Culture Review*. I think I can safely say that this issue has something for everyone.

*Felicia*

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# And Say the Zombie Responded? Or, How I Learned to Stop Living and Unlove the Undead

In February 2011 Serene Branson, a TV reporter for CBS News who was covering the Grammy Awards in Los Angeles, suffered an on-air breakdown. Over the course of ten seconds on live TV, Branson began slurring her speech and, ultimately, spouting gibberish:

Well a very very heavay ah heavy de bertation  
tonight, we had a very deris-derison. By lets go heah  
teris tazin loash tibleth hav le pet.<sup>1</sup>

The Internet video went viral. Some jokingly claimed Branson had become a real-life zombie on the air. Others worried that she had had a stroke. Either way, it appeared that her brain was suddenly not functioning in the way that a normal human brain functions—she was no longer one of *us*.

Branson's incoherence turned out to be caused by a migraine that mimics the symptoms of a stroke. She recovered quickly and was sent home. But the next day when asked to describe what had happened, her response was still terrifying. At first, she explained, it was not clear to her that something was wrong. She thought she was making sense. All she meant to say was: "Here at the Grammys, Lady Antebellum swept the awards." When she realized that something had gone wrong, she was still unable to summon up the words to communicate her own inner thoughts. She was making sounds, and was compelled to continue, but the sounds were non-communicative.<sup>2</sup> Even the words "very very" and "tonight we had" were not words that she was *meaning* to say.

It is true that some of the most interesting and confounding thing about zombies is their relationship to language and desire—and what this means for consciousness. But before we can confront such complicated issues we need to meet the zombie head on, thinking through exactly what it means for those of us who are living to have the dead still with us.

Freud tells us that it is pathological to love the dead. Libido is often mistakenly characterized as exclusively sexual energy, but Freud is clear that it merely indicates one's life force or life energy in general—the instinctual drive of the id that propels us all forward. When we love, we make an investment of libido in the object of our affection. And this is the problem with loving the dead. Libido must always be "attached." Once the libido no longer has an external subject or object to which it can be attached, the only way in which we can continue to love the dead is to re-attach that flailing libido to ourselves, taking our self to be the now-missing Other, mistakenly converting a part of the Self into a puppet version of the Other. It is not only metaphysically wrong, it is

a form of narcissism that will inevitably lead to psychological imbalance. The only healthy thing to do once someone dies is to stop loving her.

The problem is that the dead are always still present—and thus seemingly ready to accept our love. Phenomenologically, we experience people long after they are dead. It is something Freud never addressed, but when we actually look at our experience, the dead are always present: they are present, precisely, *as absent*. In this way, it still seems possible to love them.

What is at work here is what Edmund Husserl called “the play of presence of absence.” When we investigate the underlying structures of consciousness we discover that mind is always directed at something, and that something is always a whole. This is an important point that most American and British epistemologists are still not keen on accepting. For them, it seems as if only one side of an object is visible at any given time and thus the true object of consciousness is thus at best merely a surface of an object from a single vantage point. As you look before you as you read this essay, you see the page as it sits in the bound journal. It seems you can only see the journal from one angle right now, and thus the object of your consciousness must be the-front-of-this-particular-page-in-the-journal. However, phenomenology calls on us actually to look at our experience rather than reason abstractly about it. And when you look at our experience of the journal, you will find that you are experiencing—you are *conscious of*—a whole object and not some façade, some two-dimensional surface. In fact, if you truly thought that you were seeing just the front of things all around you now, if you thought that you were living in some sort of elaborately constructed movie-set, there would be good reason to worry about you and your brain.

Instead, it is the case that we actually do experience whole things around us; but how does this happen if all we ever physically see with our eyes are profiles and surfaces? The answer is to be had in understanding the way in which consciousness itself is structured. We are capable of experiencing something that is, in some sense, absent. And this experience is not a lack, a non-experience, or a negation. Instead, it is an actual, full experience: a presence of that which is absent. You are thus experiencing the journal as a whole object right now. You can see the current page as present, but you are simultaneously experiencing all of the rest of the journal as presently-absent, as there-too, as apperceived rather than directly perceived. The back cover is being experienced right now—it is immediately taken as that which could be fully present if you just turned the journal over and took a look. And it is thus that presence and absence are always at work in consciousness.

It is a small step to say that the dead are thus still present for us. This is meant to be taken in a literal way, though not in the sense that there are literal ghosts. It is true that Derrida’s notion of “the spectre” and “the trace” are coming out of this phenomenological tradition. The claim that there is no such thing as a complete erasure, that there are always traces in a text both of what has been negated and what is necessarily working to undermine the text as it

simultaneously allows the text to come to meaning—these are claims that are indebted to Husserlian phenomenology and the realization that we truly do experience things that are absent. But with our dead loved-ones, the point is literal in a different way.

If we undertake a phenomenology of death, we discover that it is never the case that when someone we know and love dies, we then cease to experience that person. The death of the Other is, for us, not an erasure, a lack of experience, a non-experience. How easy mourning would be if this were not the case. How easy it would be if one simply had less experience of the Other after the Other's death. But instead, she continues to be present in our life, but present as missing, here and not-here, present as lost. Just as we can actively experience the absence of the back of the journal when we look at the journal from the front, just as our tongue searches out the missing tooth once it is pulled as if it were still there because it feels as if it still sits in the gum, just as the phantom limb can ache and itch and drive us mad with its present absence, so we directly experience the dead Other—the Other in the mode of being absent in our life. Every dead Other is thus necessarily an apparition of what was. We are, all of us, touched by the death of Others, by the present-absence of those we love. It is the mortal human condition to lose those we love, to be forced into mourning. To be alive is to experience such loss, and thus to be alive is to be haunted.

This could thus very easily become a phenomenology of ghosts, and though there are some good ghost movies, and possibly even some good ghosts out there, our topic is slightly different. The ghost in Western culture is indicative of our realization that something is gone when we lose our loved ones, and something that is completely different and alien is now with us in their place. But zombies suggest that there is something that is *not* gone—there is a presence that is still with us that is not so different from what used to be with us, something, however, that in its presence is horrifying simply because the realization is horrifying. And since that presence is of a consciousness that is always incarnate—as all consciousness always is—when we imagine ourselves stalked by zombies in the movies and in other forms of art, we are trying to deal with the reality of mourning.

Freud's admonition not to love the dead is thus not so easily heeded because the dead are not completely gone when they die. Our libido is not so easily unattached and reeled in so that we can freely invest it elsewhere. There, as an object of consciousness, remains the person we loved, seemingly ready to act as a repository of our libido. But the dead, of course, cannot love us back. And thus we are met with horror. This is why we have some ghost stories with friendly and happy ghosts, but zombies are never friendly or happy. Zombies are a more authentic way of thinking through our relationship with the dead. They are still here, but they can never return our love. As such, can we truly ever really love *them*? The zombie embodies the terror of unrequited love and the realization that all love is headed this way eventually.

In many zombie films we thus encounter a moment at which someone comes across a loved one who is now a zombie. In George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)—the movie that started it all—Harry and Helen's daughter, Karen, eventually becomes a zombie, eats her father's flesh, and kills the mother who is unwilling to kill her zombified daughter because she still loves the dead. And in the first episode of the AMC television series *The Walking Dead*, sheriff's deputy Rick Grimes encounters a father and son who have survived the zombie apocalypse but are now faced with watching the woman who was once wife and mother to them walk the streets as a zombie. Toward the end of the episode, Morgan tells his son to stay downstairs while he takes to the second floor of the home to shoot zombies from a window. He kills two zombies with a sense of seriousness but no remorse. When he next has his wife in the sights of his rifle, he cannot bring himself to pull the trigger, setting the gun down, crying uncontrollably.<sup>3</sup>

The Freudian warning is, however, put most succinctly in the sequel to *Night of the Living Dead*. Here, in *Dawn of the Dead*, a scientist explains to a television audience:

We must not be lulled by the concept that they are our family members or our friends. They are not. They will not respond to such emotion. They must be destroyed on sight!<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the dead are still with us, but we must not continue to treat them in the same way. We must, though they are still a part of lives, move on to placing our libido—our love—elsewhere. The thought of this is horrific. It feels like we are killing our loved ones by killing our love for them. It is like watching them die a second time. And so, the zombie is a literal recreation of this very philosophical point. The dead must die twice. All of this phenomenology is what makes zombification possible on film. But of course there are ways in which the structures and cultural manifestations of what it means to be a zombie play out in similar ways in real life as well.

From 1978 to 1991, famed serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer murdered seventeen boys and men, mostly in his Milwaukee apartment. "I carried it too far, that's for sure," Dahmer told police in explaining his frustrated search for a totally compliant, zombie-type sex-slave who would always be there for him.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, Dahmer said that he merely wanted to love his victims and to receive their love in return. By drilling holes in their heads in an attempt to turn them into zombies, he meant to "keep them from leaving," to keep them present and compliant with his will. It was, in every important way, a desire for the zombie that operates in the same manner as what we have been investigating on film.

If Freud was incorrect that the problem with loving the dead is that they are no longer present, we can at least admit that although the dead are still with us, they are not present in a way that allows any attached libido to manifest itself

in a manner that leads to its flourishing. That is, the pathology of loving the dead is not merely that the dead cannot accept true libidinal investment, but that when we attempt to maintain that relationship we always end up substituting an apparently more-present person to stand in for the Other—namely, ourselves. The dead loved one, unable to love back, is substituted by a puppet version of her past self. In our minds, the puppet accepts our love. But since the puppet's strings are pulled by us, the puppet is truly but a reflection of our own will. To love the zombie puppet is to love one's self, and in this way there is always the risk of narcissism at work in our encounters with the dead.

C. S. Lewis, in the book he wrote under a pseudonym about an experience of a crisis of faith he had while mourning his wife, struggles with this exact worry. Lewis writes:

Already, less than a month after her death, I can feel the slow, insidious beginning of a process that will make the H. I think of into a more and more imaginary woman...The reality is no longer there to check me, to pull me up short, as the real H. so often did, so unexpectedly, by being so thoroughly herself and not me...The image has the...disadvantage that it will do whatever you want...It is a puppet of which you hold the strings...[T]he fatal obedience of the image, its insipid dependence on me, is bound to increase...As if I wanted to [be] in love with my memory of her...It would be a sort of incest...I want H., not something that is like her.<sup>6</sup>

This was, in many respects, Dahmer's transgression as well. Dahmer loved the zombie puppet more than the person precisely because the zombie is controllable, precisely because it was a form of self-love. Perhaps "evil" is an empty concept, but if there are actions that are evil, narcissism—and the selfishness that goes along with it—are most likely at their roots.

In the Voodoo religion of Haiti, zombies are said to be walking dead corpses who are typically controlled by an evil sorcerer, the strings once again pulled by someone with a living desire to control the dead. In the 1930s, Harlem Renaissance anthropologist and novelist Cora Neale Hurston documented a case of a woman in Haiti who had died in 1907 and, three decades later (according to family members and neighbors), returned to life. This work became the inspiration for Wade Davis' research as an ethnobotanist in the 1980s. Davis went to Haiti to search for a pharmacological explanation as to why people would seem to be dead and then return to life to do the bidding of others. And his work was the source for the 1988 Wes Craven movie, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. In Haiti, the west-African religion of Vodun came to mix with Catholicism, eventually resulting in the amalgam that is Voodoo—a religion practiced today by more than half of the 9 million residents of Haiti. In Vodun, a "zombi astral" is said to be the part of the soul of a human being that is captured

and controlled by a *bokor*, a wizard or sorcerer. The human, without a soul, is dead. And the *bokor*, having control over the soul of the deceased, thus becomes the ultimate puppet master, able to send the zombie body out to do his bidding.

We risk a subtle form of racism and exoticism by summarizing and portraying a religion so strange to mainstream American experience thus. But to be sure, one needn't look beyond the Christian religion, in fact, for traces of belief in reanimation and resurrection. By definition, one could argue that Jesus became a zombie on the third day after His crucifixion. To those who believe that such a statement borders on the sacrilegious, this is, in fact, one of the risks of Christianity—and precisely one of the risks against which Christians are specifically warned. That is, one of the lessons of liberation theology and the post-theism movement of the 1960s and '70s was that the theistic notion of God had become an idol in Christianity. Christians were treating the metaphysical, supernatural, and paranormal conception of God as a thing to be worshipped when this completely misses the point of Jesus' teachings. Christianity is a social-political-ethical system more than a metaphysics or a cosmology; and Jesus, at every opportunity, lectures on how we should pursue justice in the world, not wait for a reward in Heaven and not wait for Him magically to create justice for us. When Jesus feeds the masses with a single loaf of bread, we miss the point of the story if we think "Wow! Jesus had awesome magical baking powers!" Instead, the point is that we must feed those who are hungry around us even if it seems we don't have enough for ourselves—even if it seems impossible. When Jesus tells us to prepare for Heaven, we miss the point if we think we must place all of our hope in some supernatural afterlife in which we will float up into the clouds and live forever in a perfect Disneyland.<sup>7</sup> Instead, He tells us "The Kingdom of Heaven is spread upon the Earth though men do not see it." In other words, this world and this life are already our Heaven if we only start acting in such a way as to make it a Heaven. And when Jesus dies and is resurrected, we miss the point of the story if we begin worshipping zombie-Jesus (which, to be frank, is what the majority of Christians do today: there is a reason Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* plays like a horror movie). Instead, the lesson is that, as the Greek tells us, Jesus can still *appear* to people even after He is, physically, gone. Thus we get words such as "emphanerosen"—meaning "manifested"—to describe the coming to faith experience that people have before and after Jesus' resurrection. When Peter, for instance, has the realization that Jesus' teachings are good and true, we are given the words "Jesus manifested to Peter." This is the same language we get when, after death, Jesus manifested himself to the five hundred, to Thomas, to his disciples, etc. That is to say, "manifestation" and "appearance" are indicating the strength of the message and not a physical sight. To think otherwise is to run the risk of focusing merely on the fact that Jesus died and came back—on the metaphysics and the magic—rather than on what it all means.

We have gone on this extended detour into Christian Scripture because it is making the same point we have been investigating concerning zombies. The

presence of our lost loved ones, the present absence of the Other, is real. Zombies are a way of working this out in popular culture. And if we try to love that Other in the mode of presently-absent, we risk loving an image rather than a person. We risk horror. Similarly, for Christians there is a real presence of the divine—an actual presence that must be taken seriously. But if we worship the resurrected flesh and the sketchy metaphysics that supports it, we commit idolatry. Jesus warns us against this, but many Christians fail to listen. In zombie terms, if we take the zombie to be our loved-one, we are soon going to face horror and die ourselves. That zombie that is walking around is not what our loved one was really fully about. And in Christian terms, if we take the resurrected Jesus to be Christ, if we think that this is what Christianity is fully all about, we miss the point, we wallow in the depths of the sacrilegious, and we will face horror and die ourselves.

Of course, there are zombie moments in culture that are somewhere between Jeffrey Dahmer and Jesus Christ. If the threat of the zombie is the threat of idolatry and narcissism, then we must *always* be worried about how we treat our dead. Vladimir Lenin demanded that his body be destroyed after his death precisely so that it could never be kept as an idol, as a false object of love, thus replacing the living revolution that demanded the Russian people's full libidinal attention. But we are a species of zombie-lovers, never wanting to take the harder path. Consequently, early in the 1920s influential members of the Russian Cosmism movement argued the need to have cryogenic equipment on hand at all times in case of Lenin's death. Their plan was to preserve the leader and his brain for a full-body resurrection at some unknown future date. Though Lenin gave clear orders that nothing of the sort was to be done—because to have the body still there after death would truly jeopardize the Soviet state—doctors were secretly told instead to prepare to mummify Lenin's body should the leader pass. And it was thus that in January 1924, just three days after his death (the same amount of time it took Jesus), Lenin returned to greet the people of Moscow in his vacuum-sealed glass crypt.

The "real" zombie is thus related to the cult of personality. The real zombie is there to stand in for those we have lost, beckoning us to commit those sins of ego, those sins of idolatry, that doom us. No wonder most zombies in the movies move so slowly. They don't need to chase us down. We are drawn to them. And worse yet, we know that each of us will someday become one of them. Whether we are bitten and infected now or simply die from natural causes later, if the dead walk the Earth, this is our shared fate. Every single person will someday become a zombie—each of us haunting the world with the echo of our selfhood, driving those who loved us and whom we have left behind to the horror of that very same realization.

Over the last ten years, "zombie walks" have been growing in popularity. In large cities, college towns, and all over really, people dress up as zombies, meet at a mall or on some street, and then proceed to walk, stalk, and moan their way around. They wear the clothes of everyday people—the sorts of

clothing that people would wear in different walks of life while they are engaged in different sorts of human activities—and they paint their faces like zombies and smear themselves with blood.

The point is that this is less an act of fantasy than it is everyone acting out his or her necessary and ultimate fate. And it is interesting to think about this phenomenon not as an alternative Halloween, but as an inverse Halloween. That is, zombie walks don't always occur in October. They take place all throughout the year. But more than this, if we think of Halloween as a time to put on a costume and become something radically other, then the zombie walk is quite the opposite. One of the reasons that zombies are frightening in the movies is precisely because they do not wear scary costumes. They have on the clothing of everyday people because they *are* everyday people. They are plumbers and businessmen and professors and dancers and shoppers and cab drivers and theoretical physicists and all the rest. Of course, when we realize this—when we see that the zombie walk is something that we can both dress up for and not dress up for at the same time—we also realize that our everyday clothes are already costumes. When we go throughout our day in our so-called *real lives*, we are playing parts and adopting roles. This is what it means to be a person: we are constantly performing our identity. And clothing is one way of costuming for that performance. When I teach classes at my university, for instance, I wear a jacket and tie. It means something to my students to see me in a jacket and tie. It provides context to the words that I speak and helps establish such moments in my fractured identity: I am an academic. It would be strange, for instance, if each evening after teaching, I were to take a shower and prepare to get ready for sleep, putting on a suit and tie again before crawling into bed. One of the things we realize about ourselves from the inverse-Halloween presentation of the zombie is that it is possible to inhabit our clothes—and by extension, our roles—in a zombified manner. There is very little that separates us from the zombie. To become this monster we needn't grow hair everywhere like a werewolf; we needn't sprout fangs and do the other magical things that a vampire does; we don't grow or shrink or change species or mutate as some monsters do. Zombies are special because to become one all we have to do is die (which we will do someday) and then stay around (which we will do someday for those who love us). Or be dead in some way already (a state with which we are, all no doubt, familiar).

When we take images from popular culture and turn them into zombie versions of the same, we thus expose something about the culture that was dead—and frightening—to begin with. There are, thus, zombie Barbies, zombie Hello Kitty, and even images of a zombie Mona Lisa. And during zombie walks, participants sometimes choose to dress up first as a character from popular culture and then turn that character into a zombie. *Star Wars* characters are quite popular (with zombie Stormtroopers and Ewoks being the costumes of choice), as well as zombified corporate mascots (one hasn't really lived—or died—until one has been terrified by a zombie Ronald McDonald stalking the streets).

The point, of course, is that as cultural commodities, these icons are also always already pointing toward horror. This is one of the reasons that George Romero's zombie movies are so fascinating. Ever few years, Romero comes out with another zombie movie that tackles the state of Western culture, drawing attention to the way in which the line between humans and zombies in the film—and in reality—is a fine one. This is, arguably, most successfully accomplished in Romero's 1978 *Dawn of the Dead* in which the four main characters of the film hole up in a shopping mall after the zombie apocalypse.<sup>8</sup>

In *Dawn of the Dead* it is difficult to tell the difference between the zombies walking the mall and the regular shoppers. Both move with a dull and steady determination. Both seem directed toward a goal of consumption that seems grotesque yet they cannot control it and cannot see how grotesque it obviously is. The mall thus becomes the equivalent of a cemetery for the living, a place where dead capital goes to keep mall-walking. As Stephen, one of the main characters of the movie, puts it (after coming back from a post-zombie apocalypse exuberant shopping trip, seemingly happy that this has all happened because they now have the mall to themselves): "You should see all the great stuff we got, Franny. All kinds of stuff. This place is terrific. It really is. It's perfect. All kinds of things. We've really got it made here, Franny."

Later, discussing why so many zombies would turn up at the mall and try, day after day, to break in, three of the main characters in the film listen to the zombies pounding on the shopping mall's glass doors:

Francine: They're still here.

Stephen: They're after us. They know we're still in here.

Peter: They're after the *place*. They don't know why, they just remember. Remember that they want to be in here.

Francine: What the hell are they?

Peter: They're us; that's all.

The film *Sean of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, dir., 2004) is a funny movie, but in some ways it is also a disappointment in that its main point is merely that it is difficult to tell the zombies from the regular humans because all of the people in Sean's town are already zombified by modern life.<sup>9</sup> The problem here is that this has always been one of the main messages in the Romero films.<sup>10</sup> One cannot satirize what is already satire in this manner. It is akin to trying to do a satire of *The Jersey Shore* or *The Jerry Springer Show*. These things are already satires—and as they continue on in our culture, they become satires of themselves, even, to a certain extent. Postmodernity's challenge lies, in part, in finding a way to engage in post-irony.

Let us say, then, that part of the evil of the zombie is what they—and by proxy, we—wish to consume. Before we get to the question of consuming

brains, it makes sense to see this critique of capitalism play itself out in one other manner as well.

In the fourth—and most ethically and politically complex—of Romero's six zombie movies, *Land of the Dead* (2005), the tables have been turned completely and, morally speaking, we end up on the side of the zombies. Like with all good zombies, the movement is slow. At first, when the film begins, we are ready to fear the zombies and take joy in their being killed in new and creative ways—the hallmark of any good zombie movie. But little by little, it becomes clear in *Land of the Dead* that the humans are the evil creatures. Slowly, we come to identify with the zombies and are forced to confront the question of who deserves to continue existing in the end.

The movie starts out with a scene that slyly sets up the twist to come. Some humans have gone out to the zombie-infested suburbs. They crouch in the foliage near a gas station, spying on the zombies with binoculars. When two zombies accidentally step on the air hose causing a bell to ring in the gas station, a zombie attendant comes out as if to provide service to a car. The humans remark:

First Speaker: They're trying to be us.

Second Speaker: No. They used to be us. They're learning how to be us again.

First: No way....There's a big difference between us and them. They're dead. It's like they're pretending to be alive.

Second: Isn't that what we're doing? Pretending to be alive?

We, too, are just going through the motions, to be sure. But to admit this is not fundamentally different than our realization that we are the mall-walkers in the earlier film. What makes *Land of the Dead* stand out is that the particular motions through which we are going are so debased and so lacking of any moral foundation, it becomes increasingly difficult to root for the human survivors.

The humans we see watching the zombies through binoculars at the gas station are not afraid of these zombies. They are not even really hiding from them. Instead, the humans have purposefully come to where the zombies are in order to kill them, raid the local stores for food and supplies, and take the spoils back to a walled-in city inside a protective zone that is zombie-free. *Land of the Dead* thus works on the level of a sort of allegory for empire and colonialism. The heroes leave their home, pillage the natural resources of the foreign land, kill the locals (whom they deem sub-human), and return once again with the booty. Like all colonial rulers, those with the power far away are actually dependent on maintaining the oppression of their subjects, and this necessarily involves dehumanizing them. Back in the human city, we thus are not surprised to find zombies chained up so that humans can pay to have their picture taken

with them, and zombies kept in fighting arenas in order to have sporting spectacles on which the humans can place bets.

Meanwhile, each time the humans go out to steal the resources of the zombies, they always go at night so that they can shoot fireworks in the sky in order to distract the zombies (who always look up in shock and awe) thus making them easier to kill. All of this seems to be working well until one of the zombies starts to become aware of what is going on. This is the African American gas station attendant who is unnamed in the film but referred to as "Big Daddy" in print because this is what the name-patch sewn on his uniform says. He is defined, that is, by the job he had serving others. But still, the revolution begins. And it begins with a visceral reaction to the violence that always accompanies the human raids, especially as that violence leads to the dismembering and beheading of zombies.

Big Daddy sees a fellow zombie lose a head, and, without even understanding why, he starts to mourn. This is the beginning of the raising of his consciousness. After he learns to mourn and see death for what it is, he starts using tools, starts developing language, and starts organizing the other zombies in something resembling an uprising as they march across the river bed and lay siege to the walled-in city. It is as if what it means to possess *logos* is to have the ability to mourn, and Big Daddy is on the way to a revolutionary *logos*. When the zombies arrive, the viewer who has been paying attention is glad they are there, rooting for them to take down their oppressors.

Here, the movie ends with a reference to how it began. Riley, one of the humans who was a raider we met in the first scene but is now turned rebel, speeds away from the city and stops to look at Big Daddy through his binoculars. Their eyes meet once again across the distance. And this time, Riley orders his second-in-command not to fire. "All they want is somewhere to go," he says. "Same as us." It is a postcolonial zombie apocalypse that looks more like a beginning than an end. It looks strangely like a chance for hope.

There remain two foundational questions we must consider in our investigation of the nature of zombies, two philosophical questions of the mouth: the question of cannibalism and the question of language. Why do the zombies wish to eat humans, and why can they only moan and mutter as they stumble along? These final inquiries are related, and they provide key pieces of the puzzle if we are to understand fully what the zombie phenomenon is all about.

Part of the horror of the zombie is that he or she might hunt and eat you. And this is a true threat: to be consumed by our love of the Other. Within the various fictional and artistic worlds inhabited by zombies, there is little agreement as to *why* zombies crave human flesh. It is nearly part of the definition of "zombie," however, that they are constantly hungry and have a craving for only one food-type.

In some sense, zombies are *merely* ravenous. The only real personality trait all zombies have is that they are always hungry and always desiring human

flesh. Nothing else will satiate them—and, indeed, not even human flesh will really satiate them, because they act as though no matter how much flesh they are able to eat, they are always starving. We can read this in two ways. We might simply think of this as yet another instance of zombies being an incarnation of our own mad desire for consumption. Like the zombies mindlessly shopping in the mall—mindlessly *consuming*—perhaps this hunger is another cultural marker for our own excesses, our own desires to go on consuming and consuming with no end in sight. Yet we can also see something tragic in this compulsion. The zombies do not seem to have a choice about their desire to eat humans. And actually eating humans doesn't stop the desire. Like the gluttons in the third circle of Dante's version of hell, those who are punished are unaware of each other's presence, forced to live in a mass of flesh that is lubricated with mud caused from the continual rain that falls. The life of sensual pleasure and appetite has reduced the sinners to a world in which they cannot recognize anything other than their own desires. Narcissism and gluttony are thus related. And in this way there is a tragedy at work in such insatiable desire both in Hell and in a Hell-on-Earth. Dante also tells us that Cerberus, the three-headed dog, is the guard of the third circle of hell, and in a nod to this, the *Resident Evil* films and videogames always include zombie dogs, also named Cerberus. In the 2010 film in this series, in fact, one of the zombie dogs opens his mouth and it expands into multiple mouths with multiple rows of teeth.<sup>11</sup> All the better to eat and keep eating.

Given the relationship between zombies and gluttony, it is thus not surprising to see zombies' unending appetite as a theme that occurs repeatedly in zombie films. In the French zombie film, *The Horde*, the relationship between tragedy and desire is spoken out loud. As zombies press against the glass doors of an apartment complex, moaning and wailing to get in (in an apparent homage to Romero's mall-based *Dawn of the Dead*), one character watches and listens to the moans, remarking: "It's like some sort of cry for help." "No," another character argues. "They're starving to death."<sup>12</sup> Of course, like all zombies, they are already dead. So the starvation at work is one that is not really related to survival in any way. As is the case with the living, desire is thus always pointing at something other than its own satiation. Desire is its own end.

Zombies, even when they are cut in half and have no stomach, want to eat. This is, in fact, a major point of Romero's third zombie movie, *Day of the Dead* (1985). Here, most of the film takes place underground in a secret Army facility where a small group of soldiers and scientists live. The soldiers round up zombies and keep them in a pen, turning them over when requested, to the team of scientists who are studying them. The scientists are divided, however, as to whether or not they should be concentrating on curing the zombie virus or simply finding a way of domesticating the zombies and learning to live with them. Dr. Logan, who argues for domestication, treats the zombies as animals, vivisectioning them in his lab. "See, it wants me," explains the doctor. "It wants

food. But it has no stomach. It can take no nourishment from what it ingests. It's working on instinct, a deep, dark, primordial instinct."<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, the notion of *instinct* plays a central role here. Experimenting on a different patient, Dr. Logan cuts the zombie's brain away, layer by layer. Left with only the brain stem and the bits of tissue typically associated with the reptilian brain, the zombie still moves and reaches out and tries to eat. The implication is that the zombie has been turned into an animal—something like a crocodile, in fact, that works on instinct to hunt fresh meat.

But why do zombies crave *human* flesh? In a seventh-season episode of "The X-Files" written and directed by David Duchovny, Duchovny's character, Fox Mulder, argues that zombies have a hunger for human flesh because they are acting out all of the desires that were impossible while they were alive.<sup>14</sup> The forbidden is fair game only after death, and so zombies enact the greatest of taboos. The desire points at nothing greater than its own enactment.

It seems unquestionable that cannibalism is a marker for the complete breakdown of society, but as always, the real question is how we define our terms in order to live with ourselves. The Last Supper is not taken to be a zombie banquet, and Christian transubstantiation is not taken to be an act of cannibalism but rather an act of communion. Similarly, when a newborn baby drinks his mother's milk, literally eats a part of his mother's body, this, too, is not defined as cannibalism. And when humans who are not vegetarians eat pork and beef and chicken and the like, they do not think of themselves as cannibals because such creatures are not us: *we* are thought not to be animal.

To return to *Dawn of the Dead*, as Dr. Rausch puts it:

Normally, the first question is, "Are these cannibals?" No, they are not. Cannibalism in the truest sense of the word implies an interspecies [sic] activity. These creatures prey on humans. They do not prey on each other, that's the difference. They attack and they feed only on warm flesh . . . These creatures are nothing but pure, motorized instinct.<sup>15</sup>

One of the things to which this points is, of course, how we humans are basically just sacks of meat. And it is interesting to note the extensive implications of this sort of realization. In *The Walking Dead* television series, for instance, the human survivors include a white, Southern, racist and an African American man. When the two begin fighting, Deputy Grimes steps in and announces: "Things are different now. There is no black or white. Only white meat and dark meat. Us and them."<sup>16</sup> The assumption is that race goes away after the zombies start chasing us. Race is seen as a quality of flesh that is unimportant to anyone other than humans, and we are thus being chastised for caring so much about something so invisible to other creatures. We humans are caught up on race, that is, because we do not see the body for what it truly is:

merely a lump of meat. Of course, race is still functioning in this discourse because race is always more than skin color. In the distinction between white meat and dark meat, there is still division. But what Grimes seems to be getting at is that even if there are physical differences—even if the category of race initially is founded on some empirical quality—we must abandon the political category of “race” in a post-apocalyptic world, realizing that there are always differences among us. The differences on which we choose to focus and reify into something of import become relative. The categories of “black” and “white” have no basis in nature, but rather serve a political and ethical function.

The same, though, can be said of species. To separate a pig from a human is possible because there are differences. But difference is everywhere. It’s all a question of what one wishes to do with some difference once it is noted. Having the category distinction between black and white makes it possible to own slaves. Having the category distinction between human and pig keeps eating pork from being an act of cannibalism. The moral question thus does not begin with the question of how to act, but rather how to think, conceptualize, and perceive the world before actions even become possible. If the assumed evil of zombies is partly found in the object of their hunger, then isn’t this our secret evil as well? We crave flesh—perhaps not our own species’ (as fictional as that category might be), but we do, indeed, want to eat the living. And in this way, the zombie’s desire for human flesh is an ethical marker for our own failing, for our own desire to eat meat.

Once again, we are working out our fears and our guilt by means of the zombie. We humans are creatures capable of some degree of choice, capable of taking part in the shaping of our worldview and thus what appears to us as good and right. That so many of us continue to torture animals and eat their flesh is a not-so-secret horror that haunts us as a culture.

Let us make no mistake: this is all about the flesh. It is always about the flesh with zombies and with humans. What it means to say that a zombie is dead is, itself, an interesting philosophical question. If one is animate, responding to external stimuli, and capable of behavior, what more could we want to qualify as a living thing? It seems that zombies are considered dead only because they were once alive and stopped being alive for a time—and, perhaps, that they do not metabolize. Something has reanimated their flesh. They are brainless, and this indicates for most that they are consciousness-less as well.

This would certainly be the position of seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes—a man, I must say, who has always given me the creeps. Without a mind, Descartes claimed that a being was a mere machine. For much of his life, Descartes searched for where the mind might reside inside the human body. He claimed that the mind, that thing that truly is the Self, is “lodged in the body as a pilot in a vessel,”<sup>17</sup> but he could never quite figure out how the two things fused so that the one could control the other. For a time, he considered the possibility that the mind lives inside the pineal gland, but this is a rather dark moment in the history of philosophy given that such a claim is, to put it lightly,

incredibly stupid. Perhaps the only good thing that ever came out of Descartes' delusion was the 1959 movie by Ed Wood entitled *Plan 9 From Outer Space*—and the word “good” here is being used rather loosely—in which Cartesian aliens reanimate human corpses and turn them into zombies by stimulating their pineal glands.

Descartes was concerned that it was impossible to experience the consciousness of another person and thus there was no guarantee that there really were other sites of consciousness beyond his own. Historically, philosophers call this “the problem of other minds.” More recently, the problem has been restated and renamed “the philosophical zombie problem” such that one worries about creatures that could exist who would act like human beings in every way but would not have the internal conscious life of a human—they would, for instance, do something or experience something but not be conscious that they are doing or experiencing that thing.

All of this is only a worry, however, if one takes the mind to be something separate from the body. And one of the lessons of zombies is that this simply is not the case. Zombies are more in line with French philosophy that came three centuries after Descartes. Consciousness, argues Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is in the flesh, it is of the body: to be incarnate is to be conscious.<sup>18</sup> As phenomenology teaches us, there can be no Other, no possibility of other consciousness, without flesh. The body of the Other is the site of consciousness; the mind lives in the flesh. Far from being a question of brain-waves, consciousness is always spread throughout the body and thus without the body there can be no possibility of mind—no possibility, that is, of the true presence of the Self or the Other.<sup>19</sup> Think of the way in which it is your *body* that knows how to ride a bicycle. Think of the pianist's or the guitarist's *hands* that know where to move across the piano and the guitar. Think of the manner in which you inhabit space and your self has left, of the way in which you constitute yourself as immediately in the world and not really as “looking out at it from inside”—as if the body is merely a vessel, a prison, and not the site of consciousness itself.<sup>20</sup>

Zombies, as consciousness incarnate, thus represent another important realization for humans: though our culture is fully Cartesian and embraces the notion of the body as mere object (forcing us to disembodify ourselves and think of our own consciousness as something that is apart from the flesh), the truth is that what it means to be minded is to be en fleshed.<sup>21</sup>

If, then, zombies are conscious in a fundamental way, why is it that they lack the ability to communicate? Why do they moan and groan, at best asking only for brains, and, more typically, saying nothing at all?

If we recall the reporter at the Grammys we note that the horror was in thinking that something bad had happened to this woman—something bad had happened to her brain—but we also note that what is truly frightening about the incident is the way in which she continued to talk to us as if she were still communicating, as if she were still saying something. Part of the horror is, in

fact, that something has happened to *us*. Perhaps *we* no longer understand. Perhaps *we* are unable to communicate. Beings with whom we are unable to communicate will always be a source of anxiety, regardless of where we place the blame. This is because language is a way of making things present in their absence. It is, as well, to call a world into being. Together, we share the language and we share the world. When the first part of this breaks down, so goes the latter.

What is holding zombies back from communicating with us? They have ears that can hear, and they have tongues that can articulate—or at least some of them still have attached ears and tongues. If they are not talking to us, is it because they are unable to do so, or is it, even more frighteningly, because they choose not to? If a zombie spoke, would we be able to understand him? Would we share a world? Have we really even tried to talk to the zombie—talked in such a way that our talking is not an inquisition, but rather the start of a real conversation; talked in such a way that we are poised to hear a response rather than mere sound?

When the reporter lost control of her words, there are those who feared that the only explanation was that zombiehood had set in. There is precedent for this in the culture. When the mouth no longer communicates, we struggle to put it to use—we struggle to understand how we can still be human. And there is no finer artistic investigation of this fear than the Canadian independent film *Pontypool* (Bruce McDonald, dir., 2009).

*Pontypool* is the most cerebral zombie movie one might imagine. Some refer to it as a zombie movie without zombies, or the zombie movie that Noam Chomsky could have written. It is all this, but it is much more. The film is based on Anthony Burgess' book, *Pontypool Changes Everything*, and the action takes place almost entirely inside a radio station located in the basement of a church in the small town of Pontypool, Ontario. Filmed on location, the movie came to be after Burgess adapted his book to create a screenplay that unfolded in the style of Orsen Welles' *War of the Worlds*. And the movie is, in many ways, a radio-play—fittingly more about words than about visuals.

At the start of the film, controversial shock-jock disc jockey Grant Mazzy has emerged from a scandal and has relocated from the big city to Pontypool's small-town and small-market radio station. He is reduced to reading information about lost pets and setting up segments from field reporter Ken Loney (who pretends to be giving his traffic reports from a helicopter when he is actually just driving around town in his Dodge Dart). Grant has two female assistants, Sydney Briar (his producer) and Laurel-Ann Drummond (his technician). The radio broadcast day begins more or less like any other, but soon Ken is reporting that there are mobs of people gathering and rioting in the streets. They are repeating nonsense words and phrases, and no one is able to understand what is going on. Ken takes refuge in a nearby home and encounters a teenage boy who seems to be mimicking the sounds of his baby brother. Grant sends the report out live over the air, and the sound of the boy making repetitive

baby noises is chilling. Soon after, it seems that Ken himself is starting to experience a breakdown:

Grant: What's going on Ken?

Ken: This is going to sound weird. I can't stop thinking: do you have a sample?

Grant: I'm sorry. A sample? A sample of what?

Ken: Just simple. I think a simple kind of sample. Uh. Uh. This is what I was saying. I need to . . . I can't stop thinking. Sample. Some sample. Oh. Sample of, sample of what I'm trying to say. Do you, do you?

Grant: Just try to stay calm, Ken.

Ken: A sample of what I'm trying to say. Uh. Grant?

Grant: Ken? Ken?

Ken: I'm just going to try to to try to uh . . .

Grant: Can you think?

Ken: I can I can I can't . . .

Doctor (to Grant, in the studio): Stick to simple questions. Simple.

Ken: Simple questions. Simple. Sample. Simple.

Later, in the church basement, Laurel-Ann soon starts to show symptoms as well, repeating words and sliding into nonsense before eventually trying to attack her friends and eat them. Her talking sounds like language. It has the cadence of language. But it means nothing.

When Grant and Sydney are joined by a local doctor, he explains that the problem is a virus. But it is a virus that is being spread by language. Certain words in the English language have become "infected," and when they enter a person's consciousness, their meaning breaks down. The victim begins repeating the word in hopes of making it come to meaning once again. But soon, all language has lost its meaning. As the insanity sets in, it is marked by one simple desire: the desire to communicate. With this desire incapable of being fulfilled, the drive finds a new outlet, a new way to manifest itself. The victim searches out someone who is not infected and, unable to communicate and thus share a world, tries to consume the mouth and tongue of that person. Literally.

As the movie comes to a close, the radio station receives a message in French telling them to stop broadcasting and not to translate the message into English. French, it seems, is still a safe language. Unfortunately, Grant is doing a translation on air as he is receiving the message, and thus becomes even more culpable in the spread of the virus. Eventually, with the entire town pressing against the outside of the church and the military threatening to bomb all of Pontypool, Sydney becomes infected. Terms of endearment—words such as "honey" or "sweetheart"—have turned out to be the most dangerous, but Sydney has stumbled on the word "kill" and cannot stop herself from repeating it. Grant,

in a flash of brilliance, manages to cure Sydney by confusing her, telling her that “kiss” means “kill” and that other words do not refer to the things she had earlier believed. They try to broadcast this over the airwaves—“swimming is tomorrow, fidelity is monologue, ceiling is rhinoceros”—but a countdown begins outside the church (in French) and the movie ends when the military reaches zero, Grant and Sydney kiss, and, we presume, the bombs destroy everything.

One of the conceits of modernity was that language functioned through denotation. Words were thought to have meaning because they denote things in the world—reaching out and pointing at them, anchoring themselves like signs or labels. But postmodernity, with its critique of all meta-narrative and the naïve belief that texts have borders and the world is separate from our understanding of it—put an end to this. In Derridean terms, words refer, but they merely refer to each other. They hang above the world without ever reaching down to point, supported by faith and the force of our collective and mutual will. They carve out a world rather than describe one. In phenomenological terms, words do not point but are one way of making things present (though present in a very absent way). Communication thus becomes more of an ethical project than an ontological or metaphysical one. How we speak carries with it a responsibility for the Other. Even the word “response” and the word “ability” are hidden in “responsibility” (in much the same way that “typo” is hidden in the middle of “Pontypool”), for what it means to be responsible for someone is to have the ability to respond, and to do so with care. What is right or wrong can no longer be settled by an appeal to a correspondence theory of truth based on a belief about there being an objective world outside. And so, the weight of language is a heavy burden on our souls. The demands by which communication maintains community are great. And the zombie is the breakdown of all of this. They press against the outside of our most sacred institutions, and we have nothing left to say.

What it means for someone to be dead is never to be able to respond. The dead are, to be sure, still with us. But there will *never* be a response. We write to the dead, talk to them, cry out for them. And they do not answer back. This is Emmanuel Levinas’ definition of “death”: non-response; silence. And it is a definition that Derrida defended as well. The zombie is thus a marker both of our cultural fear about settling into the age of postmodernity bereft of the comforts of modernism, and the fear of silence, the fear of the death of the Other. If the zombie moans a bit it is not because he is struggling for language, not because he is some animal on the way toward language, but because he has passed it by—and in so doing, passed us by, passed along, passed away.

Our future lies in that direction. All around us are the markers of where we are heading. One might ask “How can someone speak and not know what they are saying?” But this is, perhaps, the rule and not the exception to most of our everyday speech. In concrete terms, one need only think of people who say the words “like” or “um” several times per sentence without any awareness that

this is what they are saying. Similar to the hand that plays the piano, it is the *tongue* that speaks the words. The illusion of the controllable self—the Cartesian mind—just be abandoned. And like the zombies of *Pontypool*, most of what we say is repetitive and all of what we say is mimicry. You say hello; I say hello. You say you love me; I say I love you, too. Language is the magician’s trick: he is able to pull a rabbit out of a hat only because he stuffed the rabbit in there in the first place before the trick ever started. And we respond to a question in a way that is recognizable and understandable because the possible responses to the question preexisted within that question before the conversation ever started. The zombie has merely accepted this and moved on.

Zombies, it might thus be argued, are animated and perhaps even conscious, but they do not seem self-aware. They do not seem aware of the fact that they are aware. They are not thinking in the same way that humans are. Perhaps. But I would, if pressed, even go so far as to champion zombie-like consciousness. Not merely a consciousness of the flesh, but a consciousness where it is the body that is consciously acting without the need for anything like second-order awareness.

I am well aware that I act like this on a regular basis. Frequently, for instance, I will be driving and come to realize that I have no memory of the last several minutes of steering the car. I obviously have kept the car centered, stopped at stop-lights, and attended to my surroundings and the laws that govern them, but I did not do so consciously. Usually this is when I am caught up in some deep thought about something that ultimately has me worried or sad. In the shower, I sometimes find myself ready to get out, reaching to turn off the water, and then pausing to ask myself if I washed my hair or even soaped up my body. I have no memory of having done any of it, but it is usually the case that the shampoo has been applied and rinsed, and the scrubbing clean has taken place, all without any conscious attention—again, all of this happening most often when I find myself preoccupied with something troubling. If you ask me, I think that I would sometimes gladly give up the worry and the sadness and all the rest, and happily just be a washing, driving, living zombie.

I don’t conclude this lightly. I am, for better or worse, an academic, someone who has to some degree or another decided to live a life of the mind. But when I stop to consider it seriously, I often think that self-reflexive consciousness is just the sort of quality that will end up killing off our species in the end—even if *species* is a specious concept.

Consider: natural selection chooses the qualities for any sort of organism that will allow that organism to survive. It must be noted, in fact, that natural selection does this “choosing” mindlessly, without a plan or a design, without any real “choice” in the usual sense of the word. It creates random mutations, stumbles around, and sees if the mutations create more viable beings. If the mutations allow the organism to survive, they are passed on. If the mutations harm survival, they begin to disappear from the population. A short period ago—something on the order of 8 million years—natural selection

stumbled on “self-reflexive consciousness” and gave it a try with humans. But it turns out that creatures with this quality come to think of themselves as selves—as monadic, solipsistic, selfish beings that are above all other creatures. Slowly, and now more rapidly, they begin to destroy the very preconditions of their own existence. They wipe out the ecosystem, kill off the environment, and hurry toward their destruction. It will not be long, I think, until nature allows this to take place.

But this will not be the end of life on Earth. Other wonderful and wonderfully non-self-conscious life will flourish and go on about its business. We have another six billion years or so until the sun turns into a Red Giant and engulfs the Earth, eventually turning into a zombie version of its once-brilliant and blinding yellow self. During that interim time, there will be plenty of new life that will find its way. Perhaps something very much like zombies will, indeed, replace us. Because the experiment of our type of consciousness will have run its course and proven not to be conducive of survival. Natural selection will select us out. And out of the ashes of our corpses, out of the failed experiment of our rotting organic matter, new beings will arise the natures of which we cannot even imagine.

All of the world is a graveyard. The living soil is itself flesh: dead and reborn, dead and reborn. Look around you even now—the future is wholly already here. The future echoes of those who will take our place are with us, calling without language to us, hungry and impatient to wait for us to turn into their food, into their bodies. They are the zombies-to-come, the promise and the horror of what we are on-the-way toward. They tempt you to love them. They disarm you with their familiarity. They are hunting you. They hold us accountable for each act of narcissism, for each immoral meal of flesh we have enjoyed, for each failure to communicate with those who need us, for each act of loving the dead, each failure to realize that we are loving only ourselves. Left on their own, they turn you into what they already are, replicating themselves.

And here, now, you and I are already one of them.

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H. Peter Steeves

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Youtube.

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., “TV reporter speaks about speech problem at Grammys,” Shreveport Times (18 February 2011).

<sup>3</sup>*The Walking Dead*, “Days Gone Bye” (Frank Darabont, dir., 31 October 2010).

<sup>4</sup>*Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, dir., 1978).

<sup>5</sup>Joan Ullman, “I Carried It Too Far, That’s for Sure,” *Psychology Today* (May 1, 1992).

<sup>6</sup>C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1961): 18, 20-22, 65.

<sup>7</sup>Or a perfect Las Vegas, if that’s more your style.

<sup>8</sup>*Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, dir., 1978).

<sup>9</sup>The point is made in a much more subtle and successful way by *The Walking Dead*. In the second episode of the television series, "Guts," Glen and Rick decide to attempt to walk to freedom through the zombie hoard by becoming one of them. To accomplish this, they systematically take apart a zombie they have killed and begin using its body. They smear the entrails on their own clothes. They chop pieces of the zombie's flesh and attach those pieces to their own bodies. Covered in the smell of rotting zombie bodies, they thus hope to pass as zombies (a plan that works well until it begins to rain and the blood and gore are washed away). Before they chop up the zombie, they hesitate, unsure as to whether or not it is ethical. Rick takes out the zombie's wallet to announce the name of the man he used to be and pay him respect. Glen, looking at the wallet, announces: "He was an organ donor." (*The Walking Dead*, Ep. 2 "Guts," written by Frank Darabon; directed by Michelle MacLaren; Original Airdate: 7 November 2010).

<sup>10</sup>"They are us. They are the extension of us. They are the same animal, simply functioning less perfectly." *Day of the Dead* (George A. Romero, dir., 1985).

<sup>11</sup>*Resident Evil: Afterlife* (Paul W. S. Anderson, dir., 2010).

<sup>12</sup>*The Horde* (Yannick Dahan and Benjamin Rocher, dir., 2010).

<sup>13</sup>Dr. Logan, *Day of the Dead* (George A. Romero, dir., 1985).

<sup>14</sup>"Hollywood A.D.," *The X-Files*, Original Airdate: 4-30-2000, Written and Directed by David Duchovny.

<sup>15</sup>Dr. Millard Rausch, *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, dir., 1978).

<sup>16</sup>Rick Grimes, in regards to the racial strife between Dixon and T-Dog; "Guts," *The Walking Dead* (Michelle MacLaren, dir., 7 November 2010).

<sup>17</sup>René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, tran. John Veitch (NY: Cosimo Classics, 2008/1637): 117.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962).

<sup>19</sup>Cf., e.g., my "Ichabodies, or The Tail of the Headless Clones," *Conscious Choice* (v. 13, n. 10) October 2000: 32.

<sup>20</sup>This is a point to which science is slowly drawing us as well. As Dick Teresi reports in "The Evolution of Death," (Salon.com, March 18, 2012): Candace Pert, the discoverer of the opiate receptor in the brain, says that there has been a new paradigm in neuroscience since about 1995. More than three hundred common molecules, chemicals, are found in the brain, the immune system, and bone marrow. In other words, brain chemicals partly responsible for consciousness are being found all over the body. When Pert says, "The body-mind is one," she's speaking not as a Buddhist but as a biochemist, though Buddhism, she says, may have anticipated this discovery. "Consciousness," she adds, "is a property of the entire body."

<sup>21</sup>This is something that *Pinocchio* (Norman Ferguson et al. dir., 1940) and the mummy films starring Brendan Fraser (*The Mummy* [Stephen Sommers, dir., 1999], *The Mummy Returns* [Stephen Sommers, dir. 2001], *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* [Rob Cohen, dir., 2008]) do not understand. The protagonists seek flesh, they desire the body, but they are already conscious. There is a Cartesian dualism at work that simply is untenable.

**NOTE:** I am grateful to Felicia Campbell who invited me to give this paper in a slightly different version as the keynote speech at the 23<sup>rd</sup> annual meeting of the Far West Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association in March 2011. To Felicia,

and to all of those who raised such interesting questions after the talk and throughout the weekend, I am indebted.

## The Tweet Life: Philosophical Reflections on the Age of Ephemera

As the year came to a close, BuzzFeed.com produced a list of the “Funniest Celebrity Tweets of 2011.”<sup>1</sup> The tweets themselves were unequal to the task: some referred to events that were already receding in collective memory, while others were notable more for who wrote them than for their content.<sup>2</sup> There is a whiff of “fad” about Twitter, even though it is a technology of communication like email or, before that, the telephone. We did not expect the telephone to be superseded—consider how much money was expended in the construction of our telephone infrastructure—nor did we expect email to become so quickly passé. They did not seem like fads. Even the web page, that repository of information that has largely replaced the phonebook and the librarian, seems dated in comparison to the social network. We live now in a constellation of twinkling messages—tweets, texts, Facebook updates, the “feed”—that come and go and are quickly replaced.

Let us suggest a name for these new technologies. Strictly speaking, tweets are “ephemera.” So are Facebook status updates, blog posts, instant messages, streaming movies, apps, downloaded songs—in short, so much of our media, our communication, our entertainment, and our lives. In a technical sense—in the sense in which the word is used in archives, for example—the word “ephemera” refers to pamphlets, brochures, flyers, signs, or any of the kinds of things which, despite containing potentially useful information, are unlikely to be saved. Such things exhibit a shared set of attributes: they are easy to make, easy to exchange, and easy to copy. They are anxious for attention—they are brief, easily digestible, and urgent. There is a pejorative ring to the word “ephemera” which is probably unwarranted. Information conveyed by ephemera is hardly trivial in its moment—a flyer announces your favorite local band’s next show, for instance—but it seems trivial afterwards. Ephemera are consumed eagerly, and then they are discarded; the sense we have is that we can always get more, or that the information is already out of date. There is a logic to ephemera—they are appropriate to their purpose. They now so characterize our communicative behaviors, though, that we have to wonder whether they are appropriate to *every* purpose, or if we are not bending our purposes to meet the logic of the new technologies.

Neil Postman warns that when a new technology comes into a culture we do not, a few years later, find the same culture *plus* the new technology. We find a *new* culture.<sup>3</sup> It is not the case that new technologies are neutral with respect to our expectations of ourselves and of others.<sup>4</sup> The washing machine did not free housewives from odious hours of clothes-washing—it changed how clean we expected our clothes, and the clothes of others, to be. The 747 did not make travel more comfortable for the occasional trans-Pacific traveler—it made trans-Pacific travel a commonplace, even a sort of duty: Bali is now a place one

“must see before one dies.” And the new information technologies did not simply allow us to be reached by the office in the unlikely event of an emergency—it bound us to the office, and to everyone else, for twenty-four hours a day.

Martin Heidegger tells us that a bridge does not simply link two sides of a river; it actually changes our compartment to the world around it, as it defines a space on the far side of the bank that is a space for us, reorganizing our sense of locatedness in the world and the possibilities afforded to us.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere Heidegger says that technology is not simply *things* that we use, but rather a pervasive mode of being in the world, and specifically an acquisitive mode—we ask the world to give up its energy to us, so we can store and use that energy—that hides other possible modes of being in the world.<sup>6</sup> Others have seen a certain truth in these suggestions and have elaborated on them. Don Ihde, for one, has traced how new technologies redefine our bodies, and has given some thought to how the new communication technologies extend our bodies in space and dissolve them with virtual representations.<sup>7</sup> Marxist theorists have been especially sensitive to material conditions and their psychological influence, and Balibar and Macherey have struggled with the degree to which our material and social conditions shape our attitudes and tastes—seemingly so “personal.”<sup>8</sup> This is a particularly important topic in an age where your iPod playlist may be a defining feature of your self-representation to others.

#### Being and Writing

Postman views the advent of the “electronic age,” dominated by the visual medium of television, as the proximate cause of the erosion of an intellectual culture founded on the primacy of the written word.<sup>9</sup> He notes that in Peoria on October 16, 1854, Lincoln and Douglas met for one of their famous debates and carried on for seven hours. Douglas delivered a three-hour opening address to a rapt audience. Lincoln was to respond, and, noting that it was already 5pm, and expecting to speak at least as long, offered that the audience go home, eat dinner, and return. Apparently they did return. Lincoln spoke for several more hours, and Douglas was allowed a lengthy rebuttal. The style and the content of the speeches suggest that this was an intellectually challenging seven hours for the audience:

Not only did Lincoln and Douglas write all their speeches in advance, but they also planned their rebuttals in writing. Even the spontaneous interactions between the speakers were expressed in a sentence structure, sentence length and rhetorical organization which took their form from writing. ...The resonance of typography was ever-present. Here was argument and counterargument, claim and counterclaim, criticism of relevant texts, the most careful scrutiny of the previously uttered sentences of one’s opponent.<sup>10</sup>

As Postman asks—with, perhaps, a palpable sense of alarm: “What kind of audience was this?”<sup>11</sup>

It was, to be sure, not just an audience proficient in the use of the alphabet. The kind of written language that the audience was steeped in was not the text message or the tweet—not ephemera—but rather the prose exposition, the book-length treatise. And if some in the audience had never read a book-length treatise—it was nineteenth-century Peoria, after all—they were at least steeped in a culture that modeled intellectual discourse on the book-length treatise, and so their expectation was that the debate would proceed along these lines. What is the drama of the book-length exposition? What *pleasure* would the audience take in this sort of activity—for surely the good people of Peoria did not attend this affair entirely out of a sense of civic obligation? In politics there is the drama of winners and losers, of course, but more importantly, in all aspects of life, the book-length exposition provides the drama of the slow unveiling, the inexorable progress, step by step, toward revealing what must be so, given all that has come before.

The drama of a visual medium is quite different. If it is a still medium, like photography, we sometimes say that it “tells a thousand words,” but there is no reason to think the words are true. A photograph frames a subject, arranging its parts artfully within the frame and suggesting what lies outside the frame. A picture of several protesters holding signs suggests, without showing, that there are many more protesters beyond the frame—whether or not there are. Moreover, pictures do not reveal slowly—there is an immediate emotional reaction to a picture of a starving child, naked and bloated, which does not rely on any history or context.<sup>12</sup> Pictures, in fact, have trouble giving context—they must be accompanied by text. Add to these constraints the motion of television or movies or, these days, the YouTube video. Motion has its own logic and requirements: it is not suitable for portraying still objects, not without the drama of the slow pan, or the simulated motion of the quick cut. More suitable, more natural to the medium, are images of movement or change: a bomb hitting a target, a building on fire. The human face, as a canvas for emotions, is charged when presented as a still image, but is even more charged when audibly laughing or wailing. A complex issue requiring a great deal of textual information is not only unwelcome on television, it is actually difficult to convey.<sup>13</sup> Words could be superimposed over images on the screen, but there is not enough room on the screen—even now, with scrolling tickers at the bottom and stock quotes running up the side of the wide screen HDTV—to provide much more text than a simple headline or quick summary.

Perhaps Postman’s most troubling claim is that additional, *unintended* information is carried by the medium of television and its visual drama. The rapid-fire juxtaposition of visually stimulating images—fires, explosions, floods, armies on the move—presented without history or context, and anchored, as it were, only by the presence of a well-dressed spokesperson, transmits the message that the world is effectively incomprehensible and chaotic—essentially

ungovernable. The viewer at home can be forgiven for feeling helpless to act and unmotivated to organize. That is, in a seemingly well-meaning effort by the major studios to inform the voting populace, the television news of the seventies and eighties actually advocated—unintentionally—for civic passivity and resignation.<sup>14</sup> The pernicious effect of this shift to primarily visual information media on American civic culture through the latter quarter of the twentieth century has been well documented.<sup>15</sup> The question for our purposes is what effect the new media has had or will have. We will need to come back to the question of what unintended message is transmitted by the particular logic/drama of ephemera.

There have always been technological developments—the flint tool, the bridge, the television—and they have always mediated our social interactions and our comportment to the world according to the particular defining characteristics of each. The flint spearhead allowed hunters to bring down larger game but required larger hunting parties to do so. The television, at least before cable, served social cohesion by presenting an entertainment experience that was broadly shared, and which could therefore be a point of connection, because it was a one-way medium with a fairly limited number of options for the viewers. What is definitive of the ephemera we are discussing here is, on the one hand, its multiplicity—every user is generating individualized content—and, on the other hand, the sheer mechanical achievement, the speed of transmission and the perfection of the transcription. We could not have the one without the other—speed and accuracy make possible the sheer volume of user-generated content.

### The Beep-Beeps

There is something intrinsic to being hyper-connected, to having easy access to content, and, indeed, to having *so much* content, that logically results in ephemera. Perhaps we should begin, then, by considering the technological shift that makes possible the ephemerality of so much that used to be solid, that used to be *property*. It is hard to remember now that only a few decades ago we needed to organize our lives around a TV schedule that presented news only once a night, and for only half an hour; or that we needed to be home because someone might call us long distance; or that we might have to listen through several songs that we do not like before the radio “disk jockey”—we still anachronistically call them “DJs”—finally played one that we do like. The revolution in access, and the consequent ascendancy of ephemera, is largely a product of a *digital* revolution, a revolution in *information* and its storage and transmission.

We think we know what information is, and we believe that a lot of it is available on the web. We have a sense that there has always been information, and that it is countable, because it is a *thing*—a set of facts, perhaps, and we feel confident that we know what *facts* are. James Gleick credits Bell Labs engineer Claude Shannon with coining the term “information,” but Shannon was thinking about it quite differently: information is what is unexpected.<sup>16</sup> For Shannon, an

electrical engineer, information occurs in a context, and it transpires serially, i.e., in time. It is a human *activity*—an *exchange* between two points. A communicative act that is expected is not as informative as one that surprises us. For example, as we are reading, a letter “u” that follows a “q” adds little—we were expecting that. Someone interested in the compression of transmitted data, as Shannon certainly was, would say that the “u” was dispensable with little degradation to the message. Of course, the “u” is only dispensable against a background of written English, which is a code shared by the sender and the receiver—Shannon was also a cryptographer—but the point was that “about 50%” of a given transmitted message is superfluous.<sup>17</sup> It can be omitted from the message with little degradation in meaning. Information can be compressed. Ambiguity can be reduced—in the transmission, if not in the language itself. Analog information can be reduced to binary packets and stored and transmitted more efficiently and accurately. These mechanical improvements in the medium of communication are important to us for two reasons: they greatly increase the *speed* with which we access or exchange information (this is not a trivial point); and they greatly improve our ability to *duplicate* information (and this is also not trivial).

Speed is not trivial because it changes the content of information. Gleick quotes Heinz von Foerster, at an early cybernetics conference, complaining that information theory is all about the “beep beeps” of communication: bandwidth, compression, noise reduction.<sup>18</sup> He was concerned that all these theories about the *transmission* of information had little to say about the *value* of the information. But this is a naïve view of information (i.e., thinking that *what* information is carried is independent of the means of carrying the message). Letters of the nineteenth century were florid and full of politeness, while the telegraph required a functional frankness. One would not try to discuss feelings by telegraph, nor would the latest stock reports be transmitted in a lengthy letter. The one was too fast, the other too slow. There was an overlap of users of the two technologies, so we know that the difference is not the result of historical changes in communication style or substance. We should not be surprised, then, that geometric increases in speed of communication, as well as the changing loci of communication—we now communicate everywhere, even while on the toilet—would have an effect on the style and substance of communication overall. Convenience is a harsh taskmaster.

Easy duplication is not trivial because it *used* to be hard—transcription is an issue for analog transmission in a way that it is not for digital transmission. For example, the quality of an analog magnetic signal degrades across a long copper wire—a problem for Claude Shannon—as does the continuous groove of a vinyl LP over successive plays. As such, the quality of the transcription is a concern, and a high quality transcription has value. A very clear recording, for instance, was something highly prized. This emphasis on clarity bled over into the digital age, so that the first CD I ever heard—it was, in fact, a demonstration CD, featuring the sound of a passenger jet passing overhead—was so clear, so

devoid of static or popping or other telltale indicators of mechanical reproduction, that it was a revelation. The digitization of older recordings, which we imagined would be that much better blemish-free, promised greater listening pleasure. In truth, however, *clarity* quickly became commonplace, and as such it lost most of its value.<sup>19</sup> Abundance has a—for lack of a better word—*economic* consequence.

Transcription is not a problem in digital media. To copy sound over an analog system required reading the vibrations in the air at one location and reproducing them at another location in enough of their minute detail to be distinguishable. Such a transcription method is sensitive to small variations, as, for example, a wearing-away of a groove in a vinyl disc, however small, changes the vibration of the needle and thus the vibration of the speaker and the resulting vibration of the air. Digital transcription, however, is nearly flawless. A channel can be open or it can be closed—there is little ambiguity in the signal, so that the signal can weaken significantly from its point of origin without becoming indistinct. Also, the digital transcription can be repeated over and over again with little or no degradation. A “1” does not slowly degrade into a “0” over time, or *vice versa*.

Is anything lost in digitization? Audiophiles insist they can tell the difference between digital and analog recordings, but psychophysics suggest otherwise. We can sample a continuous stream of sound at very close intervals, and at any given interval we might ask the question: is the channel that corresponds to exactly this wavelength “open”? That is, is the air shaking, at this very instant, in exactly the frequency that will later correspond to this channel or set of channels? If so, this particular channel will be “on” at this moment. Other channels will be on or off in accordance with whether their corresponding sounds are active at the moment of sampling or not. With enough channels and enough samples we can duplicate all the wavelengths of a symphony—or a passenger jet—closely enough to be indistinguishable to human ears. In fact, the human capacity is not very robust, and much of the airwave activity of an orchestra transpires beyond a human capacity for conscious hearing. The MP3 file dispenses with these superfluous wavelengths without appreciably changing the listener’s experience—the file is compressed. Transmission is that much faster.

The fast download and the ease of transcription make it possible to treat music as ephemera. Since the song is easy to get, it is easy to get again—we can dispose of it. Now we also have downloadable books and streamable movies, and these, too, are ephemera. This is the material state of entertainment: we have access, at a negligible price, to almost anything we want, instantly. At one time our access to these things was limited. Carefully defining one’s sphere of interest was an economic priority because one could not easily afford to own thousands of songs or books, or to go to thousands of movies in a theater. Now we are faced with a different problem: how do we choose? We need new institutions to filter for us, to push to us. Some of these institutions have already

sprung up (such as Pandora, which pushes music to you based on what you have already said you like). More will follow: we will comport ourselves to the new world. A similar problem confronts users of the new communications technologies. Used to the letter-like formalities of email exchange, I have asked my son how one ought to *end* an instant message exchange. It seems wrong simply to stop responding to a communicative act, even if the last act was the barest “LOL.”

### Disposable Me

The overabundance of media has had unexpected consequences, not just for the publishing industry or the movie or music industries, but for the meaning of ownership itself and for the person who would have owned before but who now *accesses*. We can see this in a general way: several generations grew up with a defining collection of non-ephemeral, non-digital materials: books, LPs, VHS and even DVD movies (for a time). Crates of materials were U-Hauled from one phase of life to another, because, in a very personal sense, they delimited a continuous *person* and an historical passage of the continuous person through time. Here is a dramatic life change, and yet this is the person who liked R.E.M. before R.E.M. was cool; or this is the hedge fund manager who, years after college, still has a copy of *Das Kapital* on her bookshelf for her guests to see and note. A choice to own one album or book over another, of course, was a material decision of some consequence.

Psychologists tell us that ownership serves several psychological functions, including the competing functions of socialization and individuation.<sup>20</sup> Put another way, we buy what we are expected to buy because we want to meet the expectations of others; and we buy what we are not expected to buy because we want to “be ourselves.” The suggestion is that ownership is outward-looking, so to speak: it is a representation of the self, primarily directed toward others. This is surely true, and yet the notion of an ego that is fully formed, making ownership decisions in light of a careful evaluation of what others will think, is suspect. We *want* and we *are the one who wants* simultaneously. We do not like Led Zeppelin because we see that others like Led Zeppelin; we like Led Zeppelin, like others who also like Led Zeppelin, are liked by others who also like Led Zeppelin, like Led Zeppelin all the more for it, and so on. As time passes there is a stickiness to this “liking Led Zeppelin.” It is difficult—though, tellingly, not impossible—to *stop* liking Led Zeppelin. This is our immediate experience, and Husserl puts it more formally: we take *stances* or *positions* in the world.<sup>21</sup> We attend to this, we ignore that; we like cats but not dogs; we are happy to see him but we despise her. The positions we take give shape to the world as a world *for us*—we bring meaning into it. Thus for Husserl, while the location of trees and roads and the height of tables and the distance to the nearest gas station are more or less fixed for us, the world is nevertheless constituted to some extent by our personal stances. It’s hot and I

want to sit under the tree; or I want to paint the tree; or I'm waiting for the tree to bear apples; and anyway, I don't own a car, so the gas station is irrelevant.

Stances can become habitual, of course, and most often do—they “soon trade their lived character for a sedimented one as they sink further back into the past.”<sup>22</sup> But they can never become *essential*. That is, a past stance is always past. In the present we always have some ability to take on a different project or to choose a continuation of the same project. Granted, the past project colors our decisions, and perhaps makes it likely that we will continue with the original project, but we are underdetermined by our past.<sup>23</sup> We are, in effect, making ourselves over again, and this process is not an inner, purely subjective process, but one that is implicated in the physical and social world, in the pleasures we take from it, in the frustrations we feel with it, and in the people we associate with or shun.

What does it mean to “own” a song today, or a book, or a movie?<sup>24</sup> Heidegger suggests that there is an anxiety that attends having to remake ourselves and reaffirm our stances and projects, and, indeed, one senses something like this when trying to decide what to download next.<sup>25</sup> What so characterizes our relationship to ephemera, however—the speed, the ease of access, the overabundance—makes the actual choice trivial. We can always download something else. The crates of vinyl albums that we carried from dorm room to apartment to early adulthood provided a sort of outward visible anchor to an inward invisible struggle of self-making. We are unmoored from the unreflective solidity of *stuff*.

### Being and Tweeting

Given that our stances in the world—including our action-taking and, most importantly for our purposes, our *linguistic* action-taking—are always constituting who we are, we now have to return to the tweet and the blog and the text message, to the twinkling constellation of linguistic events that now pervades our lives. It is interesting that the electronic age, characterized by a passive, largely one-way flow of *visual* information, so quickly gave way to the current situation, the age of ephemera. And what characterizes the present situation? Certainly we still receive visual information—it is easier than ever to consume—but then we engage in a wholly new and characteristically *digital* activity: we *copy* it. We forward it, link to it, post it. We call attention to the acts, linguistic or visual, of others as a way of calling attention to ourselves: look at me, I am the one who sees the beauty/comedy/outrage in this, which I now send to you in hopes that you see it—and me—too. We are anxious for attention.

The subsumption of the visual culture under an overwhelmingly linguistic culture seems important: where once we sat in a living room and received a one-way message from an anchor to whom we had no personal relation, now we write back and forth, we engage in a discourse, we are *connected*. It is not the case that the 140-character limit (the limit for a single tweet) necessarily makes tweet exchanges trivial, just as it is not the case that

two people talking face to face must be having a trivial conversation. If anything, the brevity of the tweet more closely resembles human speech, especially in its contrapuntal nature: I said something, now you tell me that you're still listening. Douglas could not speak for three hours on Twitter—not, at least, as he had prepared to speak. Someone would get him off topic. He would have to pause constantly and address objections. He would have to reiterate and reformulate for those who could not follow his point. What Postman appreciates in typographic culture—the structure, the elaborate constructions—is lost, certainly, but then there are also those who rankled at the supposed authority of the elaborate typographic construction, who saw it as a kind of tyranny of the written word. We have to think especially of Habermas here, though a bias in favor of interactive dialogue can be traced back to Plato and the myth of Theuth.<sup>26</sup> There is an illusory authority to the word in print, as though it simply *is* a thing in the world, and is not a prior linguistic act by another human being. Undergraduates often sense this authority and are helpless before it—using the wonders of digital technology, they are content to cut and paste, and nothing is lost in the transcription. We do not want our undergraduates to copy, we say: we want them to *engage*, to defend actively their positions. We want them to take their own stance, to speak for themselves, and thereby *speak themselves*. We want them to blossom into full personhood, and we think that making them speak is the way to do this.

On the Internet our words are frequently misunderstood, and so *we* are misunderstood—our self-making fails. It would be better, we think, to be speaking face to face. Derrida tells us, however, that the primacy of speaking—of being able to go “back and forth,” being able to “clarify” or “expound” or “reiterate” and thereby ensure that our words carry our *true intentions*—is just as illusory as Postman’s primacy of the written word.<sup>27</sup> Words are signs, which, once they have tripped from our lips or spilled off our keyboards onto the page, are equally out of our control. No amount of additional speaking/writing can contain them or bend them to our exact intention because these additional words are equally engaged in an active system of signs external to our intentions, outside our control. We try to speak ourselves authentically in speech and writing, but these acts are strangely impotent. They must be repeated over and over again, and we never finish elaborating ourselves—unless, perhaps, given an infinite amount of time at the podium, though of course we have much less. It seems that we have always been ephemera ourselves.

I do not mean to suggest that ephemera are somehow more authentically human, but the old technologies may have given us a false sense of completion. The “feed” scrolls away into the past with each successive post or blog or tweet; we must constantly reinvent our cleverness, our earnest political stances, or our tastes in music. We clamber to remain at the top of the page, to remain connected. This is the anxiety of connectedness: that being connected to so many resembles constantly wondering if anyone is paying attention, which is to say, it resembles loneliness. Ultimately, this may be the unintended message

of ephemera: we are alone, and only a continual effort at establishing and maintaining human connections can mitigate our sense of aloneness.

This, then, is the drama of ephemera, the thing that binds us to them: the drama of anxious self-making. We engage in the interpersonal *agony* of quibbling with others, being offended by their political positions, angrily denouncing their foolishness; or we sense a kindred spirit, we form a quivering connectedness with them—we *copy* them—never sure that this connectedness can last. Connectedness is itself aporetic: we try to gather around ourselves those who will be like us, those who will like us (or “like” us) for who we are, and who will therefore provide a certain solidity to who we are. But those to whom we connect are no more permanent than we are—they are connecting to us for the same reason—so the connectedness itself must always be in the process of an interpersonal making, always on the verge of an unmaking. The only project that is permanent, Husserl tells us, is the project of trying to make oneself through projects.<sup>28</sup> This essay, having been written about ephemera, will itself soon be irrelevant, and I will need to write another. I have written it now in an ephemeral act of self-making, of outward-directed self-making. I have written it for you, but really for me: I am here now—please cite me.

Independent Scholar

Steven J. Ingeman

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “The Best Celebrity Tweets of 2011.” accessed 5/1/12. This is far from the only example of an end-of-the-year recap of “best tweets.”

<sup>2</sup> Khloe Kardashian tweets: “Nancy Grace is about to go HAM about this verdict! Let loose the dogs Mrs Nancy Grace!!” Meanwhile, Samuel L. Jackson tweets: “Can-a muh fukkasay fuck on here?” Dr. Ruth tweets: “And please people, don’t do anything silly like going outside during hurricane to have sex. Tell u’re friends you did it, but don’t do it.”

<sup>3</sup> See esp. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962). Here McLuhan spells out his thesis that the dominant media form of a culture greatly shapes the cognitive processes of that culture.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Postman returns to this point frequently, but see esp. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977): 329-331.

<sup>6</sup> See Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977): 287-317.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Don Ihde, *Bodies in Technology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, “Literature as an Ideological Form: Some Marxist Propositions in Art and Ideology, Part 1,” *Praxis: a Journal of Radical Criticism*, 1981 (5): 43-58.

<sup>9</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (NY: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1985): 44-50.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> See Neil Postman, "Critical Thinking in the Electronic Age," *Selected Issues in Logic and Communication*, Trudy Govier, ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1988): 11-18.

<sup>13</sup> See Neil Postman, "The News," *Conscientious Objections* (New York: Knopf, 1988). Here Postman points out that a television news discussion of the federal budget is inevitably accompanied—and, indeed, *must* be accompanied—by a scene of large machines churning out huge reams of dollar bills. The visual medium demands motion.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Kiku Adatto, *Sound Bite Democracy: Network Evening News Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1968-1988* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). Adatto is especially keen to point out how little interest there is in the text of a campaign. The average "sound bite"—a "bloc of uninterrupted speech"—lasted 42.3 seconds in 1968. This is an eternity for television—try it with a stopwatch—and it shows the clumsiness of early TV production. By 1988 the average sound bite lasted only 9.8 seconds.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Gleick's expansive overview of the development of the idea of information in James Gleick, *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood* (NY: Pantheon Books, 2011): 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 217. See also Claude Elwood Shannon, "Communication Theory of Secrecy Systems," *Collected Papers* (Piscataway, NJ: IEEE Press, 1993): 85.

<sup>18</sup> Gleick, 417.

<sup>19</sup> See "Neil Young: Steve Jobs Listened to Vinyl, Piracy is the New Radio," accessed 5/11/12. Neil Young, a product of an analog age, has expressed surprise that audiences have been willing to trade accessibility for fidelity in music. See, for example, "Neil Young: Steve Jobs and I Were Working on the New iPod," accessed 5/11/12.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of psychological research on the subject, see Jon L. Peirce, Tatiana Kostova, and Kurt T. Dirks, "The State of Psychological Ownership: Integrating and Extending a Century of Research," *Review of General Psychology* (v. 7, n. 1) March 2003: 84-107; or Lita Furby, "Understanding the Psychology of Possession and Ownership: A Personal Memoir and Appraisal of Our Progress," *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* (v. 6, n. 6) 1991: 457-463.

<sup>21</sup> My thanks to Hanne Jacobs for providing me with a copy of her article "Towards a Phenomenological Account of Personal Identity," *Philosophy, Phenomenology, Sciences: Essays in Commemoration of Edmond Husserl*. Carlo Ierna, Hanne Jacobs, and Filip Mattens, eds. (New York: Springer, 2010): 333-363. In a similar vein, Sartre would say that we engage in—or are defined by—"projects," about which he says:

Now the meaning of the past is strictly dependent on my present project. This certainly does not mean that I can make the meaning of my previous acts vary in any way I please; quite the contrary, it means the fundamental project *which I am* decides absolutely the meaning which the past *which I have to be* can have for me and for others.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1956): 498 [emphasis mine].

<sup>22</sup> Jacobs, 348.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>24</sup> Here I am not asking about the new economic reality, by which we make a large number of extremely small and extremely convenient purchases rather than saving up over time for one large purchase, such as an LP. This is an interesting issue in its own right, one which warrants analysis insofar as it is a significant change in the economic life of the individual, but it falls outside the scope of this particular investigation. In particular, the new thousand-papercuts model of capitalism would seem ripe for a Marcusean reading.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

<sup>26</sup> See esp. Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1987). Habermas sees media as primarily ideological and dialogue as liberating, though both are constitutive of the individual. For Plato, see *Phaedrus*, 274c-275b.

<sup>27</sup> "From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs*. Which amounts to ruining the notion of the sign at the very moment when...its exigency is recognized in the absoluteness of its right." Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1976): 50.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Jacobs, 356-358, concerning some tantalizing thoughts from Husserl's *Nachlass*.

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## Spanish Science Fiction and Its Ghosts

The notion of ghost, with all its connotations, applies particularly well to the paradoxical situation of Spanish science fiction, which is literally haunted by both the specters of cultural globalization and those of its own obscure and repressed historical past. To practice science fiction in contemporary Spain implies openly embracing a foreign culture, and, as a result, the entire genre of science fiction still appears somewhat suspicious to many when it is “made in Spain,” as if the notions of “Spanish” and “science fiction” were simply not compatible. This instinctive fear of an entire narrative mode, namely science fiction, is based in part upon some primordial notion of nationalism, which indeed contradicts today’s predominant vision of cultural globalization: science fiction belongs most of all to the American cultural landscape, that is to a hegemonic culture *par excellence*, and is therefore perceived as a direct threat to Spanish national identity. Cultivating a genre which was originated and mostly developed in another country is naturally bound to provoke cultural tensions; however, in the case of Spanish science fiction, said tensions have been magnified to the point of creating an identity crisis, due to the fundamental differences between both cultures, which do not seem to allow for a harmonious adaptation of the genre of science fiction within today’s Spanish cultural landscape.<sup>1</sup>

To understand the phenomenon of Spanish science fiction as both an imitation and a response to its American counterpart, we must first address the specificities of its historical context, which has severely influenced its evolution: if science fiction remains to this day a problematic genre in terms of composition as well as of reception in Spain, it is most of all because it has been subjected, as most Spanish cultural endeavors after the third decade of the twentieth century, to the harsh repression of Franco’s dictatorship. In relationship with this contextual approach, we will be then able to point out some of the structural characteristics of Spanish science fiction, which distinguishes it from its American model, as the entire genre struggles between originality and imitation; ultimately, Spanish science fiction can be seen as a constant negotiation between an inspiration coming from the other side of the Atlantic, and the expression of a very defined nationalistic perception of reality, a direct heritage from a conflictive political past that still informs today’s collective consciousness.

Surprisingly enough, as documented by Santiáñez-Tió, the genre of science fiction actually flourished in Spain during the first three decades of the twentieth century (Martín Rodríguez); from the 1900s to 1936, Spain generated and consumed a great amount of narrations that could be classified as science fiction, in a variety of modes that included space adventures and alien invasions, as well as the representation of alternate and dystopian universes, which is considered by some critics as the only real type of science fiction by opposition to the mere escapism offered by space opera.<sup>2</sup> Several classic Spanish authors

who are considered canonical, such as Miguel de Unamuno, Blasco Ibañez and Azorín, have penned narrations that can be considered as science fiction and that were well received at the time of their publications by both the critics and the public. However, and in spite of promising beginnings, the growth of science fiction in Spain was cut short by the rebellion of fascist general Franco in 1936, which led to the civil war—as the hostilities began, the genre of science fiction ended.

In 1939, Franco seized power and established a dictatorship that would ruin Spain for the next four decades, not only economically and socially, but culturally as well. What distinguished Franco's dictatorship from its European equivalents, such as Italian fascism or German National Socialism, was the importance that his regime gave to the catholic religion, which was merged with the concept of nationalism.<sup>3</sup> Whereas contemporary European totalitarian regimes usually gave organized religion a minimal role within their structures, Franco's ideology, expressed by the notion of "national-Catholicism,"<sup>4</sup> emphasized the relationship between the state and the church to the point of fusing both within one single interest. Logically, the visions expressed by science fiction could not be to the liking of Franco's regime, for a narrative mode based upon the themes of scientific progress, human—and even non-human—communication and sometimes equality, and which implicitly rejects any kind of nationalism presented many dangers for a totalitarian administration with theocratic principles.

As a result, science fiction as a whole was demoted to the rank of the lowest type of pulp fiction, as a suspicious genre with subversive tendencies and no artistic merits of any kind. (Merelo, Ferreras). While Philip K. Dick was writing *The Man in the High Castle*, what passed as science fiction in Spain consisted almost exclusively of infantile adventures involving fearless heroes and giant insects with laser guns. Only one subgenre of science fiction, considered by some as quite different from the real thing, namely space opera, was somewhat spared and relatively celebrated. Space opera had a definite advantage upon dystopian science fiction: not only did it correspond to the Manichean opposition adopted as a value system by the totalitarian government of Franco, but it was also appreciated and consumed by both sides, that is by "Las Dos Españas," or "The Two Spains," the conservatives and the liberals, which had been opposing each other since the eighteenth century. Space opera, which is mainly about conquests and colonialism, battles and empires, flattered the Manichean conception of the world and of society that the Spanish Catholic Church as well as the state had adopted and enforced. From a generic point of view, we could say that space opera functions at a very elementary, not to say reptilian level, and thus provides some type of escapism for teenagers and young adults, apparently without any type of critical implication; it is indeed much closer to the universe of the Marvelous than to that of dystopian science fiction and usually does not prompt any serious reflection regarding our social and political reality.<sup>5</sup>

In 1975, Franco graced Spain with his departure, and his death coincides with an explosion of science fiction literature.<sup>6</sup> Once again, we can safely relate the reasons for the rebirth of the genre in Spain to the country's political context: Spain was no longer isolated politically from Europe, and, more importantly when it comes to our purpose, it opened up culturally to the rest of the world—that is, it acknowledged, assimilated and attempted to reproduce the cultural trends that had been developing in the rest of the Occidental world while the country was in cultural lock up. Spain had literally to catch up a forty-year delay with the rest of Europe and the United States and radically modify its frame of reference as well as its collective consciousness if it wanted to exist in this brave new world. The opening of the cultural borders in Spain, which coincided with the death of the dictator, implied the reception all at once of about a half a century of literary tradition and the discovery of many foreign science fiction authors and works, mainly but not always from the United States, who had been totally ignored until then—as far as the Spanish public was concerned. Philip K. Dick was writing *The Man in the High Castle* again for the first time about twenty years after its publication.<sup>7</sup>

When we consider the abundance of science fiction narrations produced in the United States and in Europe during the second decade of the twentieth century, the situation of Spain becomes even more uncanny, if not slightly surrealistic, for it implies absorbing an almost unlimited corpus in order to participate actively to its elaboration. Naturally, some Spanish science fiction authors were more aware than some others of the state of the genre in other countries, however, Spain's recent cultural isolation and the mistrust of Franco's regime vis-à-vis anything foreign—especially languages—had made translations rare and generally inaccurate; we must not forget that virtually all of Spain's cultural production and consumption during the four decades of Franco's rule were grinded by the regime's ruthless censorship.

Contemporary Spanish science fiction authors must therefore both assimilate an overwhelming amount of material and attempt to contribute in an original way to the genre; that is, they are forced to imitate a pre-existing narrative mode that has been articulated according to irremediably foreign linguistic and cultural parameters but must nonetheless express a Spanish identity in doing so in order to produce valid, convincing, original works. Naturally, Spain's peculiar historical circumstances have a direct influence upon the manner in which many authors attempt to resolve this paradox and as we proceed to a more textually oriented analysis, we can distinguish five elements, either thematic or paradigmatic, which set Spanish science fiction apart from its more informed international neighbors and that are either directly or indirectly related to its political and cultural situation: (1) humor, (2) self-consciousness, (3) subversion, (4) cultural tradition and—no surprise here—(5) Catholicism.

(1) Humor: Contemporary Spanish science fiction tends to be humorous, which is not a typical feature of the genre. If we indeed find humor in some American authors, such as Brown or Harrison, we do not find it in the

same proportions as in Spanish science fiction. For instance, the novel by Iván Zaldúa, *If Sabino Were Alive* (*Si Sabino viviría*, 2005), presents the structure of a space opera narration, however the planets involved in the conflict each represent a specific political tendency; we have therefore a planet inhabited by the descendents of Franco, another populated by those of the Basque separatists, and so on. The humor is produced by the opposition between the typical paradigms of a space opera narration—spaceships, distant galaxies, interstellar travels—and very precise historical and political elements. Here, the science fiction genre is used as a support to parody radical political positions as the narration leans toward political satire. We also find a recurrent figure, supposedly an amusing one, throughout contemporary Spanish science fiction, that of the “funny guy” (*el gracioso*), who is often the protagonist and the narrative voice. His outlook on life is that of a marginal character who compensates his deficiencies with humorous resignation, and his narrative function echoes a long Spanish theatrical tradition originated in the Golden century, as Spanish science fiction authors feel the need to recycle canonical literary figures in order to assert some type of national identity within a mostly alien narrative genre.

(2) Self-consciousness: This humorous tendency is intrinsically related to self-consciousness, which could be seen as a mandatory condition of any author involved in the process of creating science fiction in Spain. In spite of all their efforts, Spanish authors can never forget that they are arriving late into a narrative mode in the creation of which they did not participate and that they are still in the process of discovering, and this usually leads them to adopt an ironically self-conscious attitude vis-à-vis the text. It is indeed no easy task to take oneself seriously when one is only imitating a fundamentally foreign type of narrative that was elaborated in a radically different type of environment. Meta-narration and meta-fiction in general—in this case, meta-science fiction—are hence almost always present in contemporary Spanish science fiction, as if Spanish authors sought to defuse the somewhat contradictory aspects of their endeavor by openly exposing their paradoxical situation within their creations. The merging of meta-fiction, a narrative device traditionally associated with “high culture”, and of science-fiction, a popular genre by definition, can yield to interesting results as in the case for instance of Rodolfo Martínez’s *The Smile of the Cat* (*La sonrisa del gato*, 1995), in which the cynicism displayed by the main character regarding both his narrative universe and the literary genre to which it belongs provides a note-worthy narrative tension that could be considered as one of the novel’s most convincing aesthetic achievements.

(3) Subversion: The somewhat cynical quality that characterizes many protagonists of Spanish science fiction very often relies on the representation of apparently subversive moves, which create a humorous tension vis-à-vis societal collective expectations. However, when compared to their American counterparts, Spanish authors generally appear rather tame in terms of subversive content due to their cultural frame of reference. Indeed, what may

seem subversive to the heirs of Franco's dictatorship is often a simple exercise in free speech within any Occidental democracy. When it comes to subversion, Spanish authors are far from matching the likes of James Graham Ballard, and as always, of Philip K. Dick, for Spaniards are still fighting the ghosts of their recent political past. The shadows of Franco's long dictatorship still linger in the collective consciousness and Spanish authors are still in the process of discovering the naturally subversive aspects of dystopian science fiction as they painfully attempt to resurrect and structure the genre according to their own cultural parameters to build a credible identity.

(4) Cultural Tradition: Consequently, we find in Spanish science fiction an abundance of classical literary references for, as authors attempt to enter the realm of science fiction and to accommodate their ambition to their own frame of reference, they often borrow and blend textual paradigms from two very specific established literary traditions: classical Spanish literature and American modern science fiction. We thus find seventeenth century literary styles applied to Space Opera, as in the aforementioned *The Smile of the Cat* by Martínez as well as in Marín's *Tears of Light (Lágrimas de luz, 1982)* and in Sainz Cidoncha's *Memories of an Stellar Vagabond, (Memorias de un merodeador estelar, 1995)*, two very popular and representative works of the genre in contemporary Spain. Spanish science fiction authors, having been culturally alienated by their recent past from the rest of Europe and the United States, do not seem to be able to shake the weight of their own canonical tradition, which in the case of the genre of science fiction is indeed a paradoxical position. Since science fiction was considered in Spain during Franco's time as among the lowest manifestations of popular literature, it appears natural that Spanish modern science fiction authors would attempt to elevate the status of the genre they cultivate by directly referring to highly respectable and authoritative works and authors from the national tradition; however, by doing so, they compromise the modernity which characterizes the genre by using a stylistic register that refers to a very determined cultural and historical period, hence defeating the very object of science fiction—from the dystopian variety to space opera—which, very simply put, consists in creating new, either futuristic or un-historical universes. It must be noted, however, that with the turn of the new century, the direct references to classical Spanish literature tend to disappear, as the difference between high and low art becomes increasingly elusive and challenged by most cultural critics, and science fiction is more and more accepted as a legitimate artistic corpus within academic circles.<sup>8</sup>

(5) Catholicism: The cultural tradition that weights so heavily upon Spanish science fiction is most of all informed by the Catholic religion, and the importance of this particular influence remains one of the most determining yet underestimated traits of contemporary Spanish cultural manifestations, literary or otherwise. National-Catholicism, Spain's very own brand of metaphysical national socialism, has left a very deep imprint in contemporary Spanish consciousness, and, consequently, any noteworthy contemporary Spanish

science fiction novel usually depicts a god-like entity that the main character must fight and defeat in order to conquer his freedom. The treatment of this particular narrative paradigm in Spanish science fiction echoes the quasi-perfect structural equivalence between Franco's totalitarian regime and the Catholic concept of pyramidal hierarchy, fused within the national-catholic ideology. Although the presence of a more or less divine entity is hardly a novel idea in science fiction,<sup>9</sup> here again, the proportions differ: Spanish science fiction appears much more concerned than its US counterpart with the relationship between the Human and a concrete manifestation of an openly religious Absolute, which is expressed through unlimited power and/or total control, and merges totalitarianism and religion. Unlike canonical science fiction Anglo Saxon novels, such as Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*,<sup>10</sup> which describe an essentially physical type of totalitarianism,<sup>11</sup> Spanish science fiction authors conceive repression as both physical and metaphysical, and the divine entity that must be defeated is a god as well as a dictator.

The state of contemporary Spanish science fiction is particularly representative of the on-going struggle of Spanish consciousness with the shadows of its past, however anachronistic it may seem in today's globalized landscape. Because of its great narrative flexibility, which allows it to generate new and unexpected yet coherent universes, the genre of science fiction has become privileged ground to explore as well as to denounce the weight of the ideological make-up that has determined the country's cultural output—or lack thereof—for most of the twentieth century, as contemporary Spanish science fiction authors "Hispanicize" more or less willingly their American sources to restructure the genre according to their own priorities and obsessions. And, if we are to judge by their recent productions as well as by the even more recent political changes that have affected Spain at the end of last year and which have sanctioned the return to power of a right wing party with Catholic undertones, it seems that Spain is still to defeat the not so holy ghosts of its theocratic heritage.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> We cannot evidently confine science fiction to the United States and ignore the important contributions of other English speaking countries to the genre, such as the United Kingdom, Canada or Australia, as well as the influence of canonical non-Anglo-Saxon authors such as the French Jules Verne or of the Polish Stanislaw Lem; however, because of its magnitude and diversity, the North American, mainly United States, science fiction corpus, both literary and cinematic, has become the unavoidable reference for anyone involved in the practice of the genre.

<sup>2</sup> In strict structural terms, the sub-genre of space opera, exemplified by *Dune* or *Star Wars*, would seem to correspond to the narrative characteristics of the adventure story and even of the Marvelous genre; the ill-defined category of "fantasy" tends to blur any

distinction between science fiction, space opera and modern epic, and is hence able to accommodate a great variety of disparate works, such as *Conan of Cimmeria* or *Avatar*.

<sup>3</sup> This unfortunate fusion between Catholicism and nationalism, which appears quite anachronistic in twentieth-century European politics, represents in Spain a return to the mentality of the so-called “Golden Age” (1492-1659), when the Spanish empire, a theocracy by any other name, dominated most of the Occidental world and Spaniards believed that they had been chosen by the hand of the All Mighty to spread the good word, i.e., Catholicism.

<sup>4</sup> From a purely linguistic point of view, National Catholicism (*nacional catolicismo*) is a direct emulation of German National Socialism, for it subverts Spanish grammar by placing the adjective before the noun.

<sup>5</sup> Whereas dystopian science fiction is grounded on a prospective vision of our reality (see Moreno) and hence refers us to our own environment, space opera, on the contrary, revolves around the representation of exotic and distant worlds.

<sup>6</sup> The explosion of the science fiction genre in Spain following the death of Franco is amply documented, in particular by Diez in his essay “Ciencia ficción española: una análisis en perspectiva.”

<sup>7</sup> Although Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* was translated into Spanish and published in Argentina in 1974—twelve years after its original release in English—under the name *El hombre en el Castillo* (*The Man in the Castle*) and hence theoretically available in Spain, its reception remained highly limited; Philip K. Dick, along with most U.S. science fiction authors of his time, was literally re-born for the Spanish public in the eighties.

<sup>8</sup> In the spirit of full disclosure, it should be mentioned that Spain’s recent reevaluation of science fiction as a legitimate corpus for scholarly research is very heavily influenced by the trends in cultural and popular culture studies that are shaping today’s syllabi throughout most American universities.

<sup>9</sup> From Philip K. Dick’s *Valis* to the Wachosky brothers’ *Matrix*, the metaphysical dimension has been a recurrent narrative paradigm in the genre of science fiction; however, Spanish authors’ conception of this particular notion often merges the physical and metaphysical realms in order to represent a repressive order on both levels, reproducing the theocratic peculiarities of Franco’s regime.

<sup>10</sup> It must be underlined that both novels, *1984* and *Brave New World*, are considered classical works of literature in spite of belonging to the genre of dystopian science fiction, and their very presence at the heart of the canon demonstrates the arbitrariness of the distinction between what is perceived as Literature and what is downplayed as “popular literature:” it could indeed be argued that Philip K. Dick is a direct heir to both Orwell and Huxley and that his novels deserve the same type of scholarly attention.

<sup>11</sup> Any religious reading of Orwell’s *1984* or of Huxley’s *Brave New World* requires a metaphysical interpretive frame that precedes the text itself, for the types of totalitarianism both works introduce, if quite different from each other, are both based upon and structured according to the physical world.

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## The World Upside Down: Contributions of Three Contemporary World War II-era Novels to Popular Culture

The Holocaust has been officially over for more than sixty-five years. Post-war, immediate literary approaches to people's experiences during World War II were unusual, but not unknown, particularly as they related to the Holocaust. For example, Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), the quintessential account of two families' experiences in hiding, reads more like a novel than a real-life diary. Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947) relates an immediate account of the tragedy of living in a concentration camp. It is a memoir so intense that readers have often depersonalized it to a popular novel.

Other relatively early approaches to writing about the Holocaust were often cloaked by an immediacy that was dark, full of despair, and dissolution of self, such as the tone and atmosphere of *Night*, by Hungarian author Elie Wiesel. First published in Yiddish in 1956 in Argentina, this memoir about a father and son's experiences at the German concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald has been classified as a novel, autobiography, autobiographical novel, nonfictional novel, among other hybrid classifications. The variety of literary classifications about *Night* illustrates the range of popular literature about the Holocaust. *Night*'s popularity as a "hybrid" work became evident in 2005 when it was selected for review by Oprah Winfrey's book club. By 2011, over six million copies of *Night* had been sold.

The scope of popular literature about the Holocaust—as compared to scholarly reports about this critical field of study—encompasses memoirs, autobiographies, novels, epistolary novels, books for children and young adults, semi-historical accounts of hero-actors, and updated third-person accounts which read like novels. The popularity of holocaust literature draws on the desire for meaning, the reader's interest in people, times, and places in a pre-social media world, and the desire to be entertained, to learn, and to understand. Literature becomes popular when it resonates with readers, no matter what its genre, approach, or style. The mass appeal of these writings leads into the mainstream of popular culture as the world of the Holocaust is reconfigured into contemporary experiences.

Now that at least two generations have learned about the atrocities of the Holocaust, World War II, and Nazi Germany, there has been increased interest in literary approaches to the horrors and humanity of WWII. Seven of these popular novels and documentary-style writings that have contributed to the body of popular literature and popular culture about the Holocaust are as follows:

- *Schindler's List* (1982), the portrait of a cunning, street-smart entrepreneur with a deep sense of what it means to be human in a world of horror
- *The Nazi Officer's Wife* (1998), an autobiographical account of how one young Austrian law graduate, even pressed into service as a German judge after World War II, survived a marriage to a temperamental, abusive German who later became a Nazi officer
- *The Zookeeper's Wife* (2007), a novel-like documentary that depicts actions taken by a Polish zoo director and his wife, to save hundreds of Jewish people from concentration camps
- *The Book Thief* (2005), a powerful, cathartic novel, originally intended for young readers in the United States, that conveys a profound view of testing the limits in ordinary German society during WWII
- *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* (2008), an epistolary novel of courage, love, and the literature that binds the human soul
- *The Reader* (1995), a stark minimalist novel (similar in tone to Wiesel's *Night*) that combines coming of age, deception, shame of self and society, and inspirational hope
- *The Postmistress* (2010), a novel spanning the United States and England in 1940, before the United States entered war, focusing on the lives of three resilient women and a letter never delivered

This article addresses the art of the reading of literature in three contemporary popular novels—*The Book Thief*, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, and *The Reader*. Since their publications, each has sold millions of copies and has been translated into a number of languages, further increasing their integration into the popular culture of “what people read.” Although setting, timeframe, style, tone, and voice are different in these works, each book’s characters display a striking array of feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about the Holocaust, ranging from the philosophical to the practical. The reading of literature, as depicted in these three works, serves as a means to deal with sacrifice, provide sanctuary, and generate redemption to transcend the horrors of war. Each of these three accounts illustrate the broad appeal that defines popular literature and portrays the Holocaust in terms to which readers can relate, particularly with respect to the themes of sacrifice, sanctuary, and redemption—universal themes that enter the consciousness of contemporary popular culture.

### *The Book Thief*

Published in 2005, *The Book Thief* by Australian writer Markus Zusak is a novel about the importance of stories and words in Nazi Germany. The novel is suitable for all audiences, but it has been marketed in the United States as a young-adult book. It has won numerous prizes, including the Michael L. Printz Honor Book Award and the National Jewish Book Award. It has become phenomenally popular because of its appeal to persons of all ages, the

personalization of death, the depiction of ordinary life in extraordinary times, and the use of drawings to convey themes, emotions, and loss and grief. The story may be summarized as follows: “Trying to make sense of the horrors of World War II, Death relates the story of Liesel—a young German girl whose book-stealing and story-telling talents help sustain her family and the Jewish man they are hiding, as well as their neighbors” (iv).

Zusak repeatedly uses the literary device of foreshadowing to pull the reader into the story. Death, the first-person narrator, is intrigued by young Liesel Meminger and her life in the German town of Molching, on Himmel Street (ironically, “heaven” street), between 1939 and 1943. After a devastating bombing of Himmel Street in 1943, Liesel emerges from her basement refuge where she has been writing her own life story, entitled *The Book Thief*. She loses her book manuscript in the rubble. Death retrieves her book, and as Zusak’s novel begins, Death decides to share with us Liesel’s story from her own book, which he has carried with him for many years since the 1943 bombing of Molching. The organizing plan of Zusak’s novel is to move from book to book that Liesel steals during her suffering and pain, and to connect each book to her maturing years from 1939 on.

The first book Liesel steals is *The Grave Digger’s Handbook*. She is nine years old, almost ten, in January 1939 when her younger brother dies on the train taking her and her mother to Munich. Liesel and her brother are to be placed with foster parents in Molching, for Liesel’s mother and husband are being persecuted as communists by the Nazis. Her mother and Liesel have to bury the young boy en route before reaching Munich. At the gravesite, one of the young grave diggers leaves behind *The Grave Digger’s Handbook*, the manual which Liesel takes and prizes in her pain, even though she cannot read most of the words. Merely having the book helps her cope with the suffering of her brother’s death. Later on, her foster father Hans Hubermann will discover this book under Liesel’s mattress and begin to teach her to read the twelve-step guide to grave-digging success.

According to Death, the meaning of Liesel’s first stolen book is that it reminds her of the last time she saw her dead brother and her birth mother. Her sacrifice of these two loved ones is connected with the manual, and the manual gives her some comfort or solace, even before Hans teaches her how to read at night when Liesel wakes up from her nightmares. Hans starts with the alphabet. Liesel is now ten years old, significantly lagging behind her schoolmates in reading and writing ability. Meanwhile, Molching and Germany in general are depicted as increasingly coming under Nazi tyranny. This is a state in which the Jewish people are persecuted mentally, emotionally, and physically every ordinary day.

For Liesel, learning to read and, eventually, to write means empowerment. Stealing books allows her to preserve her “self” during the chaos of war in Germany. For Christmas, 1939, her foster parents Hans and Rosa give Liesel two small popular children’s books: *Faust the Dog* and *The Lighthouse*.

Hans sacrifices his cigarette ration to pay for these books. However, on Hitler's birthday in April 1940, Liesel steals her second book from a bonfire of banned books. *The Shoulder Shrug* is the name of the book, and the mayor's wife sees her confiscate this smoldering book from the bonfire and hide it inside her uniform. This sizzling book generates pain for Liesel, yet it also makes her happy, thus illustrating the sacrifice and sanctuary motifs in the novel.

Books and the words in them almost always seem to be involved with the events of Zusak's *The Book Thief*. Thus, when the young Jew Max Vandenburg arrives on Hans and Rosa Hubermann's doorstep seeking refuge, he carries a copy of *Mein Kampf* as a ruse to hide who he really is. Later on, Liesel and Max will pull out the pages of the Hitler book, paint over the text, and use the now-clean painted pages for their own writing paper. Amid fear and pain, the written word can lead to a degree of sanctuary—especially when the canvass is stripped of polluted words for a fresh approach to the creativity of what it means to suffer in a world upside down.

At another time in *The Book Thief*, Liesel visits the mayor's house to pick up and deliver the washing and ironing that Liesel's foster mother takes in for some extra money during these hard times for ordinary German citizens. Ilsa Hermann, the mayor's wife, is the person who earlier saw Liesel steal the book from the bonfire. Ilsa allows Liesel to read some of the books in her home library. One such book is the murder mystery entitled *The Whistler*. In the mayor's wife's library, Liesel gains a measure of sanctuary from the outside world of war, hunger, and fear of the Nazis' finding out about her foster family's harboring a Jew in their basement. When the mayor and his wife must cancel the washing and ironing service, Liesel then breaks into the library room and steals *The Whistler*, true to her name as the book thief.

Simultaneously, Max and Liesel read each night in the cold basement on Himmel Street. Max even writes a story with sketches for Liesel. This thirteen-page book, called *The Standover Man*, is written on the painted-over pages of his copy of *Mein Kampf*.

Here Zusak uses symbolism in that the Jew Max's story obliterates the Fuhrer's famous words. Liesel and Max closely bond in their time together, as they share stories, words, and writings in the basement. In a sense, their work together mitigates their sacrifices and sufferings, provides some sanctuary, and even leads to some redemption or hope for a time after the war. In fact, while many on Himmel Street will die before the novel's close in 1943, Liesel and Max do survive and live on, as Death explains. Survival may be conceptualized as fortune, "the survival of the species," the sheer will to live, or resilience. But Zusak helps us think about the nourishment of the human spirit, in this case through the creation of the popular written word, as a way of thriving and surviving.

Still another book that Liesel steals from the mayor's wife's library is *The Dream Carrier*. Often the library room's window is left open, allowing Liesel easy access once she climbs up and reaches it. This book is about an

abandoned child, and it connects with Liesel in a startling way. It is now 1942, as Death interjects comments into Liesel's story about events elsewhere, such as Auschwitz and the imminent bombings from the Allies. But in Molching, Ilsa Hermann writes to Liesel and gives her a dictionary and thesaurus, the traditional keys to understanding, thus patching up their fractured relationship and offering some hope amid the chaos of war and an ordinary world turned upside down.

During air raids, Liesel takes her books with her to the basement of a nearby house designated as a bomb shelter. As those gathered shudder in fear, Liesel, now maturing into her young teens, reads to the group from *The Whistler*. This reading soothes and comforts the group. Here words can help alleviate pain and panic; above ground, the words of Hitler and the Nazis cause pain and panic. When leaving the basement shelter, many of the people "thanked the girl for the distraction" (382). When there are more sirens and air raids, Liesel continues to read to those assembled. Moreover, Liesel is asked by Frau Holtzapfel to read to her in her home as a distraction, especially after the loss of one of her sons in battle. Liesel's reading to another person gives sanctuary—some meaning, personal contact, and calming relief—to a person in a terrible situation of normal grief engulfed by a world where little is normal.

On the night of October 7, 1943, Liesel's already-troubled world comes apart and is turned upside down. Munich is the Allies' target, but Molching's Himmel Street is devastated, and Liesel loses her family and friends. According to Death, Liesel is saved because she was in her family's shallow basement writing and revising her own book or diary—*The Book Thief*—during the surprise bombing. When she is rescued by searchers, she is clutching her book manuscript: "She was holding desperately on to the words who had saved her life" (499). The personification in Zusak's phrase "words who" is noteworthy. Even as so many people die, the words live on. Liesel's book writing is redemptive, for it tells of ordinary people caught up in the frenzy of war, of the many deaths in the camps, of those who are anti-Hitler, and of those who follow the Fuhrer's every command. Liesel lives beyond this terrible bombing scene; Max returns from the camps, and they reunite. Her book is heavy with its pain, yet hopeful with its tales of humanity. Her book sets her free; it delivers her.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, Liesel lost her book manuscript in the rubble on Himmel Street. Still, she lives to a very old age. She has a husband and children and grandchildren. When Death finally comes for her in Sydney, Australia, he shows and returns to her the special book that "saved" her life—in several senses. The narrator Death is moved by humans such as Liesel and what they can accomplish for themselves and others in a horrible world. According to Death, "I am haunted by humans" (550).

*The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*

Published in 2008 by American authors Mary Ann Shaffer (now deceased) and her niece Annie Barrows, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel*

*Pie Society* takes place in Guernsey, one of the Channel Islands off the coast of England. The immense popularity and attraction of this novel are characterized by themes that are valued among popular literature—a series of engaging, easy-to-read short letters, character development, an unfamiliar location that feels familiar, and pure romance. The timeframe of this epistolary novel occurs from January through September 1946, when the shock, fatigue, suffering, and isolation of Guernsey's wartime occupation was beginning to dissipate. Invaded by Germany on June 30, 1940, with the occupation lasting until early 1945, the Guernsey Islanders were shut off from newspapers, food, household goods, and other everyday items. Prior to the novel's publication, few persons in the United States knew of the Guernsey Islands or realized that the Germans had captured this territory early in the war. The popularity of the novel has even led to several large cruise ships stopping at the Guernsey Islands during tours around the British Isles or to other European countries.

To lessen the weariness and drudgery that the inhabitants experienced during the Occupation, they formed the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society one night after a resident (Amelia Maugery) hosted a secret roast pig dinner. As the dinner guests walked home, obviously past curfew, Elizabeth McKenna convinces the German guards that the revelers are simply late in leaving their literary society meeting. And from that incident, the Guernsey Literary Society is born as Elizabeth scurries to locate and assign books to society members. The "Potato Peel Pie" portion of the society's name was added when one of the recalcitrant members affirmed that he would not attend the literary society meetings unless there were refreshments. Without the usual baking ingredients, a potato peel pie was concocted: "mashed potatoes for filling, strained beets for sweetness, and potato peelings for crust" (51).

In the novel, Guernsey is viewed through the eyes of writer Juliet Ashton, a minor author, who becomes popular in England from her wartime series of newspaper columns. After the war, one of the Guernsey Islanders, Dawsey Adams, writes to Juliet about Charles Lamb, his interest piqued after having read one of Juliet's books. Juliet was also asked to write a column for a London paper's literary supplement on the practical, moral, and philosophical value of reading. So a series of letters between Juliet and other Guernsey Islanders begins. From those letters and a later visit to the Guernsey town of St. Peter Port, the reader becomes immersed in the daily life of many of the residents. Themes of classic, contemporary, and 1930s contemporary English literary works are threaded through the novel against the backdrop of humorous, ordinary island life.

During the war, the novel describes sacrifices ranging from everyday hardships to those of the greatest tests of humanity. Severe shortages were normal, as well described in many historical accounts, of common foodstuffs, supplies, and medicine. But the lack of information (such as current newspapers, books, and radio shows) created one of the greatest hardships imposed by the German occupation. As a result of forming the Literary Society, the dearth of

information turned the members from a subsistence surviving group to a gathering that reflected on life's greatest questions. The power generated from the reading of classic, traditional, and popular authors gave the Islanders a notion of a historical world view, normalizing their fear, uncertainty, and worry.

Initially, the society was an urgent practical means of keeping the Germans from learning about a dinner where meat was served. Later, as members read and reviewed works by Shakespeare, Catullus, Charles Lamb, Wadsworth, Seneca, Thomas Carlyle, and Marcus Aurelius, among others, they became passionate about the themes. One member, after reading Carlyle's *Past and Present*, had the group reflect on the presence of a soul, quoting from the book, "but yet it is a pity that we have lost the tidings of our souls" (101).

Guernsey Islanders also experienced other significant sacrifices. With only one day's notice, some of the island's children were readied and sent by transport ship to England: "Families had one day to decide and five years to abide with it... Some families dressed up their children, as though they were going to a party," undoubtedly a coping mechanism to keep the children from being anxious on this urgent Channel crossing. "Of all of the things that happened during the war, this one—making your children go away to try to keep them safe—was surely the most terrible" (229). The notion of sacrifice and sanctuary here are closely related. Books—and their themes, lives, philosophies, and characters—formed the nucleus of a sanctuary for the islanders: "we clung to books and to our friends; they reminded us we had another part to us" (64). And several of this novel's characters reflect on the personal and national sacrifices made by the authors of the works that they read. As in *The Book Thief*, books (and knowledge) were sacrificed by burning them to provide basic heat for shelter, but the knowledge symbolized by those destroyed works of Catullus and Wordsworth generated a greater sacrifice.

But sacrifice and sanctuary also took on a deeply personal meaning for the islanders. Elizabeth McKenna, one of the fiery young residents, began a series of sacrifices when she fell in love with Christian Hellman, a German doctor who was assigned to Guernsey. Described as "the German you imagine...except he could feel pain" (168), Christian fathered the child named Kit with Elizabeth. Shaffer and Barrows make some sympathetic references to the German soldiers on Guernsey, many of whom viewed the island as a sanctuary from the war on the continent.

But Elizabeth's nature was one of fighting and sacrificing for what was good and right. After caring for a dying, vermin-infested teenage Polish indentured worker, Elizabeth was arrested, sent to a French prison, and then to Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. She was executed there after trying to defend a young Jewish girl from a brutal beating.

In the most classic sense, redemption in *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* is portrayed through Elizabeth's atonement for her daughter's illegitimate birth from her liaison with the enemy doctor. Elizabeth nurses a seriously ill "slave laborer," is imprisoned for her defiance, and

executed for her protection of a young Jewish woman. The themes of redemption and deliverance involve many of the Guernsey Islanders as they tell how they have raised Kit and how the child's life has given them a renewed sense of purpose. At the end of the novel, the impending marriage of Juliet and Dawsey—and their adoption of Kit—completes the cycle of rebirth and generation. Amid references to Jane Austen, Balzac, Mark Twain, and Leigh Hunt, this novel reminds us about the meaning of literature—still one of the truest representations of humanity, soul, and self. In short, the reading of literature may be the only means, when the world has gone awry, that helps humankind continue to persevere over adversity and evil. The continued popularity of these themes attracts contemporary readers who want to understand the past in contemporary terms, making sense of the dangers and horrors of extraordinary times.

### *The Reader*

Its popularity fueled by the recent movie with the same name, Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* is a short, three-part novel of great depth, complexity, and moral anguish. It generates a kaleidoscope of emotions about the self-absorbed reactions to WWII from the second generation of Germans. The first part of this austere 1995 novel is set in an unnamed German city about twenty years after the end of the Second World War. Michael Berg, a fifteen-year-old student, encounters Hanna Schmitz, a woman in her mid-thirties, when he becomes suddenly ill with hepatitis. During his convalescence, Michael becomes obsessed with Hanna, and so returns to her apartment to thank her for her help. From that encounter, Michael and Hanna begin a brief, intense, passionate affair that ultimately consumes Michael's life—both as an adolescent and as an adult.

The atmosphere and tone of this first section, reflected in the "here and now memoir" and in the older Berg's recollection of the time, is of a nameless, colorless, emotionless city. Early dreams of a building by the train station depict a dead world, dusty with blind windows, reflecting the post-war world with a stark, anonymous, colorless existence. Michael's struggle with self-control reflects the post-war German psyche and his father's scholarly pursuits as an academic philosopher. The heritage of the eighteenth-century German romantic, *Sturm und Drang* era is evident in the duality of Michael's interior monologue; it also reflects his reading to Hanna about Hegelian dialectics:

"Events back then were part of a life-long pattern in which thinking and doing have either *come together* or *failed to come together*" (20)

"Precisely because she was *both close and removed* in such an easy way, I didn't want to visit her." (93)

The act of reading is central to *The Reader*, but it is very different from the reading in the Guernsey novel. In the latter, characters react strongly, even

passionately, to the classic works they read as individuals and then describe to the group. In effect, the characters popularize classic literature through their discussions. We hear the Guernsey Islanders declare their simple and/or complex literary opinions to a community of friends, in a world of color and transparent emotions, even if these feelings are silent, undeclared, or delayed in their expression. Through reading, the Guernsey Literary Society members offer each other hope, diversion, and sanctuary from the isolation and stoicism they endure from the German occupation. Reading is their bridge to the universal meaning of life.

But in *The Reader* the concept of literary sanctuary is much different—intimate, self-absorbing, a precursor to the sanctuary of sexual desire, longing, and fantasy that the young Michael desires. Early in their relationship, Hanna wants to know what Michael reads and learns in school. In secondary school, Michael reads literature from Homer and Cicero to Hemingway and modern European works. The more modern books are associated with adolescent learning and education, a backdrop for the sexual awakening Michael experiences from his lover. Reading becomes one means of transitioning into adulthood, finding meaning in school assignments that would have been cavalierly submitted for a grade. Within this intellectual heritage, Michael's reading is enveloped by dissolving colors, the song of a blackbird, and lighter and darker shades of gray. Reading is personal. It requires duality of thought. The morality of reading is also associated with Michael's father, a professor of philosophy whose colorless existence is compatible with endless dialectics: "thinking was his life—thinking and reading and writing and teaching" (30).

Michael's reflections on reading—and literature—are derived from his experiences as a young lover and adolescent life. He reads both classical and popular German and European novels—romantic and "coming of age." He imagines his relationship with Hanna to be similar to Julien Sorel's affair with Madame de Renal in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (*Scarlet and Black*). Similarly, he is enamored of Goethe's reported relationship with Madame von Stein. Thus, literary references are personal, romantic, and reflect Michael's longing and desire to escape from a colorless, passionless, intellectual adolescence. Michael reads *Emilia Galotti*, a late eighteenth-century, five-act German tragedy by Gotthold Lessing that portrays the challenges of love among the emerging bourgeois class. The reference to Lessing's play symbolizes the inherent class struggle that Michael later experiences—the clash between the untutored, older woman and the young lover from an academic background. Later references to Friederich Schiller's *Intrigue and Love*, another popular late eighteenth-century play, reflect the themes of bondage, power, and loss of freedom, both societal and personal. Clearly, *Intrigue and Love* symbolizes Michael's struggle with being possessed, possession, and the personal power and autonomy of adulthood. Schiller and Lessing also wrote about the implied sacrifices that the protagonists made in their lives, certainly an unspoken issue for the young Michael.

Shortly after their affair begins, Michael goes away with Hanna on a four-day biking trip through south-central Germany. Their travel is full of color and passion, and Hanna allows Michael to dominate in selecting the path, the inns, and the restaurants. It is during this trip that the first defined clues of Hanna's illiteracy surface. On one occasion, Hanna overreacts when Michael leaves a note that he is going out for breakfast. When he returns, Hanna explodes with shuddering, violence, physical tears, and animal sounds—a passion that hides her inability to read. Interestingly, it is during this interlude that they read German romantic author Joseph von Eichendorff's *Memoirs of a Good-for-Nothing*, a nineteenth-century picaresque account of a young man who leaves home after a fight with his father over the girl he loves:

She liked the disguises, the mix-ups, the complications and pursuits which the hero gets mixed up in in Italy. At the same time, she held it against him that he's a good-for-nothing who doesn't achieve anything, can't do anything, and doesn't want to besides. She was torn in all directions; hours after I stopped reading, she was still coming up with questions. (57)

Over the summer, as the pull of his classmates and adolescent activities entices Michael to leave Hanna's world, their affair wanes. Michael has sacrificed the company and camaraderie of his schoolmates for his affair with Hanna. But the reading of literature continues to offer them a sanctuary; together they experience Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, a novel new to them both. But this time, Hanna does not actively engage herself in the novel's world, as she had with other works that Michael read to her. Instead, she reacted to the reading as an outsider, absorbed in the milieu that the author created. The sanctuary offered by this world became more "open." As Michael is pulled by friends and activities at the local swimming pool, the pool mirrors the depth of the differences between the two of them—education, age, socioeconomic status: "we did not have a world we shared" (77). By the end of the summer, Hanna disappears, cementing the denial, disavowal, and betrayal that Michael began when the pull of his peer group overtook the passion of the relationship he had with Hanna.

During the second part of the novel, Michael is a young law student who describes his ennui as an envelope, completely "effortless": "...I had no difficulty with anything. Everything was easy: nothing weighed heavily. Perhaps that is why my bundle of memories is so small" (88). But it is during this time, after losing Hanna, that he spends shapeless afternoons, unable to open books without asking "if they were suitable for reading aloud" (87).

During his legal studies, he serendipitously becomes involved as an observer in a Nazi war crimes trial. Hanna and four other female SS guards are accused of preventing many young female Jewish prisoners from escaping a bombed, burning church near Cracow in 1944. Testimony from concentration

camp survivors indicates that as a guard, Hanna selected “favorite” prisoners, usually very frail and weak, to read aloud to her at night during their imprisonment. She was also accused of writing the report about the prisoners’ experiences during the bombing, their deaths, and the guards’ refusal to free them from the burning church. During the trial, Hanna admitted to writing the report—but only after being asked for a sample of her handwriting. Clearly it was more humiliating and shameful for Hanna to admit her illiteracy than to acknowledge her innocence because she could not have written the report.

The trial fills Michael with a void—a nothingness—as he sees Hanna after an eight-year absence. But his angst also reflects his generation’s need to explore the war, the camps, and the genocide, almost with scholarly detachment, to understand what happened. This sense of numbness, anesthesia, and nothingness permeates his view of Hanna’s trial, causing Michael to become a singular observer in an unending metaphysical hole.

The detachment, disengagement, and indifference Michael feels as he hears these revelations reflect the alienation he experienced after Hanna left him as an adolescent. There is no real sanctuary for Michael. Previously, his affairs, education, and youthful hobbies gave him sanctuary—but they were depersonalized, vacant experiences, not the spirit-filled, peaceful feeling of any activity, such as reading, or any place as a sanctuary. This “general numbness” permeates the law court as Michael’s generation, Germany’s “second generation,” struggles with what to do with the knowledge of the Jewish extermination.

Even though Hanna commits suicide at the end of *The Reader* (rather than face the outside world after 18 years in prison), still there is some hope in her learning to read and write while in prison and in her bequest of 7000 marks (made by Michael to the fund against Jewish illiteracy). Did not learning to read and write change for the worse her coping abilities to deal with this new German society? Would her being able to read and write when young have allowed Hanna to be a different, better person during the war?

In short, the popular culture about the Holocaust has become more important during the years since it officially ended. As the last survivors of the Holocaust are nearing the end of their lives, these popular works help to keep alive in popular understanding the horrors of that era. The scholarly and classic studies do not generally convey the intensity, the ordinariness of life, death, and rebirth, and people’s experiences in terms that have broad, mass appeal to engage the interest and understanding of contemporary readers, as do popular works. Novels, short stories, and hybrid novel-like accounts of the Holocaust capture the public’s engagement—no matter what the genre and style—when they deal with universal themes within and through the filter of contemporary social mores. All three of these contemporary novels reflect the popular culture about the Holocaust in terms that attract millions of readers. While these novels address the art of reading literature to portray sacrifice, provide emotional sanctuary, and generate redemption, they also reflect the popular sentiment of

knowing that an ordinary, honorable person can triumph over inexplicable adversity.

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## Tarzan and Sookie Sittin' in a Tree

This year Tarzan turns one hundred, delivered in the pages of *All-Story* magazine in October 1912. If the *Oxford American* “southern magazine of good writing” can claim William Shakespeare for the American South,<sup>1</sup> Tarzan should be a no-brainer. *Tarzan of the Apes* begins on a ship from England, takes place mostly in Africa, and interludes in Paris on the way to a Wisconsin dairy farm (I know—right?), but its heart belongs to Dixie. As everyone knows, the true heart of manly pulp fiction lives in its heroine, in this case Jane, a blonde-haired blue-eyed Baltimore beauty who regards her “dear South” as home.

The first film version was shot in the wilds of Louisiana, the apes of Tarzan’s clan played by men recruited from the New Orleans YMCA, inspiring Governor Bobby Jindal to declare April 13, 2012, as Tarzan Day.<sup>2</sup> The actor who played Tarzan in that 1918 film, Elmo Lincoln, had previously enjoyed a role in *Birth of a Nation* and in an earlier career once served as an Arkansas state trooper. Coincidence?

That Americans often assume Tarzan’s creator British simply because of Tarzan’s true identity as the Earl of Greystoke speaks volumes. Edgar Rice Burroughs hailed from Chicago, but his books’ yearning for aristocracy is indisputably Southern. Tarzan’s story is a fantasy marriage of inherited and natural aristocracies, where a blueblood child is also the ultimate self-made American man.

Tarzan chiefly expresses his superiority through his subordination of the locals, both savage ape-creatures and savage ape-like natives. Take that, Jack Johnson! Take that, Marcus Garvey! In ape-creature speech, Tarzan means *white-skin*. The nearby African village Burroughs’ calls a “plantation,” and when Tarzan kills the natives he does so one by one, dropping a lasso from the branch on which he lurks, yanking the innocent up, tying the rope off, and letting him swing—and cutting of him a figure all too familiar in the post-bellum South. Later, his mentor the Frenchman Paul D’Arnot stops him from shooting a black man they happen upon, but Tarzan doesn’t understand his new friend’s moral fussiness.

When by Providence’s hand Jane lands on the African coast at the exact spot where Tarzan’s parents landed twenty years before, her party includes Esmeralda, an Aunt Jemimah comic-relief nanny who panics about, screaming her fears of “gorilephants” while failing to stuff her bulk into a cabinet (in the beach cottage Tarzan’s human father erected), and passing out at the drop of a dime. Jane is soon enough taken by an ape-creature “toward a fate a thousand times worse than death,” in another thinly camouflaged reference, this time to the irrational collective Southern fear of the rapacious black man unable to control his hunger for fleshy whiteness. That 1918 movie did not bother with the camouflage: a black man, not an ape-creature, carries her off (even while the trailer reflexes the black-as-primate formulation by forgetting the film’s

substitution and promising a vision of the “ABDUCTION OF THE WHITE GIRL BY APES...”). But rest assured: if any of those apes did lay a finger on Enid Markey’s Jane, it was a white hand inside that monkey-suit glove.

Tarzan saves Jane, defeating the ape-creature (who happens to be his foster parents’ biological son) only to carry her away, beset himself by the bestial stirrings. Now it’s Jane’s turn to save herself, by saving Tarzan from himself. A paragon of Southern Ladyhood, Jane inspires his restraint. For Jane—as the book unambiguously messages—does Tarzan become a civilized man. For Jane he leaves nature and all things natural behind. I’d go so far as to say that because over the course of twenty-four books these two hearts-on-fire lovers have only one child suggests that they consummated their love only the one time, on the wedding night, and thus can Jane, for all intents and purposes within the world of Southern propriety, uphold the cults of virginity and connubial domesticity that readers of William Faulkner know so well. (Compare this to New York City’s solution, whereby the source of white fascination and anxiety becomes the literal impediment: make the Kong so enormous to render intimate congress impossible.)

Here’s where things get really interesting. Jane too, despite her snowy whiteness, is beset by bestial stirrings. Instinctively, for Lord Greystoke, for the noble hidden within; but physically, for the savage body in front of her. A body Burroughs describes as deeply darkened by the African sun and a body clad in native garb. As Conevery Bolton Valecius’s study of attitudes of nineteenth century settlers to Southern frontier states like Missouri and Arkansas shows, white Americans felt they “did not belong in hot places; black people did.”<sup>3</sup> At one point Jane shudders with the thought of the half-caste children Tarzan likely has fathered on a native bride, but that shudder runs rich and deep. Burroughs has overtly saved the reader from witnessing the white woman’s rape by the ape-creature and surrogate black man only to subliminally titillate the reader with the miscegenous lust between Tarzan and Jane. It’s not for nothing that Nigel Cox’s novel *Tarzan Presley* imagines Tarzan as rockabilly Elvis, taking advantage of the transgressive blackness essential to the two iconic white men’s appeal: “Tarzan [Presley] was not just the race thing but also the race thing with sex in it.”<sup>4</sup>

The universe of Tarzan narratives and artifacts I call Tarzania, flirts with more than just the miscegenation taboo. Miscegenation, homosexuality, and incest—these are the sexual relations civilization has defined not as unnatural, but as uncivilized. They are not crimes against nature. They are crimes *of* nature against civilization. Thus these bestial potentialities constitute the necessary and necessarily repressed subtexts of Tarzan’s design to evolve into an English gentleman. In Tarzan tales, cannibalism is often their proxy.<sup>5</sup>

Miscegenation, homosexuality, and incest also happen to be the three contending motives for the murder at the center of William Faulkner’s great Southern epic *Absalom, Absalom!* Does Henry Sutpen kill Charles Bon rather than let his sister marry him because Bon has black blood; because he is their

half-brother, and Henry is in love with his own sister; or because Henry is himself in love with Bon? To which would their father Thomas most object? Which most undermines the social order he has so painstakingly adapted himself to? Which will most upset his design to evolve into a Southern aristocrat?

It's hard for me not to see something of Burroughs' larger-than-life Tarzan, something of his Darwinian American Adam, in Faulkner's larger-than-life Thomas Sutpen. Sutpen begins as a white trash boy from backwoods Appalachia so far out of time and mind that he did not learn the South's racial hierarchy until his family moved to Tidewater Virginia. When a finely dressed "monkey-nigger" butler refuses him entrance into a white plantation house, Sutpen takes this as an affront to his very humanity, and spends the rest of his life, like Tarzan the ape-boy after learning of his human origin, defining himself against that image of the uppity monkey-nigger. In Haiti he puts down a slave revolt by walking alone into their ranks and subduing them not by force but by "some ascendancy or forbearance"—by the very white superiority by which Tarzan comes to lord over African natives. (Haven't you seen them kowtow to him in the Johnny Weissmuller movies?). In Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi, he and his Haitian workers live together for years in the swamp from which they drag the logs to build his mansion, and where a townsman, stepping on one of those workers, mistakes him for an alligator.

One of the novel's great images is of Sutpen wrestling with his black workers for sport—the two opponents shirtless, covered in the mud, verily indistinguishable, "gouging at one another's eyes as if their skins should not only have been the same color but should have been covered with fur too." Like Tarzan. And like Tarzan, Sutpen always wins. My favorite chapter has Sutpen telling his life story in parallel with his hunting down, along with white townsmen, his Haitians, and the town's hunting dogs, the fleeing French architect who designed Sutpen's mansion. Like Tarzan, the architect evades by moving through the trees, until unlike Tarzan a miscalculation brings him back to earth and the dogs and the workers trap him like a coon. All the while Sutpen wonders aloud about his own miscalculation, the error in his life's design, which will eventually run him similarly to the ground and have his family line devolve to a mixed race man of animal intelligence bellowing from the wilderness.

*Abaslom, Abaslaom!*'s true plaint is not Quentin Compson's protest of the novel's last line—"I don't hate the south! I don't hate the south!"—but Thomas Sutpen's unspoken *I am not an animal! I am not an animal!* Yet, as *Tarzan of the Apes* is a popular romance, its protagonist can in the end accept both his aristocratic heritage and the evolutionary truth that "my mother was an ape."

Burroughs and Faulkner were great storytellers fully aware, as Southern masters are, of the tallness of their tales. Tarzan himself loved practical jokes, and as Burroughs continued spinning out the series he planted his tongue visibly in his cheek. In *Tarzan and the Lion Man*, Tarzan auditions for a movie role to play Tarzan but doesn't get the part. The self-parody makes for much of

the delight in the reading. *Absalom, Absalom!* for all its ponderousness, is also good-humored. In the opening pages Quentin bemoans how long it's taking to get to the story—which won't end for three hundred more long-winded, long-winding pages. And when his Harvard roommate Shreve begins to "play" with Quentin's gloomy story, well, it's fairly clear that Shreve's lighthearted send-up is the healthier choice.

There's also something undeniably, unquenchably vampiric about Faulkner's South—the undead and unliving feeding off one another, the living never letting the decedent fully die, the dead never letting the quick fully quicken. It's almost as if the Transylvanian castle has been transplanted to Sutpen's Hundred. Lest we forget, the book's narrating spirit, Quentin Compson, is himself living dead, having killed himself seven years before this book in *The Sound and the Fury*. There's something shady about this ghost's obsessing us, his parasitic thriving at our expense, while warning us against just such haunts.

As a pet corollary to the hypothesis that Tarzan no longer commands the collective imagination, I propose that his story's foundational man-or-beast dilemma has, at our turn-of-the-millennium moment, merely possessed itself of a different literary corpus. You need only have caught one episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *True Blood* to know what I'm talking about: when these vamps get their game faces on, they aren't suave, seductive, caped counts, but canine-fanged frenzied animals akin to the ape-creature who steals away with Jane tucked under his arm. The new male vampire protagonists fight for their human souls by restraining the beast within—it's Tarzan all over again. If Tarzan had Jane Porter to inspire him to behave, his reincarnations have Buffy Summers, Sookie Stackhouse, and Bella Swan. Tellingly, the very first humanity-defining moral quandary Tarzan confronts involves cannibalism. Like Buffy's Angel and Sookie's Bill Compton, to redeem his soul Tarzan must choose, against his abiding hunger, not to chow down. Tarzan's embodiment of the man-or-beast question is too tired, a too literal inquiry into the question that has lost its shock a century and a half now after Darwin. In other words, he's a bore. He's just not sexy anymore.

Moreover, I can't think of a popular turn-of-the-millennium vampire from television or the big screen that can't keep the beast-people out. The lycanthropes of *Buffy*, *True Blood*, *Twilight*, and *Being Human* only underscore what these shows are really about. Not coincidentally, the great vampire narratives of Burroughs' generation, Stoker's *Dracula* and F.W. Murnau's unauthorized cinematic rip-off *Nosferatu*, also represent the threat not as that of the demonic and the supernatural realm, but as that of animality and the natural world. Stoker's count is a hirsute man from the wilderness with a special connection to wolves, and Murnau fills the eye with images of dangerous nature: those craggy mountains, the howling wolves, the earth and rats that accompany Count Orlok to London, the storm that drives the ship, the spider and the carnivorous plant as blatant analogues for the predator from Transylvania whom

the script characterizes as an animal: “Sharp rat-like teeth appear over the lower lip . . . The claws of the Count’s spidery fingers cover much of the [letter] . . . He looks at Hutter as a snake would hypnotize its prey.”<sup>6</sup> The mixed metaphors strengthen Count Orlok’s connection to nature’s overwhelming and indeterminate monstrosity. These vampires are supernatural only by being so exceedingly natural.

Naturally, some of the best of the new vampires are Southern. Specifically Louisianan: Anne Rice’s *LeStat*, Jewelle Gomez’s *Gilda*, and Charlaine Harris’s Bill Compton (two from New Orleans, where Faulkner’s Sutpen stashes his biracial ex-wife and child). That *Buffy*, *Being Human*, and *Twilight* also channel Tarzan does not negate the American South as an especial beacon. What better place for Tarzan’s dilemma of belonging?—as John Jeremiah Sullivan has written in a different context, “the region has always produced its geniuses, but nobody ever referred to it as an incubator of civilization.”<sup>7</sup> Bill Compton was one of the boys in grey Tarzan’s Jane so esteemed, a Confederate soldier when he passed from the living to the undead. Harris might as well have named him Compson after Faulkner’s undead Quentin.

The gothic incest of Faulkner and Poe is here too: when one vampire makes another, the relationship is always as parent and child, sibling-comrades, and lovers. Homosexuality, a staple subtext of vampire tales from the beginning, has risen to the surface in a preponderance of the recent fictions. The old South’s denial of interracial relations is exploded in the new South’s vampire narratives like *The Gilda Stories*, and *True Blood*. Like the Sookie Stackhouse novels on which it is based, the HBO series, set in small-town Bon Temps, Louisiana, is probably the best example of the persistence of Tarzan’s repressed preoccupations. It has orphans and kings and queens and queers, and colorblind colorful sex. Its polysexual orgy includes people who sleep with the half-animal vamps, with animal shifters, with werewolves, and, once in season two, almost with an actual bull. Bon Temps indeed.

Have I mentioned that Tarzan’s first girlfriend was an ape?

These new Southern vampires have reinvigorated Tarzan’s dilemma, entertaining us with their own species of literature, and in their own way getting after what Faulkner considered the only thing that can “make good writing,” the only thing “worth writing about”—“the human heart in conflict with itself.”

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Warwick Sabin, “Billy Shakespeare: Southern Man,” *Oxford American* 73 (June 2011), 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> See *Tarzan: Lord of the Louisiana Jungle*, prod. and dir. Al Bohl, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 232.

<sup>4</sup> Nigel Cox, *Tarzan Presley* (Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press, 2004), 298.

<sup>5</sup> Drawn from Alex Vernon, *On Tarzan* (U. Georgia Press), 2008.

<sup>6</sup> *Nosferatu* (The Ultimate Two-Disc Edition, Kino Video), 2007.

<sup>7</sup> *Pulphead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 215.

## The Evolution of *The Thing*

Recently, the prequel to *The Thing* has appeared in theaters confirming the fascination which has grown up around this story. In this paper, I will outline the evolution of this story from print to films in order to show the cultural shifts that have taken place from the original appearance of the story in 1938. From the emergence of the Great Depression through the War on Terrorism, this archetypal story has built on the hopes and fears of the American public for nearly seventy-five years. Building on H. P. Lovecraft's famous statement that the greatest fear of all is the fear of the unknown, the story of the Thing has successfully captured the essence of both twentieth and twenty-first century primal fears. Each work presents an alien villain that threatens civilization and an American hero to combat it. In each case, the mood of the times, the President at the time, and the nature of the threat give symbolic meaning to the story.

The original appearance of the evolving story of the Thing was in the magazine *Astounding* in 1938. The author, John W. Campbell, Jr., has become an icon from the Golden Age of Science Fiction, although his career was based more on editing than on original writing. The story "Who Goes There" is the core for all of the following film versions. The basic plot of the story is an encounter with an alien creature that can shift its appearance as a survival technique. A group of heroic Antarctic explorers encounter and conquer the creature, defeating an alien invasion.

For the historical background of the time of the writing, America was still suffering from the effects of the Great Depression. Never had an economic catastrophe created such far reaching effects on America and on the world as a whole. The 1920's had been a time of unprecedented growth, leading to heavy financial speculation and inevitably to the banking crisis. The Hoover administration, practicing a laissez-faire economic policy of economic self-correction, did little to abate the crisis. Ordinary people saw their property and wells being gobbled up by powerful forces that they little understood and had no power to withstand. Newly elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched a policy of activism to combat what he saw as America's greatest enemy—fear. His most famous quotation in fact is, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." He launched one innovative program after another—the WPA program, Rural Electrification, the SEC, the Social Security Act, the Wagner Act—to combat the invisible enemy, the Depression. Although the activist period slowed in 1937-1938, Americans had taken hope from his optimistic, enthusiastic counterattack on the Depression (Remini 223-228).

Thematically, Campbell's story endorses the "can-do" values of America in a time of growing optimism when under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt it was working its way out of the Great Depression. The story is relatively simple with strong emphasis on the science aspect of science

fiction/fantasy. The main character, MacReady (the pun on readiness is surely intended), represents the traditional American hero of popular culture. In stature, he is gigantic, a powerful physical figure with a mane of blonde hair, rugged good looks, intense seriousness, and complete confidence in his ability, both as a geologist and as an American. The alien, even with its shape-shifting capability and vastly advanced science, is simply no match for the brave, resourceful American hero. Campbell believed that such a hero, through use of science and bravery, could impose his will on nature. He believed, "It is deadly to *adapt* to nature, a lazy, undisciplined way that leads to digestion by the cosmic process; survival means *control* of nature. The monster is the opposite of humanity because it goes with nature, not against it. For curiosity, it has mere cunning, for pooled mental resources collective imitation . . ." (Stover 116).

The conflict derives not only from the malevolent alien, discovered as the apparent sole survivor of a spaceship crash 20 million years ago, frozen in a block of ice away from the ship, but from the philosophical/scientific disagreement between the biologist and pure scientist Blair (perhaps representing the unsympathetic economists of the Hoover Administration) and the more instinctive, intuitive physicist Norris (perhaps reflecting Roosevelt's more humane approach). Blair feels that the threat the alien poses should be discounted for the sake of pure knowledge, while Norris feels that its evil appearance—three red eyes and an expression of extreme anger—indicate that it is dangerous. Of course, Blair wins the argument, and like many scientists, opens the Pandora's box of an alien infection that could end humanity. During this time period, as war raged in Europe and the memory of the massive destruction of WW I, readers would have understood all too well the dangers of science applied to hostile purpose.

As soon as it thaws, the alien immediately fights back with every bit of the anger shown in its expression. The sled dogs instinctively attack it, and the men are forced to shoot at it, finding that it can withstand bullets. Only the large blow torches can finally kill it.

In studying its corpse and the corpse of one of the dogs, they find that the alien's cells continue to live and are imitating the dog. At this point, the theme of paranoia, of not being able to trust friends or colleagues, sets in. Immediately, Blair realizes the implications of what he has unleashed and turns in horror from his colleagues, thirty-seven in all, feeling that they have already been infected and that the only solution is to kill every living thing to preserve humanity. The others realize that this is an overreaction and confine him, taking the alternative of filtering out the alien imposters from the still human figures.

Since Garry, the commanding officer, is under suspicion from his contact with the alien, he turns command over to MacReady, the Chief Pilot and second in command. MacReady takes immediate, decisive action, killing all the dogs and burning their corpses, and following suit with the cattle, which had also been contaminated. He then, using knowledge from his former study of medicine and with the cooperation of Van Wall, devises the blood test that will

separate the aliens from the humans. The test flushes out fourteen aliens who are quickly destroyed during their transformations, using the blow torches. As a coda, MacReady and the remaining humans find that Blair in isolation had been taken over and had been in the process of building an air lifting device to take him to civilization. The device is driven by atomic power, only a theory at this time, and anti-gravity which has never been developed. Even the danger of an albatross flying in and being taken over could have led to the destruction of all humanity. A word needs to be said about the setting that works both to advantage and disadvantage. The isolation is frightening, in that the human group can expect no outside help. One critic, Elizabeth Leane, actually sees the environment as also being an alien force. A similar linkage to the alien environment appears in an earlier study by Vivian Sobchak in reference to the Arctic in the earlier film (Chapter 2). However, the setting is also disadvantageous to the alien in that it cannot use its greatest advantage, imitating life forms, once it has been discovered, due to the bleakness of this landscape.

Although the threat is never minimized, with the stakes of the entire planet on the line, the American hero is more than equal to the task of defeating the alien presence. The trump card for humanity turns out to be instinct, the gut feeling that Norris and the dogs experienced at the appearance of the alien, and the ferocious survival instinct. These quintessentially human characteristics dating back to the earliest appearance of humanoids and shared by its fellow animals, the dogs in particular, are the salvation of humanity. The theme suggests that pure science is inferior to the biological nature of humanity, as found in the red-blooded American hero whose physicality defeats the advanced intellectuality of the alien just as the Roosevelt administration eventually defeated the Great Depression.

Campbell believed in activism. As editor or writer, he preferred stories “. . . in which the protagonist solves a technical problem through scientific or engineering training or outwits one or more aliens because humans are the toughest, smartest kids on the block” (D’Ammassa 70). Furthermore, he believed in rugged American individuality over the rising block of collectivism emerging from Communism in the USSR and China. “For him [Campbell], collectivism is a monstrous thing that would devour human ideals, but should not be able to do so as long as the superior strength of individuals is united in free association” (Stover 116).

Following World War II, Americans continued to feel confident after their defeat of the Axis powers. However, the Atomic Age brought new concerns about threats to America. The prospect of invasion from powerful enemies in China and the USSR, now possessing atomic weapons and aided through espionage, created a climate of fear and paranoia leading to the extremes of McCarthyism. President Harry Truman, though the successful prosecutor of the American victories in Europe and Asia, fell into a quagmire in Korea trying to combat Communism in a limited war. His popularity fell as he was blamed for “losing” China to Communism and failing to fight aggressively

enough in Korea. His principal critic, General Douglas MacArthur, was a highly popular figure who elicited great sympathy from the American public when Truman fired him for insubordination (Remini 243-257).

Campbell's story offered the potential to explore this threat of invasion/infiltration through the symbolic concept of alien invasion. The black and white movie, *The Thing from Another Worlds* (Howard Hawkes 1951) grew from Campbell's plot but added some new dimensions to the story, while changing characters and the nature of the alien. Visually, the Arctic region (note the change from Antarctic to Arctic) once again offered a great setting for the story. Its remoteness, bleakness, and isolation added a natural source of visual wonder to the story. The crash landing of the space ship, called in that day a flying saucer, focused on the fascination with outer space and aliens popular during the time. From a technical point of view, having the ship buried in ice and destroyed by thermite charges, consistent with the original story, left the appearance of the ship to the viewer's imagination, keeping it mysterious. It was much easier to produce the alien itself, since its essential form is humanoid. It, too, was buried in ice but was hacked out and carried to the base of the scientific team for further study. The setting once again plays an important role, both exterior and interior. The compound is full of nooks and isolated areas from which the monster can pounce unexpectedly on its victims. It is noteworthy that film critic Roger Ebert remembers this film as especially terrifying for this very reason.

Although the characters' names were all changed from the original story, the actor Kenneth Tobey clearly embodies the heroic character of the American. In this version, and appropriate to a time in which America had been involved in military action in Korea, a military framework seemed appropriate. Tobey as Captain Patrick Hendry is sent on orders from his commanding General to find out what is happening in the Arctic since the reports are confusing about the crash of an airship. It is not American or Canadian, so it could possibly be a Russian aircraft. Naturally, during the Cold War, the military would want to know what the Russians were doing and to examine the aircraft to learn about their technological capability.

Other new elements in the movie are the appearance of women characters and an awkward, "aw shucks" romance between Captain Hendry and Carrington's secretary Nikki Nicholson (Margaret Sheridan). This topic is pursued in Margaret Tarratt's article, "Monsters from the Id," with a focus on the Freudian elements of 1950's sexual repression and subconscious desire. Another added element is a reporter Ned Scott (Douglas Spencer) who serves as the Gabriel to warn the whole world of the first contact with aliens and with the need to be on the watch for their appearance. The watchword for this movie actually is his line, "Watch the skies."

In addition to fighting the alien itself, following the original story, Captain Hendry has to fight scientist Doctor Carrington (Robert Cornthwaite) who wants to preserve the creature in the name of "pure" science." From a

cultural perspective, the struggle represents the conflict between the military priority of dealing with a clear and present danger compared to science's desire to promote knowledge, even when it poses a danger to the general public. The arrogant scientist, a reflection of the archetypal Dr. Frankenstein, reminds the viewers of the inhuman experiments of Nazi scientists such as Joseph Mengele and of the unleashing of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. During this time period, Americans put more faith in the military than in the scientists (and politicians), as attested by the wide popularity of General Douglas McArthur.

The scientist believes that the alien must represent an advanced technology since it came from a world in which the inhabitants were able to build a space ship, which was beyond the capability of human beings. The alien is also a form of plant life, devoid of the emotions and sex drive which the scientist believes have held back human progress. Unfortunately though, the alien seems to have no desire to communicate with earth beings, only to destroy them and to survive on their blood. Dr. Carrington actually uses some of the tissue from the alien's arm, which the sled dogs pulled off, to begin breeding seedlings which ostensibly will evolve into full grown aliens, like the one attacking the compound. The alien (played by James Arness) displays only savagery and destruction, seeming to be incapable of building a space craft or of sharing knowledge. In appearance, it is a clear imitation of the Frankenstein monster, as is Carrington's stubborn defense of it, reminiscent of the obsessed Dr. Frankenstein.

In this film, a new weapon is put into play to destroy the alien: electricity. Captain Hendry and his men employ an electric cable to burn the vegetative alien to death. In spite of its advanced scientific knowledge and of Dr. Carrington's desperate attempts to warn it or save it, the alien walks straight into the trap and is destroyed. As follow up, Hendry destroys the seedlings Dr. Carrington had produced from the alien arm in order to eliminate all possibility of any continuing alien presence. Ultimately, it is human camaraderie that saves the day. "The group becomes for [Howard] Hawks, a metaphor for the American dream—a nation capable of facing the challenge of the unknown and facing its own diversity and division, not through strength or knowledge alone, but through an abiding affection that bonds it together" (Phillips 52).

Part of the terror the film inspires is that of "the Other," an unknowable intelligence bent on the destruction of humanity. The cultural perspective comes at that time both from the revelations of the Concentration Camps showing the depths of evil the Nazis were capable of and the single-minded enmity of the Japanese with their kamikaze attacks. Now, the Chinese hordes, described as the "Yellow Peril," and the implacable Russians, also possessing a huge and determined military, represented an incomprehensible threat to American values. Some critics feel that the threat symbolized is nearer to home in the form of the "corporation man" who pursues business over human concerns (Phillips 55), a similar complaint from the Depression era about the Hoover administration. The

point seems to be that even intelligent, humanoid creatures can be capable of savagery and coldness beyond what we consider humanity.

In the final analysis, *The Thing from Another World*, reinforces the original story's contention that the American hero can defeat even the most advanced alien intelligence based on intuition and ingenuity. ". . . the Thing could just as well be an escaped wild animal; all that's needed to contain and restrain it is clear thinking and prompt action" (Strick 23). The larger application is that America will prevail against the Communist threat from Russia and Red China no matter what weapons or implacable will they demonstrate. However, the alien's inability to imitate life forms and its apparent lack of understanding of its enemy and weapons make it fairly easy to defeat, far more so than the insidious alien of the original story.

In the years leading up to 1982, America was undergoing another crisis, one of confidence. The Jimmy Carter administration had presided over a series of crises—major gas price hikes, uncontrolled inflation, accompanying economic difficulties leading to an unprecedented prime rate of 20% killing the housing market, and ultimately, the worst one, the Iran Hostage Crisis. Carter actually delivered an address to the nation, identifying a crisis of confidence, a malaise that had fallen over America. Of all, the hostage crisis undermined confidence the most. Carter's nemesis was the Ayatollah Khomeini, a grim, implacable enemy who refused in any way to deal with the "great Satan," the United States. In desperation, Carter authorized a military rescue mission to liberate the hostages. It failed miserably and may have been one of the most direct reasons for Ronald Reagan defeating Carter in the 1980 Presidential election (Remini 289-292). Other critics have linked the Vietnam War to the film, notably Brooks Landon in chapter two of *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence: Rethinking Science Fiction Film in the Age of Electronic Reproduction*. He points out the shape-shifting quality of the North Vietnamese who could strike through a peasant, woman, or child, who were strapped with explosives (Landon 40-41).

During the first years of the Reagan Presidency, the country continued to suffer a severe recession, a painful economic phenomenon affecting nearly the entire population in ways, arguably, that the Cold War had not. Although, like Eisenhower before him, Reagan had resolved the international crisis of the Iran hostages, the mood of the country was generally sour, and Reagan, later to become one of the most popular Presidents, had a low approval rating (Remini 292). Following the lead of two other iconic movies with radical political messages for their times, *Night of the Living Dead*, 1968, (during the Viet Nam War), in which the hero is killed at the end, and *Jaws*, 1975, (the earlier gas crisis and the subsequent economic pinch), in which the shark represents a force almost too powerful for human beings, *The Thing* presented an extremely negative view of the times. In fact so much so that it was a box office failure, with audiences preferring the sunny picture of aliens presented in Spielberg's *ET*, perhaps inspired by the mood of optimism that Reagan in imitation of FDR

had brought to the country. “Carpenter’s apocalyptic, pessimistic, and graphic tale of paranoia and alien invasion was met with lukewarm box-office receipts and an almost overwhelming critical condemnation” (Phillips 143) with respected critics such as Harlan Ellison, representing science fiction/fantasy, and Roger Ebert, representing film, finding the movie appallingly bad. As with Jimmy Carter, but not to as severe an extent, the film damaged John Carpenter’s career as a film maker. The film only later gained popularity among science fiction/fantasy aficionados and in time became a cult favorite. Once again, the story of the Thing offered a resonant trope for the times, even though the general viewing audience found the film too grim to square with their hopes in the new Reagan administration.

The film version of the original story now became simply *The Thing* (John Carpenter). Its echoes of its 1951 predecessor were the title burning its way ominously on to the screen and the early scenes of the spaceship buried in the ice. In nearly every other way, it reverted to the original “Who Goes There” story, but with an entirely different cultural message. A dimension largely missing from the earlier film was the ominous music of Ennio Morricone. From the first scene with the helicopter mysteriously chasing the sled dog, the music creates a tone of dread, especially as it is coupled with the stark scenery, now in color, of Antarctica.

The 1982 film follows “Who Goes There?” in the names of the characters. R. J. MacReady (Kurt Russell) is literally a darker version of the original, with a dark mane of hair and beard, not bronze. The other characters largely follow the original names—Blair, Bennings, Copper, Garry, Norris, Clark—while adding new ones—Nauls, (cook), Windows (communications), Childs (mechanic), Fuchs (assistant to Blair), and Palmer (second string chopper pilot and pothead). The group is smaller than the original 37 men and strictly a scientific operation, although Garry seems to have a military background. And, in this film, paranoia dominates, in contrast to the 1951 version, with none of the crew trusting each other as the action progresses.

Differing from the original story, the scientific team follows up the unexpected and tragic visit of the Norwegian helicopter, through travelling to the ruined Norwegian camp site. There, they discover the charred remains of the Thing, the ice case in which it had been carried to the camp, another echo of the 1951 film, and several video tapes recording the Norwegian discovery. It is only on a second trip that they discover the buried space ship, which in contrast to the original and the 1951 movie, survived the thermite charges. As in the 1951 movie, the age is estimated at 100,000 years instead of the millions of the original story. Unlike in the original story or the 1951 film, the team does not discover the full impact of the Thing’s threat until well into the movie after the infected dog from the Norwegian camp, a factor not present in the preceding versions, has a chance to infect at least one member of the team, either Norris or Palmer. The dramatic battle follows the original printed version with the Thing revealing its presence only when it is confined with the sled dogs who sense its

alien nature. The ensuing fight employs the more advanced technology of 1982, creating a monster worthy of the descriptions in "Who Goes There," a tentacle, shape-shifting monstrosity that seeks any form to defend itself while attacking both dogs and men. In this version, it is a flame thrower that finally dispatches the monster.

It is only at this crisis point that the team, at Garry's command and under Blair's expertise, realizes that the alien cells are still living and that it had been hiding in the dog, as a perfect imitation. As in the original, Blair realizes the stark possibility of the destruction of humanity in approximately one year's time if the Thing reaches civilization. He also finds through the same computer projection that the chance of a crew member being infected is 75%. With those odds and the high stakes, he sets about destroying all the equipment in order to isolate the crew and ultimately kill all the potentially infected people, meaning everyone. Again, the team takes a more conservative approach, disarming and isolating Blair and trying to devise a test to separate the infected from the healthy.

As in the original version, the Thing is extremely insidious, capable of stealth and deception. As a perfect copy, it moves seamlessly among the crew members, hearing everything they say and planting suspicion among them. The only power it lacks from the original version is that it apparently can't read their minds. However, it always moves to thwart any test that would identify it, destroying the clean blood samples in the medical supply room. It simply, like the Ayatollah Khomeini, refuses to follow rules of human negotiation. It quickly becomes clear that it is at least a match and maybe more against human ingenuity. Since, as in the original, both Dr. Copper and Garry, are implicated in the destruction of the blood samples, they are bound and drugged, as MacReady with the help of Fuchs tries to devise a definitive test. Devising the test is far more difficult than in the original.

In another innovation, Norris has a heart attack, forcing MacReady to release Dr. Copper to try to revive him. As he works desperately, the Thing bursts out of Norris, killing Copper. It takes a particularly hideous, spider-like form, using Norris' head and tentacles, splitting off into two separate creatures. Only the flame thrower can destroy these two monstrosities. After control is re-established, MacReady realizes that a simple hot needle in a blood sample, the same test from the original, will identify the monsters. The test works, flushing out Palmer who also reverts to alien form, killing Windows in the process. After both are burned, the test confirms that all remaining members are human, leaving only Blair isolated in his cabin to test. Once again, this task is far more difficult to achieve, with a storm raging outside.

When the team reaches the shed where Blair is confined, they discover that he has escaped but that below the floor he has nearly completed a miniature space ship, a small duplicate of the one in the ice. At this point, the remaining members under MacReady's leadership realize that there is only one sure way to defeat the monster, to destroy the entire compound, virtually committing

suicide. In this sense, the group is certainly a courageous representative of humanity, but the cultural message is that humanity is not strong enough to overcome the crisis. The only victory can be Pyrrhic in spite of their heroism.

Blair returns, reverts to alien form, but is unable to prevent the explosion that destroys the complex. At the end, only two crew members remain, MacReady and Childs, who wandered off into the storm, thinking he saw Blair, and therefore, may be contaminated. The whole complex is burning away, and it is clear neither can survive. The film ends ambiguously, posing two possibilities: MacReady will use the flame thrower to kill Childs to make sure; a rescue crew will discover the corpses and relive the nightmare this crew has just experienced if Childs is infected, possibly releasing the Thing on the world population.

Clearly, this film takes a bleaker view of human prospects than either of its predecessors. It is uncompromising in its statement that humanity is not capable of defeating an implacable enemy, such as the negative impact of the economy or the implacability of Islam. In fact, an alternative ending had been filmed in which a rescue helicopter finds McRready and Childs, but it was never shown to audiences.

For many years, a prequel to the 1982 film of *The Thing* has been in the works. In the years leading to this project, the United States once again suffered a huge crisis, the near Depression of 2008, brought on by the bursting of the housing bubble. This time, the outgoing President George W. Bush cooperated with the incoming Obama administration to take active measures to prevent a full scale Depression. Although a full blown Great Depression was averted, once again huge numbers of Americans as well as the rest of the world, lost homes and jobs because of the crisis. New President Obama tried to launch an activist approach imitating FDR, but the negative fallout from the crisis hindered initiatives such as health care reform and other progressive measures. The Republican opposition coalesced into an obstructionist body leaving America in a state of paralysis and promoting a crisis of confidence in government as a solution to its citizens' problems. Riding above these overwhelming crises, Obama inherited the continuing War on Terror. Foreshadowed in some ways in 1979 through the Iran Hostage crisis, the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, had provoked the Bush administration to lash back against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, the heirs of the Ayatollah Khomeini now in the person of Osama Bin Laden. This grinding conflict had sapped the money and energy of Americans for longer than any foreign war. Also, the enemy became a faceless, insidious entity which followed no rules of combat and had no regard for human life. In this environment of negativity, the 1982 film gained even more popularity as a cultural symbol.

The prequel to *The Thing*, 2011, (Matthijs van Heijningen Jr.) takes us back to the original encounter of the Norwegians with the alien as outlined in the 1982 movie which would be just a few weeks previous to the action of the Carpenter film. At the beginning of the film, Dr. Sander Halvorson (Ulrich

Thomsen), a prominent scientist, enlists an American graduate student in paleontology, Kate Lloyd (Mary Elizabeth Winstead), to help him examine a 100,000 year old "fossil." His colleague, Dr. Edvard Wolner (Trond Espen Seim), the head of the scientific team of twelve people which has discovered the spacecraft, has contacted Halvorson about this incredible find. The conflict is almost immediately established between the "pure" scientist Halvorson, who will pursue knowledge at any cost, and the graduate student paleontologist Lloyd who takes the more cautious path of preserving human life. This conflict occurs in two of the preceding versions, *Carrington vs. Hendry* (1951 film) and *Blair vs. Norris* (1938 text). Wolner immediately sides with Halvorson, while Lloyd draws her allies from Halvorson's assistant, Goodman (Eric Christian Olsen) and from the ranks of the crew, the two helicopter pilots, Carter (Joel Edgerton), a Norwegian version of MacReady and Jameson (Adewale Akanuoye-Agbaje), and Lars (Jorgen Langhelle), the all-purpose workman and dog handler.

The focus of the prequel quickly becomes action in contrast to the 1982 version which played heavily on suspense. On the first night in the compound, the Thing explodes dramatically out of the block of ice, shattering the roof and escaping into the compound. Two of the team who are searching for the alien find it hiding under a shed. It attacks them almost immediately, killing one by pulling him into its gullet and spattering the other with blood. The rest of the team quickly douses it with kerosene and sets it afire with a flame thrower. The remains are carried inside for an autopsy.

During the autopsy, Lloyd discovers that the alien was imitating the victim's cells. She also discovers that it can only imitate biological tissue since it has ejected a metal brace the victim had to reinforce a broken bone. This discovery is an innovation in the story not appearing in any other version and playing an important role in the ensuing plot. The surviving member of the pair who first encountered the alien is acting in a peculiar manner, appearing to be a victim of posttraumatic stress. The scientists decide to send him to a hospital for treatment via helicopter. Once again, Lloyd's intuition leads her to check the bathroom the victim had recently visited. There, she discovers blood and several dental fillings, indicating to her that the victim is actually infected. When she flags the helicopter, another infected member of the crew on board transforms, causing the helicopter to spiral out of control and crash in an inaccessible area apparently killing all aboard.

As Blair had concluded, Lloyd quickly realizes that no one should leave the camp. In order to prevent some of the team from traveling to a neighboring Russian camp, she enlists the only other female member of the crew Juliette (Kim Bubbs) who seems to be on her side and has been casting suspicion on other crew members to show her where the keys to the sno-cats are hidden. At this point, Juliette transforms revealing the Thing's basic form. It is essentially a four-appendage monstrosity which retains the head of the victim and can unleash clawed tentacles that serve as spears to pierce its victims. It can

move forward in a somewhat awkward walking or running pattern to pursue its victims. As in all other versions, fire is the only sure way to kill it.

The plot advances rapidly from this point. Using the fact that the aliens cannot imitate inorganic materials, Lloyd devises a test much simpler than the laborious, time-consuming blood tests of the original story and of the 1982 film. She simply checks the mouths of each crew member to see if they have dental fillings. From this simple test, she is able to isolate the humans from the suspected aliens. Her allies, Carter and Jameson have remarkably survived the helicopter crash and have returned to her aid. The two scientists are primary suspects, although they claim to have porcelain fillings or to have practiced such excellent dental health that they have no fillings. As in the printed text and the 1982 film, the test quickly flushes out the aliens. After a fire fight that destroys most of the compound, Halvorson escapes in a sno-cat and heads toward the spacecraft with Lloyd and Carter, nearly the only human survivors, pursuing. He descends into the spaceship and ignites its engines, apparently planning to take off for either Earth's civilization or for his home planet. In a scene reminiscent of *Aliens*, Lloyd finds her way into the interior of the craft, staves off the transformed Halvorson, with help from Carter, and throws a grenade into the ship's engine.

Lloyd and Carter escape and plan to travel to the Russian camp. However, Lloyd sees the telltale sign of Carter now missing the ear ring that had been her assurance that he was human. She destroys him with the flamethrower, and as in the 1982 film, is left to ponder whether it is better for her to die in the storm or to travel to the Russian camp, perhaps risking the destruction of the world if she has been contaminated through contact with the Halvorson alien. The film ends with Lars and one other survivor pursuing the last living Thing, a sled dog, as segue to the 1982 film.

In essence, the newest version of *The Thing* serves as a credible prequel. The action of the film is consistent with action that follows in the 1982 film. It does offer a few new ideas about the nature of the alien and about how it could be detected through looking for dental fillings. In the end, it sacrifices suspense for action and advanced computerized images of the alien, a criticism many expressed about the 1982 film, and much in the way *Aliens* does with its predecessor *Alien*.

The cultural significance of the film is that it, like its predecessors, plays on the dominant current fear, terrorism and the economic instability it has created to attack America. The appropriateness of the trope of shape shifting applies well here, since terrorists can appear in the form of women, children, airplane passengers, or other seemingly innocent civilians who blend seamlessly into society, appearing to be normal citizens. In other words, the prequel to *The Thing* parallels the War on Terrorism which has lasted since 2001 and before in earlier attacks on the World Trade Center and other targets. Another similarity occurs in the implacable nature of the terrorists, their lack of regard for human life, and their willingness to attack civilians as well as military personnel. A last

resemblance is that it is a war that cannot be ended easily, since the mentality of the terrorists is alien to Western values and refuses to negotiate or play by the rules of engagement in war observed throughout most of the twentieth century.

In conclusion, John W. Campbell Jr.'s creation of *The Thing* has resonated in the popular culture for nearly seventy-five years now. The image of confronting an alien being threatening the entire world population has evolved from a confident, post-Depression endorsement of American heroism, through a post-Korean War endorsement of American military capability, to, after Vietnam and the World Trade Center attacks, a dark, uncompromising view of a force perhaps too powerful for the greatest heroism and self-sacrifice Americans and their allies are capable of performing in the 1982 and 2011 film versions.

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## Gag Order: Muting, Mortification, and Motherhood in Eminem's "Cleaning Out My Closet"

Most children, it seems safe to say, will at some point in life be embarrassed by their parents, whether with baby pictures, unflattering anecdotes, or merely their well-intended presence at a social function. Few, however, strike back with a virulence like that of the rapper in Marshall "Eminem" Mathers's apostrophic song "Cleaning Out My Closet" (*The Eminem Show*, 2002). In *The Pursuit of Signs*, Jonathan Culler writes of apostrophes—direct second-person address—in lyric poetry that "above all they are embarrassing: embarrassing to me and to you" as "images of invested passion" (135-138) and may be employed by a poet "to give the dead or inanimate a voice and make them speak" (153). In "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," Barbara Johnson writes that as the "direct address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker," apostrophe ventriloquistically "throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee." She reads apostrophic poems by Baudelaire and Shelley as self-reflexive contemplations on the possibility of animation through rhetoric; in them, apostrophe becomes "not just the poem's mode but also the poem's theme." Following this notion of the literalization of "language's capacity to give life" into poems about abortion, in which speakers use direct address to animate and give voice to aborted children, Johnson asserts that the life-giving act of address creates a state of suspended animation in which the children can stay "alive" indefinitely. In a rather more vitriolic—though no less passionate—tone than most of the poems Culler and Johnson examine, "Cleaning Out My Closet" takes their ideas about apostrophe in alternate affective directions; namely, through its angry, forestalling mode of address, it humiliates instead of embarrassing, it silences while purporting to give voice, and it turns animation into a cadaverous stasis. Instead of hyperbolically ventriloquizing dead or inanimate objects, this malevolent incarnation of apostrophe humiliates by taking away the voice of the living.

The title "Cleaning Out My Closet" both privileges the rapper's own voice over anyone else's and implies some kind of revelation, some exposure and exposition of sordid secrets and sins, and the rapper's diction reveals his desire to make that display as loudly public as possible. He repeatedly positions himself at the forefront of crowd scenes, being "protested and demonstrated against," causing "all this commotion," and describing his life as "the Eminem Show." And if it is a show, he makes it a spectacular courtroom drama in which little order is to be found. Indeed, this drama is hardly fictional; Deborah Mathers filed a lawsuit against her son in 1999, seeking ten million dollars in damages for slander (the suit was settled for \$25,000, of which all but \$1,600 went to her lawyers) (Moss 2001).

Through another fraught maternal figure—the speaker in Gwendolyn Brooks’s “The Mother”—Johnson demonstrates that apostrophe is vitalizing, vocative, and vocalizing for the addressee; however, “Cleaning Out My Closet” shows that apostrophic address can just as easily render its object suffocated and silenced. If the rapper’s<sup>1</sup> mother can be conceived of as one of the women to whom Johnson alludes, one for whom “the choice [to abort or not] is not between violence and non-violence, but between simple violence to a fetus and complex, less determinate violence to an involuntary mother and/or an unwanted child,” then the song constitutes the discontented wail of the born infant instead of the aborted embryo’s “mute responsiveness” (191). Interestingly, Johnson cites *The Silent Scream*, a pro-life propaganda film Johnson mentions as a counterargument.

Having given birth to the child, the rapper’s mother also gave voice to him, and the grown infant is now using that voice to take away his mother’s—effectively, to abort her. Significantly, the rapper does not actually lodge any specific complaints against her until the third and final verse, after he has already excoriated his father, his ex-wife (the object of Eminem’s verbal violence in multiple songs), and her lover. However, the overriding goal of the rapper, as he proclaims in the first verse, is to make his mother “look so ridiculous now,” and her repeated address in the chorus builds toward that end. Although he catalogs a whole range of her sins, from “popping prescription pills” to “Münchausen syndrome,” the tone only shifts from descriptive to overtly accusatory when he confronts the issue of her voice and “that CD [she] made” for him.

The CD in question presumably refers to the short album “Set the Record Straight” (2000), for which Deborah Mathers, performed two songs with rap group ID-X as a reaction to his lyrical attacks on her character<sup>2</sup> (*Market Wire*, 2000). As Brooks’s “voices in the wind . . . initiate the need” for apostrophe, so too does the rapper’s mother performing her song, “telling [her]self that [she] was a mom.” (in Eminem’s words) The rapper is insolently talking back to his mother after she has talked back to him. In contrast to the rapper’s father and wife, who have angered him by their flight and adultery respectively, his mother’s greatest crime seems to have been committed in self-defense—in fact, her crime is the very act of her self-defense. The rapper sets the scene in the first half of the third verse, citing his mother’s mental health issues, including the aforementioned “prescription pills” and “Münchausen syndrome” and the extreme poverty that necessitated “Going through public housing systems,” both of which are apparently evidence of her unfitness for motherhood. Again, at the risk of reading too much into Marshall Mathers’s biographical background, it seems worth noting that Deborah Mathers was born in 1957 and would have been only fourteen or fifteen years old when she had Marshall—likely an unintended pregnancy (*Eminem born ’72*). The implicit, morbid suggestion is that she should not have given birth to him. If, in Johnson’s terms, the rapper’s mother carried through the anthropomorphization of her

embryo by giving birth, then that act was no less an act of violence than abortion would have been, and her plight exemplifies the flipside of the dilemma Johnson elucidates in “The Mother”—where Brooks’s speaker and “sweets” suffer as a result of her decision to abort, this rapper’s mother and child suffer as a result of the decision *not* to abort. While the rapper’s mother would have been condemned by evangelical pro-life groups for what they hold to be the mortal sin of infanticide, the baby she kept is now telling her “I hope you fuckin’ burn in hell for this shit.” She is damned if she did and damned because she didn’t.

This doubly-binding dichotomy is representative of the gross oversimplification of the rhetoric surrounding abortion, and the ambiguity of the song’s pronouns attest to the complications it brings to the subject-object relationship. It is, as Johnson explains of similar ambiguity in “The Mother,” “clear that something has happened to the possibility of establishing a clear-cut distinction . . . between subject and object, agent and victim.” To return to the figurative courtroom drama the song constructs, the rapper is at once accuser and confessor—the eponymous lyric implies the latter, while the slurs he hurls at his mother construct him as the case’s plaintiff. The mother is called to the stand to defend herself by the apostrophic address, yet the song denies her any opportunity to do so. His repetition of “I’m sorry mama” preemptively negates anything she can say; he will have already apologized for whatever claims her speech might launch against him. This act of silencing is a part of the punishment the rapper is inflicting upon his mother, employing the “embarrassment” of apostrophe as a weapon against her and striking her dumb in front of an audience, though he clearly hopes to provoke more than mere “titters” (in Cullers words). As previously suggested, he twists embarrassment and suspends temporality in a more sinister direction than either Culler’s or Johnson’s, combining the two into *mortification*, a hybrid effect of apostrophe that at once humiliates and de-animates.

Indeed, the etymological presence of “to kill” in the Latin root of “mortification” indicates that the rapper is more concerned with *habeas* corpse than *corpus*. The song’s judicial undercurrents intersect tellingly with its condemnation of motherhood when the rapper establishes 1973 as a chronological reference point, aligning his infancy with the landmark *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that the right to privacy should encompass the right to abortion. Intriguingly, the first verse of the song has already set the rapper up as the object of civil demonstrations, and the “picket signs” evoke iconic images of placard-wielding protesters outside of abortion clinics. Addressed alternately to the listener and to the rapper’s mother, the song expresses a child’s rancor toward a mother he believes has failed him. He infantilizes himself throughout, referring to himself as a “kid,” recalling his childhood, and calling his mother “mama” or simply squalling “ma!” as an upset baby might do. Additionally, when taken in a literal sense, cleaning out one’s closet is a chore, something a mother might demand of her child, and considered as such it provides the rapper an opportunity to subvert his mother’s voice and

turn her mandate against her; just as his apologies give him invective license, the implied domestic framework allows him to maintain the appearance of obedience even as he undermines her maternal authority. This outraged infant's attitude toward his mother for what seems to be best (if simplistically) described as life, raises the question of capital-L Life as a maternal gift and/or curse, and from this perspective, the "skeletons in [the rapper's] closet" become an image morbidly reminiscent of aborted fetuses and the haunting shame their memory might evoke.

The disruption of the "I-thou" pronoun structure of "Cleaning Out My Closet" and the shifting roles of its referents resonate with the rhetorical complications of the abortion debate, which include the impossibility of "symmetrical oppositions" and "logical binary model[s] for ethical choices." The various manifestations of the poetic "I" and "you" in the song run the gamut of roles in the judicial process. The rapper is at first a testifying plaintiff who sets out to "expose" the "skeletons in [his] closet," but he becomes a confessor as well. In addition to setting up the confessional framework with the song's title and chorus, he acknowledges having "maybe made some mistakes" before returning to an accusatory mode in the third verse. During these shifts, the listener starts out simply as the rapper's audience—the prefatory "Yo, yo" stands in for the traditional apostrophic "O"—and then is forced into identification with the rapper's mother through the lines "Look at me now, I bet you're probably sick of me now/ Ain't you mama? I'ma make you look so ridiculous now," which reveal the mother as a second object of address. The conflation of these roles establishes the listener as both silent witness and defendant, making him or her complicit with the mother's past actions. However, the rapper later enjoins the reader to identify with him, to "put yourself in [his] position, just try to envision / Witnessing your mama popping prescription pills in the kitchen," a move that translates roughly to the classic "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury" appeal and distances the listener from the maligned mother. Yet suddenly again, the rapper slides into invective against the maternal, rapping, "it makes you sick to your stomach, doesn't it? / Wasn't it the reason you made that CD for me MA?" The remainder of the "you"s in the song address his mother, and after having identified with the rapper at his behest, the verbal attack he launches feels all the more caustic to the listener.

At the end of this final verse, the rapper acts as judge, jury, and executioner, as it were, damning his mother (and, implicitly through second-person address, the listener as well) to hell before carrying out his own death sentence as her ultimate punishment: "I am dead, dead to you as can be!" Of course, this self-annihilation is a necessarily failed venture; by the very act of addressing his mother, the rapper animates himself to her. Nevertheless, it creates a violent and precarious moment that disrupts the oneness of the mother and fetus *in utero*—where in Brooks's poem the speaker addresses the baby to preserve it and suspend the moment of its death, here the baby addresses the mother to immobilize itself and suspend the moment of its birth. If, as Johnson

explains, male writing is considered (not unproblematically) to be “by nature procreative, while female writing is somehow by nature infanticidal,” then Eminem’s song performs a male version of abortion on himself and his mother through his artistic voice and against hers. As long as the rapper keeps rapping, as long as he apologizes, as long as he preempts her speech, he prevents her from apostrophizing and animating him. By verbally killing himself, he takes away her reproductive rights, rhetorically undoing his birth, negating her decision to keep her baby, and revoking the freedom of choice given her by *Roe v. Wade*. And, in conclusion—or, I hope, as a point of genesis for further discussion—we thus see how one of the most controversial and antagonistic figures in popular culture manages to construct, however objectionably, through his rap an intersection of canonical poetics, questions of intentionality and free speech, the acute political issue of abortion.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> While I am leery of plunging too deeply into biographical criticism, and I certainly have no wish to psychoanalyze Marshall Mathers, Eminem’s frequent allusions to real people and events (or at least his “creation” of poetic characters who share names and traits of actual figures in his life, e.g. his estranged wife, Kim, and his daughter, Hailie) seem to validate and even invite a biographical approach to some degree, and in fact his brand of poetic verisimilitude serves to make his rap all the more potent by playing on the listener’s uncertainty. Morally questionable though it may be, this blurring of the distinction between art and reality is a powerfully effective technique for painting a vivid image that involves and discomfits the listener. Throughout this essay, I refer to “the rapper” as I would “the speaker” of a poem—an entity distinct from Eminem the person.

<sup>2</sup> On *The Slim Shady LP*, Eminem’s 1999 major-label debut album, the songs “Brain Damage” and “My Name Is” both refer to the rapper’s mother in a derogatory manner, imputing drug use and child abuse to her.

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## **Democracy or Decadence? A Cultural Aside to the “Golden Age” of the Pahlavi Monarchy in Iran**

In the years following the revolution of 1979 in Iran, since the puritanical state of the Islamic Republic, by any means, sometimes through downright contempt or sheer violence, has disrupted the most basic individual and social freedoms of the Iranian citizens, such as the freedom to choose dress, to display heterosexual affection in public, and to drink alcohol, a hugely unscholarly assumption has taken shape among a portion of the malcontented and disillusioned public that the Pahlavi monarchy was “democratic.” Given the spontaneous existence of this assumption, a variety of the exile monarchists, during recent years, especially after the dramatic upheavals of 2009, the consequent severe suppression of the Iranian civil society, the general atrophy of all the other forms of opposition to the regime, and the emergence of a pseudo-state of war between the West and the Islamic Republic, perceiving the ripeness of the situation for obtaining hegemony and thus returning to power in Iran, in a systematic manner, through activities like the regular posting of the pictures and displaying of the films of that period with the accompaniment of nostalgic captions and commentaries on their satellite channels, websites, Youtube, Facebook, etc., have been struggling to promote the above-mentioned assumption and to stress the good, old days of the “democratic monarchy.” In this vein, they push as far as to call the last two decades of the Pahlavi monarchy, the “Golden Age.” Thus, in this short article, my aim is, by examining a number of the most prevalent cultural aspects of the last two decades of the monarchy in Iran, to put this assumption to the test of historical facts; to melt it in the crucible of history.

In this regard, I believe that while the popular advocates of this assumption, as a retroactive means of escape in dire straits, mostly unconsciously identify “democracy” with “decadence,” its political advocates quite consciously accentuate this identity. What I mean by decadence here is a sociocultural phenomenon that is usually associated with an aura of complacency, witticism, and sophistication, accompanied with psychological games carrying erotic undertones all soaked in a luxuriously fashionable ambiance among the urban middle or upper classes. In a classic essay, called *The Decadent Movement in Literature* (1893), Symons describes decadence as such: “An interesting disease typical of an over-luxurious civilization, characterized by an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity.” Among the most well-known instances of this phenomenon in the modern age could be counted the fin de siècle in France, the last years of the Weimar Republic in Germany, and certain aspects of the pop culture and

counter-culture in the United States and Western Europe during the 1960s and 1970s.

Regardless of the value-laden and “morally judgmental” attitude that, whether one likes it or not, has been prevalent in the descriptions, interpretations and critiques of such a phenomenon in the course of history of art and culture, it is quite obvious that the dominant cultural atmosphere of the last two decades of the Pahlavi monarchy in Iran practically demonstrated such a decadence. During these decades, especially in the 1970s, thanks to the oil industry boom that led to the rushing of a huge torrent of petro-dollars to Iran, commodity consumerism saw a dramatic flourishing among the urban middle and upper classes. Meanwhile, as a great number of Iranians, mostly by taking educational, touristic, or business trips to Western Europe and the United States, had come to experience firsthand and to understand the contemporary pop culture in those lands, and brought back to home certain aspects of that culture, thereby making a breakthrough in the historical epistemology of Iranians in general, the demand for similar homemade cultural consumer commodities also increased.



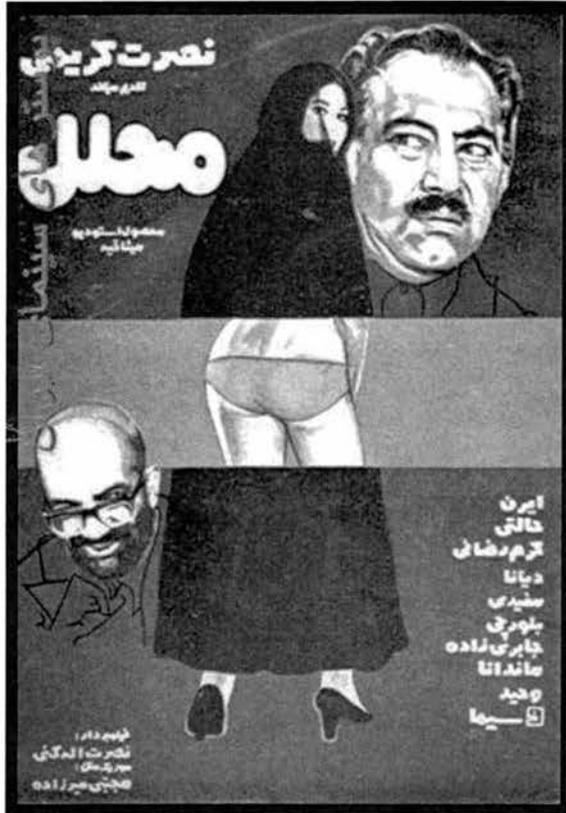
Ganj-e Qarun (Croesus' Wealth) (1965), the ultimate Filmfarsi

The task of catering to such a demand fell to the lot of Filmfarsi, Rangarang Show, and yellow journals: “vehicles” that were both the products and the propagators of an exotic pop culture that more often than not verged on decadence. It must be noted that, regarding these “visual” principal vehicles of the pop culture in Iran, such a culture principally set up a predisposition for “gazing,” “peeking” and “peeping.” Consequently, a people who, in a cultural milieu predominantly favoring a neatly “black-and-white” epistemology with regard to ethics during history, through the implementation of convention, religion and sheer force, had been advised, ordered, and made to “abstain from harem (religiously forbidden)” and to “guard their eyes,” now had their eyes overwhelmed by a rush of formerly-forbidden scenes and colors, for which they prudishly felt ashamed on the one hand and in which they frivolously basked on the other.

Filmfarsi, for its immediate availability and also durability, undoubtedly played the most important role in the spread of such decadence in Iran. The compound term “Filmfarsi” is a well-known coinage in the realm of the contemporary Iranian cinema, made by the eminent Iranian cinema theorist and film critic, Houshang Kavousi (b. 1922), as applying particularly to the popular films of the 1960s and 1970s in Iran, and in general to all those films that are believed to contain the themes and elements of the classic Filmfarsi. As the term usually suggests in the first encounter, Filmfarsi is a film that speaks in Farsi, or more generally, an Iranian film. However, this interpretation is generally misleading; for what Kavousi meant by it, ironically, was a motion picture which neither constituted a film proper nor did it have anything to do with the real life in Iran. Truth is, most of the Filmfarsi themes and elements were borrowed or rather plagiarized from third-rate Hollywood or Bollywood thrillers/melodramas.

To better understand Filmfarsi, it proves useful to briefly review its most salient ingredients. A typical Filmfarsi usually tells a “Thief-of-Baghdad” or a “Cinderella” story, centered on the main theme of the love of the poor boy for the rich girl or vice versa (usually the first one holds). The boy must necessarily come from the marginal, “nameless” populace of the “lower town,” the girl from a famous “upper town” industrialist family. The hero boy, though usually a witty thief or some such rascal who carouses and sings at any pretext, is in principle manly and honest and has self-respect. He waxes eloquent about the evils of the riches and shortcomings of the rich on the one hand, and the blessings of poverty and happiness of the poor on the other, singing hollow praises of integrity. He usually comes across the girl when she is about to be raped, and, being an avowed macho, single-handedly fights the goons to save the damsel in distress. Therefore, the girl has no other way but to fall for him. However, there is still a host of far-fetched troubles to overcome. In the meantime, the audience goes through a great deal of double entendre, wittily

erotic jokes, carousing, singing, womanizing, whore-mongering, plot-divulging, car-chasing and fist-fighting. In the end, when the boy and the girl are joined in “holy matrimony,” everybody, including the audience, goes home happily stultified. As such, Filmfarsi, in sum, is a vulgar pastiche full of kitsch.



Mohalleh (1971), a quality Filmfarsi

Nevertheless, regardless of the shabby contextual and structural aspects of Filmfarsi, what it genuinely specializes in is the “visualization of the body.” Filmfarsi’s camera lens, which in many scenes in effect plays the role of the “eye of the beholder,” is a naughty voyeur that playfully peeps at every niche and nook: from the cleavage of the company’s secretary to the pants of the cabaret dancer, from the legs in the miniskirt to the arms and neck under the chador, from the bower and bed to the disco stage, from the cellar to the roof, from the private swimming pool to the public seaside, and so on and so forth. Thus, by highlighting the significance of the body and the commonness of the body-centered discourse in everyday life, a discourse which

had been detrimentally absent from the “patent”—as opposed to the latent—culture of Iran, Filmfarsi, fundamentally, albeit greatly inadvertently, transforms the consciousness of the Iranian public with respect to the body.



A mosaic of the Rangarang Show singers and sets

The second most important vehicle of the pop culture in Iran was Rangarang (Colorful) Show. A tremendously popular pop music show in the vein of the European and American shows of the 1960s and 1970s, Rangarang, being regularly broadcast from the Iranian National TV, broke a whole new path in the realm of the Iranian esthetics: the avant-garde, abstract-art, phantasmagoric set-designing of this show, almost unexceptionally full of glittering light and color, and its exotic costume-designing, especially with regard to female artists, made a huge impact on the attitude of the ordinary Iranian citizen concerning beauty and imagination. This fashion-show style of art, primarily dwelling on light and color, emphasized, generally pleasantly, but sometimes to the point of vulgarity, the significance of the synthesis of the body and light/color in human esthetics. In the end, Rangarang Show and Filmfarsi typically merged on the covers or within the pages of the countless yellow journals. The fact that many of the singers were also actors and vice versa contributed all the more to the dissolution of the boundary between the two phenomena and their effective merger.

In addition to the above-mentioned vehicles of the pop culture, the more exclusively classy and up-market art festivals such as the “Festival of Culture and Arts” and the “Shiraz Arts Festival,” both held annually since the late 1960s, and then the pompously glamorous “Celebrations of the 2500 Years of the Persian Monarchy” in 1971, which all in all constituted a setting more for and to the taste of the Pahlavi elite and their international visitors, due to their

avant-garde cultural and esthetic nature, made a partial but deep, mostly negative, impact on the Iranian populace. For instance, during the last Shiraz Arts Festival in 1978 which coincided with the holy month of Ramadan, when observant Muslims fast and abstain from both eating and drinking from dawn till dusk, in a play called “The Pig, The Kid, and the Fire,” a completely real “rape” was enacted before the eyes of the populace in a street in Shiraz, which sparked the ire of the people and clerics, in a manner that even the notorious Pahlavi secret service, SAVAK, was drawn to it.



An issue of the popular weekly, *Ettela'at-e Haftegi* (*Weekly News*)

In sum, what came above constituted the core of the Pahlavi cultural policy in its final decades. Nevertheless, bringing these factors up in this article is not meant for putting forward a proper “art” critique of them, which certainly calls for discrete and comprehensive essays on the respective subjects. Rather, by bringing them up here I intend to broach the broader question of democracy

in Iran; for, as I stated in the beginning of this article, recently, the exile monarchists, in the wake of a foreign invasion of Iran, have undertaken to systematically present these frolicsome and rather decadent cultural aspects of the Pahlavi Monarchy as democracy to the hard-pressed Iranian populace, thereby paving the way for a probable restoration.

All this is while democracy, as much as being a “social” phenomenon, or even more than that, is a “political” phenomenon; which means that freedom in individual and social behavior does not necessarily equal or lead to the “greater necessity for democracy,” i.e. political freedom: to a human right to maintain a voice and express an independent opinion on the process of governance, and to an inalienable constitutional right to participate in the governing of the self and the nation. Therefore, the monarchists’ majorly calculated myopic position, by way of analogy, smacks of the claim that the existence of casinos and clubs in Las Vegas is the essence of democracy in the United States, and the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and a myriad of other bills, documents, and amendments have nothing whatsoever to do with it. To put it logically, their claim constitutes a “reverse deduction.” Ironically, there exists a patent counter-example to the monarchists’ claim, which is India, which while many of the above-mentioned facts about the Pahlavi cultural sphere, such as the display of sex and even kissing in the cinema, are still absent from it, not many can be found to deny that India is one of the greatest democracies of the contemporary world.



Merce Cunningham during the sixth Shiraz Arts Festival (1972)

As such, the illusion of luxury that was being publicized by Filmfarsi, Rangarang Show, and yellow journalism, in effect cast a long shadow over the principal truth that in spite of the appearance of leading a thriving social life, the majority of the Iranian people only lay in the margins of this modern-day

Babylon, longingly observing it; and that the distribution of national wealth was unfairly arbitrary, it being accumulated in the hands of the Pahlavis and the closed circle of the “notables” that ingratiatingly hobnobbed with the court. Even more significant than that, the primarily decadent social freedoms that were promoted by the Pahlavi regime were meant, in a manner, to substitute for the absent and much-demanded political freedoms that were supposed to be predicated upon the “human” and “constitutional” rights of the Iranian citizens. Therefore, such decadence not only did not lead to national entente, but also emphasized the class/economic line.

In fact, it was by taking advantage of this predicament that the Islamists, through employing leftist-sounding inflammatory terminology such as “Mostaz’af” (poor) and “Mostakber” (rich), embarked upon scorching the Pahlavis and the monarchists; and, after the revolution, following the same strategy, unleashed arbitrary suppression on the Mostakbers in particular and anything that smacked of them or their “behavior” in general; in effect cracking down on any rudimentary individual and social freedom imaginable. Thus, similar to what had happened in Germany around half a century before, from the heart of the decadent apathy of the final years of the monarchy in Iran rose a harshly puritanical movement that, in the long run, not only did not help to create or develop the formerly absent or latent political freedoms, but also swept across the formerly present social freedoms. In the meantime, the Islamists and the Leftists, by putting forward “libertinism” as “liberalism” in the context of an “Islamic country,” uninhibitedly trampled the liberal ideals like civil society, democracy, and republic. For the sake of political expediency, nobody remembered then that the most fundamental and ethical achievements of democracy in contemporary Iran had been the fruit of the liberal thinkers and activists’ efforts.

As it happens, even today a number of Iranian exiles in Europe and the United States, who do not necessarily have anything to do with the monarchists, somehow in a similar manner confuse democracy with decadence. A famous instance of this phenomenon is the recent wave of publicized nudity that, following the example of the Egyptian girl, Olia Majeda Al Mahdi, has broken loose among the Iranian community “abroad” in the name of defending democracy in Iran. Truth is, in a democratic society everyone, as long as he/she keeps to his/her constitutional rights and does not breach those of others, has a “right” to display or to “cover” his/her body, and nobody has absolutely any right to accost him/her. In such a society, being nude or covered will not be mandatory, but voluntary, and all have—or must have—a right to choose what suits their attitude and taste best. However, naively presenting the “freedom to discard the dress” as outright “democracy,” as if the essence of freedom is nudity beyond which naught is needed, is a fatal mistake. In this respect, perhaps it sounds ironic that even such a radical feminist as the late Andrea Dworkin should regard the stark display of the body as dehumanizing. As such, amidst

the bizarrely bamboozling bazaar of present-day politics, Iranians must beware not to mistake gilt for gold.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Reza Parchizedeh



## **BOOK REVIEWS**



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## ***Swift Viewing: The Popular Life of Subliminal Influence***

Charles R. Acland  
Duke University Press, 2011

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Scholars have debated the idea that hidden messages might influence behavior on a large scale and generally concluded that subliminal advertisements fail to produce the results suggested by their proponents. Regardless, since the 1950s, popular audiences have both fueled and feared the possibility that such messages might have an effect on consumers and social behavior. Charles R. Acland's *Swift Viewing* reveals how the concept of subliminal advertising evolved from a set of psychological experiments to a widespread belief that media could indeed manipulate viewers with imperceptible messages. Acland's narrative describes the tracks of academic and popular—the latter he describes as “vernacular”—understandings that have emerged from subliminal messaging strategies, beginning with forms of nineteenth-century hypnotism, to dubious claims made by marketers in the 1950s, and eventually to leading stories of contemporary news.

Acland's history delves deeply into concerns about subliminal messages, showing how the notion of “hidden persuaders” became part of the vernacular media critique, as well as how this widespread social interpretation reflected anxiety about a media environment that had become overwhelming. He presents a rich archive of examples, many of them fascinating and even mesmerizing, which include educational technologies used in American classrooms, literary devices in science fiction, and sensational (“huckster”) claims in the late 1950s. Woven together with theories about the role of media popularized by Marshall McLuhan, Acland advances the notion that subliminal messages provided, at the very least, a reflection of the social sense of information overload throughout the second half the twentieth century.

In Acland's narrative, the infamous Orson Welles “War of the Worlds” radio broadcast in 1938 marked the first major event in the development of contemporary notions about the way media might influence society on subliminal levels. Based on the national hysteria that followed Welles's staged interplanetary invasion, scholars recognized that popular audiences might react en masse to media in ways the producers of messages had not previously understood. Both research on the phenomenon and popular reaction to it were fueled by the experiments of James Vicary, who, in the late 1950s, announced the results of a demonstration involving more than 14,000 patrons of a New Jersey movie theater. Vicary had arranged to have the words “drink Coca Cola” and “eat popcorn” flashed on the movie screen for fractions of a second at intervals throughout the projection of a feature film. The results, he claimed, included a rise in sales of Coke and popcorn. However, Vicary failed in attempts

to duplicate the results from his New Jersey movie theater experiment and later admitted that his findings had embellished data. Moreover, popular resentment over the use of subliminal messages as manipulative marketing contributed to banishing it as an accepted form of communication.

Regardless, subliminal messaging has recurrently appeared in both scholarly and popular discussions. A notable example: the 2000 election, which was at least temporarily diverted by allegations that ads on behalf of Republican candidate George W. Bush had subliminally referenced the word “rats” as a subtext for “Democrats.” The other samples Acland offers of subliminal messaging during its heyday in the late 1950s, as well as its continued (but marginalized) uses since then, are a mix of fun and weird. His style combines a rich historiography with popular and obscure symbols to create an informative and entertaining read. Acland, a communication studies professor at Concordia University in Montreal, is the author of *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (2003) and co-editor of *Useful Cinema* (2011), both of which are also published by Duke University Press.

Gregory A. Borchard, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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***The Bride Factory: Mass Media Portrayals  
of Women and Weddings***

Erika Engstrom

Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2012

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There is some sort of lure in reality programming that can suck in even those who firmly believe that sort of media presentation is the worst dreck ever presented to a mass audience. And what could be more alluring than programs about weddings? It’s an event that many of us will participate in at least once in our lifetimes: whether as bride/groom, as an attendant, or an observer. There’s something very appealing about being able to take a look behind the scenes, watching drama unfold on the way to the big event. As an event grounded in a reality that most of us can relate to, in one way or another, there is almost nothing to equal a wedding as a spectacle, except perhaps for reality drug rehabilitation programs (but that’s another story entirely). It’s a cultural event, one that brings all of us together, in one form or another.

While *The Bride Factory: Mass Media Portrayals of Women and Weddings* (Erika Engstrom) doesn’t contain itself to television media only, the fact is that today the majority of media consumed is on television, with the internet running in second place. Overall, the book is a fascinating look at

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changes in weddings over time, including a view into such popular culture events as the various English royal weddings of recent history and Grace Kelly's wedding (Hollywood royalty, if you will). With interesting discussions about feminism and femininity, Engstrom's book is appropriate to this point in our culture when many women are pondering how feminism is changing. The author even talks about her feelings about her own wedding and the power of hegemony (did she really need the "perfect" dress?).

The book starts with a discussion of weddings as "published gossip" as early as ancient Roman times. Previous to the Victorian Age, weddings were calm home affairs with the primary participants dressed in their Sunday best. As society pages became more important, so did the cultural manifestation of large wedding productions, often copying royalty or high society wedding events. Simple styles gave way to emulating the Victorian elite, right down to the idolization of the ideal woman. Over time, this has produced our current culture of reality television with the spectacle of the pre-ceremony antics seeming of almost equal weight as the actual ceremony. The ideal is the "perfect" wedding: the perfectly beautiful bride, the perfect dress, perfect details, none of which say anything at all about the state of marriage. Nay, even the groom seems to be an afterthought: he's a detail that needs to be dressed properly. He can nip off and play golf with his buddies while the bride spends hours of hair, makeup, and getting dressed.

Indeed, the whole spectacle is aimed at putting the woman on stage so she can have *her* day. Empowerment or subjugation? You can decide after reading this book!

Mindy Hutchings, Independent Scholar



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## *Popular Culture Review*

*Popular Culture Review*, the refereed journal of the Far West Popular and American Culture Associations (sponsored by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas) is published twice yearly. It is indexed in the MLA Bibliography and the Modern Humanities Research Association's Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature. Members of the FWPCA/FWACA receive each issue as part of membership. Single copies may be purchased for \$10.00 domestic and \$15.00 international. Yearly subscriptions for institutions and libraries are \$25.00. Requests for back issues should be submitted to the editor.

Please note that the journal is now all electronic and all requests for submission guidelines and/or submissions should be sent to Felicia Campbell (Department of English, University of Nevada, Las Vegas) at [fcampbell@ccmail.nevada.edu](mailto:fcampbell@ccmail.nevada.edu). Documentation may take the form appropriate for the discipline of the writer; the current MLA style sheet is a useful model. The editorial staff will defer to the current *Chicago Manual of Style* to resolve stylistic differences.

The journal invites articles on all aspects of both popular and American culture. Correspondence about membership in FWPCA/FWACA, which includes a subscription to *Popular Culture Review*, should be sent to Felicia Campbell at [felicia.campbell@unlv.edu](mailto:felicia.campbell@unlv.edu).

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## *Studies in Popular Culture*

*Studies in Popular Culture*, the journal of the Popular Culture Association in the South and the American Culture Association in the South, publishes articles on popular culture and American culture however mediated: through film, literature, radio, television, music, graphics, print, practices, conditions of life. Its contributors from the United States, Canada, France, Israel, and Australia include distinguished anthropologists, sociologists, cultural geographers, ethnomusicologists, historians, and scholars in mass communications, philosophy, literature, and religion.

Please direct editorial queries to the editor: Dennis Hall, University of Louisville, Department of English, Louisville, KY 40292. Telephone: (502) 588-6896/0509. Fax: (502) 588-5055. Bitnet: DRHALL01@ULKYVM. Internet: drhall01@ulkyvm.louisville.edu.

All manuscripts should be sent to the editor care of the University of Louisville, Department of English, Louisville, KY 40292. Please enclose two double-spaced copies and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Black and white illustrations may accompany the text. Our preference is for essays that total, with notes and bibliography, no more than twenty pages. Documentation may take the form appropriate for the discipline of the writer; the current MLA style sheet is a useful model. Please indicate if the work is available on computer disk. The editor reserves the right to make stylistic changes on accepted manuscripts.

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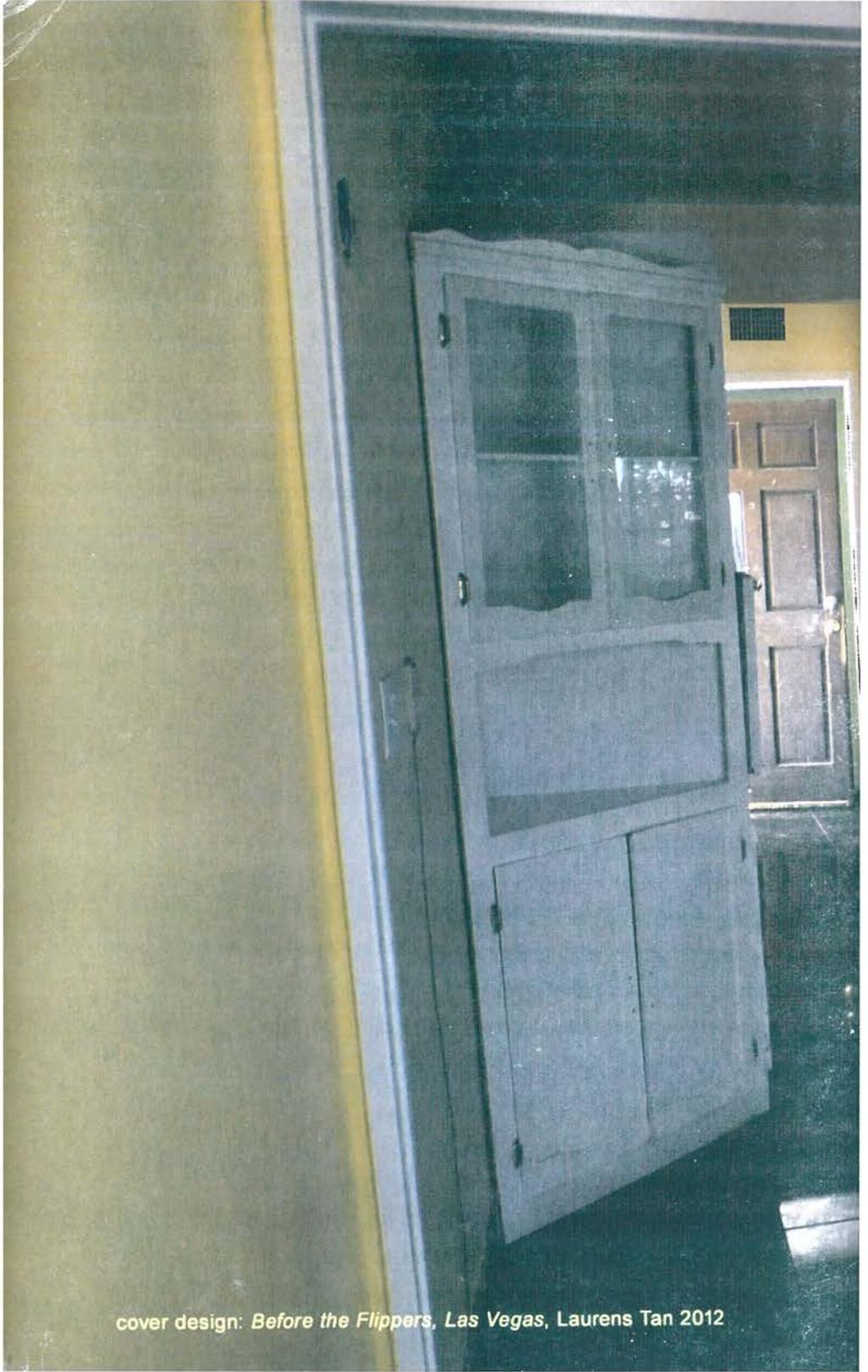
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